

Project PRISM

PARA-ATHLETE RETIREMENT: INSIGHTS, SUPPORT, MANAGEMENT

A collaboration between the Peter Harrison Centre for Disability Sport and the English Institute of Sport's Performance Lifestyle Team

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Background

The EIS Performance Lifestyle Team supports and mentors athletes as they move through the stages of their sport career. To date, there have been no empirical studies of the 'out of sport' transitions of para-athletes and practitioners therefore utilise expertise from health and social care, disability specific charitable organisations and existing able-bodied research.

Research Aims

(1) Document the after sport experiences of retired GB para-athletes. (2) Assess what PL support para-athletes accessed during and immediately following their sport careers and if and how these services assisted them in their transition. (3) Investigate what factors facilitated or impeded their transition from sport with attention to disability specific factors. (4) Identify areas where EIS can have a positive influence on facilitating para-athletes transition from sport and provide guides for best practice grounded in empirical data.

Methods

An online survey was sent to para-athletes who represented GB at a Paralympic Games or international event. Select survey respondents were then contacted for more in-depth interviews. A thematic analysis was conducted using deductive codes from existing literature on athlete transitions and inductive codes developed throughout the course of the work.

An athlete's pathway out of sport is at least as important as his or her pathway into sport and part of an ethical sport system.

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS



60 from 24 para-sports responded to the survey.



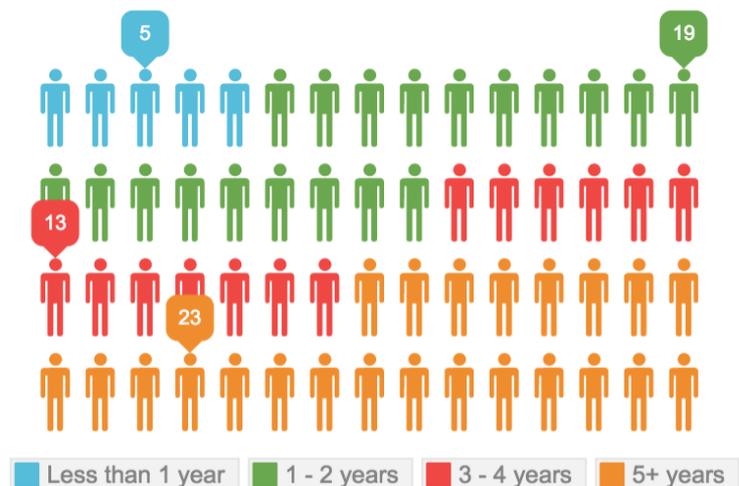
48 were Paralympians and 21 had medalled at a Paralympic Games.



21 females and 39 males participated in the project.



25 had congenital impairments and 35 had acquired impairments.

