

# Matching Coping Strategies to Athletic Retirement Stressors among Japanese Female Athletes

Miyako Oulevey, David Lavalley, Naohiko Kohtake

**Abstract**—Retirement from sport can be stressful to athletes for many reasons. Accordingly, it is necessary to match coping strategies depending on the stressors. One of the athlete career assistance programs for Japanese top athletes in Japan, the Japan Olympic Committee Career Academy (JCA), has focused on the service contents regarding occupational supports which can be said to cope with financial and occupational stress; however, other supports such as psychological support were unclear due to the lack of psychological professionals in the JCA. Tailoring the program, it is important to match the needs of the athletes at athletic retirement with the service contents. Japanese Olympic athletes have been found to retire for different reasons. Especially female athletes who competed in the Summer Olympic Games were found to retire with psychological reasons. The purpose of this research was to investigate the types of stressors Japanese female athletes experience as a result of athletic retirement. As part of the study, 44 female retired athletes from 13 competitive sports completed an open-ended questionnaire. The KJ method was used to analyze stress experienced as a result of retirement. As a result, nine conceptualized stressors were aggregated such as “Conflict with athletic identity”, “Desire to live as an athlete”, and “Career plan after retirement”. In order to match the coping strategies according to the stressors, each stressor was classified with the four types of adjustments; psychological, social, financial, and occupational changes. As a result, the stressor relating to psychological adjustment accounted for 69.0% of coping-related needs, the financial and occupational adjustment was 21.8%, and social adjustment was 9.2%. In conclusion, coping strategies according to the stressors are suggested.

**Keywords**—Athletic retirement, coping, female athlete, stress.

## I. INTRODUCTION

CAREER assistance programs providing athletic retirement services vary across countries to meet the needs of their athletes in transition [1]. Prior to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the Japanese Sports Agency initiated the development of a tailored career assistance program for Olympic athletes by unifying several existing career assistance programs in Japan, including the JCA established in 2008 for retiring Olympic athletes. Oulevey et al. [2] analyzed the service contents of the JCA program and identified 15 conceptual categories. It was also found that the JCA had occupational supports for both current and retired Olympic athletes; however, other supports such as psychological support were unclear due to the lack of psychological professionals in the JCA.

In order to understand the retirement of top athletes, including Olympic athletes, several conceptual models of sport career transition have been developed. One of the most cited

models in sports is the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition proposed by Lavalley et al. [3]. Oulevey et al. [4] conducted a quantitative study using the model and revealed the differences with regard to the causes of career termination between Summer/Winter and Male/Female Japanese Olympians. It was found that Female Summer Olympians (FSOs) tended to retire for psychological reasons—namely, either they had achieved their sporting goals, or they no longer enjoyed participating in their sport. Athletic retirement has been found to be associated with psychological distress for many athletes. Alfermann [5] pointed out several studies regarding to psychological distress in retiring athletes and concluded that some athletes show emotional and behavioral problems requiring professional counseling advice. Better understanding of what psychological support is needed for retiring Japanese athletes could help inform professional practice (i.e., psychological support provided by psychological professionals at the JCA). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to find out what types of coping strategies would be needed depending on the stressors at the time of athletic retirement among Japanese female athletes.

## II. METHOD

As part of the study, 44 female retired athletes from 13 competitive sports (Table I) were asked, "what kind of stress did you experience at retirement from your sport?" during their participation of a coaching education seminar for women. The number of professional athletes and those who had experiences of competing at world-level competitions (hereinafter referred to as top athletes) were nine people, which was 20.5% among the participants of the research. In the analysis, the KJ method was employed to better understand the stress experienced as a result of retirement. In the analysis, discussions were held until the two KJ method interpreters, who had experienced stress coping training, agreed with the interpretation.

