

“Navigating a Path Beyond the Finish Line” — How Can Post-Retirement Support Enhance the Transition for Athletes After Retirement in China?

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doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2024.09.08

Abstract

This paper investigates the post-retirement challenges faced by Chinese athletes and proposes solutions to improve their career transitions. Despite government efforts, many Chinese athletes—primarily from economically disadvantaged families—continue to struggle with inadequate education, health issues, and limited employment opportunities. This study analyzes existing research and benchmarks international athlete transition systems, seeking ways to improve China’s current approach. By comparing China’s system with those in other countries, the findings highlight the need for comprehensive education, better healthcare, and enhanced employment opportunities for retired athletes. Key recommendations include providing short-term pre-retirement training focused on life after sports, improving long-term educational preparation, and encouraging athletes to develop intellectual property and foster a positive public image for external financial stability. In addition, government policies should be improved to offer more appropriate job opportunities and stronger post-retirement support. By refining the current athlete retirement system, this paper aims to facilitate a smoother transition for athletes as they navigate beyond their sports careers.

Keywords: career transition, post-retirement challenges, education, athlete transition systems, pre-retirement training, post-retirement support, athlete retirement system, Chinese athletes, sports careers, sports management

1. Introduction

The research paper aims to explain and find solutions for the retirement problems faced by Chinese athletes during their career transition and development. Athletes worldwide surpass themselves and attain remarkable achievements throughout their sporting journeys. However, beneath the glory lies a huge challenge that has gathered limited awareness but deserves more attention — the athlete retirement problem.

China, with its substantial population and a majority of athletes originating from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, has nearly 4,000 retired athletes per year (Xu, 2022). The majority of athletes have dedicated extensive effort and time to representing their country, and given the demanding significance of the matter, the government’s assistance for retired athletes remains incomplete. While China is implementing various direct policies to

ensure employment and financial support for athletes, a large number of athletes continue to encompass issues related to health, financial insecurity, as well as deficiencies in education. By investigating the problem, which stems from an incomplete official post-retirement system and a lack of personal post-retirement support, through critical analysis and comparison between athlete intellectual property (IP), the issue can be addressed by enhancing the educational preparation during their athletic careers, bolstering their mental and physical well-being, and ensuring financial stability through employment opportunities. To achieve this, it is imperative to enhance public awareness about the challenges faced by retired athletes and develop effective post-retirement programs. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate and improve athlete retirement transition progress to solve a series of existing retirement challenges.

2. Methodology

The research paper aims to investigate and propose solutions to the retirement problems faced by Chinese athletes. Through benchmarking athletes' career transition and development, the primary challenges they encounter encompass the need for education, employment opportunities, and the management of physical and mental health. From these perspectives, the study will incorporate existing data and analyze articles on the current situation, leveraging athlete intellectual property (IP) examples to compare career transitions in China with different countries and assess the retirement status of typical athlete IPs. Focusing on athletes' career transition and development from diverse perspectives, including those of athletes and sports organizations, the research paper seeks to identify solutions to these challenges and enhance public awareness.

3. Result

3.1 Education

Firstly, Chinese athletes often encounter a significant challenge attributed to the lack of a well-rounded education in general knowledge and post-retirement preparation. The education level has a crucial impact on a smooth career transition and development potential. A sufficient school education over the long term shapes an athlete's behavior post-retirement and influences their employability. In China, most

athletes attend 'whole concentration' sports schools, where militarized management limits study time to maximize training hours. A survey in Putian city revealed that only 65%-70% of students meet the required primary school graduation (Cui, 2021). Currently, the majority of uneducated Chinese athletes face financial pressure and limited career options. As Malcolm X's famous saying suggests, 'Education is the passport to the future,' a lack of education restricts their potential development, posing profound challenges on employment competitiveness. Additionally, the inclusion of pre-education for initiating an athlete's transition imparts knowledge on avoiding health problems and self-management. A pre-education consciousness not only paves a smooth path for personal pursuits and instills confidence to face challenges, but it also enables athletes to build intellectual property, create business value, and acquire skills for self-improvement. By comparing athletes at different education levels from two perspectives of career development and transition, the importance of education becomes apparent. Therefore, in the absence of government policy support and a well-developed pre-education system, transitioning from militarized sports team management to society is abrupt and challenging, as a low level of literacy becomes a major disadvantage limiting future development.

