

A European need analysis on athletes' employment after sports retirement (EP-NEST)

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ABSTRACT

This project adds evidence and contributes on the research in sports retirement and transition to an alternative professional career by evaluating the current public policies concerning the employability of active and former (semi)professional athletes and assessing the perceived participants needs. The specific objectives of this study are: (a) exploring existing public policies about the employability of (semi)professional athletes in the EU countries, (b) analysing expert perceptions and identified needs related to athletic retirement and current EU policies, and (c) identifying evidence based good practices examples and areas of development in existing public policies about athlete's employability in the partaking countries. Data collection involved reviewing diverse sources such as scientific publications, research projects, and European (EU) sports policies, alongside insights from an international expert panel. The dissemination of the project was designed and carried out in the form of informative videos. The results of this project are categorized into (a) evidence review (scientific evidence, EU policy findings, and research project findings), (b) expert group insights (perceptions on European policies, need for support, and personal challenges), and (c) dissemination outcomes. Good practices examples and evidence-based recommendations and future research lines for policymakers, employers, sport entourages, researchers, and active and former (semi)professional athletes are presented as key findings emphasizing the project strengths.

Keywords: Sports retirement, career transition, employability, public policies, needs analysis

RELEVANCE OF THE PROJECT

The origin of research on 'sports retirement and the transition to an alternative professional career' dates to the late 1960s (e.g., Mihovilovic, 1968), generating abundant research in the last decades, as reviewed by Park et al. (2012) in their work aimed at evaluating the 126 scientific works on this topic published in English between 1968 and 2010. The study of sports retirement was the precursor of an investigation trend about athletic career transitions and the promotion of dual careers (the combination of sport and studies/work; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015). The first studies were mostly focused on the difficulties perceived by elite athletes after finishing their sports career, concluding that 16% of participants had experimented adversities related to this transition and the life-after-sports adaptation (Park et al., 2012). These results are similar to the findings of Stambulova & Wylleman (2015), who suggested that around 20% of athletes experienced sports retirement as a crisis. These indicators led to numerous research on the factors that supported an adaptive coping to this transition. In general, scientific evidence on the topic concludes that retirement from sports and the transition to an alternative career is facilitated by: (a) pre-retirement planning; (b) perceiving readiness for career termination; (c) presenting a multidimensional identity and not being focused exclusively on sport; (d) having social support; and (e) implementing active coping strategies (Jordana et al., 2017; Stambulova et al., 2021; Torregrossa et al., 2015).

As suggested by Torregrossa et al. (2020), the importance of developing Career Assistance Programs (CAPs) was acknowledged by European public policies (e.g., EU Work Plan for Sport 2014-2017; European Commission, 2016). Specifically for sports retirement and the transition to an alternative professional career, projects oriented at supporting and preparing athletes during this process have been developed. For instance, the Erasmus+ B-Wiser (579782-EPP-1-2016-2-BE-SPO-SCP; e.g., Smismans et al., 2021) had the objective of assessing the employability competencies of active and former elite athletes to facilitate the transition to an alternative professional career. In a similar line, the project funded by the Spanish *Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades* (HeDuCa: RTI2018-095468-B-100) includes the evaluation of competencies that support the employability of active and former semi-professional athletes, as well as the analysis of athletes' entourage during this transition process (i.e., coaches and families). From an evidence-based practice perspective, which alludes to the integration of the best available research with the applied practice expertise in the context of participants' characteristics, culture, and preferences (APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006; Ramis et al., 2019). And considering the European context as a common space in which dual career and retirement from sport and transition to an alternative career share good practices, problems, and challenges (Stambulova et al. 2024), this project aims to add evidence on the topic of sports retirement, by evaluating the current public policies concerning the employability of active and former (semi)professional athletes and analysing their correspondence with participants perceived needs. To consider the context and culture, and therefore to promote the representativeness of the sample and the results of the project, the public policies and needs of three different EU countries (i.e., Spain, Belgium, and Italy) has been explored.

Objectives

General Objective

The general objective of this project is to develop a European needs analysis on the employability of athletes after retirement.

Specific Objectives

1. To explore the existing public policies about the employability of (semi)professional athletes in the EU countries.
2. To analyse experts' perceptions and detected needs in relation to athletic retirement and current public EU policies.
3. To identify evidence based good practices examples and areas of development in existing public policies about employability in the partaking countries.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

To achieve the purpose of the project we have gathered and analysed information from two types of sources: (a) evidence on the topic published in different formats (i.e., scientific publications, research projects, EU sports policies), and (b) opinions and experiences from a panel of international experts on the topic. In this section we will explain how we collected and analysed these aspects, as well as the results generated.

Review of the evidence on athlete's employability

To review the evidence on the topic of athlete's employability after sports careers we collected information from three sources: (a) published scientific evidence on the topic, (b) outcomes/dissemination products generated in projects funded by the Erasmus+ call, and (c) existent policies and programs focused on supporting athletes' transition to the job market.

Scientific evidence

We developed a systematic search drawing from the updated Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA; Moher et al., 2010; Page et al., 2021) guidelines to ensure an exhaustive and effective evidence search and analysis.