TABLE I  
PARTICIPANTS OF THE RESEARCH FROM 13 SPORTS

SPORTS	NUMBER	SPORTS	NUMBER
TRACK&FIELD	8	VOLLEYBALL	4
SWIMMING	4	TENNIS	2
GYMNASTICS	6	SOFTBALL	3
CYCLING	1	RUGBY	1
SOCCER	6	GOLF	2
BASKETBALL	4	CHEERLEADING	1
HANDBALL	2		

M.O. is PhD Candidate at Dept. of System Design and Management, Keio University, Kanagawa, Japan (corresponding author, e-mail: miyako.tanaka-ouleyey@sdm.keio.ac.jp).

## III. RESULTS

*Result 1: Athletic Retirement Stressors*

87 responses were obtained from 36 respondents with a response rate of 81.8% excluding non-responders. As a result of sorting and consolidating using the KJ method, nine conceptualized stressors were generated: 1) Desire to live as an

athlete, 2) Regrets about sport results, 3) Conflict with athletic retirement, 4) Relationship with close surroundings after retirement, 5) Denial of past athletic life, 6) Challenges of working as a woman in society, 7) Career development as a coach, 8) Career plan after retirement, and 9) Conflict with athletic identity (Table II).

TABLE II  
RESULTS OF THE STRESSORS AT THE ATHLETIC RETIREMENT

Answers	Sub category	Conceptualized Stressors
Guilt for eating normally Regarding food	Concerns about food (2)	
I don't like myself not being a hard worker anymore		
Conflict of wanting to feel passion about something	Lack of the same amount of passion as in the athletic life (6)	
My body shape changed		
Weight gained and physically weaker	Body changed from the days as an athlete (2)	
Unable to relieve stress by exercise		
I can move my body but I can't move as well as before	Lack of satisfaction with exercising (2)	
Loneliness of not being with my team mates	No connection with team mates (1)	Desire to live as an athlete (13)
I did not end my sport career with satisfactory results		
I couldn't reach the level that I would be satisfied as a player	Did not end with satisfying results (4)	
People tell you great only if you competed in the Olympics	Not become an Olympic athlete (1)	Regrets about sport results (5)
I wonder if I could have continued my sport a little longer		
I think I escaped myself when I retired	Feeling about continuing my sport (3)	
I noticed too late that I was able to cope with things earlier		
Regrets in various situations when I look back	Regrets looking back on athletic life (5)	Conflict with athletic retirement (8)
Not along with my coach at the retirement		
Not communicating well with my sport federation	Difficulty of communication with federation and coaches (2)	
People ask me whether I marry and have children or not		
People around me dictate my future	Interference from people around (5)	
Feel sorry for my parents	Feeling sorry for people around (1)	Relationship with close surroundings after retirement (8)
I felt that all my hard work during my sport career was useless		
I can't use my skills earned in sport to any other places	Feeling lack of ability not using skills earned from sport (4)	
I didn't even watch my sport on TV because I wanted to leave my sport		
I don't like my sport anymore	Feeling to avoid involvement in my sport (3)	
I don't like my body size that matches my sport	Lack of confidence about body image (1)	Denial of past athletic life (8)
Pressure of being successful in both parenting and coaching		
The movement of women into the workforce	Difficulties in working as a woman (2)	
Male dominated in sports federations	Male dominated atmosphere in sports federations (1)	Challenges of working as a woman in the society (3)
I'm not good at expressing my thought well during coaching		
Irritation about the gap between myself as an athlete and as a coach		Career development as a coach (5)
I didn't have a career after retirement, so I wondered how to think about future employment.		
Is there any other way to make a living besides coaching?	Anxiety about employment/life (6)	
Worrying about my future		
I couldn't imagine my future	Anxiety about future (5)	Career plan after retirement (11)
I'm not confident when I feel no value in myself except being an athlete		
I worried what I should do because I was only doing my sport	Anxiety about myself outside of sports (3)	
I feel embarrassed about my lack of social experience		
Lack of peers and networks in other fields besides sport	Anxiety about adapting to society (6)	
How should I spend the time I used for my competitive sport?		
I have no clue how to live after leaving my sport	Anxiety about the lack of knowledge how to live outside of my sport world (12)	
Emptiness		
Feeling losing all things what I have been doing	Lack of energy in life (5)	Conflict with athletic identity (26)

