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The Duration of the Sports Career as a Determinant of the Second Professional Career

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Abstract

Theoretical background: A sports career is a specific activity because it starts at an early age, lasts a relatively short time, and usually athletes are most successful when their peers are just starting to develop their typical professional careers. In previous research on the second careers of ex-athletes, mainly the top performers were described, forgetting that many athletes play in the lower leagues and sport is also their main profession. In this study, athletes who played at different levels of competition were analysed.
Purpose of the article: The article aims to determine how the length of a sports career affects the second professional career of former athletes.
Research methods: The studied population were Polish basketball players of working-age after finishing their sports careers. The survey was conducted online in 2021 and 301 people took part in it. The average duration of a sports career of participants was 10.13 years. Former basketball players were divided into 2 groups according to their career length. The first group consisted of those whose basketball careers lasted at least 10 years (160 people), and the second group consisted of those whose careers were shorter than 10 years (141 people).
Main findings: Former players whose sports careers lasted for at least 10 years are more satisfied with them than those whose sports careers were shorter, but they assess their current career prospects worse.

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It may result from the fact that among those whose sports careers were shorter, a greater percentage have higher education. The results also show that those whose basketball careers were longer, are now more likely to work in the field of sport. In conclusion, it can be said that earlier retirement from sports, favours to a greater extent university graduating and also allows a faster transition to a second professional career.

Introduction

A sports career is a specific activity because it starts early in life, lasts relatively short, and the greatest successes usually occur when non-athlete peers are just starting to climb the steps of a typical professional career (Lenartowicz, 2009). Usually, around 35 years of age (depends on the sport) former players face the challenge of starting new work, often outside of sports, competing with mostly better-educated and prepared people. Ending a sports career and moving to other professions is usually a demanding and stressful task (Brown, Webb, Robinson, & Cotgreave, 2019; Carapinheira, Mendes, Carvalho, & Travassos, 2019). It should also be added that despite the prevailing belief that professional athletes receive very high salaries, only a few of them can secure themselves financially for life.

This article deals with the subject of the second career of former professional athletes. It can be said that they are young retirees because they can no longer practice their profession, i.e. play sports professionally. On the other hand, most of these people have to retrain, find a new job and start a so-called second career. The study group consisted of 301 former Polish basketball players. The purpose of the article is to determine how the length of a sports career affects the second professional career of former athletes. Career length is an important factor because it has been assumed that the longer a person plays sports professionally, the more difficult it may be to adjust to the demands of a new job.

Literature review

In the literature on the subject, such factors as education, social origin, social capital, marital status, gender, and psychological characteristics are often listed as determinants of a person's situation in the labor market (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Ng & Feldman, 2014). However, it should be noted that a sports career is a rather specific occupation. According to the literature on the subject, the professional transition of athletes is differentiated by sport identity, the length of the career, the main reason for its termination, and the degree of satisfaction with it (Cosh, Crabb, & Lecouteur, 2013; Kuettel, Boyle, & Schmid, 2017). It is also worth adding that some professional athletes already carry out a parallel earning activity during their sports careers (e.g. participate in advertising, set up their own companies), and the dual career of athletes (e.g. combining sports with education) is also becoming more and more common (Debois, Ledon, & Wylleman, 2015). The government and

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the various sports associations are also trying to provide programs to assist former athletes in taking up new jobs (Żyśko, 2013). Undoubtedly, these activities can help former athletes, but now and then the media shows examples of former top athletes struggling to adapt to a new reality (BBC Sport, 2018). Some studies conducted in the best leagues in the world also show that despite high earnings during their sports careers, many athletes quickly get into financial trouble (Torre, 2009). Some leagues – such as the NBA (Kennedy, 2020) – try to deal with this problem themselves by introducing a retirement system for their players, but this is still very rare.

It is worth mentioning that more and more research indicate that physical activity is important for work, for example, by playing sports a person can develop certain competencies (e.g. perseverance), build social capital and positively affect physical and mental health (Bailey, Hillman Arent, & Petitpas, 2013; Lechner & Sari, 2015; Metelski, 2018, 2019, 2020). However, the impact of amateur rather than professional sport was most often analyzed. This study, *inter alia*, makes it possible to assess whether the positive impact of sport on work also applies to professional sport. It is also worth considering whether perhaps team sports better prepare for later work, or on the contrary – individual sports? It seems that team sports, such as basketball, may give an advantage because competencies such as the ability to work in a group or communication skills are very important in the modern labor market (Root, 2019).

