

Review

Post-retirement transition: Challenges and support strategies for professional football players

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Abstract: The career lifespan of professional football players is often notably brief, typically spanning only a few years, which presents unique challenges when transitioning to life after retirement. Despite the inevitability of this transition, many football players find themselves inadequately prepared for the abrupt change from the structured environment of professional sports to the broader, less predictable professional world. This study seeks to identify the factors influencing the duration of their sports careers, explore the various challenges when transitioning to post-football life, and offer a set of recommendations for enhancing the various support systems. The study highlights the importance of a proactive and holistic approach to career transition, advocating for integrating comprehensive support systems that address these challenges well before retirement, helping as many retired football players as possible transition into entrepreneurial roles or start new ventures. Existing programs that support this transition are examined, with findings pointing to the need for tailored guidance, continuous education, and robust mentorship as critical components of successful transition strategies. It demonstrated that Human Resource Management [HRM] strategies are crucial for helping football players adapt to post-retirement life, offering support in various areas such as skills development, mental health, re-employment prospects and career redirection. This study contributes to the broader discourse on athlete welfare and underscores the need for continued investment in support mechanisms to ensure the well-being of professional football players both during and after their careers. By focusing on these areas, the study aims to foster environments that not only prepare football players for their eventual transition but also enable them to thrive in life beyond the playing field.

Keywords: career lifespan; professional football players; transition challenges; career longevity factors; post-football life; human resource management strategies; entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

Retirement is an inevitable phase in the career of any athlete, including professional football players. Despite its certainty, many athletes find themselves unprepared for the challenges that accompany this transition [1]. The career span of a professional football athlete is subject to considerable variation, influenced by a range of factors including amongst others injury history, playing position, talent, and overall physical condition [2]. Naturally, professional football players embark on their careers in their early 20s. The duration can span approximately ten to fifteen years, even though this period can be shorter or longer depending on individual circumstances [3]. The physical demands of football are substantial, and injuries play a critical role in determining the length of a player's career. Some football athletes may be compelled to retire prematurely due to severe injuries, while others may enjoy extended careers with relatively few health issues [4].

The end of a sports career can lead to a loss of identity and purpose, as athletes often define themselves by their athletic achievements [5]. This can result in feelings of depression, anxiety, and a sense of purposelessness. Access to mental health resources, including counselling and support groups, can help athletes navigate these emotional challenges and develop a new sense of identity and purpose beyond the playing field [6]. Given these realities, preparing for life after a football career is not just advisable but essential. The transition from professional sports to a new career can be fraught with challenges, but athletes who take proactive steps and plan ahead can significantly enhance their prospects for a successful and fulfilling post-football life. This preparation involves several key components, including financial planning, education, skill development, mental health support, etc. [7].

Fostering a culture that encourages proactive planning for retirement within the sports community is essential. Athletes should be encouraged to think about their post-sport careers from the early stages of their professional journeys. This cultural shift can be facilitated through mentorship programs, where retired athletes share their experiences and insights with current players, highlighting the importance of planning for the future. While retirement is an inevitable part, the transition to life after football can be managed effectively with careful preparation and a strategic approach, and athletes can navigate this process successfully and find meaningful and rewarding opportunities beyond the playing field [8]. The combined efforts of athletes, sports organizations, and the broader sports community are essential in ensuring that athletes are well-prepared for the next chapter of their lives.

1.1. Research goals and objectives

Leaning on the above, this research aims to identify the career lifespan of professional football athletes, explore the challenges they face when transitioning to life after their football careers, and present the existing programs and strategies that support this transition. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the factors that influence the duration of a professional football career, examine the challenges athletes encounter post-retirement, and identify existing programs that support them in their post-football careers. Ultimately, the research intends to provide recommendations for enhancing support systems to better prepare athletes for a successful transition to life after football. To achieve the above aim, three objectives underpinning the problem are set:

- to identify the factors influencing the career lifespan of professional football athletes.
- to explore the challenges football athletes face when transitioning to life after football.
- to present programs and strategies that support athletes in their post-football careers.

1.2. Significance of the study

The study addresses a critical gap in the existing literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing career duration and the challenges athletes face post-retirement. Understanding these elements is essential for developing

targeted interventions that can enhance the well-being and career prospects of retiring football athletes. Next, the study's findings will be invaluable for sports organizations, policymakers, and support programs. These stakeholders can implement evidence-based practices to better assist athletes in their transition by identifying the most effective strategies and support systems. This can lead to the development of more robust financial planning services, educational opportunities, and mental health resources tailored to the unique needs of professional football players.

Moreover, the study has broader societal implications. Professional athletes often serve as role models, and their successful transition to life after sports can inspire and influence younger athletes and the general public. Highlighting the importance of proactive planning and the availability of support systems, the study encourages a cultural shift within the sports community towards greater awareness and preparation for life beyond the playing field. Finally, the research will inform policy changes at the organizational and league levels, ensuring that support systems are adequately funded and accessible to all athletes, regardless of their career stage or financial status.

2. Literature review

The career lifespan of professional football athletes is a subject of considerable interest and importance within the sports community, encompassing players, coaches, sports organizations, and researchers [9]. Understanding the duration of a professional football career and the variety of factors that influence career longevity is crucial for developing strategies to enhance athlete well-being, performance, and post-retirement success [1]. The average career span of a professional football player is relatively short compared to other professions. Most players start their careers in their early 20s, often after years of rigorous training and competition at the youth and collegiate levels. The peak performance years for football players typically range from their early 20s to early 30s, with many players retiring by their mid-30s. This results in an average career length of about ten to fifteen years, although this can vary widely depending on individual circumstances [3].

2.1. Factors influencing the career lifespan of professional football athletes

A variety of factors influence the career longevity of professional football athletes, including age, physical health, performance levels, playing position, external circumstances, and personal attributes. Each of these factors plays a significant role not only in shaping the duration but also in the quality and value of an athlete's career [10].

Age is a natural factor influencing career longevity in professional football. As athletes grow older, their physical capabilities may diminish, making it harder to compete at the highest level [11]. The peak performance age for football players generally falls between the mid-20s and early 30s, a period during which they typically exhibit a blend of physical prowess, technical skills, and tactical understanding [12]. As athletes surpass their peak performance years, they may experience declines in physical attributes like speed, strength, and endurance. This decline can hinder their ability to compete at the top level, potentially leading to reduced playing time or a shift

to less physically demanding roles [7]. Despite the natural physical decline associated with ageing, experienced athletes often compensate through their tactical and technical skills, and their mental resilience, adapting their playing style to emphasize aspects of the game that rely more on experience and intelligence rather than physical attributes [13].