Search strategy

First, we followed the four steps suggested by Moher et al. (2010) that consisted of the identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion of articles. We considered two inclusion criteria: (a) articles entailing the employability of athletes during or after their sports career, and (b) articles in which the participants were professional or semi-professional athletes. We excluded articles about the combination of sports and studies because this purpose was out of the scope of the project. We used the CHIP tool (i.e., Context, How, Issue, Population) to organize the keywords and conducted the following search in three different relevant databases:

Database Search	
Web of Science	"Employ*" OR "Job placement" OR "labour insertion" OR "labor insertion" OR "workplace insertion" OR "employment insertion" OR "job insertion" (Topic) AND ("Professional athletes" OR "semiprofessional athletes") AND ("During sport career" OR "after retirement" OR "after sport" OR "former athlete") (Topic) AND "Dual Career" (Topic)
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("employ*" OR "Job placement" OR "labour insertion" OR "labor insertion" OR "workplace insertion" OR "employment insertion" OR "job insertion" AND ("professional" AND "athletes" OR "semiprofessional" AND "athletes") OR ("Dual Career") AND ("after retirement" OR "after sport" OR "former athlete"))

("Employ*" OR "Job placement" OR "labour insertion" OR "labor insertion" OR "workplace insertion" OR "employment insertion" OR "job insertion") AND ("Professional athletes" OR "semiprofessional athletes") AND ("During sport career" OR "after retirement" OR "after sport" OR "former athlete") AND ("Dual Career")

The search strategy was in English to ensure the identification of abstracts of articles written in any language.

Identification of relevant publications

We identified 28 articles (see Figure 1) through the search via databases. In addition, and following the recommendations of Booth et al. (2016) we also carried out a manual search via other sources (e.g., websites, citation searching, abstracts) that resulted in 33 potential relevant documents. After removing duplicates and irrelevant records, 18 articles and 12 documents were eligible and screened by title and abstract resulting in the exclusion of 8 articles and 1 document that did not meet the inclusion criteria. The final step consisted in analysing the full text of the remaining records, which resulted in a total of 21 articles included in the review.