In studies of the second careers of ex-athletes, the top performers were most often described (Carlson, Kim, Lusardi, & Camerer, 2015; Knights, Sherry, & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Ramos, De Subijana, Barriopedro, & Muniesa, 2017; Torre, 2009), forgetting that many athletes play in the lower leagues and sport is also their main job. In this study, former basketball players who played basketball at different levels of competition were selected for the study group. And, thus, in the studied group there were, among others, players who represented Poland in the national team, but also those who played only, for example, in the second division. When reviewing the literature on the subject, it should be concluded that there is a gap in this area.

Research methods

An analysis of the source material (archival league tables and team squads) allowed to conclude that the average retirement age for basketball players is 35. On the other hand, the retirement age in Poland is 60 years for women and 65 years for men. After the end of their sports careers, the former players have to, on average, work for the next 30 years to reach retirement age. The population studied were Polish basketball players (of working age after the end of their sporting careers), who played in four different league levels in Poland: Ekstraklasa, 1, 2, and 3 leagues. The survey study was conducted online in 2021, and 301 people took part in it. When starting the study, it was assumed that a longer sports career may make it more difficult for former players to move to a new job. Therefore, the following hypothesis

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was formulated: a longer sports career negatively affects the second professional career of former athletes.

The average duration of a sports career of participants was 10.13 years. Former basketball players were divided into 2 groups according to their career length. The first group consisted of those whose basketball career lasted at least 10 years (160 people), and the second group consisted of those whose career was shorter than 10 years (141 people). Microsoft Excel 2019 and IBM SPSS Statistics 26 were both used to process the quantitative data of research.

Results

One of the factors that affect the career transition of former athletes is the degree of satisfaction with their sports careers (Kuettel et al., 2017). Therefore, it was decided to check to what extent former basketball players are satisfied with their sports careers. It turns out that people whose sports career lasted at least 10 years are more satisfied with it than people whose career was shorter. It is especially visible in the case of the "very satisfied" answer, where the percentage in the first group was over three times higher. A detailed distribution of responses is presented in Table 1. The career duration turned out to be a factor that significantly differentiates the level of satisfaction with sports careers. The following results of the Mann–Whitney U test were obtained: $U = 8414.50$; $Z = -4.09$; $p < 0.001$.

Table 1. The level of satisfaction with a sports career and the duration of a sports career

Sports career satisfaction	At least 10 years	Less than 10 years
Very satisfied	11.9% (n = 19)	3.5% (n = 5)
Satisfied	51.9% (n = 83)	39.0% (n = 55)
Hard to say	27.5% (n = 44)	39.7% (n = 56)
Dissatisfied	8.1% (n = 13)	16.3% (n = 23)
Very dissatisfied	0.6% (n = 1)	1.4% (n = 2)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The second analyzed factor was whether the current work of former basketball players is related to sports. The results show that those whose basketball careers were longer are now more likely to work in the field of sport. It is also worth noting how many former basketball players had to retrain since the vast majority of them now work in jobs not related to sports. A detailed distribution of the respondents' answers is presented in Table 2. The obtained results are statistically significant, as the following value of the chi^2 was obtained: chi^2 (1, N = 299) = 14.05; $p < 0.001$.

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Table 2. The relation between current work and sport and the duration of a sports career

Is your current job related to sports?	At least 10 years	Less than 10 years
Yes	40.9% (n = 65)	20.7% (n = 29)
No	59.1% (n = 94)	79.3% (n = 111)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The study also analyzed the level of education of former professional basketball players. The results show that the vast majority of them have higher education, and it is particularly visible in the group of those whose sports career was shorter than 10 years – 85.8%. An interesting result is also that all former basketball players had at least secondary education. Detailed results are presented in Table 3. It turned out that results are statistically significant: chi^2 (1, N = 301) = 10.72; $p = 0.001$.

Table 3. The level of education and the duration of a sports career

Level of education	At least 10 years	Less than 10 years
Higher	70.0% (n = 112)	85.8% (n = 121)
Secondary	30.0% (n = 48)	14.2% (n = 20)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The last analyzed factor was the satisfaction with career prospects. The results show that people with a sports career shorter than 10 years show higher levels of satisfaction with their present career prospects. The biggest difference between the two groups could be observed in the case of the "very satisfied" answer. Table 4 presents a detailed distribution of the respondents' answers.

