

## At the end of the match: exploring retirement of Italian football players

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*AL FINAL DEL PARTIDO: EXPLORANDO LA RETIRADA DE LOS JUGADORES DE FÚTBOL ITALIANOS*

**KEYWORDS:** Retirement, football players, social support, athletic identity, voluntariness and planning.

**ABSTRACT:** Retirement of Italian football players is unknown, thus, after analysing current literature about leaving from sport and using a Phenomenological-Interpretative approach we develop an explorative study on Italian former football players' experience of withdrawal. We interview 14 former players that competed in the highest level of Italian football Championship, to better understand their lived experience of retirement and compare it with literature. It emerges that the minority of football players choose voluntary to retire – except in the case when they enter into their Clubs as coaches or manager – and cannot plan retirement in advance; they share a strong athletic identity but the risk of identity foreclosure seems to be moderated by social support, especially from families and partners, while less from sport context (coach and teammates). Implications for future research in Italy and the work of sport psychologists and professional Clubs of football are discussed.

One of the most delicate athletic transition is retirement (Schlossberg, 1981; Coakley, 1983), which occurs very soon for athletes (Alfermann and Stambulova, 2012). Career termination can be lived as a positive or negative crisis transition (Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb, and Kettler, 2012; FEPSAC, 1999; Lavalley and Robinson, 2007; Wylleman, Alfermann, and Lavalley, 2004), where not just individual factors are important, but also relationships and social support can be fundamental resources (Baillie and Danish, 1992; Murphy, 2009). Literature underline that retirement, thus, is not a single event but rather a process (Sinclair and Orlick, 1993).

In Italy, athletic retirement is unexplored, so we set up a first explorative study on the main and more widespread sport in the country, from both the social and economic point of view: football (Centro Studi e Osservatori Statistici per lo Sport, 2016). In Italy, being a football player is a specific socio-

economic status, as no other sport is, identified with popularity and wealth.

Both at national and international there are few works on football player's retirement (Drawer and Fuller, 2002; Rintaugu and Mwisukha, 2011), and they focus mainly on the evaluation of career retirement' services offered by their sport organizations – if compared to other sport's athletes (Lally, 2007; Pallarés, Azócar, Torregrosa, Selva, and Ramis, 2011; Torregrosa, Boixadós, Valiente, and Cruz, 2004). We aim at exploring the process of career retirement of Italian football players and analysing if and how the factors identified in international literature can be convergent. We explore in particular some of the meaningful factors following literature, such as: athletic identity and voluntariness of retirement decision, as aspects influencing the quality of termination process, and pre-retirement planning and psychosocial support, as available resources during transition (Park et al., 2013).

## Method

### Participants

We involved 14 male former football players ( $M_{\text{age}}=48.1$ ). Using a convenience sampling, we selected players that competed at highest level of Italian football Championship, with the maximum variability in years from retirement ( $M_{\text{years from retirement}}=13.4$ ,  $sd=9.5$ ; min= six months, max= 31 years). 10 players competed in the first division of Italian Football Championship and in the National Team, two competed in the second division and two in the third.

### Procedure

Using a Phenomenological-Interpretative approach (Smith and Osborn, 2008), we set a semi-structured interview to explore players' retirement. IPA is used to study the meanings experiences, events, states hold for participants (Smith and Osborn 2008, p. 51). The interview framework was designed using literature review and the schedule include questions about experience, sense-making and specific factors of the process of career retirement. Interviews were collected within last two years, and last between 40 and 90 minutes. All interviewed give us informed consensus. Interviews were tape recorded, transcribed verbatim and undergone to a paper and pen content analysis.

### Data analysis

Analysis proceeded using the standard techniques of IPA (Smith and Osborn, 2008), in which raw textual codes are combined into linked themes, and finally condensed into master themes that hold across the full corpus of data. We divide the interviews into three steps: player's career, retirement and the post retirement life, until today. The analysis was then recurrently checked and revised by all authors until triangular consensus was achieved (Patton, 1990; Yardley 2000).

## Results

### Pre-retirement planning

All interviewed mention the impossibility to think about retirement or to a life after sport right during their career, preferring avoid distractions. It emerges a sort of lack of thinking about retirement, to avoid this negative moment and to protect the identity from a change that can take to a performance decrease. This seems also due to the high demands from the

competitive level they play. *"If you really want to be a football player, you must think only of that"*.

### Retirement's emotions

As cause of retirement six former players mention injuries, one mention negative feeling during training and matches and one a negative relationship with coach (not voluntary); only two affirm their voluntary decision to leave to enter the Club management and four affirm retire because of performance and motivation decrease (voluntary).

The eight former players that had a not voluntary retirement report mainly negative emotions – i.e. nostalgia, depression, closeness, sadness and confusion about their role:

*"You get depressed. You experience depression and crisis, because you don't know who you are anymore. This is the truth"*.

