

Stellenbosch University

Research Project

Life After Sport

Research conducted at the 2024 African games in Ghana

Commissioned by Maties Sport in collaboration with:

The Centre for Sport Leadership (CSL) & south African centre for Olympic studies and social impact (SACOSSI)

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Executive Summary

The 13th African Games held in Ghana from 8 to 23 March 2024, showcased 5,000 athletes from across Africa competing in 29 sports disciplines, with some disciplines serving as qualifiers for the 2024 Paris Olympics. Such an event brings together talented African athletes from all five regions and provided coaches, technical officials, team managers, medical staff and others with the opportunity to render specialist services and ensure that the African Games maintain a high standard of competition within the Pan-African celebration of nations. As such it provided a continental forum for strategic research and investigating burning issues within the African sport sector. The research, entitled *Life after Sport* is such a discourse that requires academic scrutiny for strategic decision-making – in this case it entails career pathways in and beyond the realm of competitive sport.

The research aims to investigate how competitive African athletes respond (plan, prepare and execute plans) and find support to (the inevitable) transition from their sporting career as athlete. To address this question, the following questions were also considered and explored:

Research Question (RQ) 1. How were athletes socialised into and through sport as they transition between different phases?

RQ 2. What expectations and plans do/did athletes (retrospective for staff) have/had for their post-sport careers?

RQ 3. What support (if any) have athletes received from significant others, institutions and programmes in preparing for life after sport?

RQ 4. What barriers, enables and lessons can be learnt to inform strategic decisions by stakeholders to aid athletes in their final transition?

This research follows an exploratory qualitative case study design and implements a mixed-method approach. The quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews) data sets are integrated and to serve as part of triangulating data and for validating and augmenting contextual insights as integral part of knowledge production.

The 2024 survey, consisting of two questionnaires (completed in person and online) was completed by a total of 580 respondents.

- (i) Players/athletes (N=444) from 42 countries across 25 sports completed the questionnaire at the African Games (hard copy, N=409 or online after the event, N=11) of whom 246 (55.7%) were male, 185 (41.9%) were female and 11 (2.5%) preferred 'not to say'.
- (ii) The staff component completed 136 questionnaires of whom 115 (84.6%) (did it during the African Games) and 21 (15.4%) completed it online after the event.

Qualitative data comprised of a total of 53 *interviewees* from four out of the five African regions (e.g. North, South, East and West) of which 37 (69.8%) were men and 16 women (30.2%). Research participants represented different categories, namely:

- (i) 30 athletes –18 men (60%) and 12 women (40%) from eight (8) countries and eleven (11) different sports.
- (ii) 23 staff members - 19 men (82.6%) and four (4) women (17.4%) from 12 countries and six (6) sports in addition to 11 National Olympic Committee (NOC) and medical staff involved in multiple sports.

Key Findings

Age range

- The age range corresponds with the high number of *student-athletes* (N=207, 46.6%) as respondents and the peak phase of athletes in the sample.
- Most *staff* fell in the age categories of 31-39 years old (N=43, 32.1%) and 40-49 years old (N=39, 29.1%) respectively with only 24 (17.9%) being 50 years and older.

Level of competition

- About half (N=221, 50.5%) *athletes* reported the African (continental) Games as the highest level of achievement, with only 47 (10.6%) having competed in the Olympic Games.
- Most of the *staff* respondents (N=102, 77.3%) took part in competitive sports, of whom 45 (44.6%) did so at international level.

Transnational flow

- *Athletes* (N=28, 6.3%) show a high level of mobility by training and competing in other countries such as America, France, Hungary, the UK, Japan, Algeria, Morocco and Senegal.

Access to resources and income generation

- About half (N=103, 49.8%) of the *student-athletes* has access to a sport scholarship whilst 101 (48.8%) are self-funded.
- 125 (28.8%) athletes indicated they receive an income (getting paid) from sport participation, whilst about half (N=203; 48.1%) generated income through "other" employment.
- Limited access to funding from the NOC, federations, government, corporate sponsor or universities contributed to the fact that most athletes (N=276) are financially dependent on their parents (including family and self-funded).

Psycho-social support

- Most *athletes* get psycho-social from their parents (N=201), whereas the coach (N=183), their sports club (N=93) or university (club and other entities) (N=104) provide both psychological and technical support.

