Career Problems and Retirement Among Elite Athletes: The Female Tennis Professional

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This investigation used qualitative techniques to identify and analyze the experiences of elite female tennis professionals and their perceptions of their competitive years and subsequent retirement from the sport. Through a system of networking and snowball sampling techniques (Babbie, 1986), 28 athletes who had played on the professional tennis circuit were contacted and asked to complete an extensive semistructured questionnaire; 20 completed questionnaires were returned. The questionnaire asked players to recount their earliest expectations and goals in competitive tennis, their experiences and perceptions during their most competitive years, and their reasons for and reactions to retirement from the tour. In general, results indicated that the athletes did not find disengagement from their competitive years traumatic, but rather found it as an opportunity to reestablish more traditional societal roles and lifestyles.

Over the past decade or so, there have been several theoretical and empirical attempts to gain insight into the career orientations, contingencies, and process of retirement among elite performers, including the early works of Ball (1976), Haerle (1975), Hill and Lowe (1974), and Mihovilovic (1968). In general, these early works relied heavily on anecdotal accounts from which to draw theoretical insights into the processes and problems of disengagement from professional sport careers. Mihovilovic (1968) was one of the few to actually present descriptive data outlining perceptions of players, coaches, and managers toward the process of sport retirement. He found that many athletes experienced much stress and frustration as their competitive years ended. In addition, Mihovilovic found that most athletes held on to those careers as long as possible and attempted to substitute their athletic roles for coaching roles at various levels of athletic competition.

Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in the process of disengagement from sport. In much of this work, disengagement from sport has been linked to both gerontological theory (Lerch, 1984; McPherson, 1977; Rosenberg, 1981) and/or thanatological theory that likens sport retirement to a form of social death.

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(Greendorfer & Kleiber, 1982; Lerch, 1984; Rosenberg, 1984). Those utilizing the gerontological perspective have likened sport retirement to the process of retirement from the work force. Theories such as activity theory, disengagement theory, and continuity theory have been applied in an attempt to understand the problems and processes that athletes confront as they leave their sporting careers. In addition to the problems of lack of equivalence between work disengagement and athletic career disengagement, data to this point have not provided strong support for any of these theoretical orientations (Lerch, 1984). The analogy between sport disengagement and death has also received recent attention. Rosenberg (1984) develops this thesis to its extreme when suggesting that the athlete may move through stages similar to those experienced by the dying patient (Kubler-Ross, 1969): shock and denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance.

Clearly, one of the basic premises extant in much of this literature is that the process of retirement is psychologically quite traumatic for the athlete. The literature has typically portrayed the image of an athlete who must undergo a tremendous period of emotional readjustment involving the loss of one role and adoption of new roles. And although Lerch (1984) has clearly indicated that the level and type of emotional response experienced by athletes will depend on whether retirement was voluntary or involuntary, the literature implies that few positive outcomes result.

One of the earliest writers to challenge this perspective was Coakley (1983), who argued that retirement from sport could serve a positive function for the athlete. In addition, Allison and Meyer (1984) presented preliminary evidence to support the thesis that retirement may be perceived by professional tennis athletes as an opportunity to pursue and/or expand on roles they otherwise have had to ignore while they were on the circuit. Thus, retirement may serve as an opportunity for social rebirth rather than a form of social death. These competing perspectives indicate that our understanding of the process of retirement is still somewhat incomplete (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985).

In addition, the traditional methodological approaches utilized illustrate a lack of awareness in knowing how to investigate systematically the dynamics of retirement. A recent increase in quantitative research attempts to identify variables that might help predict adjustment to retirement (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Greendorfer & Kleiber, 1982; Lerch, 1984). However, understanding of the qualitative and experiential nature of retirement for the athlete continues to be minimal (Prus, 1984). In addition, although much work has been done toward understanding the process of retirement among male professional athletes, little work has been conducted toward understanding the perspectives and experiences of the professional female athlete. Finally, most research to this point has attempted to identify the processes and problems of retirement among professional team sport athletes, without any attempt to understand the ways in which individual sport athletes experience the retirement process. Such insights are particularly important since the individual sport athletes must carry the burdens, stresses, and frustrations of competition themselves and cannot share and/or defray reasons for failure with other teammates.