Table 4. The level of satisfaction with career prospects and the duration of a sports career

Level of satisfaction with career prospects	At least 10 years	Less than 10 years
Very satisfied	20.6% (n = 33)	30.5% (n = 43)
Satisfied	54.4% (n = 87)	50.4% (n = 71)
Hard to say	20.0% (n = 32)	16.3% (n = 23)
Dissatisfied	3.8% (n = 6)	2.8% (n = 4)
Very dissatisfied	1.3% (n = 2)	0.0% (n = 0)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The duration of a sports career turned out to be a factor that significantly differentiates the level of satisfaction with career prospects. The following results of the Mann–Whitney U test were obtained: $U = 9889.00$; $Z = -2.02$; $p < 0.043$. It should be stated that people whose sports careers were shorter than 10 years assess their future career prospects better than people whose sports careers lasted for at least 10 years.

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Discussion

The study aimed to analyze whether the duration of a sports career affects some aspects of a second career. When starting the study, it was expected that a longer sports career might cause some problems for former players when moving to a second job, such as the difficulty of adapting. On the other hand, a long sports career largely allows players to accumulate some savings for the future, which may also help in calmly looking for a second job. This paper highlights interesting aspects of the relationship between the duration of a sports career and a second career.

First of all, it is worth noting that the former players whose sports careers lasted at least 10 years are more satisfied with it. This relationship is not surprising, as it can be assumed that players who played basketball for many years did it for important reasons, such as higher earnings, better position on the team, better health, etc. People who played for less than 10 years often had to end their sports careers due to injury or could not find an appropriate club, so it could undoubtedly contribute to their lower satisfaction with it. According to the literature on the subject, satisfaction with a sports career is one of the conditions for a positive professional transition of athletes (Kuettel et al., 2017).

The study also showed that former players who played for at least 10 years, now more often work with sports. This can be explained in two ways. Firstly, by playing for many years, they have gained unique experience that they can now use at work as coaches, sports managers, etc. Secondly, a very long basketball career can make it difficult to find any job outside of sports. However, it is worth noting that the vast majority of former players had to find a new job outside of sports. Previous research also showed that only a few former players can find a job in sports, for example, by becoming a coach (Metelski & Kaźmierczyk, 2020).

An interesting result is also that most of the former basketball players who participated in the study have higher education, and a higher percentage in this regard was recorded in the group whose basketball careers were shorter than 10 years. It is worth underlining that education is one of the factors that influence a person's position in the labor market (Judge et al., 1995). In the study, it was also checked whether the duration of a sports career has an impact on the current assessment of one's career prospects. The results show that people who played shorter than 10 years assess their career prospects much better. Perhaps this is because they ended their sports careers relatively early and, thus, had more time to adapt to the requirements of the labor market and gain appropriate professional experience. Undoubtedly, it may also be influenced by the fact that almost 86% of them have higher education. In conclusion, it can be said that the hypothesis that a longer sports career negatively affects the second professional career of former athletes has been partially confirmed.

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Conclusions

Summing up, it should be stated that the duration of a sports career affects the second professional career. First of all, former players whose sports careers lasted for at least 10 years are more satisfied with them than those whose sports careers were shorter, but they assess their current career prospects worse. It may result from the fact that among those whose sports careers were shorter, a greater percentage have higher education. It, therefore, seems that an earlier retirement from sports may favor to a greater extent university graduating and also allow a faster transition to a second professional career.

It is worth adding that it is often difficult for an athlete to undertake sufficient actions necessary for retraining because sports success requires intensive training and participation in numerous competitions. It is also worth noting that only 21% of people whose sports careers were shorter than 10 years are currently working in the field of sports. In the group who played basketball for more than 10 years, this percentage is much higher – 41%. These numbers show how many former players have to retrain after the end of their sports careers. It also underlines how important it should be for all athletes to be aware that the sports careers are relatively short and that they have many more years ahead of them in other jobs. Finally, it is worth noting that this study focused on former basketball players, and in subsequent studies it would be worth checking whether similar relationships also occur in other sports. Further research could also take into account other factors that may affect the professional transition of former athletes, such as the personality of the players, injuries or the results achieved by their teams.

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