

*Report*

## Development of Japanese women professional soccer athletes' second career training

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe, explain, and recommend how women's professional soccer players and clubs could prepare for second career transitions in a way that minimizes psychosocial crises upon retirement. The Japan Women's Empowerment Professional Football League (called the WE league) was founded with a mission to contribute towards building a sustainable society through promoting female social participation and enhancing diversity and choice. This study suggested training strategies that could foster second career development in the WE league. These strategies are (a) including theoretical frameworks in second career pathways, (b) the necessity of dual education pathways for Japanese women's professional athletes, (c) promoting virtual internship experiences for Japanese women's professional athletes, and (d) recommendations of second career training workshops for professional athletes in the WE League. The WE League and teams should allow professional athletes to improve meaningful skills and knowledge development, multiple experiential learning opportunities, and applicable training on second career development. Due to the paucity of research in this area, it is essential for scholars to further explore potential education and internships opportunities to ease transitions to second careers upon retirement.

**Keywords:** Soccer, Second Career, Professional Athletes, Gender.

### 1. Introduction

The termination of professional athletes' career is a salient transition in an athlete's life that can be highly distressing (Cosh, Crabb, LeCouteur, & Kettler, 2012) and require second career intervention and psychological support. Many professional athletes experience a crisis in self and social position post retirement (e.g., lack of sense of belonging, social isolation) as they fear being unable to use knowledge and skills learned in professional sport within a second career (Ando et al., 2022). This can lead to the athlete withdrawing from their sport completely and be susceptible to negative self-evaluation (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). In the realm of professional sport, this is particularly concerning as the vast majority of athletes have relatively short careers and require a second career to support themselves thereafter (Stambulova, Ryba, & Henriksen, 2020). Thus far, research and training on how to support and prepare professional sports persons (in particular female athletes) transition to a second career is lacking, perhaps due to the historically gendered bias towards male athletes compared to female (Bekker et al., 2018). There is also a dearth of research regarding professional female athletes compared to male in general which may be attributed to both a much shorter legacy of professionalism within female sport (Lovse et al., 2020), but also patriarchal systems and norms that situate male sport as in some way superior to female sport (Norman & Simpson, 2022). This is still evident through the inequitable wage gap that exists between male and female athletes in many sports (Agha & Berri, 2021).

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Female athletes tend to be paid much less than men and are afforded a much shorter gap between retirement and the necessity of a second career to financially support themselves. As professional female athletes' transition to second careers is still underrepresented in the sport and kinesiology literature, this limits practitioners' ability to adopt and apply a second career approach when working with professional female athletes (Emmonds, Heyward, & Jones, 2019).

The termination of a professional sporting career may occur due to aging, deselection from the player roster or list, sudden injuries, or social and financial reasons (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). For many, the decision was not theirs and may occur due to a traumatic incident (e.g., injury) resulting in an immediate and unexpected end to their athletic role and identity (Phoenix, Faulkner, & Sparkes, 2005). Such an experience can cause grief and the triggering of poor mental health. Indeed, Stambulova et al (2009) concluded that 15-20% of retired athletes experienced psychological distress upon career transitions that necessitated professional psychological support. This may be attributed to general anxiety accompanying dramatic changes in employment status and job role, self-identity, self-confidence, a shift in social status (e.g., from having experience and being respected, to being inexperienced and having to earn respect), and forms of intra-and interorganizational mobility (Yao et al., 2020). The consequent grief, loss of self, and social position could significantly impact the athlete's welfare as they lose their life narrative and experience a crisis of self (Stambulova, Pehrson, & Olsson, 2017). To avoid this, scholars and practitioners have advocated for athlete training and support to prepare them for retirement and transition from first to second careers (Gordon, 1995). Efforts thus far, however, have focused mainly on male athletes which is problematic considering the already gender-privileged arena that is professional sport. McCormack and Walseth (2013), for example, concluded that male soccer players received more training, preparation and opportunities for second career pathways within sport. These authors described a transition whereby retired or retiring players were placed into well-paid coaching or sport administration roles as they were perceived to have the essential knowledge and skills required to fulfill these roles due to playing professional soccer. In contrast, Harrison, Vickers, Flecher, & Taylor, (2020) noted significant gender inequalities among female soccer players and, despite also having knowledge and skills developed from their sporting career, these individuals struggled to find any pathway to a second career in their sport.