3.2 Health

Moreover, throughout the transition period, health issues emerge as significant challenges that may impede an athlete's career development, affecting both mental and physical well-being. Physical health problems in athletes can arise from injuries and serve as a direct cause of retirement. Research indicates that up to 24% of professional athletes retire early due to involuntary injuries with chronic effects. For example, according to a survey on Chinese athletes, the rate of athletes retiring with physical injuries is close to 90%, with more than 50% of athletes requiring long-term treatment (Yuan, 2023). The shift from intense training to a loss of fitness routines and from specialized healthcare to general healthcare provisions brings about significant changes in diet, metabolism, and activity levels for athletes. In addition, injuries and illnesses have narrowed the scope of employment for retired athletes, stopping them from performing high-intensity

work and physically demanding jobs. Given the interconnected and equally important nature of physical and mental health, athletes face potential depression or anxiety during the retirement transition. A post-retirement athlete often struggles to accept a change in value and reputation, as they no longer derive a sense of achievement through a successful identity as before (Schmid et al., 2023). According to the "Study on the Performance and Adjustment of Psychological Problems in Employment of Retired Athletes in China," there is discomfort and feelings of future aimlessness in returning to normal life, as athletes experience self-doubt, loss of purpose, and stress during the transition period (Ren, 2010). Consequently, chronic physical injury and mental depression during an athlete's transition are inevitable and critical aspects of career transition, demanding a holistic approach to guide athletes through this intricate period.

3.3 Employment

In addition, athletes face employment issues related to financial stability and societal values. In this context, an athlete's employment can be interpreted as the career transition to find a job with stable income and finances after retirement. Insufficient preparation of transferable skills and a lack of education can directly impact athletes' income levels and employment opportunities. Due to various factors, such as injuries, athletes often find their job opportunities limited, with most retired athletes opting for sport-related positions or government-provided jobs. In a research survey on the Wushu transition dilemma in Shanxi Province, one-third of the athletes expressed dissatisfaction with their retirement transition. In terms of income, most athletes reported monthly earnings in the middle-income range of RMB 3,000-6,000, falling short of athletes' psychological expectations (Yuan, 2023). A similar survey of retired basketball players in Henan Province yielded comparable results, revealing that only about one-third of the total respondents were able to secure employment within six months of retirement. The disconnection of abrupt retirement transition results in high post-retirement expectations that often lead to positioning bias and overestimation. In the survey on the ideal monthly income, 20 respondents selected RMB 8,000 and above, significantly higher than the average salary level of 3000 RMB, underscoring the disparity

between athletes' expectations and reality (Li, 2023). The data on athletes' income levels, re-employment time, and satisfaction levels show that employment challenges become one of the main issues for athletes after retirement. If the employment opportunities for the athletes' base are not stabilized, further commercial and social value cannot be created subsequently.

4. Recommendation

4.1 Education

Two recommendations are given based on the short-term and long-term development of the education system.

From a long-term perspective, the government should enhance the cultural education of athletes. Currently, the athlete training system in China follows the model of "amateur — sports schools — sport teams," with a lack of sufficient emphasis on regular academic studies. The inadequate allocation of time can lead to long-term consequences, especially for some underdeveloped athletes; they cannot achieve either glory in sports or the minimum educational requirement. To address this, the government should focus on improving the scientific and cultural education of athletes. Strengthening basic cultural education, optimizing the mode of physical education teaching in colleges and universities, and promoting the integration of sports schools with normal schools are essential steps. Distance teaching, facilitated by technological and network advancements, is a practical method. The government can provide and balance online educational resources and courses, particularly in underserved regions with limited educational resources, emphasizing sports education. In addition, distance teaching offers greater flexibility for athletes, aligning with their routines, thereby enhancing accessibility and improving the overall quality of education. Although China has 9 years of compulsory education, most athletes have far less study time and education, and there are significant gaps in bridging to university studies. Benchmarking inspiration from international practices, China can consider the United States' NCAA student-athlete league as an inspiration. This league, organized into three divisions, emphasizes both sports and academics and offers academic and membership support. NCAA athletes in each division are engaged in both cultural education and high-level athletic