TABLE III  
STRESSORS CATEGORIZED INTO ADJUSTMENT TYPES

Stressors	Labels	Adjustment types	%
Conflict with athletic identity	26		
Desire to live as an athlete	13		
Denial of past athletic life	8		
Regrets about sport results	5		
Conflict with athletic retirement	8	Psychological changes	69.0%
Relationship with surroundings after retirement	8	Social changes	9.2%
Career plan after retirement	11		
Challenges of working as a woman in society	3		
Career development as a coach	5	Financial & Occupational changes	21.8%

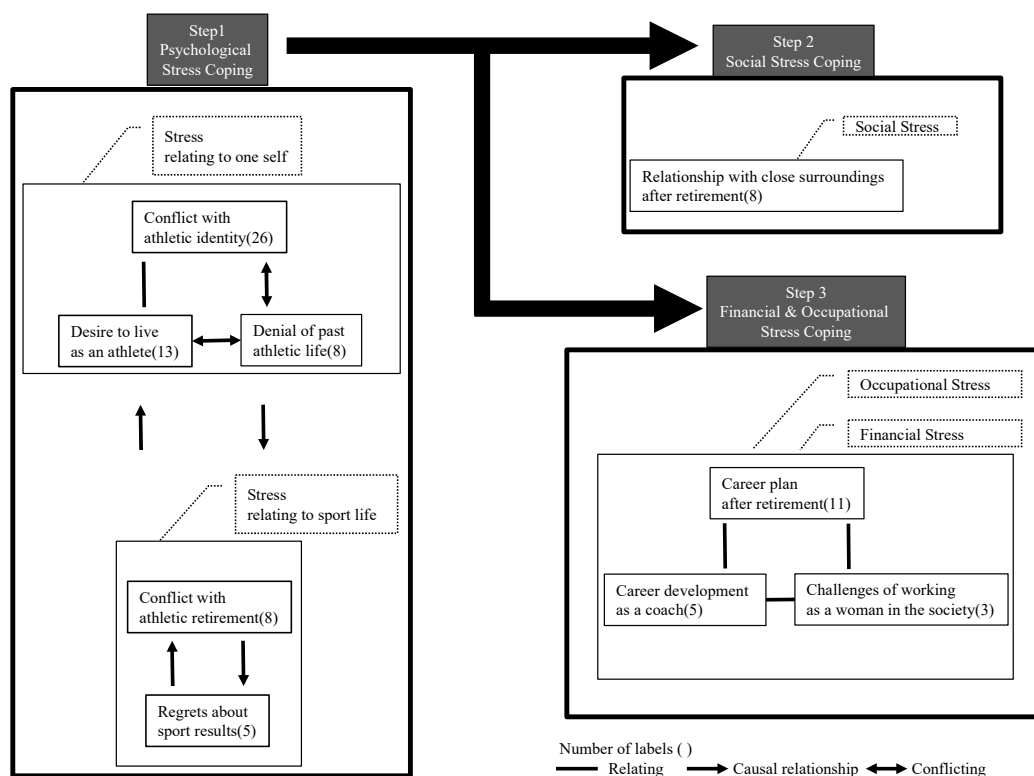


Fig. 1 Coping Strategies to According to Athletic Retirement Stressor

#### A. Desire to Live as an Athlete

This stressor was created to describe the stresses relating to desire to live as an athlete. The sub-categories were “Concerns about food”, “Lack of the same amount of passion as in athletic life”, “Body changed from the days as an athlete”, “Lack of satisfaction with exercising”, and “No connection with team mates”.

#### B. Regrets about Sport Results

This stressor was obtained from two of the sub-categories which were “Did not end with satisfying results” and “Not become an Olympic athlete”.