One of the most significant factors affecting the career longevity of professional football athletes is physical health, particularly the occurrence and severity of injuries. Football is a physically demanding sport that involves high-intensity activities such as running, jumping, and tackling, which can lead to a range of injuries [14]. Common injuries in football include ligament tears, muscle strains, fractures, and concussions. The impact of these injuries on a player's career can be substantial. Severe injuries can lead to early retirement [7]. Even less severe injuries can result in prolonged recovery periods, reduced performance, and increased vulnerability to future injuries. Injury prevention and management are therefore critical for extending the career lifespan of football athletes. Advances in sports medicine, physiotherapy, and injury rehabilitation have contributed to better outcomes for injured players. Additionally, training programs that focus on strength, flexibility, and conditioning can help reduce the risk of injuries [15].

Performance levels are also a critical determinant of career durability. Given the sport's highly competitive nature, athletes must consistently deliver high performance to retain their positions on teams and secure contracts. Several factors contribute to an athlete's performance, including physical fitness, technical skills, tactical understanding, and mental resilience [11]. Maintaining peak physical fitness is vital for optimal performance. This requires regular training, proper nutrition, and sufficient rest and recovery. As athletes age, sustaining physical fitness can become more challenging, necessitating adjustments in training routines to accommodate bodily changes. Technical skills, such as ball control, passing accuracy, and shooting ability, are fundamental to a football player's performance [16]. Continuous practice and skill development are essential to maintain and enhance these abilities throughout an athlete's career [1]. Tactical understanding involves an athlete's ability to read the game, make strategic decisions, and effectively execute game plans. Experience and in-depth knowledge of the sport can improve an athlete's tactical understanding, enabling them to adapt to various playing styles and opponents. Lastly, mental resilience is crucial for coping with the pressures and challenges of professional sports. This includes managing stress, maintaining focus, and staying motivated. Mental resilience can be cultivated through mental training techniques [17].

The playing position of a football athlete significantly impacts career strength due to varying physical demands and skill requirements. Midfielders and forwards often experience shorter careers because their roles involve high physical exertion, including covering large distances, making quick sprints, and engaging in frequent physical confrontations. This intense physical toll can lead to a reduced career span [18]. In contrast, goalkeepers generally enjoy longer careers. Their position demands less running and physical strain, allowing them to sustain performance levels over a more extended period [19]. Additionally, goalkeepers benefit from experience, positioning, and decision-making skills, which tend to improve with age. Similarly, defenders, especially central defenders, may have relatively longer careers. Although

their role involves physical challenges like tackling and aerial duels, defenders can leverage their tactical understanding and positioning to offset any decline in physical capabilities.

External factors such as team dynamics, coaching changes, and market conditions significantly impact a professional footballer's career duration [20]. The relationships within a team, including those with teammates, coaches, and management, play a crucial role. Positive team dynamics foster a supportive environment that enhances performance and extends career longevity [21]. In contrast, negative dynamics, such as conflicts or lack of support, can cause stress and dissatisfaction, potentially shortening an athlete's career [22]. Coaching changes also affect an athlete's career. Different coaches bring varying philosophies, tactics, and player preferences. An athlete who excels under one coach may struggle to adapt to the style and expectations of a new coach, which can impact their playing time and career duration [12]. Market conditions within professional football, including the financial stability of clubs, transfer policies, and competition for positions, also influence career longevity. Economic challenges faced by clubs may lead to budget cuts, affecting player contracts and job security. Additionally, the influx of new talent and heightened competition for positions can impact on an athlete's ability to secure and maintain a place in the team [2].

Personal attributes such as work ethic, attitude, and adaptability significantly influence career longevity in professional football. These traits affect an athlete's ability to overcome challenges, maintain performance, and adapt to changes throughout their career. A strong work ethic is crucial for a long and successful career [23]. Athletes who are dedicated to their training, consistently seek improvement, and maintain discipline are more likely to achieve career longevity [3]. A positive attitude, characterized by resilience, determination, and a willingness to learn, helps athletes navigate the ups and downs of a professional career. Those who stay motivated and focused, even when facing setbacks, are better equipped to sustain their careers [17]. Adaptability is also essential for career longevity. Athletes who can adjust their playing style, embrace new roles, and remain open to learning and development are more likely to extend their careers. This ability to adapt to changes in physical condition, team dynamics, or external circumstances is crucial for maintaining a long-term presence in professional football [14].

2.2. Challenges athletes face when transitioning to life after football

The transition from a professional football career to life after the sport is a complex and multifaceted process that presents numerous challenges for athletes. This period of change can be fraught with difficulties, ranging from psychological and emotional struggles to financial and social adjustments. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing effective support systems to help athletes navigate this significant life transition successfully.

One of the most significant challenges they face is the psychological and emotional impact of retirement. For many, their identity is deeply intertwined with their role as professional football players. The abrupt loss of this identity can trigger a range of emotional responses, including feelings of loss, grief, and a sense of

purposelessness [24]. Athletes often grapple with the question, “Who am I without football?” and may experience a profound sense of emptiness as they seek a new sense of purpose [25]. Depression and anxiety are common among retired athletes. The sudden end of a career that has been the central focus of their lives for many years can lead to considerable emotional turmoil [6]. The absence of the structure and routine provided by professional sports can intensify these feelings, leaving athletes feeling directionless and uncertain about their future. Furthermore, the loss of camaraderie and social support that comes with being part of a team can contribute to feelings of isolation and loneliness [12].

Financial challenges represent a significant obstacle for athletes. Although many football players earn considerable incomes during their careers, the financial landscape can shift dramatically once they retire. The abrupt loss of a regular paycheck can be jarring, particularly for those who have not sufficiently planned for their financial future. Issues such as poor financial management, insufficient savings, and unwise investments can lead to financial instability and stress [11]. Additionally, the lifestyle that athletes become accustomed to during their playing years can be challenging to maintain without a similar level of income. The pressure to uphold a certain standard of living can result in financial strain and, in some cases, debt. Finding new sources of income can also be problematic, as the skills and experience gained in football may not easily transfer to other career fields [26]. This mismatch can make the job search process intimidating and contribute to financial insecurity. Moreover, the lack of financial literacy among some athletes exacerbates these challenges. Without proper guidance and support, athletes may struggle to manage their finances effectively, leading to long-term financial difficulties [27].

