

Moving on in Sport Science

It's an old line that there are few fairy tales in elite sport, and most athletes don't get to leave or retire on their own terms. Injury, being past their best, younger players and athletes coming through, losing the confidence of the coach or committee, family pressures, financial circumstances, or dwindling motivation are all factors we recognize in sport. Many of these also apply in occupational, employment, and professional settings, including sport-science practice and research. When the drum of moving on starts to beat louder and longer it's time for self-reflection and decision making. Moving on, particularly after a long career or stint, is a big decision and it is worth looking both backward (to revisit the journey, experiences, and enjoyment) and forward (to new challenges and opportunities) for a 360° perspective. At the right time, it is worth discussing big decisions with family, close colleagues, and friends, as a problem or decision shared is often a problem or decision halved.

Whether it is in Olympic, professional, or lower-level sport or in an academic environment, those of us who have been in sport science long enough have lived or witnessed all kinds of situations that justify a move. Very recently, one of us (I.M.) went back to visit the professional football club where I worked 14 years ago. It still felt like the dream workplace for an applied sports physiologist. Former colleagues and players welcomed me, talked about the good old times, and fantasized about "how great things could have been" had I stayed in the club . . . so why didn't I? Simply because a new board decided I should leave, as they did not grasp the value of having a department of research and development in the club. Needless to say, that board did not last, but once I was gone, there was no way back, as I had already embarked on new exciting projects. Over the past 25 years, I moved on professionally multiple times and for various reasons: as a triathlon coach because some athletes retired, and others decided to look elsewhere; as a sports physiologist because I was offered the opportunity to work in a new sport; because I felt it was time to go back home after working in a different country; the team I was working with lost its sponsorship and was dismantled; I was considered "too expensive"; and I did not want to work with people I did not respect professionally and whose project I did not believe in. Reasons I moved on in academia included not wanting to lecture on topics I was not interested in, being poorly paid, and not wanting to deal with the heavy administrative task load involved.

In consultation with the Editorial Board of *IJSP*, we realize that many of us have faced similar situations throughout our respective professional careers. Competitive sport is a ruthless work environment. There's no hiding in competition, and oftentimes when athletes fail, everyone around them fails, as well. As a result, staff turnover rate is massive: coaches, performance directors, and support staff come and go faster than in any other industry. Either we accept and adapt to constant change or we had better move on. If professional stability is what we are after, we had better look elsewhere. Conflicts of interest with colleagues and/or sport-governing bodies, lack of balance between family life and work requirements (long hours, busy weekends, weeks-long training camps away, constant travel for international competition, etc), loss

of interest in the somewhat repetitive nature of preparation for competition, and lack of opportunities for intellectual growth and research and development are often-cited reasons to move on.

Like any other industry, private practice in sport science can also be affected by both financial difficulties and high employee turnover. As a result, we may decide to move on, or someone else may decide that we must leave. In those situations, searching for professional stability seems like a reasonable thing to do, stability that we often try to find in academia, a work environment we sometimes perceive as less risky and more stable than sport. Besides stability, we may also be attracted to the lively and exciting cut-and-thrust atmosphere of scientific research, sometimes right on the boundary between the academic and the sport-performance worlds. Unfortunately, the realization often dawns that in some (or many) parts of the world academia has become a quite ruthless cutthroat occupational environment, so learning to cope with failure and frustration more often than anticipated is critical. Scientific articles, a key outcome of our research activities, are rejected at least as often as they are accepted, often without peer revision and/or with low-quality reviewer comments. Unsuccessful grant proposals, funding applications, student allowance requests can pile up in our personal record of failures and setbacks. Additional often-mentioned reasons to move on from an academic institution include difficulties navigating complex academic politics, being evaluated by peers perceived as less qualified than ourselves but holding higher-rank positions, academic nepotism and endogamy (or inbreeding), frustration related to lack of financial support and opportunity to grow, resistance to change, and the impossibility of challenging an unsatisfactory status quo.

All of these scenarios indicate that resilience is important not just for athletes but also for sport scientists, given the inevitable setbacks and need to move on with professional careers, whether it is coaching, service provision in sports, or academia. Sport scientists must bounce back and keep growing professionally and personally—we need to rise from the ashes like a phoenix. In his 1934 book *The World as I See It*, Albert Einstein famously wrote,

Without crisis there are no challenges, without challenges life is a routine, a slow agony. Without a crisis there is no merit. It is in the crisis that the best of everyone comes up, because without a crisis all winds are only light breezes.

Fortunately, however, not all departures need to be traumatic or the consequence of professional frustration. Sometimes individuals may decide to move on simply because a better opportunity came our way: a more interesting, stimulating, challenging position that better aligns with our goals or interests; a job that allows us to live where we wanted to; or, why not, a better-paid job! Whatever the reason to leave, it is our advice to always behave ethically and remember that a friendly departure with no bridges burned should facilitate future employment options. Reflect on the circumstances that made you move on, improve what needs to be improved, and move forward, just like the athletes we work with do after both successful and unsuccessful competition.

Of course, there are also plenty of reasons *not* to move on. Sometimes we may accept a professional position because it is the only job available, or we may consider it a temporary platform to something better. However, these positions may unexpectedly become (or we may turn them into) the perfect job for us, the position that we will hold on to for the better part of our professional lives. When our sport-science work environment remains motivating, intellectually challenging, and provides opportunity for growth, we may simply decide to stay put. Besides the exciting process of scientific research and discovery, an academic position may provide opportunities to develop or modify a curriculum, create or coordinate postgraduate programs, set up a successful research laboratory, supervise PhD students, get academic promotion, attend international conferences, host and visit colleagues internationally, and embark on a sabbatical. Some or all of these opportunities could bring sufficient professional satisfaction to stay where we are. A profound sense of belonging, the comfort of a well-known rhythm, pursuing a familiar line of work, interacting with trustworthy colleagues, or maintaining a safe and solid environment for the family are also perfectly valid reasons for sport scientists to remain loyal to an academic or sports institution, a club, a national team.

Three good friends with whom I (I.M.) graduated in physical education and sport science worked as an airline long-haul flight attendant, hotel manager, and toilet paper sales representative at some point in their professional careers, before 2 of them eventually found their place in sport management. A former PhD student of mine who had successfully completed his thesis suddenly decided to change career paths and became a project manager in

banking. We lost contact, but he “reappeared” a few years later: “I realized I could be a pretty good half-marathon and marathon runner, and I am traveling the world on savings and racing prize money,” he said before disappearing again for years. Then, a few months ago, he contacted me out of the blue: “I am in your area, but I haven’t got much time: I am a sailor, and my ship is departing in 24 hours.” Short or long, life is a journey, and while it may be true that some trains pass only once, it is certain that there are many trains and multiple destinations. We have all been stuck on the platform looking left and right, unsure which way to go. When that’s the position you are in, make sure that you keep an open mind, continue studying, try to stay up to date with the literature, stay healthy and fit, and do some writing, reviewing, and collaborating with colleagues who share similar interests in sport science, whether locally or internationally. It is important to keep dreaming, open new doors, do new things, stay curious, and not be afraid of change.

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