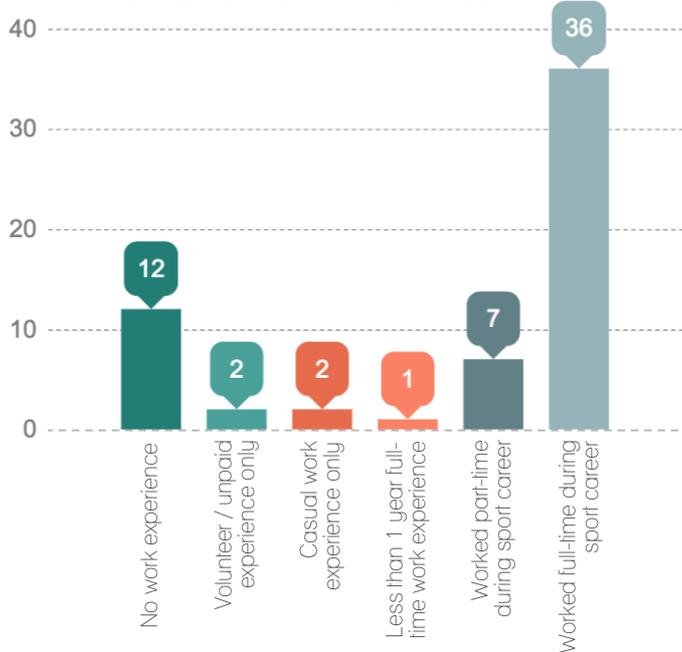


TIME SINCE SPORT RETIREMENT

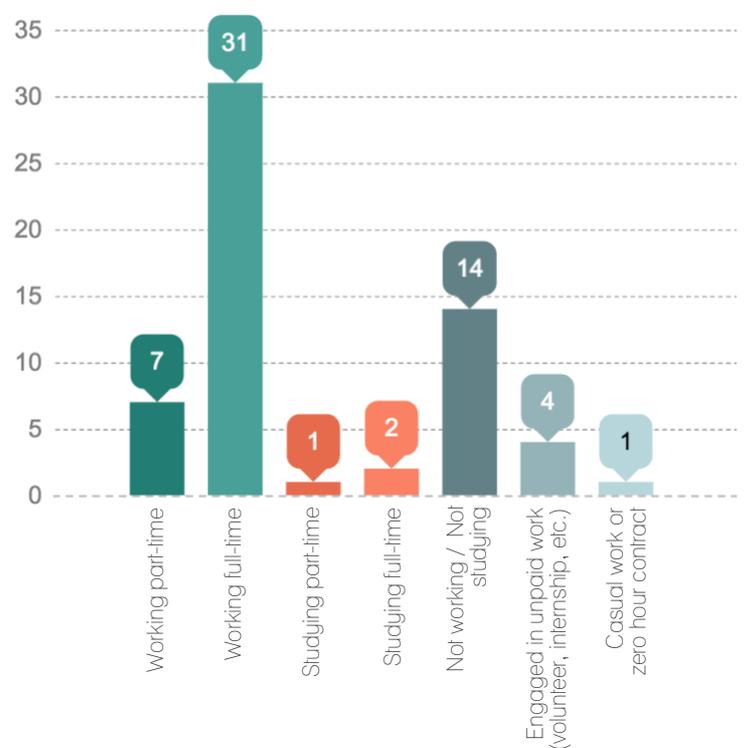
SURVEY RESPONSES



WORK EXPERIENCE AT TIME OF LEAVING SPORT



CURRENT EMPLOYMENT / STUDY STATUS



"Consider your options prior to retirement and start thinking about areas you might want to go into.

Whilst elite sport has many transferable skills, experience or qualifications in a certain field/subject are also often required.

Even an hour of work experience a week could help better set you up for life after sport and I wish that I had considered that at the time."

- Advice to current athletes from a retired Paralympian

INTERVIEW RESPONSE SUMMARY

Finding 1

STRUGGLING TO STAY IN SPORT / STRUGGLING TO LEAVE SPORT: There was a definite difference between athletes who received 'full-time' funding whilst in sport and those who received 'part-time' funding or whose careers pre-dated the current funding arrangement. While para-athletes with less funding struggled to stay in sport due to financial reasons, those with full-time funding struggled to leave sport due to financial issues.

"There was a period before we had lottery funding, so before '97 where I had to pretend to be looking for work and on the dole to get money and my rent paid and to lie about representing my country. Which was awful. I always hated it. And at that time I was wondering what I would do when I finished but still felt I wanted to [do sport]."
(Para-athlete who retired in 2004)

INTERVIEWER: "So getting the job essentially confirmed your plans for retirement then?"
ATHLETE: "Yeah. I don't think I would have retired unless I had a job. Cause we had a baby so I wouldn't have been able to – I would have carried on doing [sport] until I had a job or an income so that I could retire. ... When I was competing I was quite well paid. ... If you're in that position it is quite difficult to retire." (Para-athlete who retired post-2012)

Finding 2

TYPES OF RETIREMENT UNIQUE TO PARA-SPORT: Para-athletes who were 'unclassifiable' or became ineligible because of reclassification or declassification reported particularly distressing transitions out of sport. These athletes experienced forced, unplanned and sudden retirements that challenged both their athletic and disabled identities.

"I have a disability that affects me but they are not saying I'm not disabled. They're just saying I'm not the right kind of disabled."
(Para-athlete who retired due to 'declassification')

Additionally, they felt that their sport governing bodies failed to support them during this unexpected out of sport transition. One athlete stated that instances of declassification are rare and in reflection her sport (and the PL practitioners) perhaps did not know how to help para-athletes in this position.

"I think at the time I was sort of all emotional but looking back rationally I think well actually they didn't really know what to do either. They had no mechanisms in place for transitions [due to declassification]. And really I suppose they did the best they could. It wasn't what I needed at the time. But I would really like it to get better for other athletes in that position. Because I would hate for them to go through what I did."
(Para-athlete who retired due to 'declassification')

Finding 3

TIMING OF PL SERVICES AND SUPPORT: The para-athletes interviewed included a mix of athletes who had extensively worked with PL practitioners, those who had minimal contact and those who had no contact. The athletes who had worked with a PL practitioner prior to considering retirement were a lot more positive about the benefits of PL and understood how EIS practitioners could assist them in transition. Those athletes who had little contact with PL prior to retiring were unclear on how a PL practitioner could assist them in transition and did not seek out these services. One clear theme was that career services and 'thinking about life after sport' needed to be implemented before the athlete was considering retirement. The actual time of retirement was too late, too traumatic and often para-athletes needed to start earning an income immediately and felt they did not have time to explore their options.

"I needed money. I needed a job. Because I've got a house to keep and that kind of thing. So the workshops would have been useful when I was on the programme but not when I'd come off it. ... I'd been on A level funding since 2007 through to 2013 and that stopped."
(Para-athlete who had a sudden retirement)

"Just like you take a junior athlete and you build their training regime, you need to build an athlete's performance lifestyle regime. And I think it does need to be a regime. You have to start them thinking 'what else are you going to do?'"
(Para-athlete who had accessed PL)

English Institute of Sport Performance Lifestyle Team

"The rigorous research process and great relationship with the research team has produced very high quality research revealing some extremely interesting and impactful findings that we as Performance Lifestyle practitioners will be able to use to inform our practice and develop new projects and resources to support para-athletes exiting world class programmes."

- Arabella Ashfield, EIS Performance Lifestyle Research Lead

For more information about this research please contact the Peter Harrison Centre for Disability Sport at phc@lboro.ac.uk

Research team: Arabella Ashfield (EIS), Andrea Bundon (PHC), Nik Diaper (EIS), Vicky Goosey-Tolfrey (PHC), Joanna Harrison (EIS), Emily Hunton (PHC), Emma Norris (PHC), Brett Smith (PHC)