It is apparent that the gendered history of professional sport, increased value of male athletes past experiences and inequitable wages during a professional sports career provides female soccer players with a greater need to quickly and successful transfer to a second career. Indeed, the potentially poor wages female soccer players received throughout their career compared to men may necessitate the need for a dual career pathway to ensure survival. Within the wider context of female employment in Japan (the focus of this paper), female soccer players' career trajectory post retirement is even more important as according to Assmann (2014), in Japan, in general, 60 to 70 percent of women have non-regular employment (part time), low salaries (as two million yen (\$18,000) resulting in many social and psychological disadvantages. It has many disadvantages and often results in salaries that are as low As a result, an exploration of how female professional soccer players may be supported during and after their retirement to find employment is essential.

## **2. The Japan women's empowerment professional football league (WE League)**

Using the Japan Women's Empowerment Professional Football League (called WE league) as a case study, the purpose of this paper was to describe, explain, and recommend how women's professional soccer players and clubs could prepare for second career transitions. The WE League is the first fully professional women's football league in Japan and had its inaugural season in 2021-2022 (FIFA, 2021). Historically, there was no professional team sport for women in Japan, but for over 30 years the semi-professional Nadeshiko League consisted of three divisions and 32 teams in total. However, very few Nadeshiko players had never been paid, and the vast majority of players worked full time jobs to support themselves. With a social mission focus to craft a more sustainable, diverse and equitable approach to female sport and social participation (Japan Time, 2021), the WE league integrated specific policies within its structure to enhance the professionalism of female soccer players. For example, one policy required each team to include at least 15 professional players who signed professional contracts, and at least five of these 15 players had to earn the equivalent of at least \$50,000 annually. Further, at least one team executive member had to be female (Asahi News Paper, 2020). While WE League desired to enhance gender equity in professional sport, it is necessary to explore how WE can also support athletes upon retirement.

## **3. Theoretical framework in second career path in soccer**

Theories were formulated to predict, describe and explain phenomena and, to challenge and extend existing knowledge within the limits of bonded critical assumptions (Abend, 2008). Further, there is no theory-free knowledge to lived experience, nor how people see the world around them (Smith & Sparkes, 2016) (for example, professional female soccer players). Although there is no specific theoretical framework exploring second career transitions among

professional female athletes, we were informed by numerous theories that have been used in similar contexts. For example, Ando et al (2022) used occupational socialization theory to explore the acculturation, professional socialization, and organizational socialization of a professional sport team, and influential factors that contributed to an athlete's behaviors and decisions (such as choosing to retire; Richards, Templin, & Graber, 2014). By exploring the occupational socialization of professional female soccer players, they investigated social situation and perceived norms and values in a 'workplace' (in this case a professional soccer team) that were disrupted when they were required to transition to a second career.

Also, Collins and Stockton (2018), stated a theoretical framework in second career studies should focus on four different dimensions; a) provide focus and organization to the study, b) expose and obstruct meaning, c) connect the study to existing scholarship and terms, and d) identify strength and weaknesses. This framework was not, however, within the context of sport. For a more specific context (or bounded assumptions) in second career transitions in sport, Lavalle & Robinson, (2007) advocated for other potential frameworks, and these may be more beneficial for framing Japanese women's second career transition in sport. For example, in activity theory (Rosenberg, 1981), professional athletes may retire from soccer but they apply their knowledge, skills, and motivations to new sporting activities which help maintain a sense of self and presence in a desired life domain. Alternatively, continuity theory (Lerch, 1981) assesses and predicts professional athletes' ability and level of adjustment for retirement based on the significance of sport in their life and how they adapt to new life situations. Many theorists have also used death theory as a lens to explore, describe and explain professional athletes' psychological patterns when they were recovering and rehabilitating from injury (Wiese-Bjornstal & Smith, 1993). However, these frameworks have been explored in a much more privileged, established sporting context (men's sport) that often has clear pathways for retirement, or numerous opportunities for players to develop skills in preparation for a second career in sport, such as coaching. This is not yet present in a female sporting context and professional female athletes oftentimes must learn new skills and undertake trainings *during* their professional career to ensure financial and social stability upon retirement – in many instances within employment completely different from sport (Ando et al., 2022). To address this, past work has advocated for second career training facilitated through professional soccer teams to prepare players for life and work after their sporting career had ended (Flannery, 1995; Ando et al., 2022). To promote second career training for professional athletes, andragogy (the teaching of adults) is an effective and important theory that describes athletes' learning experiences through second career training and professional development while they belong to the professional soccer teams (Knowles, 1989). This is a theory we drew upon heavily throughout our work.

