



THE SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE OF ATHLETES DURING AND AFTER ELITE COMPETITION

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It is with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation to talk today about “The social and professional life of athletes during and after their careers in elite sport”.

However, before starting, I would like to thank all those federations, which have contributed to today’s debate through the correspondence they have sent me. Of course, in the limited time available, I cannot touch upon all the subjects mentioned, so please accept my apologies for this. All contributors raised very important issues and suggested very interesting means of resolution. I look forward to hearing their comments in a few minutes.

I would also like to say that I am not only speaking today as the President of the International Cycling Union (UCI), but also as the Vice-President of the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF). The subject of this session is pertinent, in different ways and to different extents, to all sports.

To return to the subject of the session, I think, and I am sure you will agree with me, that it is the athletes who should be at the centre of our concerns. We should never forget that, above all, it is the athletes who write the history of sport. The athlete is the essential element of all sport. However, the athlete is relatively fragile: we all know that an athlete’s career is short, sometimes very short. A very small proportion of a lifetime in fact. Only a minority of athletes will immediately find work – or will not even need to find work – after retirement from their chosen sport. The great majority have to find their way in an environment, which is often alien to them and in which they have to play a new role. A role for which, unfortunately, they are often unprepared.

A professional sportsperson’s life often gives him or her special status. This can lead to individuals being isolated from “real life” (both socially as well as economically).

An athlete’s social life is often characterised by the following features:

- social interaction that is almost completely restricted to the sporting environment (other team members, coaches, etc.);
- poor exposure to the external world (lack of time, lack of motivation, etc.);
- an environment that may treat the athlete as a child, protected from the stresses of “real life”;
- a special lifestyle (lots of travel, many constraints specific to the elite sports environment).

An athlete’s working life is often characterised by the following features:

- focus, understandably, on the sporting career (particularly the case for professional sportspeople);
- the athlete not investing great efforts in his or her employment (this is often the case for semi-professional sportspeople who work part-time purely to provide the funds to live on; this is very common in many sports).

After having developed in this background, an athlete is often poorly prepared to face the challenges of a new life. This new life also involves integration into society. There is a considerable risk that a mismatch between the former athlete’s capabilities and the constraints of “normal” life could represent a fatal blow to the athlete’s hopes for a successful post-sporting life.

It is important to remember that when an athlete is at his or her peak everyone is their friend; this is the time to plan, to prepare, to take advantage for the future. As Federations we must help every athlete with this process as they are our future ambassadors.

It is here that we, the International Federations (IFs), must act. Promoting and developing our sports also means giving our sportspeople the opportunity to be successful in their ordinary lives as well as giving them the chance to become champions in their chosen disciplines.

Our capacity to act in this respect is not negligible but it is rather limited. For this reason, it is a good idea to collaborate with other interested parties, such as the National Olympic Committees (NOCs), National Federations (NFs) and groups focused on this area such as the World Academy of Sport, which in turn can work with the national authorities.

If the measures that we can implement to encourage the integration of athletes into society are to be effective, they must apply to the athlete both during his or her sporting career as well as during the transition phase between this and the rest of the athlete’s life, and even perhaps during the beginning of the former athlete’s new career.

I do not want to pursue this theme too far as it is the subject of the forthcoming discussion, but I do think it is useful to quote a few measures that can allow athletes to correct the distorting effects of professional sport and encourage the incorporation of sportspeople into the world of employment. These are complementary themes:

- During the athlete’s sporting career, courses should be made available that encourage the proper integration of sportspeople into their environment. Such courses could include promoting social skills such as communication, learning foreign languages, as well as education about the Olympic Movement. At the UCI we have created the



UCI Academy to undertake such initiatives. I know that the International Judo Federation has put in place such a programme for former athletes.

- There should also be the support of sports authorities during the athlete's sporting career so that athletes can follow studies (with all necessary arrangements made).
- Saving schemes (or solidarity schemes) and mandatory insurance should be set up for athletes during their sporting career, in anticipation of the transition period.
- After their sporting career, jobs should be made available to former athletes within the sporting family (for example as coaches, providing that recognised qualifications have been achieved) and within sports administration.
- We need to also ensure that our coaches, who are the mentors of many athletes, support such initiatives.