The transition often brings significant social and relationship changes. During their careers, athletes typically have a robust social network within the sports community, including teammates, coaches, and fans. Retirement can disrupt this support system, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness. The camaraderie and sense of belonging that come with being part of a team are hard to replace [28]. Personal relationships with family and friends can also be affected. The rigorous demands of a professional football career, such as travel and training schedules, often strain these relationships. While retirement offers an opportunity to reconnect with loved ones, it also introduces new challenges as athletes adjust to spending more time at home and renegotiating their roles within their families [29]. The shift in social status and public recognition that accompanies retirement can further impact an athlete’s self-esteem and sense of identity [7]. The loss of routine and structure that professional sports provide can exacerbate these feelings of disconnection. Athletes may struggle to find new social circles and activities that offer the same level of engagement and support. This period of adjustment requires time and effort to rebuild a sense of community and belonging outside the sports world [1].

Transitioning to a new career is a significant challenge for athletes. Many have devoted their lives to their sport from a young age, often sacrificing higher education and work experience in other fields. This singular focus can put them at a disadvantage when they enter the job market. The absence of a clear career path and the necessity to acquire new skills and qualifications can make this transition particularly difficult [11]. Moreover, the job search process can be daunting for athletes who have spent

their entire careers within the sports industry. Skills such as writing resumes, preparing for interviews, and networking may need to be developed from scratch. Athletes often face stereotypes and misconceptions from potential employers who may not fully recognize the transferable skills and qualities that athletes bring to the table, such as discipline, teamwork, and leadership [30]. These challenges highlight the need for comprehensive support systems to assist athletes in their career transitions. Career counselling, skill development programs, and mentorship can play crucial roles in helping athletes navigate this new phase of their lives [12].

Physical health is also a significant concern. The rigorous demands of a professional football career often result in chronic injuries and long-term health issues. Managing these health problems can be particularly challenging in retirement, as athletes may require ongoing medical treatment, physical therapy, and rehabilitation to address the residual effects of their playing days [15]. Without the structured training and support provided by professional sports teams, maintaining physical fitness can become difficult. Athletes may find it challenging to discover new ways to stay active and healthy, which can adversely affect their overall well-being. The absence of the physical outlet that football once provided can also impact on mental health, as regular exercise is known to have beneficial effects on mood and stress levels [31]. In retirement, athletes must navigate the complexities of managing their physical health independently. This includes finding appropriate medical care, adhering to rehabilitation programs, and developing new fitness routines. The transition from a highly structured environment to one where they must take personal responsibility for their health can be daunting. The end of a football career may lead to a decrease in physical activity [6].

The issue of identity and self-worth is a fundamental challenge athletes encounter. For many, their identity is deeply intertwined with their role as professional football players. The conclusion of their playing career can trigger an identity crisis, as they struggle with the question of who they are without the sport that has long defined them [32]. Reconstructing a sense of self-worth and discovering a new identity is a complex and emotional journey. Athletes may need to explore new roles and passions, whether in different careers, further education, or personal interests. This process of self-discovery is not immediate; it requires considerable time, patience, and support from family, friends, and professionals [33]. The transition involves redefining one's purpose and finding fulfilment outside the realm of professional sports. Athletes must navigate the emotional landscape of letting go of their former identity while embracing new opportunities and challenges [30].

Mental health and well-being are vital components of the transition [34]. The psychological impact of retirement can be significant, with athletes often facing mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and stress [4]. The abrupt loss of identity, routine, and social support exacerbates these issues, underscoring the need for accessible mental health resources and support systems [6]. Counselling and therapy are invaluable for athletes dealing with the emotional hurdles of retirement. Mental health professionals can assist athletes in developing effective coping strategies, building resilience, and addressing any underlying mental health concerns. Additionally, support groups and peer networks offer a sense of community and understanding, helping athletes feel less isolated during this transitional period [28].

2.3. Theoretical framework

Literature reveals that the career lifespan of professional football athletes is influenced by a complex interplay of factors. Moreover, this transition toward retirement is multifaceted and presents numerous challenges. Understanding these factors and recognizing the various challenges (Figure 1) is fundamental for creating effective support systems and strategies to help athletes successfully navigate through this change.

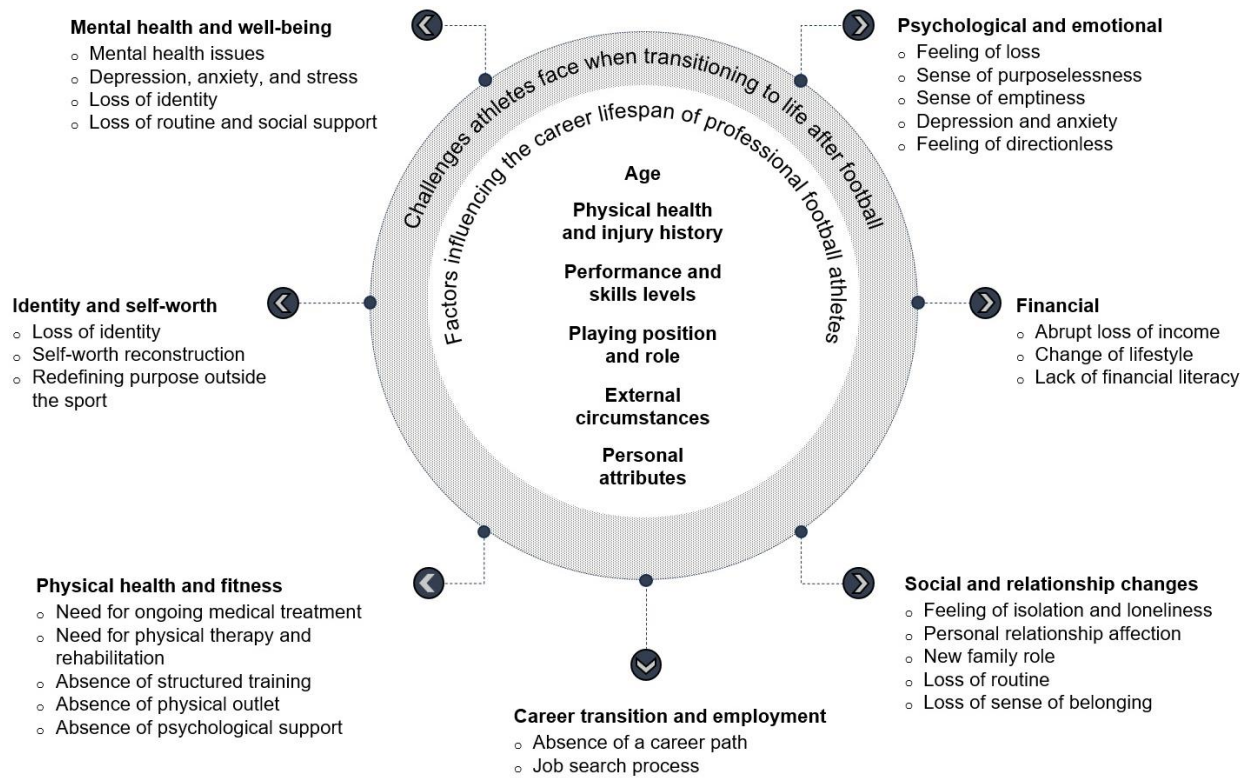


Figure 1. Factors influencing the career lifespan of professional football athletes and the challenges of transitioning to life after football.