#### **4. The necessity of dual education pathway for Japanese women's professional athletes**

According to Ryba, Ronkainen, Douglas, and Aunola (2021), elite professional soccer athletes may follow one of three career trajectories; (a) focusing exclusively on sport, (b) combining sport and education/work while prioritizing sport-based development, and (c) constructing a stable dual career pathway. These athletes were based in Finland, however, and it is essential to appreciate cultural sensitivity when doing any research in social or national contexts (Ryba et al., 2013). For example, when we compare the above career pathways and trajectories to Japanese pathways, Japanese professional athletes were mainly focused purely on sport or a dual career (discussed in the next section). They did not focus on higher education (undergraduate to graduate degrees) while they were in offseason. This is an oversight as according to Cross and Fouke (2019), professional athletes should become part time students to develop physically, intellectually, and emotionally, and experience being committed to high-level engagement in more than one domain. Drawing from an andragogical framework, college or university courses have traditionally been taught in face-to-face formats where the instructor and students physically meet in classrooms weekly to engage in discussion and experiential exercises on a certain topic (Gilbert, Schiff, & Cunliffe, 2013). However, professional athletes have limited free time during the on-season with demands associated with training practice, traveling, matches and other commitments. Face-to-face meetings may not therefore be feasible. To address this, on demand distance education that makes educational training available online anytime may be an appropriate adaptation. This provides a more efficient and effective method for professional development linked to second careers as this can be completed around their lifestyle and prescheduled commitments (Sato & Haegele, 2019). Further, players may benefit from an on demand distance education approach that involves sharing ideas and resources with classmates via an online, interactive bulletin board discussion, multiple perspectives and conceptual understandings linked to second career pathway opportunities in higher education (Agee & Smith, 2011). Although it may be difficult to build the dual educational system in professional leagues in Japan, it is important to consider athletes' desired future career plans so they can prepare for this eventuality, feel empowered by choice, and facilitate this choice through higher or vocational education.

#### **5. Promoting virtual internship experiences for Japanese women's professional athletes**

Through internship experiences as well as commitments to education, the WE League may need to allow players to access professional development opportunities to further complement their education during *on and off* seasons

(Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). More specifically, the WE League may need to suggest and recommend that professional athletes enroll in a college or university internship to gain experience of either a dual or future career pathway and/or graduate school opportunities. For example, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign developed workshops and internships for elite athletes related to possible future career opportunities within sport including nutrition, food, behavioural habits, scientific measurement of athletic performance, facility management and techniques, and life experiences (Fighting Illinois Sport Camps and Clinics, 2015). Therefore, as well as promoting education, the WE League could encourage internship experiences in higher education to help professional athletes gain mentoring, knowledge, experiences and skills of possible future career paths post retirement. Internships may also be completed outside of a higher education facility. However, as noted, time demands, lack of autonomy, and professional commitments may stand in the way of players undertaking any development outside of professional soccer obligations. To address this, a *virtual* internship during both on and off seasons for professional athletes may help build capabilities, skills and demonstrate players' own hands-on learning experience (Jaime, Olarte, Garcia-Izquierdo, & Dominguez, 2020). Through virtual internship experiences, professional athletes may develop effective communication, planning, organization, and clear expectations from employers, supervisors, and mentors (Koopman, Emmett, & Sanderlin, 2021). Bayerlein and Jeske (2018) explained that although virtual interns gained less effective and skill-based learning, virtual internships offered greater access and convenience for learning that can be address with career practices and technology choices (using various social network services). Thus, virtual internship allows professional athletes increase access to available learning environments and met their unique needs.

While higher education is desirable, this is not accessible or appropriate for all and other options are required for a second career. Based on our study (Ando et al., 2022), several female soccer players required 'dual careers' where they held other paid employment in addition to soccer. This was encouraged by the teams of the WE League, and was something participants valued; dual career arrangements were perceived to be important for financial and career stability. One desirable second career pathway was to coach soccer as (similar to literature regarding men's soccer), players believed they had the skill, insight and experience that would enable them to help other players develop. However, many acknowledged that they were unable to prepare or train for coaching opportunities as they had roles and responsibilities to fulfill as professional soccer players. Indeed, players who pursued coaching qualifications during their professional career had to sacrifice playing time as they were not afforded leave to do so. Some players were unable to devote time to coaching qualifications as they needed additional jobs for financial stability. These jobs at times were in a different domain to sport (e.g., office worker) and for some players, provided a clear and desired second career pathway into office work when retirement was needed (Ando et al., 2022). However, exposure to other work domains did not necessitate a change in career among all players. Similar to Lavalley & Robinson (2007), socioculturally a profession soccer career was deemed as more successful and impressive than an office career, while office work was done purely to add necessary income. Players in both studies expressed fear that without another option for a second career, office work was their own pathway and that in transitioning from part-time to full-time office work they would lose their sense of identity, self and purpose.

