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The Impact of Retirement Status on Athletic Identity and Performance Expectations: A study of Paralympic Swimmers at a Major International Competition

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Abstract: Retirement status has been found to have an impact upon the athletic identity of elite athletes as they make the transition from active participation in sport through to retirement. The psychological construct of athletic identity has been shown to be a key variable in both the quality of an athlete’s performance and his or her adjustment to post-sport life. Although high levels of athletic identity have been positively associated with athletic performance, the quality of an athlete’s adjustment to retirement is facilitated if athletic identity decreases. Recent studies have shown athletic identity to decrease significantly as athletes begin to consider retiring from their sport, resulting in a relatively smooth transition to retirement. However, the impact of these changes on an athlete’s self-set performance goals and subsequent performance has not yet been explored. The current study aimed to track the retirement status, athletic identity, performance expectations, and psychological well-being of Paralympic swimmers competing in a major international competition. Participants were 17 Australian Paralympic swimmers (6 females) who competed at the IPC 2013 World Championships. Participants were surveyed at three different time-points: one week prior to the World Championships, the day after each athlete finished competing, and one month post-competition. The survey collected demographic (age; gender) and retirement status information (retirement plans over the next 4 years), as well as athlete training and performance information (training hours per week; self-set performance goals). Four well-validated questionnaires assessing athletic identity, stress, life satisfaction, and self-esteem were also included. Non-parametric statistics were used to investigate differences for each of the constructs in relation to retirement status. Participants who were considering retiring from sport were found to have significant lower levels of athletic identity than those athletes who were not considering retirement at the initial time-point. In addition, 45% of the athletes with no plans to retire performed within 1 second of their self-set goal time for their strongest swimming event, as compared to only 17% of the athletes who were considering retiring. Implications of these and other findings will be discussed.

Keywords: Athletic Identity Career Transition Paralympic Athletes Performance Expectations