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An investigation of athletic identity, career choices and decision-making difficulties of Australian elite athletes

Introduction: Career planning and development is a particularly salient issue in regards to elite athletes. Although many of these individuals may devote much of their lives to their dream of becoming a professional athlete, there are limited long-term opportunities to build a career in this area. It is therefore important that athletes continue to actively explore a variety of vocational options. Engagement in career-planning activities has also been found to have positive repercussions for athletes in relation to psychosocial development and performance. Studies have revealed, however, that the physical and psychological commitment required to be successful in elite sport can restrict athletes from exploring these options. Individuals with a strong athletic identity have been found to be less likely to plan for their future vocations before retirement, with young male athletes involved in high-revenue sports, such as football, golf, and tennis, identified as being more likely to avoid such planning. High levels of athletic identity have also been shown to be significantly related to particular types of career decision-making difficulties experienced by younger athletes. These difficulties include general indecisiveness, and a lack of knowledge about occupations. The current study aimed to explore the career decision-making difficulties of Australian elite athletes from different age groups (teenage/emerging adults/adults) and sports, and the relationship these difficulties may share with their levels of athletic identity. The types of career choices being considered by these athletes were also explored. Method: The participants in the study were 908 athletes on sporting scholarships linked with the Australian Institute of Sport. Participants were surveyed using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale and the Career Decision Difficulties Questionnaire. Results/Discussion: Career decision-making difficulties were found to decrease significantly with age. The strongest relationships between athletic identity levels and career decision-making difficulties were found to occur for athletes aged between 18-25 years. Only a small percentage of athletes identified the occupation of being a "Professional athlete" as the only career option they were willing to consider in the future. These and other findings will be discussed.