This investigation identifies, from the perspective of the retired female tennis player, the types of stresses, problems, and considerations with which she
has had to deal as she moved through her professional athletic career. As Ball (1976) and McPherson (1977) have pointed out, one of the major problems in attempting to analyze the process of disengagement among athletes is that it is not only difficult to identify the whereabouts of former athletes, but once identified, to secure their participation in such studies. This problem is increasingly exaggerated in individual sports in which the potential sampling pool is much smaller, and since athletes do not represent a team or community but travel throughout the world as individuals until retirement, they are much more difficult to locate.

These problems of identification and response are exacerbated in women's sport because its evolution and bureaucratic organization are still in the process of development. Record-keeping and public accounting of performance are still developing in tennis.

**Purpose and Methods of Study**

This study was designed to examine, using in-depth qualitative analyses, the career and retirement patterns and problems experienced among a sample of professional women tennis players (N=20). Several guiding questions served as the foundation of this study:

1. What were the early goals and expectations of these athletes as they entered the tennis world?
2. What were the types of emotional reactions and experiences, both positive and negative, which they remember most about their competitive years?
3. What were their reasons for and reactions to retirement once they realized that their highly competitive athletic careers were over?

Through the use of snowball sampling techniques (Babbie, 1986) and a system of networking (initial contacts were asked for names and current addresses of other retired athletes), 28 athletes who had retired completely from competition were identified. An initial list of 18 retired players known by the informant were sent surveys and were requested at the end of the questionnaire to include the names of other retired players of whom they knew the whereabouts. Ten additional names were received, and these individuals were also sent questionnaires. A follow-up mailing requested surveys that had not been returned. As indicated, 20 athletes returned completed questionnaires, and attempts to get further names were not successful due to confidentiality exercised by the USTA. Thus the sample is small so it is difficult to assess the degree to which this group represents a cross-section of former female tennis professionals. And although caution should be exercised in generalizing these results to the total population of retired female tennis professionals, it was felt that the data reflected important initial insights into the lives of such professionals.

The 20 female athletes surveyed in this investigation were part of an elite tennis group who had retired from the professional circuit. As a group, the highest mean ranking they had achieved while at the peak of their respective careers in the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) ranking system was 33. The range of rankings was wide, including one player who had been ranked no. 1 in the world.
and another athlete who held position no. 71 at the point of retirement. The female athletes in this study began playing at about 10 years of age ($M=9.5$), although the range was 6–13. They had competed an average of 14.5 years (7 years in the junior ranges and 7.5 years in the professional ranks). Thus most of these athletes had spent much of their early life in high-level competition.

Findings from this study come from two sources. The major source of data reported herein was the extensive mail surveys completed by 20 retired female professional athletes. The 10-page questionnaire consisted of both Likert and open-ended items. In addition to a series of demographic questions, the questionnaire asked players to recount (a) their earliest expectations and goals in competitive tennis, (b) their experiences and perceptions during their most competitive years, and (c) their reactions to retirement from the tour. Open-ended items were coded by category for post hoc analyses. Where appropriate, both quantitative and qualitative responses are reported.

A second source of data for this investigation was a key informant. The coinvestigator was herself a member of the professional tennis tour. She had competed in the junior ranks for 6 years and the professional ranks for 7 years. Thus, in this investigation she served as an informant to what Hughes (1971) has called the “inner-workings” of an occupational group. Her insights into the daily personal and organizational requirements and demands of the professional tennis circuit helped elucidate and clarify various aspects of tour life. Thus the survey data collected on 20 former tennis professionals were supplemented with qualitative insights provided by the key informant.

Findings

Early Goals and Expectations

Athletes were asked to think back to their early competitive years and recount whether or not they expected tennis would become a long-term career. In addition, individuals were asked to recount their earliest aspirations as athletes as they moved into the professional circuit.