Source: Developed by author.

The theoretical framework aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted elements that shape the duration of a professional football career and the subsequent transition to post-sport life. This framework presents a range of factors that collectively influence career longevity. Additionally, it identifies the challenges athletes face when retiring from professional football. By integrating these diverse aspects, the framework seeks to identify the key determinants of career longevity and the critical support systems needed to facilitate a smooth and fulfilling transition for athletes. This holistic approach underscores the importance of tailored interventions and comprehensive support programs to address the unique needs of retiring athletes, ultimately promoting their long-life well-being.

3. Methodology

This paper employs a theoretical approach to identify the career lifespan of professional football athletes, explore the challenges they face when transitioning to

life after their football careers, and present the existing programs and strategies that support this transition. Based on a comprehensive review of the literature a theoretical framework is developed, closely aligned with the research objectives., addressing the distinct factors influencing the career lifespan of professional football athletes and the challenges of transitioning to life after football. The framework draws upon proven elements from previous research, thus ensuring its relevance and applicability. Employing the customized theoretical framework, the study systematically identifies and examines programs and strategies that support football athletes in their post-sport careers. The study's methodological rigor facilitates the introduction of targeted recommendations for enhancing existing support programs, thereby assisting athletes in navigating their post-sport lives with greater ease and success.

4. Results

The shift from professional football to post-sport life poses numerous challenges for athletes. Successfully navigating this transition requires a holistic approach that includes psychological support, financial planning, career support, and skill development opportunities [1]. Recognizing and addressing the distinct needs of retiring athletes is crucial, sports organizations and policymakers play a vital role in facilitating this process. These entities can help athletes manage the psychological and emotional impacts of retirement, secure their financial future, explore new career paths, and develop new skills by providing comprehensive resources and tailored assistance [7]. This multifaceted support system is essential for a smooth transition and to build rewarding lives beyond the playing field. To facilitate this transition, various programs and strategies have been progressed to support athletes in their post-football careers. These initiatives aim to address the multifaceted challenges athletes face, including psychological, financial, and social adjustments, and to provide them with the tools and resources necessary for a successful and fulfilling post-sport life [13].

4.1. Career counselling and transition program

Career counselling is a vital component of support for athletes. These programs provide customized guidance to help athletes explore new career paths, identify their strengths and interests, and develop the skills necessary for success in the job market. Career counsellors work closely with athletes to create individualized career plans, set realistic and achievable goals, and navigate the complexities of the job search process [35]. This comprehensive support includes assistance with crafting effective resumes, preparing for interviews, and leveraging networking opportunities to connect with potential employers [36]. Transition programs often incorporate a variety of workshops and seminars that cover a wide range of career-related topics. These may include sessions on entrepreneurship, understanding job market trends, and professional development. The goal of these initiatives is to equip athletes with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their chosen fields. These programs help athletes make informed decisions about their future by offering insights into different career options and the current job market [37]. In addition, some organizations offer job placement services specifically designed for athletes. These services connect

athletes with potential employers and provide internship opportunities to gain valuable work experience. Facilitating these connections helps athletes shift smoothly into new careers and build professional networks outside of the sports industry [30]. Besides, career counselling programs include mentorship opportunities, where retired football athletes who have successfully transitioned to new careers share their experiences and provide guidance. This peer support may be proven invaluable, offering practical advice and emotional support [38].

4.2. Financial planning and management program

Financial planning is also vibrant. Many athletes encounter financial difficulties upon retirement due to a lack of financial literacy, poor investment choices, and the abrupt loss of income. Financial planning programs are designed to equip athletes with the tools and knowledge necessary to manage their finances effectively and ensure long-term financial stability [26]. These programs typically include workshops on essential financial topics such as budgeting, saving, investing, and debt management. Financial advisors collaborate with athletes to develop personalized financial plans tailored to their unique needs and goals. This personalized approach may encompass strategies for managing existing wealth, planning for retirement, and creating multiple income streams to diversify and secure their financial future [27]. Moreover, these programs often provide one-on-one consultations with financial experts who can offer tailored advice and guidance. These experts help athletes understand the complexities of financial management, from tax planning to estate planning, ensuring that they are well-prepared for the financial challenges that may arise post-retirement. Athletes can mitigate the stress associated with financial instability and make informed decisions that support their long-term well-being by fostering strong financial management skills.

4.3. Education and skill development program

Several athletes may have prioritized their sports careers over higher education or vocational training, which can put them at a disadvantage when entering the job market [39]. Education programs are designed to bridge this gap by providing opportunities for athletes to acquire new skills and qualifications that enhance their employability [40]. These programs often include scholarships for higher education, vocational training courses, and access to online learning platforms. Some organizations collaborate with universities and educational institutions to offer customized programs specifically for athletes, enabling them to balance their academic pursuits with their training and competition schedules. This tailored approach ensures that athletes can continue their education without compromising their athletic commitments [36]. In addition, skill development workshops play a crucial role in preparing athletes for diverse career fields, as they focus on essential areas such as leadership, communication, and project management, which are highly valued in various professional environments. Athletes can increase their versatility and appeal to potential employers through the enhancement of these skills [40].