Academic qualifications

- Of the 187 (77.8% of total) *athletes* who indicated that had post-school sport-related qualifications, 19 (6.1%) underwent vocational training; 64 (26.1%) had either a certificate or diploma; 50 (16.1%) had a degree; 17 (5.5%) obtained a post-graduate certificate and 25 (8.0%) had a post-graduate degree.
- Of the 98 *staff* who responded to this question (72.1% of total), 82.7% had post-school qualifications with 15.3% having obtained a post-graduate certificate and 15.3% had a masters or doctoral degree.

Career choice and status

- About half of *athlete* respondents (N=229; 52.6%) indicated that their sport participation influenced their choice of career.
- Of the 282 athlete who wanted to pursue a sports-related career, considered: coaching (N=152), technical officiating (N=74), administration (N=56), sport psychology (N=51), sport science (N=37), physiotherapy (N=34), sport nutrition (N=34) and sport medicine (N=33).
- 51.6% *staff* respondents had a professional career, with 26.9% volunteering, 31.2% are contracted and 24.7% being self-employed

Challenges

- *Athletes* (N=172) are waiting for a (currently uncertain) career-related opportunity.
- 104 find themselves in a dual career or triple career position where they have study, compete in sport and to work to earn an income or augment their career prospects.
- Undermining career preparedness includes having been "too focused on sport" (N=79); not having been able to study (82 indicated lack of funding and 36 did not qualify academically), lack of career guidance (N=80) and not having clear [career] goals (N=51).
- Most *staff* respondents $\geq 50\%$ experienced similar challenges that include: not focused on a career; initially wrong career choice; not access to accredited training, life-sport balance; no funding for studies; not proper career guidance; inadequate school academic performance.

Post-sport career preparation

- For current *athletes*, the most prominent strategies include Information sharing (N=81); providing career guidance services/information (N=190); facilitating work-related experiences through volunteering (N=155) and focused (vocational-oriented) training such as entrepreneurship (N=97).

- Interventions include study bursaries (N=54) and internships (N=103) inclusive of the acquisition of soft skills (psychosocial skills and personal development) (N=105), lifestyle management (N=122), coping strategies (N=75) and financial management (N=101).
- A comparison between athletes and *staff* (who indicated what support they received as high performing athletes) most sources are well-aligned except that for athletes, the support from parents measured 10% (emotional) and 20% (financial) higher, and 10% more (than staff) had access to high-performance resources provided by universities.

Skills transfer from sport to the world of work

- *Athletes* identified that a positive work ethic (being hardworking) (N=259), having passion (N=240), being competitive/ambitious (N=229), resilient/perseverance (N=209) and reliability (n=164) as crucial work-related traits.
- Most *athletes* (N=310) viewed teamwork as a key work-related skill.
- *Staff* respondents also emphasised: resilience (Staff – 83.7% vs Athletes – 77.4%); being dependable (Staff 70.1% vs Athletes – 61.9%), and connectivity with people and/or organisations (Staff 81.4% vs Athletes 74.1%).

Transition out of competitive sport

- For athletes, transitioning out of sport was influenced by being time to move on to a different career (45.2%); not being able to generate enough income (39.0%) or viewing their sporting career as a “financial burden” (29.5%).
- Other “push factors” entail the toll it took on athletes to balance their sport, study/work, social life and other commitments (32.9%), leaving sport to “complete studies” (23.1%), “competing became too stressful” (18.4%) or not making the team (21.3%) or injuries – too many (21.0%) or a career-ending (19.5%).
- For 27.8% *staff* dissocialising was a traumatic experience compared to 18.4% stating that it was a relief, whilst half missed their teammates (50.0%) after retirement. or not being recognised (31.6%).

Recommendations to improve preparedness for a life after sport

- *Athletes* suggested:
 - focused (vocational, N=135) trainings or trainings in entrepreneurship (N=153).
 - retirement preparation (N=142), career planning (N=198) and development of work-related skills/competencies such as financial (N=186) and lifestyle management (N=187) and personal management (N=214).
 - psychosocial support (N=164) and interventions around transitions.
- Staff-athlete comparison shows ≥ 5 percentage points difference (ranging between 6.2% to 16.4%) with strategies most important for staff being:

- career planning (83%),
- personal and lifestyle management (82.2%),
- financial planning (78.8%), and
- psychological support (77.1%).