Perhaps one of the most interesting characteristics of these female tennis professionals is that over half (60%) never had any intention of becoming career tennis players. In many instances these athletes indicated that they had thought about careers in areas such as law, business, science, and public relations, but for the most part these career options seldom came to fruition, in part because of their evolving commitment to tennis. Comments offered by these individuals included the following:

I had definite plans to graduate from college but these plans changed after I won the 18-and-under nationals and everyone starting telling me to turn pro. It was no career in the beginning . . . it was just to have fun and travel. When I began there was no professional tour—just amateur tennis where we got to travel, see the world, and compete with expenses covered. It all just snowballed into a full-time occupation. When I first started I felt that I would play for a long time, but I didn’t think about it as a career.
Given the preceding comments, one gets a sense that the sport careers of these professionals could be characterized as snowballing, or "unfolding," to use Haerle's (1975) term. Even those athletes who had considered tennis as a possible career tended to be somewhat uncertain about the career potential: "When I turned pro I planned to stay with it all during my young adult years, probably 5 to 8 years less than I actually played."

These professionals began their careers during their early childhood years and in many ways were swept along by the potential excitement of the tour, their own personal ambitions, and the encouragement of others (e.g., parents and coaches) around them. Other career choices emerged and faded during those early years. The problems of career training and choice were exacerbated by college programs not strong enough to prepare serious tennis players for world-class competition. And since the structure of ascendancy in tennis has not been traditionally linked to collegiate competition, unlike basketball and football, the training potential for alternate careers was extremely difficult given the travel and other demands of the world-class tour. Thus, as Wilensky (1960) suggests, career patterns do not necessarily take on the orderliness that is often perceived by outsiders.

With regard to the early goals and ambitions these athletes carried with them in their formative tennis years, data indicate they had specific ambitions. When players were asked to list the highest honor they believed they would obtain in tennis, 45% indicated playing at Wimbledon was their goal. The remainder of responses included receiving a college scholarship and/or placing in the top 10 rankings in the world. The Wimbledon tourney, however, was clearly seen as the definition of success among these athletes.

### The Competitive Years

In an attempt to identify the professional athletes' perceptions of their competitive years, they were asked to respond to a series of Likert scale items evaluating their retrospective emotional responses to those years (see Table 1). In addition, utilizing an open-ended format, individuals were asked to describe their most and least enjoyable experiences while on the circuit. The data indicate that these athletes had quite mixed emotional responses to their competitive years. As Table 1 indicates, most athletes agreed that their competitive years were filled

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of competitive years</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
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<td>The best years of my life</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very frustrating</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filled with much stress</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filled with challenge/excitement</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'd give anything to go back</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>1.47</td>
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with challenge and excitement. However, a large number of these athletes also found those years quite stressful and frustrating. Moreover, when asked if they wished to return to those competitive years, 85% of the athletes disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Athletes were then asked to describe their most and least enjoyable experiences while on the tour. The most enjoyable experiences can be categorized into four major areas: winning, 50%; self-esteem, 25%; travel, 20%; and competition, 5%. Comments made by subjects regarding their least enjoyable experiences during those early years included the following:

Not one specific experience. Mostly it was the loneliness—it was constant and never-ending. I never felt close to anyone, including my family, because I was never able to tell anyone my deepest thoughts and feelings. I was beginning to tire of travel and being alone. I wanted roots and closer friends.

All the traveling and going from city to city, hotel to hotel.

Being alone so much and never having anyone to help me.

When not doing well, the way you are treated by the people running the game, the politics in the game, and putting up with players who are self-centered brats.

The frustration and uncertainty.

Snotty disrespectful attitude from a lot of the new kids.

Cutthroat competition—friend against friend.

The frustration and pressure on the tour came from several sources. One source of frustration, according to the informant, was the constant intensity and pressure players experienced due to the Women’s Tennis Association ranking system. The ranking is published every 2 weeks and determines not only which tournaments the athlete can participate in but also whether or not the athlete must compete in the qualifying rounds. In addition, the ranking becomes public record every 2 weeks; individual failure as well as success becomes common knowledge. The pressure is immense, and in the words of the informant, “The WTA ranking becomes everything.”

A second source of frustration on the tour was the degree of loneliness experienced by the athletes. According to the key informant, the lack of social networks was a major difference between the men’s and women’s professional tour. Specifically, she indicated that most of the female athletes traveled alone on the tour. In contrast to many of the male tennis athletes (at least those in the top 40), female athletes could not afford to bring spouses or mates along on the tour. And in most cases the spouses and mates were often establishing their own careers, leaving the female competitor on her own. In addition, the key informant indicated that the men and women on the tour related to fellow competitors in very different ways. Whereas many of the male competitors would socialize and go to bars together after a match, the female athletes would typically go back to their rooms and/or spend much time alone.