4.4. Psychological and emotional support program

Numerous athletes experience feelings of loss, identity crises, and anxiety as they adjust to a new phase of life. The end of a professional sports career often means the loss of a structured routine, a sense of purpose, and the camaraderie of teammates, all of which can contribute to emotional turmoil. Mental health support programs are specifically designed to address these challenges and promote overall well-being during this critical transition period [25]. Counselling and therapy services play a crucial role in providing athletes with a safe and confidential space to discuss their concerns and develop effective coping strategies. Mental health professionals work closely with athletes to address issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress, which are common during the transition to post-sport life. These professionals help athletes understand and manage their emotions, fostering resilience and mental strength. In addition, support groups and peer networks offer a sense of community and shared understanding, helping athletes feel less isolated in their experiences. These groups provide a platform for athletes to share their stories, exchange advice, and build meaningful connections with others who are going through similar transitions [4]. Mental health programs may also include workshops on stress management, mindfulness, and resilience training. Stress management workshops teach athletes techniques to handle the pressures and uncertainties of their new lives, while mindfulness practices help them stay present and focused. Resilience training equips athletes with the tools needed to bounce back from setbacks and adapt to new challenges. These programs aim to provide athletes with a comprehensive toolkit to navigate the emotional ups and downs of retirement and build a strong foundation for their post-sport lives [15].

4.5. Mentorship and peer support program

Mentorship programs are instrumental in supporting retiring athletes by connecting them with former players who have successfully navigated the transition to life after football. These mentors offer invaluable guidance, support, and insights drawn from their own experiences, helping current athletes understand and manage the complexities of retirement. Through mentorship relationships, athletes can gain practical advice on exploring new career opportunities, overcoming challenges, and building confidence in their abilities. Mentors can provide personalized support, helping athletes set realistic goals, develop new skills, and adapt to their new lives [41]. Furthermore, peer support networks play a vital role in the transition process. These networks bring together athletes who are experiencing similar life changes, fostering a sense of camaraderie and mutual support. Peer support groups create a safe and understanding environment where athletes can share their stories, exchange advice, and build meaningful connections. These interactions can help alleviate feelings of isolation and provide emotional support during a challenging period [42]. Peer support networks also offer practical benefits. Sharing experiences and strategies, athletes can learn from one another and develop effective coping mechanisms. These groups can facilitate discussions on various topics, such as career planning, financial management, and mental health, providing a comprehensive support system. Also,

peer networks can help athletes expand their professional and social circles, opening up new opportunities for collaboration and growth [13].

4.6. Entrepreneurship and business development program

Entrepreneurship programs play a pivotal role in encouraging athletes to explore business opportunities and hone their entrepreneurial skills. Many athletes inherently possess qualities such as discipline, leadership, and resilience, which are highly valuable in the business world [43]. These programs provide the necessary training and resources to help athletes initiate and grow their businesses, thereby facilitating a smooth transition from sports to entrepreneurship [44]. Typically, entrepreneurship programs encompass a variety of workshops and seminars focused on essential business topics such as business planning, marketing strategies, financial management, and operational management. These educational sessions aim to equip athletes with a comprehensive understanding of the business landscape and the practical skills needed to succeed [36]. Additionally, some organizations offer specialized incubator programs designed to support athlete-led startups, providing crucial resources such as funding, mentorship, and networking opportunities, which are instrumental in the early stages of business development [45].

4.7. Community engagement and volunteering program

Community engagement and volunteering programs encourage athletes to give back to their communities and make a positive impact. These initiatives provide athletes with opportunities to leverage their skills and influence in support of charitable causes, mentor young athletes, and participate in various forms of community service. Engaging in these activities allows athletes to continue contributing to the sports community and beyond, fostering a sense of purpose and fulfillment [5]. Volunteering offers a meaningful way for athletes to stay connected to the sports community, even after their professional careers have ended. It allows them to share their experiences, knowledge, and passion for football with the next generation, thereby creating a lasting legacy. Moreover, community engagement programs provide athletes with the chance to develop new skills that are transferable to other areas of life. For instance, organizing events, fundraising, and public speaking are valuable skills that can enhance an athlete's personal and professional growth [37]. Also, these programs assist athletes expand their networks by connecting them with like-minded individuals, community leaders, and organizations. This networking can open doors to potential career paths in the nonprofit sector, where athletes can continue to make a difference. Exploring roles in nonprofit management, advocacy, and program development can provide athletes with rewarding career opportunities that align with their values and interests [36].

4.8. Holistic wellness program

Holistic wellness programs adopt a comprehensive approach to supporting athletes, addressing the physical, mental, emotional, and social dimensions of well-being. These programs are designed to promote a balanced and healthy lifestyle, ensuring that athletes are well-equipped to handle the multifaceted challenges of post-

sport life [44]. A key component of holistic wellness programs is fitness and nutrition coaching. These services help athletes maintain their physical health by providing personalized exercise routines and dietary plans tailored to their specific needs. Staying physically active and following a nutritious diet enables athletes to preserve their fitness levels and overall health, which are crucial for a smooth transition [37]. Mental health support is another critical element of these programs. Athletes often face psychological challenges such as anxiety, depression, and identity loss after retiring from professional sports. Holistic wellness programs offer counselling services, therapy sessions, and mental health workshops to help athletes manage these issues. Stress management workshops teach techniques that enable athletes to cope with the pressures and uncertainties of their new lives [12].

4.9. Policy advocacy and support program

Policy advocacy and support programs are designed to foster a supportive environment for retiring athletes by shaping policies and regulations at both organizational and governmental levels. These initiatives strive to ensure that athletes have access to the necessary resources and support systems to facilitate a smooth and successful transition [36]. Policy advocacy efforts often concentrate on several key areas, including financial security, mental health support, education and training opportunities, and career transition programs. These programs aim to implement policies that provide athletes with the tools and knowledge to manage their finances effectively, ensuring long-term stability [37]. Prioritizing the well-being of athletes, these advocacy efforts contribute to a more supportive and inclusive sports community [33].

4.10. Research and evaluation program

Research and evaluation programs are fundamental in comprehending the challenges athletes encounter and assessing the effectiveness of support initiatives designed to aid their transition. Systematically studying the experiences of retiring athletes and evaluating the impact of various support programs yields valuable insights that inform the development of more effective support strategies [1]. Research programs typically employ a variety of methodologies, including surveys, interviews, and case studies, to collect comprehensive data on the needs and experiences of athletes. Surveys can capture broad trends and common issues faced by athletes, while interviews provide deeper, qualitative insights into individual experiences. Case studies offer detailed examinations of specific instances, highlighting successful transitions and identifying factors that contribute to positive outcomes [4]. Evaluation efforts focus on assessing the outcomes of existing support programs, determining their effectiveness, and identifying best practices. This involves analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data to measure the impact of these programs on athletes' post-football lives. Pinpointing areas for improvement, evaluation efforts help refine and enhance support initiatives, ensuring they are better tailored to meet the unique needs of athletes [5]. Continuous monitoring and improvement of support programs are essential for maintaining their relevance and effectiveness. Regularly updating and refining these initiatives based on the latest research findings, organizations can ensure

that athletes receive the most effective assistance possible. This ongoing process of evaluation and adaptation helps create a robust support system that evolves in response to the changing needs of athletes [25].