The WE league has hired many professional athletes who hold dual career status (e.g., professional soccer player and office administrator). Ando et al. (2022) found that this dual career pathway was ubiquitous as professional soccer players perceived having a more balanced lifestyle, gained competences to prioritize and plan post career, and better chances for a future after retirement. However, holding a dual career requires intense time and effort, as well as pressures from responsibilities, expectations, coaches, teammates, and bosses from both careers (Kuttel, Christensen, Zysko, & Hansen, 2018). Plus, athletes may struggle to manage different demands resulting in burnout, dropout, and mental health issues (Sallen, Hemming, & Richartz, 2018). While it is beyond the scope of this article to suggest how burnout and financial burdens may be reduced to better support players that require a dual career, the WE League may be able to offers players development opportunities early in their career to help inform which dual career to undertake if this is a necessity.

The WE league may, however, struggle and hesitate to offer effective and appropriate second career training or professional development workshops due to a lack of resources, fragile systems or foundations of practice, or lack of external supports that covers relevant education, internships and/or opportunities for professional athletes. More specifically, the WE league may be uncertain about the theoretical basis and associated professional training required to facilitate a successful workshop that takes into consideration the age and cognitive abilities of different athletes. Therefore, objectives must be clear, measurable, and specific, so that professional athletes, coaches, and teams determine when and how they tackle and solve problems in relation to second career training.

## **6. Recommendations of second career training workshop for professional athletes in the WE League**

Many second career training programs had goals and objectives that align with professional athletes' expectations and ideal image of their career success (Dwyer, 2004). As such, it is essential to consider the athlete's perspectives, desires and learning experiences in order to create workshops that meet their personal and professional needs. To do so, this study recommends that second career training workshops be designed based on andragogy theory (Knowles, 1989). Specifically within the context of teaching and training professional athletes for second careers, this theory helps us appreciate what and how players may best learn, and motivations for them to continue learning. Gonzalez (2017) explained several principals of how to apply andragogy theory to second career training and development. These were a) assess needs, b) involve professional athletes in training plans, c) connect to experiences, d) make it relevant, e) evaluate learning outcomes. How this may be applied in the context of andragogy for female professional players in the WE league is:

A: Professional teams are encouraged to use informal assessment and find baseline knowledge levels of their career paths.

B: After assessing knowledge gaps between ideals second careers and the reality of that second career, teams must coproduce second career workshops and training with players to ensure their needs are met. This will encourage athletes to engage in learning and gain more satisfaction through training.

C: Second career workshops should be contextual and involve specific problem- based exercises that players have and will experience in their second career.

D: The coaches and teams must plan second career workshop goals and objectives that match the requirements of desired second careers, be such that professional athletes can connect learning and training to career requirements and goals, and gain a greater sense of satisfaction.

E: Assessing and evaluating workshops is essential for identifying strengths, weaknesses and areas of improvements for future workshops. The teams and coaches must consider amendments to workshops based on using data of athletes' intended and successful learning outcomes before the beginning and end of the workshops respectively (Mahajan & Kaur Sarjit Singh, 2017).

## 7. Conclusion

In order to minimize social break down during post-retirement for professional athletes, a dual career pathway can provide numerous social, health related, psychological and developmental benefits reasons (Harrison at al., 2020). More specifically, professional athletes typically follow one of three trajectories: a) focusing exclusively on sport; b) combining sport and education/work while prioritizing sport-based development; and c) constructing a professional development of career pathway (Ryba, Ronkainen, Douglas, & Aunola, 2021), but within a female, Japanese soccer context, this is currently lacking. In this article, we provided recommendations for how professional female soccer players in the WE league may be better supported and prepared for seconds careers post retirement. The WE League and teams should facilitate the meaningful development of professional athletes' skills and knowledge, multiple experiential learning opportunities, and appropriate training on second career development. Due to the paucity of research in this area, it is essential for scholars to further explore follow-up education and internships to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies.

## Author Contributions

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