Data from the competitive years, then, indicate that these years were not nearly as glorious as the media portrays. Although there is much fun and excitement during the early stages of the professional career, frustration, pressure, and
loneliness begin to become a reality with which many of the athletes were not prepared to cope. As one subject indicated, "I stopped enjoying the competition at age 15, but didn’t know what else to do, and felt pressure from family and friends to stay on the circuit.

Reasons and Reactions to Retirement

In the final section of the questionnaire, players were asked to explain the major reason for their retirement. In addition they were asked to describe their psychological/emotional reactions to retirement.

Five major reasons emerged for retirement. As might be expected, these reasons were closely related to the least enjoyable experiences the athletes identified while on the tour: frustration, 40%; travel, 25%; injury, 15%; other opponents, 10%; age, 10%. Comments offered by the athletes included the following:

Wanted to settle down and stop traveling—I got married and began a family.
I was beginning to tire of traveling and being alone. I wanted roots, closer friends, and less laundry.
I didn’t have to retire but I wanted to because I was unhappy and I just didn’t want the grind and stress anymore.
Mental fatigue and discipline to keep in shape—wanted to stay home for a change.
Tired of being alone and struggling.
Chose to retire because I was no longer enjoying the competition and forgot how to win the close ones.
Boredom and couldn’t relate to the 12-year-olds on the tour.
I wasn’t happy.

And finally, when athletes were asked to respond to the question, "What was your first psychological/emotional response to retirement?" 50% indicated relief while another 30% indicated that they had feelings of isolation and loss of identity upon retirement from professional tennis. Comments offered by subjects included the following:

Relief and anticipation of something new and different in my life.
Yeah! No more traveling and I can be with my husband and make a nice home and settle down.
Relief I think, the pressure was off me once the decision was made and I had an exciting new life ahead of me.
Relief—scared about my parents’ response, anxiety about what I would do next—but relieved.
Lack of identity. Although I was a psychologist, I didn’t feel like one—I still felt like a player.
I believed my state [injury] was temporary. When I realized it was not, I was disoriented, unhappy, lonely, and anxious.
I felt a sense of loss and failure. My dream was shattered but I knew I had made the right decision.
As these statements indicate, the initial reactions to retirement were complex. On the one hand, the subjects indicated frustration and anxiety, but at the same time many of these tennis professionals saw retirement as an opportunity to reestablish a normal lifestyle in which relationships could be strengthened and stabilized. Retirement was perceived, then, as a positive rather than as a negative transition into a new life.

When asked to describe their current emotional response to their retirement, 50% indicated they felt a sense of satisfaction, and 40% indicated they experienced feelings of stability/acceptance with their decision. Only 2 subjects felt as though they had failed to accomplish their objectives as an athlete, and in both cases this retirement was unexpected due to injury. One reason that could explain the level of satisfaction experienced is that 15 of the 20 professionals (75%) had maintained contact with the game of tennis as either coaching or teaching professionals (7), promotion specialists (4), or assistant coaches for university teams (4). The other 5 subjects were full-time housewives.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The goal of this investigation was to identify and analyze elite female tennis professionals’ experiences and perceptions of their competitive years and their subsequent retirement from the sport. Despite the investigators’ early expectations, the process of retirement was not nearly as traumatic as might have been expected from an analysis of previous literature. In fact, many of the athletes had mixed emotions about their competitive years, and many indicated their first psychological response to retirement was one of relief. Many of the athletes perceived the end of their competitive careers as an opportunity to pursue a new set of roles and experiences that had not been as open or available to them while on the circuit. This is not to say that the athletes did not enjoy many aspects of their competitive days, or that some initial problems of readjustment may not have occurred. Rather, from the perspective of the athletes, retirement and the end to the pressures of the competitive tour opened up alternate avenues of personal investment.

One could suggest, of course, that the relief responses of these athletes were nothing more than intricate forms of rationalizing for declines in performance, winnings, and self-esteem (Brown, 1985). However, to insist on this interpretation is to force on the data and subjects a “retirement must be traumatic” model, that is, to suggest that athletes who did not view retirement as traumatic must have been failing and/or noncompetitive.