participation. They compete in their designated divisions and strike distinct balances between academic and athletic accomplishments. Division III athletes balance more time on education while Division I athletes have greater potential in sports. Statistics indicate that 90% of Division I athletes successfully graduate from college, underscoring the effectiveness of this organizational approach (NCAA, 2022). The long-term education system can build a strong educational basis for athletes to develop after retirement.

Aside from the long-term and academic-inclined education, the preparation of transferable skills is significant during athlete transition, aiming retired athletes to learn the basic social survival knowledge and vocational skills to raise initial awareness. According to a survey on the necessity of skills training for retired athletes, 86 percent expressed a strong need for such training (Li, 2023). Notably, a majority of athletes indicated a preference for financial training. This form of education aims to enhance individuals' abilities and competitiveness by providing specialized knowledge tailored to their specific needs. For athletes, personalized training can highlight their traits of resilience and the ability to remain optimistic and focused, benefiting subsequent employment. It involves expanding expertise in alignment with individual, career, and market requirements. While the Government currently provides programs addressing this challenge, their effectiveness is limited. Several issues have occurred: athletes possess insufficient basic knowledge and social skills, have a limited understanding of the training content, and find the courses dull (Li, 2023). Addressing this problem requires the refinement of the long-term education system, as discussed previously. Additionally, the training method lacks diversity and creativity. Aside from standard lectures, personalized one-on-one training should be implemented based on athletes' interests; the uncertainty of market demand, coupled with rigid training structures, leads to suboptimal outcomes. In fact, not only should the government design more targeted and practical pre-education, but athletes can contact external agencies and businesses for the same purpose. Therefore, the enhancement of current programs and collaboration with other institutions will broaden the impact of pre-education on skills enhancement.

Engaging in pre-education can effectively ease the transition process for athletes, while a long-term educational system creates more potential opportunities in future career development.

4.2 Health

As a result of high-strength training and competitive pressure, athletes need to encounter mental and physical health problems. Athletes not only have to endure the psychological fallout of retirement, but they also must ensure their physical health.

Regarding mental health, two different methods can be applied to both directly and implicitly mitigate their pressure. Athletes may experience a sense of aimlessness, financial stress, and anxiety during their career transition (Schmid et al., 2023). Currently, the Chinese government employs expert lectures for in-depth psychological counseling. While this approach helps athletes gain self-awareness and reintegrate into society, it is nonspecific and temporary. Firstly, the responsibility for more effective and targeted psychological counseling should not solely rest on the government; sports organizations should also play a role in this initiative. Chinese sports organizations are deficient in providing humanistic care and taking initiative or showing awareness in addressing these issues, especially when compared to foreign organizations that demonstrate more effective efforts. For example, the NFL Player Care Foundation (PCF), an independent organization dedicated to helping retired players improve their quality of life, established partnerships and the Foundation's diverse board membership to obtain mental health expertise. PCF uses a unique case management model that focuses on individualized strategies to help players through challenging times. The organization provides various health sessions to overcome such issues. Secondly, for athletes facing self-doubt and a sense of identity shift, engaging in charity events under the retired athlete identity can enhance self-identity and societal value, reducing the mental conflict associated with a career change.