The analysis of interviews, produced the following seven main themes:

- Professionalization, commercialisation and career pathways
 - Wealth and fame are part of the aspirations of athletes
 - Life cycle and transitions cause adaptation challenges although anticipated
 - Changing understanding of success shift with athletes' experiences
 - Career and lifestyle simulate success in its anticipation and in reality
- The world of competitive sport versus real lives: A parallel universe
 - Athletic glory and economic mobility (wealth) vs socio-economic struggles
 - Differential access to opportunities and tension between passion and livelihood
 - National pride and nation-building versus political neglect and financial instability
 - International representation, visibility and connections versus local struggles
- Socialisation – influences, structures and programmes
 - Phases and mechanisms of socialisation and roles of significant others with parents and the coach playing crucial roles
 - Educational (school) institutions – primary and secondary being socialised in and through school sport
 - Educational (tertiary/university) institutions focusing on student-athletes
 - Clubs, sport academies, programmes, NOCs and federations provided different support programmes and funding although inadequate in the response to the needs of athletes
- Duel/Triple career pathway development
 - Educational pathway in career development in juxtaposition with sport career development
 - Aligned/non-aligned work/income generation – to access income

- Personal life and well-being in having to deal with multiple demands
- Balancing sport/education/work/personal growth and well-being – holism in development
- Access to opportunities and resources
 - Financial and material resources – inadequate as a career progress
 - Educational and career opportunities compromised due to time poverty and a non-conducive environment (in sport or in university)
 - Psycho-social support and well-being are essential throughout a sporting career
 - Coaching and mentorship are significant factors for sporting success
 - Career guidance, planning and practice play an important role in career preparation for athletes – inside and outside the sport sector
 - Social connectivity is a source of social capital most relevant for a career after competitive sport participation
- Differential intersecting factors and inequality – disadvantaged populations
 - Socio-economic status and geographic location (rural and war-torn communities) – the lack of economic and material resources diminishes athletes' career options and upward social mobility
 - Race/ethnicity, gender and age
 - Affiliation - student-athletes are relatively better resourced than non-student-athletes dependent on resource provision and opportunities
- Influences and responses across the life span
 - Life for/in the moment - drop out – become destitute
 - Making sacrifices is part and parcel of a sporting career with decisions to remain or drop out of sport related to a cost-benefit trade-off
 - Building on strengths/opportunities and overcoming barriers (a life of strife)
 - Transitioning and facing realities entails a process that is postponed by many
 - Staying connected – active citizenship/giving back embodies the lifestyle of most athletes who transition into a sport-related career or remaining engaged at the masters' level

Conclusion

Athletes and staff who participated in the research conducted at the 2024 African Games is not disconnected from the global sporting community but may be due to many compounding factors find themselves relatively vulnerable and resource dependent although most agencies cannot adequately provide in their needs or requirements to reach their full potential as athletes.

Most athletes are highly dependent on their families, self-funding or institutions to assist them with resources, opportunities and providing a nurturing environment to invest in their journey and strife for excellence in sport. The dream is to “make it big” that also trap many in the anticipation of succeeding at higher levels of competition and financial independency (and fame) in securing a decent and secure existence in and beyond sport. Significant others like parents and coaches play a crucial role as facilitators and mentors.

Although many institutions are positioned across the sporting ecosystem, those from the sport sector (e.g. NOCs, sport federations, school and university associations and clubs) are not able to adequately provide for athletes and staff to achieve financial security and post-sport career stable employment. Universities stand out as institutions of excellence in acting as national resource centres for high performance provision and educational advancement that underpins a positive transition for athletes and staff into the world of work.

Recommendations from athletes and staff supported by literature signify the collective responsibilities and accountability of all relevant agencies (including sponsors) not to only share in the accolades of international fame in association of athletes or coaches, but to ensure that the undercurrent of well resourced, flexible and conducive environments are a reality. Accountability and ethical conduct of those responsible also lies in the investment of careers beyond sporting excellence to ensure that athletes are not just cast aside once they have delivered (or not) on collective ambitions. This is a shared responsibility as much as the fame has evolved into a shared collective consciousness of what sporting success means to all.