Instead, these data lend strong support to Prus’ (1984) life cycle model of athletic participation, in which the athletic role may be seen as a multiplicity of roles that either exist simultaneously or are substituted over time for alternate roles as part of a larger career scenario. For example, these athletes entered the tennis world at a very early age ($M=9.5$) and the level, length, and direction of tennis involvement unfolded or evolved through various phases. The phases themselves may not have been unidirectional, but the athletes may have perceived them as an evolving series of “forks in the road” where they were confronted with choices based on myriad factors (e.g., level of continued performance, professional contacts made, personal life choices).
Those choices and/or alternate roles may or may not have become increasingly attractive during the competitive tenure. Added to the potential range of career choices, there is the additional probability that the athletes experience a natural process of professional maturation while on the circuit. After a few years, the athletes come to know the demands of the tour in a much more objective fashion—the awe and rose-colored glasses soon fade. Thus, unless the tennis career is involuntary and/or unexpectedly ended (e.g., through injury), these athletes are likely to undergo a conscious and unconscious process of continual analysis and evaluation of the status of their careers. Data from this study indicate that many athletes are perhaps psychologically ready to establish a sense of normalcy and stability not available while on the circuit. If this is the case, then neither the gerontological nor the thanatological models apply to the present findings, because the athletes perceive opportunity rather than discontinuity (i.e., social death or total disengagement) at the time of retirement.

In addition to presenting an alternate interpretation to gerontological and thanatological theories of sport retirement (Greendorfer & Kleiber, 1982; Lerch, 1984; Rosenberg, 1981), these data suggest several other theoretical and methodological considerations for future research on this process. First, we must clarify conceptually what is meant by career and retirement in regard to sport participation. For example, many athletes in this study have shifted from competitive participation to teaching/coaching responsibilities. Are their (competitive) careers over or have they simply completed one phase of a normal career transition? As Haeerle (1975) suggests, careers can take on many forms, and care should be taken to define concepts before imposing an occupational framework on our athletic groups.

Second, in future investigations of sport retirement, we must begin to develop methodological strategies that will allow us to view more completely the inner workings of the sport world. Increased use of informants and increased use of scientist/participant research teams are two possible strategies. The insight of actual athletes are essential in defining and refining questions that may be meaningful for a particular group of athletes in a particular organizational structure (e.g., team vs. individual sports, player controlled vs. management controlled).

Third, future methods must allow us to identify the perceptions and experiences of athletes as they move through their competitive phases. This study, as well as most previous ones, has relied heavily on recall data. Beyond recall data, one approach that might prove beneficial is greater reliance on longitudinal cohort (e.g., age groupings) data sampling. As our informant indicated, the perceptions of young athletes just establishing themselves on the competitive tour are quite different from those of the veterans who have been on the tour for several years. The tennis world itself is undergoing constant change. Thus, conclusions about the process of retirement and/or disengagement must be intimately linked with an understanding of the nature of the experiences during the competitive years. Many of these competitive years were quite volatile and dynamic; performance would ebb and flow depending on a multitude of factors (e.g., level of competitors, psychological state, nagging injuries). Many athletes rank in the top 10 one year, then plummet, then rise again. Traditional cross-sectional analyses seldom consider the impact of such dynamics on perceptions of career and retire-
ment. Our methods must begin to understand both the evolution and dissolution of such careers as part of an ongoing process.

Finally, and perhaps most important, in order to further our understanding of the sport experience our methods must allow the athlete to describe the day-in and day-out routine of the competitive life. As with the media, the public tends to glorify the professional sport career and assume that when that career is over, psychological frustration must result. By allowing athletes to personalize and reflect on their experiences, both positive and negative, we can come to understand better the objective reality of their sport careers.

In conclusion, the data from this investigation present a very different perspective on the process of retirement by elite athletes—in this case the woman professional tennis athlete. The data indicate that many athletes welcome disengagement from their traditional competitive role because it has allowed them to pursue other life roles (Prus, 1984) which had been impeded by their athletic careers during their early years of development. Rather than a form of social death, these data lend credence to Coakley's (1983) supposition that retirement may in fact serve as a form of social rebirth. Thus, as part of a life course, disengagement from athletics may serve positive functions as well.

References


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