Six players that had a voluntary retirement, experience comfort, freeing, and describe the passage like something natural and gradual.

### Social support

Speaking about retirement, all former players state that the strict decision to leave football is taken by them alone, like something that grow in their mind especially during the last years of their career and then become shared with closest ones. They rarely discuss the choice with team mates or coaches - as retirement seems like a taboo in football context - while they share their decision firstly with their families, and only after with their coach, manager and team.

*"I share my decision with my family, my friends, but they hardly understand what you're feeling"*

Family, or partners, are important source of support from outside sport context, mentioned by all players after their decision taking, but still more important appear to be the perceived support from the sport context (i.e. from the actual or past Club, coach or manager).

### Athletic identity

Former players develop a strong athletic identity during their career, that support them in reaching and performing at high level, risking remaining fixed into their athletic role and experiencing difficulties in adapting to normal life.

During retirement players claim to have been supported by the closest people around them – family, partners, coach, or Club managers – that help them in orienting towards a new role within football context. Today, all but one former players work within

football as coach, manager, testimonial, soccer pundit or as observer, while only one is a businessman. If the athlete felt supported by the social environment, athletic identity becomes a protective factor within the process of development, allowing the growth of new skills. Contrary, the athlete could remain fixed in the athletic role, and losing the social and athletic status can be detrimental.

*“He [Club’s manager], has been important because after my injury he ask me if I would like to coach within the Club, and I appreciated it very much”*

## Discussion

This first exploration of football players retirement allows us to better understand what they experience during retirement and compare it with the literature, which is quite absent in football. We detach some commonalities with international literature, but also underline some peculiar aspects of the Italian footballers.

First: thinking about a future far away from their athletic role seems quite impossible, especially within high level Clubs’ players; this prevent retirement planning and forcing them to stay focalized on their performance until the very end. This impossibility to think about future and different roles, seem to hide also a defensive fear of players, as if it would be failure in their career.

Second: as literature state, when players experience not voluntary decision of retirement (i.e for injuries or bad relationships), they feel negative emotions (Zaichkowsky, King and McCarthy, 2000), but if they perceive strong social support (in particular from sport context), they can override such

difficulties and avoid social retirement (McKenna and Thomas, 2007), as prove by the positive outcome of all our sample.

Third: our sample confirm a strong athletic identity, that support them in their athletic achievement (Lavalée and Robinson, 2007) but, contrary to what literature affirm (Lally, 2007), not all our sample experience difficulties because of it: when the athlete feels not to be alone in the process of change and can entrust someone from his network, this strong athletic identity allows him to develop new skills to remain within sport, as coach or manager.

Social support, from sport and non-sport people, seem to soften the career retirement (Young, Pearce, Kane and Pain, 2006). It could be a key element that prevent players’ identity foreclosure or mental discomfort in the moment of retirement. From our interviews, it emerges that support from sport context is essential, because all former players recognize its importance, not only when the retirement is voluntary. When retirement is not voluntary, who has been supported by sport context succeed better in transition, while who do not feel support experience more difficulties in the process.

One of the limitation of this research is that the sample is not uniform in the number of years from retirement. For future research, it could be interesting to compare players who retire from different amount time, set up longitudinal research with athletes before, during and after retirement, or explore other factors impacting career retirement.

It seems necessary to further analyse retirement in Italy, as the issue is quite relevant for sport psychologists that work with professional athletes and coaches’ education (Gozzoli, Frascaroli, D’Angelo, and Licari, 2014; Frascaroli, Gozzoli, and D’Angelo, 2016), that should be sensitize toward the theme.

## AL FINAL DEL PARTIDO: EXPLORANDO LA RETIRADA DE LOS JUGADORES DE FÚTBOL ITALIANOS

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Retirada, jugadores de fútbol, apoyo social, identidad atlética, voluntariedad y planificación.

**RESUMEN:** La retirada de jugadores de fútbol en Italia es desconocida. Así, después de analizar la literatura actual y usando un enfoque fenomenológico-interpretativo, desarrollamos un estudio exploratorio sobre esta experiencia de los ex-jugadores de fútbol italiano. Entrevistamos a 14 ex-jugadores, que compitieron en el más alto nivel del Campeonato de Fútbol italiano, para comprender su experiencia de jubilación y compararla con la literatura. La minoría de jugadores de fútbol eligen voluntariamente retirarse - excepto en el caso de que entren a sus clubes como entrenadores o gestores - y no quieren planificar la jubilación anticipadamente. Comparten una fuerte identidad atlética, pero el riesgo de exclusión de identidad parece ser moderado por el apoyo social, especialmente de las familias, pero menos del contexto deportivo (entrenador y compañeros de equipo). Se discuten las implicaciones para futuras investigaciones en Italia y el trabajo de psicólogos deportivos y clubes profesionales de fútbol.

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