From the perspective of physical well-being, athletes need to uphold their health post-retirement, considering the injuries suffered during their careers. Without access to professional equipment and health insurance

after retirement, they require specialized facilities for rehabilitation and rely insufficiently on an athlete's individual medical account for treatment. In fact, through actual investigation, many Chinese athletes' injury compensation was also not being paid out. Thus, similarly, sports organizations should take significant responsibility over this. For instance, the World Tennis Association (WTA) also establishes a performance health team, comprising primary healthcare providers and massage therapists. Furthermore, given that injuries vary by sport, rehabilitation programs need customization. For instance, retired professional footballers experience conditions like Osteoarthritis in the lower limbs, musculoskeletal pain, and mental health symptoms (Johnson, 2022). There is a demand for professional rehabilitation institutions to prevent further injury and inconvenience. According to research, athletes' rehabilitation influences their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions to injury rehabilitation (Steinbein, 2016). On a broader scale, sports training can advance sports science to optimize athletes' training methodologies, preventing injuries that have the potential limitation in the future. Thus, the integration of scientific training approaches with medical rehabilitation can contribute to reducing the incidence of physical injuries.

Addressing the issue from two well-being perspectives, the support from professional institutions is significant while emphasizing the importance of initiating health care during the active career phase.

4.3 Employment

For retired athletes, the government will provide employment opportunities and policies as support, while some of them also build their own intellectual property (IP) for commercialization and create additional value.

The government's current work provision falls short of athletes' salary expectations. An improvement in government policy is needed to emphasize the retirement issue. The existing Sports Law of the People's Republic of China inadequately addresses the employment aspect, failing to recognize its significant impact on athletes' post-retirement such as their legal status, occupational risks, and professional specificities. The government should enhance communication and collaboration with various departments, establish a long-term cooperation

system with companies, and implement policies with favorable conditions, encouraging new businesses. Consummating policy measures, such as tax incentives to reduce costs and risks, is crucial. The government can broaden career options and sport community development. For instance, over 550 current and retired athletes have joined the Team USA Career & Education Hub on LinkedIn, providing great job opportunities while developing athletes' skills as a community (United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee, 2022). The government can consult a similar employment program for athletes and influence athlete career development. Thus, the government ought to enhance its policies, bolster preferential measures for athlete groups, and offer higher-quality employment opportunities, ensuring stability in athletes' lives.

In addition to government support, athletes can leverage their existing popularity to create intellectual property (IP) and generate additional income. For instance, TRNDY Social, a leading talent agency, assists athletes in building valuable assets that major global brands seek for endorsements and advocacy. These agencies create a 'post-retirement pathway' by commercializing athletes' images through social media and generating an extra source of income. Companies like TRANDY offer athletes opportunities to earn through brand endorsements, TV appearances, and commercials. Notably, TRANDY's CEO, Mike Visnick, is also a retired athlete who has founded a business that not only builds a positive social image for himself by assisting other athletes in their career development but also acquires steady finance (NY Weekly Staff, 2022). Additionally, athletes also create positive commercial value throughout their careers. Athletes may portray a positive image during their active careers to accumulate ample resources and visibility in advance, preparing for commercial opportunities. An exemplary success example is Roger Federer, who ranked 9th in this year's Athletes' Business Value at \$95.1 million even after retirement. Federer continued to benefit from 14 endorsement brands, demonstrating the enduring commercial value for retired athletes (Zhang, 2023). Therefore, while it is crucial to create a positive athlete image during their careers to attract resources, joining an IP agency, such as TRANDY, to manage their careers and turn their

post-sports journey into a promising business venture.

Hence, the employment issue can be solved by various aspects. Athletes can create a positive image and participate in business brand events throughout their career, while the government can offer job opportunities and new policies for extra support. External entities, like IP agencies, can also assist athletes in providing alternative employment avenues through improved commercialization.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this research paper is to examine and address the challenges faced by Chinese athletes in their post-retirement transition and development, with a focus on three main aspects: education, health, and employment. The analysis reveals that Chinese athletes encounter mental stress, physical health issues, and employment challenges due to inadequate education and support from stakeholders, including the government and external agencies. Recommendations involve enhancing the education system and government policies, establishing connections with counselors and educators to address athletes' health concerns, and providing pre-retirement education. Additionally, joining professional agencies to develop intellectual property (IP) and ensuring a smooth career path is advised. Future research may explore efficient athlete career development post-retirement, delving into areas such as technology integration, policy alteration, and engaging relevant stakeholders to navigate a successful path beyond the finish line.

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