#### C. Conflict with Athletic Retirement

This stressor was created from the stresses regarding athletic retirement. The sub-categories were “Feeling about continuing

my sport” and “Regrets looking back on athletic life”.

#### D. Relationship with Close Surroundings after Retirement

This stressor was created from stresses relating to people around athletes. The sub-categories were “Difficulty of communication with federation and coaches”, “Interference from people around”, and “Feeling sorry for people around”.

#### E. Denial of Past Athletic Life

This stressor was obtained from the stresses relating to the feeling of denial of the past. The sub-categories were “Feeling lack of ability not using skills earned from sport”, “Feeling to avoid involvement in my sport”, and “Lack of confidence about body image”.

#### F. Challenges of Working as a Woman in Society

This stressor was created from the stresses relating to

challenges of working as a woman in Japanese society. The sub-categories were “Difficulties in working as a woman”, and “Male dominated atmosphere in sports federations”.

#### G. Career Development as a Coach

This stressor was created from the two answers without creating the sub-category. These answers were “I’m not good at expressing my thoughts well during coaching” and “Irritation about the gap between myself as an athlete and as a coach”.

#### H. Career Plan after Retirement

This stressor was created from the stresses relating to career plan after retirement. The sub-categories were “Anxiety about employment/life” and “Anxiety about future”.

#### I. Conflict with Athletic Identity

This stressor was created from the stresses relating to athletic identity. The sub-categories consist of four categories; “Anxiety about myself outside of sports”, “Anxiety about adapting to society”, “Anxiety about the lack of knowledge how to live outside of my sport world”, and “Lack of energy in life”.

#### Result 2: Stressors Categorized into Adjustment Types

In order to match coping strategies according to athletic retirement stressors, each stressor was classified with the four types of adjustment which tend to be experienced by athletes towards the end of their careers [6]. The four adjustment types are; psychological, social, financial, and occupational changes. Nine stressors were categorized into the four adjustment types and a ratio was calculated (Table III). Stressors relating to Psychological adjustment were created from five conceptualized stressors; “Conflict with athletic identity”, “Desire to live as an athlete”, “Denial of past athletic life”, “Regrets about sport results”, and “Conflict with athletic retirement”. This psychological stressor, athletic identity conflict accounted for 69.0%, revealing that it is an important issue not limited to top athletes. There was also stress relating to Social adjustment of re-building relationships with people around athletes. In addition, stress relating to Financial and Occupational adjustment was obtained and one of the stressors in this category was relevant to women, namely the challenges of working as a woman in Japan.

### IV. DISCUSSION

The nine conceptualized stressors were aggregated by the KJ method, and each stressor was classified according to four types of adjustment; psychological, social, financial, and occupational changes. The results revealed that the stressor relating to psychological adjustment accounted for 69.0% of the coping-related needed. Especially, in the psychological adjustment, the stress, “Conflict with athletic identity” is important since it consisted of 26 labels, the most number of labels among the other stressors. Besides the stressor of “Conflict with athletic identity”, several stressors related to oneself as an athlete were shown in the stress relating to psychological adjustment. The feeling of “desire returning to life like when I was an athlete” (Desire to live as an athlete),

and “regrets of retirement” were the examples. Furthermore, in social adjustment, it was found that people around athletes could be stressful. Originally, it is thought that they could become athletes’ social support, but it could be a cause of stress; this is important as social support is often an important way of coping with athletic retirement [3]. Moreover, questions about marriage and childbirth by people around athletes were stressful for female athletes. Finally, regarding occupational adjustment, the stress for women regarding working in the Japanese occupational environment was found. To cope with athletic retirement-related stressors, it is important to match coping strategies with stressors [7] (Fig. 1). Athletic identity conflicts could affect the choice of career after retirement, so it is suggested that this is considered first. After coping with stresses relating to psychological adjustment (Step1), coping with stress relating to social changes should then be considered (Step2). Finally, coping with stressors relating to financial and occupational adjustment can be supported. These findings add detail to the existing models of retirement from sport [3].

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