4.11. Collaboration and partnerships approach program

Collaboration and partnerships among sports organizations, educational institutions, businesses, and nonprofit organizations are essential for establishing comprehensive support systems for retiring athletes. These entities can pool resources, share expertise, and develop innovative programs by joining forces, catering to the diverse needs of football athletes transitioning to life after sports [44]. Partnerships with educational institutions are particularly valuable, as they can provide athletes with access to customized education and training programs. These programs can be tailored to fit the unique schedules and learning needs of athletes, enabling them to acquire new skills and qualifications that enhance their employability. Educational institutions can also offer scholarships and flexible learning options, making it easier for athletes to pursue higher education while managing their other commitments [29]. Collaborations with businesses are equally important, as they can create job placement opportunities and support entrepreneurial ventures. Businesses can offer internships, apprenticeships, and full-time positions that allow athletes to gain valuable work experience and transition smoothly into new careers. Additionally, businesses can provide mentorship and networking opportunities, helping football athletes build professional connections and navigate the job market [40].

4.12. Success stories and role models program

Highlighting success stories and showcasing role models can significantly inspire and motivate retiring athletes as they navigate their transition from professional football to new activities. Sharing the experiences of former athletes who have successfully transitioned to new careers, launched businesses, or made meaningful contributions to their communities can provide invaluable insights and encouragement [46]. These stories serve as tangible examples of what is possible, demonstrating that life after football can be both fulfilling and successful [30]. Role models play a crucial role in this process by serving as mentors. They offer guidance and support based on their own experiences, helping retiring athletes understand the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Mentors can provide practical advice on career planning, skill development, and personal growth, making the transition smoother and less daunting. The mentorship relationship fosters a sense of camaraderie and trust, which can be incredibly reassuring for athletes facing an uncertain future [11]. Success stories and role models can be shared through a variety of platforms to reach a broad audience. Social media is a powerful tool for disseminating these narratives, allowing for wide-reaching impact and engagement. Workshops and seminars provide interactive environments where athletes can learn directly from those who have walked the same path. Events, such as conferences and panel discussions, offer opportunities for networking and deeper exploration of post-football career options [47].

4.13. Tailored support for diverse needs program

Recognizing the uniqueness of each athlete's transition experience, tailored support programs address the diverse needs of retiring athletes. These programs consider various factors such as age, career stage, cultural background, and personal goals to provide personalized and effective assistance. The transition from a professional sports career to a new phase of life is a highly individualized process, and a one-size-fits-all approach is often insufficient [37]. Tailored support programs may encompass a range of services designed to meet the specific needs of each athlete. Individualized career counselling is a key component, offering personalized guidance to help athletes explore new career paths, identify their strengths and interests, and develop the skills necessary for success in the job market. Career counsellors work closely with football athletes to create customized career plans, set achievable goals, and navigate the complexities of the job search process, including resume writing, interview preparation, and networking opportunities [5]. Customized financial planning is another critical aspect of tailored support. Financial advisors provide personalized strategies for managing existing wealth, planning for retirement, and creating multiple income streams. This individualized approach helps athletes secure their financial future and reduce the stress associated with financial instability [23]. Specialized services are also integral to tailored support programs. Access to mental health professionals who understand these challenges is valuable support, including counselling, therapy, and mental health workshops focused on stress management, resilience, and overall well-being [12].

4.14. Long-term follow-up and support programs

Long-term follow-up and support ensure the sustained well-being of retiring athletes. The transition to life after football is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that can present various challenges and adjustments over time. Athletes may encounter new obstacles as they adapt to their post-sport lives, making continuous support essential for their long-term success and fulfilment [33]. Long-term support programs offer ongoing assistance and resources to help athletes navigate these changes effectively. These programs often include regular check-ins with career counsellors, financial advisors, and mental health professionals. Such consistent engagement allows athletes to receive personalized guidance and address any emerging issues promptly. Career counsellors can help athletes refine their career plans and set new goals, while financial advisors can assist with managing finances and planning for future stability. Mental health professionals provide crucial support for coping with the emotional and psychological aspects of retirement [44]. In addition, continued access to education and training opportunities is essential for athletes' long-term development. These opportunities enable athletes to acquire new skills and qualifications, enhancing their employability and career prospects. Mentorship programs also play a significant role, connecting athletes with experienced mentors who can offer valuable insights and support based on their own transition experiences [31]. Peer support networks further contribute to long-term well-being by fostering a sense of community and shared understanding. These networks allow

athletes to connect with others who are going through similar transitions, providing mutual support and encouragement [45].

5. Discussion

The transition from a professional career to life after sport is a complex and multifaceted process that requires comprehensive support. Strategies and programs that address the psychological, financial, educational, and social needs of retiring athletes are essential for facilitating a smooth and successful transition (**Figure 2**).

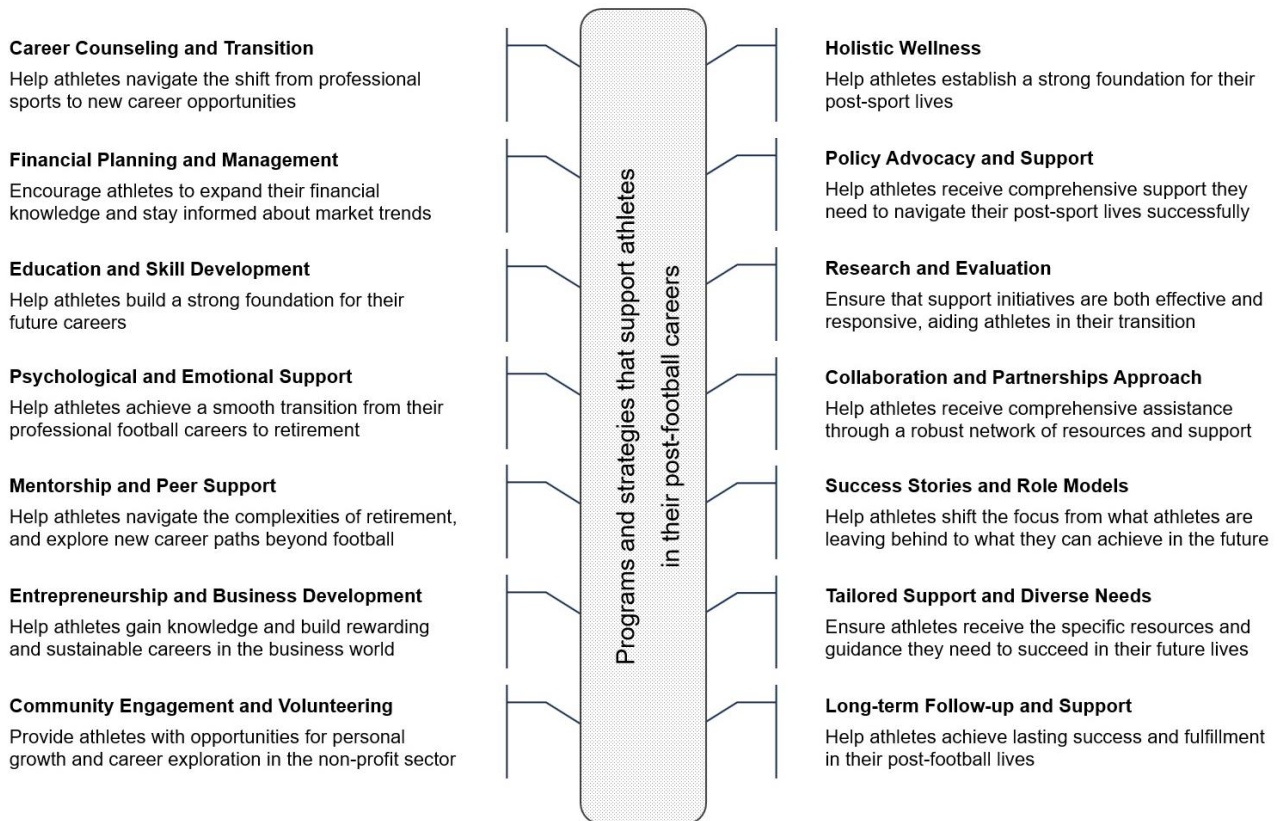


Figure 2. Programs and strategies that support football athletes’ post-football careers.

Source: Developed by author.

Career counselling and transition programs play an essential role in aiding athletes as they move from professional sports to new career opportunities. These programs provide personalized guidance, educational resources, and job placement services, empowering athletes to build successful and fulfilling post-sport careers. Financial planning and management initiatives emphasize the importance of financial literacy, encouraging athletes to expand their financial knowledge and stay informed about market trends and investment opportunities. This proactive approach empowers athletes to take charge of their financial futures, make sound investment decisions, and establish a robust foundation for life after football. Effective financial planning enables athletes to transition smoothly from their professional sports careers to a financially secure and rewarding post-retirement life.

Education and skill development programs are crucial for athletes preparing for life after football. These programs help athletes build a solid base for their future

careers by offering scholarships, customized academic programs, and skill development workshops. Collaborations with educational institutions and mentorship opportunities ensure that athletes are well-equipped to thrive in their post-sport lives. Addressing the psychological and emotional aspects of this transition, mental health support programs play a vital role in facilitating a smooth and fulfilling shift from professional football careers to post-sport life. These programs promote mental well-being and empower athletes to embrace new opportunities and craft rewarding lives beyond the playing field.

Mentorship programs and peer support networks are integral components of a holistic approach to supporting athletes in their transition to life after football. These programs can help athletes navigate the complexities of retirement, explore new career paths, and build fulfilling lives beyond the field by leveraging the experiences and insights of former players and fostering a sense of community among current athletes. Continued support and connection enable athletes to adapt successfully to their new roles and thrive in post-sport efforts. Entrepreneurial mindset programs further empower athletes to take control of their career paths and achieve financial independence. These programs encourage athletes to utilize their unique skills and experiences to create innovative business ventures, providing them with the tools and knowledge needed to succeed in the business world. Ultimately, these programs inspire confidence and self-reliance, enabling athletes to build rewarding and sustainable careers beyond sports.

Community engagement and volunteering initiatives offer athletes a platform to make a positive impact, stay connected to the sports community, and find purpose. These programs benefit communities while providing athletes opportunities for personal growth, skill development, and career exploration in the nonprofit sector. Athletes can continue to lead meaningful lives beyond their professional sports careers through participation in these initiatives. Well-being and holistic wellness programs help athletes establish a strong foundation for their post-sport lives. These programs aim to ensure long-term success and happiness by addressing all aspects of health and well-being, empowering athletes to navigate their transition with confidence and resilience.

Policy advocacy and support programs play a fundamental role in creating an environment that prioritizes the needs of retiring athletes. These programs ensure comprehensive support for athletes as they navigate their post-sport lives successfully by influencing policies related to financial security, mental health, education, and career transition. Research and evaluation programs are crucial for understanding the multifaceted challenges athletes face and for developing and refining support strategies. Through rigorous data collection and analysis, these initiatives ensure support programs are effective and responsive, aiding athletes in their transition to life after football.

Promoting collaboration enhances the overall support system for athletes through partnerships among sports organizations, educational institutions, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. This robust network of resources ensures athletes receive the comprehensive assistance they need for a successful transition. Positive narratives about life after football, highlighted by success stories and role models, can help shift

the focus from what athletes are leaving behind to what they can achieve, alleviating retirement anxiety and empowering athletes to proactively build meaningful lives.

Through personalized support, athletes receive the specific resources and guidance they need to succeed in their post-sport lives. Tailored support programs aid athletes in navigating the complexities of retirement and achieving their personal and professional goals. These various support mechanisms maintain long-term engagement, better equipping athletes to handle retirement challenges and build meaningful lives beyond the playing field.

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges athletes face when transitioning from professional football to post-sport life. The transition process is complex, involving psychological, financial, and social adjustments. Effective support systems are essential to help athletes navigate these challenges successfully. These initiatives not only promote the well-being and fulfilment of athletes but also contribute to a more supportive and inclusive sports community. Ultimately, the findings highlight the importance of a holistic approach to athlete transition, ensuring that athletes are well-prepared for life beyond the playing field.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several key recommendations can be made to support athletes in their transition. These recommendations focus on addressing the multifaceted challenges football players face and providing comprehensive support systems to ensure their long-term well-being and success.

- Football players should be introduced to career counselling and educational opportunities early in their professional journeys. This proactive approach allows them to explore potential career paths, acquire new skills, and pursue higher education or vocational training while still playing. Integrating career planning into their athletic development enables athletes to build a strong foundation for their post-sport lives, reducing the uncertainty and anxiety associated with retirement. Innovation is key to creating sustainable post-career opportunities, and understanding entrepreneurial principles can help them utilize their unique brand and network to initiate successful businesses or projects after retirement.
- Comprehensive financial planning and management programs should be made available to athletes throughout their careers. These programs should include workshops on budgeting, saving, investing, and debt management, as well as personalized financial counselling. Financial advisors can help football players create long-term financial plans that account for their unique needs and goals, ensuring they are well-prepared for the financial realities of retirement. Fostering financial literacy and prudent financial practices through these programs can help them secure their financial future and avoid common pitfalls such as poor investments and overspending. They need effective financial planning to ensure their earnings during their playing career can sustain them post-retirement. Fintech services and robust financial management strategies can aid investment, wealth preservation, and income diversification, ensuring long-term financial stability.

- Access to counselling and therapy services should be readily available to football players, providing them with a safe space to discuss their concerns and develop coping strategies. Additionally, mental health workshops focusing on stress management, resilience training, and mindfulness practices can equip them with the tools needed to navigate the emotional ups and downs of retirement. Peer support networks and support groups can also play a crucial role in providing a sense of community and shared understanding.
- Mentorship programs that connect retiring them with former players who have successfully transitioned to new careers should be available, to provide invaluable guidance and support. Mentors can offer insights based on their own experiences, helping athletes navigate the challenges of retirement and explore new career opportunities. HRM strategies are crucial for helping them adapt to post-retirement life, offering support in areas such as skills development, mental health, and re-employment or career redirection. Also, networking opportunities should be facilitated, allowing them to connect with professionals in various fields. Building a strong professional network can open doors to job opportunities, internships, and collaborations, enhancing their career prospects and providing a sense of direction.
- A holistic approach to wellness is essential to be in place for supporting them in their transition to post-sport life. Holistic wellness programs should address the physical, mental, emotional, and social aspects of well-being. These programs can include fitness and nutrition coaching, mental health support, stress management workshops, and social activities. Promoting a balanced and healthy lifestyle through holistic wellness programs helps them build a strong foundation for their post-sport lives. Additionally, community engagement and volunteering opportunities can provide them with a sense of purpose and fulfilment, allowing them to give back to their communities and stay connected to the sports world.

These recommendations are essential for supporting football players in their transition from professional to post-sport life. By implementing these strategies, sports organizations, policymakers, and support networks can significantly enhance the well-being and success of retiring football players, ensuring they are well-prepared for the next chapter of their lives.

6. Conclusion

The transition from a professional football career to life after the sport is a multifaceted and challenging process that requires comprehensive support systems. The findings of this study highlight the importance of addressing the various factors that influence career longevity, such as age, physical health, performance levels, playing position, external circumstances, and personal attributes. Equally important is the need to provide robust support mechanisms and HRM strategies to help athletes navigate the psychological, financial, and social adjustments associated with retirement. Effective HRM strategies include early career planning and education, comprehensive financial planning and management, mental health and emotional support, mentorship and networking opportunities, and holistic wellness programs. Implementing these recommendations enables sports organizations, policymakers,

and support networks to significantly enhance the well-being and success of retiring football players. These initiatives not only promote a smoother transition to post-sport life but also contribute to a more supportive and inclusive sports community. Ultimately, a holistic approach that integrates career development, financial stability, mental health, and social support is essential for ensuring that athletes are well-prepared for life beyond the playing field. This comprehensive support framework will empower football players to build rewarding and fulfilling lives after their football careers, fostering long-term well-being and success.

6.1. Implications

The implications of this study are far-reaching, highlighting the critical need for comprehensive support systems to aid athletes in their transition from professional football to post-sport life. Firstly, sports organizations and policymakers must recognize the importance of early career planning and education, integrating these elements into athletes' development programs to ensure they are well-prepared for life beyond the playing field. Financial stability is another crucial area, necessitating the implementation of robust financial planning and management programs that equip athletes with the knowledge and skills to secure their financial future. The psychological and emotional challenges associated with retirement underscore the need for accessible mental health and emotional support services, including counselling, therapy, and resilience training. Mentorship and networking opportunities are also vital, as they provide retiring athletes with guidance, support, and connections that can open doors to new career paths. Finally, a holistic approach to wellness, addressing physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being, is essential for promoting a balanced and fulfilling post-sport life. Adopting these comprehensive support strategies allows sports organizations, policymakers, and support networks to significantly enhance the well-being and success of retiring athletes. This holistic approach not only benefits the athletes but also contributes to a more supportive and inclusive sports community, ultimately fostering a culture that values and prioritizes the long-term well-being of its members.

6.2. Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing the career lifespan of professional football athletes and the challenges they face when transitioning to life after football, it is not without limitations. One significant limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability and recall inaccuracies. Additionally, the study's sample may not be fully representative of the diverse experiences of all professional football athletes, as it may be skewed towards those who are more willing or able to participate in research. The cross-sectional nature of the study also limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships between the identified factors and career longevity or transition challenges. Furthermore, the study may not account for all potential variables influencing career transitions, such as cultural differences, varying levels of support from sports organizations, and individual personality traits. Finally, the rapidly changing landscape of professional sports, including evolving financial conditions and

advancements in sports medicine, may affect the generalizability of the findings over time. Future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and a broader range of variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

6.3. Future research directions

Future research directions should focus on further exploring the multifaceted challenges athletes face when transitioning from professional football to post-sport life, as well as the effectiveness of various support programs. One area of interest is the long-term impact of early career planning and education on athletes' post-retirement success. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how early interventions influence career outcomes and overall well-being. Additionally, research should examine the specific financial challenges athletes encounter and the effectiveness of different financial planning strategies in mitigating these issues. This could include comparative studies of athletes who received financial counselling versus those who did not. Mental health remains a critical area for future research. Studies should investigate the prevalence of mental health issues among retired athletes and the effectiveness of various mental health support programs, including counselling, peer support networks, and resilience training. Understanding the psychological impact of retirement and identifying best practices for mental health support can inform the development of more effective interventions. Furthermore, research should explore the role of mentorship and networking in facilitating successful career transitions. Investigating the long-term benefits of mentorship programs and identifying key factors that contribute to their success can help refine these initiatives. Finally, holistic wellness programs that address physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being should be evaluated for their overall impact on athletes' post-sport lives. Focusing on these future research directions enables us to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the transition process and enhance the support systems available to retiring athletes.

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