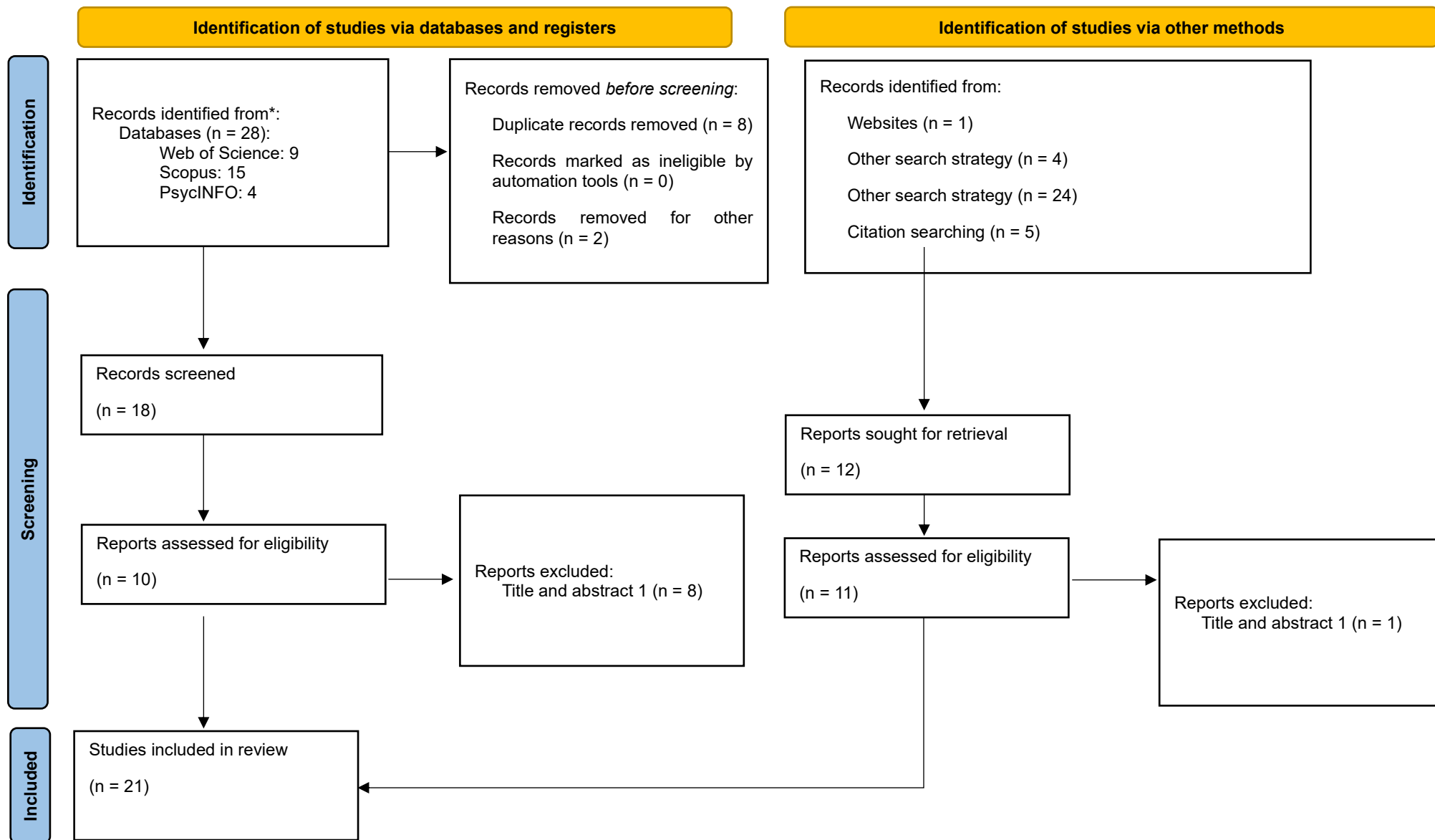


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart representing the four steps and results of the search strategy.

Results of the scientific evidence review

The results depicted in [Annex 1](#) show that all studies but one (i.e., Liu & Lu, 2016) were developed in European contexts (i.e., Spain = 5; Norway = 1; Slovenia = 1; United Kingdom = 1; Switzerland = 1; multiple countries = 1).

In relation to the objectives researched, works were mainly focused on the study of factors/competencies/strategies that facilitate and/or hinder the employability of Olympic & elite athletes, DC athletes, gender differences in those factors, and the study of specific contexts (e.g., footballers, cricketers). Moreover, there were some (n=3) studies on factors influencing transitions from athlete to coaches

In terms of the design of the studies, there is a diversity in terms of methodological approaches (quantitative = 6; qualitative = 5; literature review = 1). The sample characteristics shows a tendency of studying athletes after retiring from sports (only former athletes = 6; former & active athletes = 3), although there is one study including only active athletes in the sample. The data collection procedures consist mainly of *ad-hoc* questionnaires (n = 7) and in-depth semi-structured interviews (n = 4).

Findings suggest gender differences in terms of employability, as men are prone to have more full-time employment, more income, and find their first after-sport work earlier than women. The review of the evidence also suggests several facilitators that support the transition to an alternative professional career after sports retirement. Individual aspects that favour an adaptive transition are competencies (e.g., being concerned about the future), having been a high-profile athlete (more support to professional and Olympic athletes), having worked on retirement planning, transfer of sport-related values to the work market, and accumulated human capital (e.g., networking). Moreover, developing a dual career facilitates retirement because it is associated with more chances of finding an after-sports career job. Higher education status also provides the athlete with more educational background that can be transferred to the job market. Participating in previous vocational training (e.g., working during sport career) provides the athlete with experience and knowledge that facilitate athlete's adaptation to a new profession. At an interpersonal and organizational level, perceived social and family support is essential for this transition (e.g., conciliation), as well as the existence of government policies supporting athletes during this process.

In addition, evidence suggests some barriers hindering the transition to an alternative professional career. Athletes perceive they need to make a great effort to deal with the strict requirements of the professional market (e.g., inflexibility in schedules, pressure to reach goals). There is also a lack of support in the combination of the athletic-work domains (e.g., pressure from coaches to not miss any trainings). In terms of job opportunities, athletes find it difficult to obtain a job outside of the sports context and they are at a higher risk of facing financial problems during their first steps after retirement if they don't get any support. Some athletes are fast-tracked into post-athletic high-performance coaching positions and even though it is a great opportunity for professional development, this fast (sometimes precipitated) transition may cause some difficulties in athletes (e.g., lack of coaching philosophy, lack of self-reflexive practices).

With all the summarized evidence, we encounter two main gaps which are not yet covered by existing research in the field of athletes' employability after their sports career: (a) exploring the reality of semi-professional athletes, and (b) work of women's coach development studies and the experiences of women who make the transition from athlete to high-performance coach.

EU projects

The Erasmus+ Sport programme call is funded by the European Commission and aims at helping ‘generations of Europeans to become active citizens, with the skills, knowledge and experience to tackle the challenges facing our society, both now and in the years to come.’ Within Europe’s priorities, there is a specific EU programme for education, training, youth, and sport. We conducted a search through the [European Commission webpage](#) to review the different research projects aimed to explore the topic on the employability of athletes after retirement.

Search strategy

First, we considered one inclusion criteria: projects entailing the employability of athletes during or after their sports career. We excluded projects about the combination of sports and studies because this purpose was out of the scope of the project. We organized the keywords and conducted the following search in two different ways:

	Database Search	Nº results
Search strategy 1	Dual Career AND Employability AND Athletes	18
Search strategy 2	Dual Career Athletes	87

Identification of relevant projects

We identified 105 projects through the European Commission webpage. After removing duplicates and irrelevant records, 88 documents were eligible and screened by title and abstract resulting in the exclusion of 66 documents that did not meet the inclusion criteria (e.g., the target population were student-athletes). The final step consisted in analysing the outputs of the projects on athletes’ employability, which resulted in a total of 23 projects included in the review (see Figure 2).

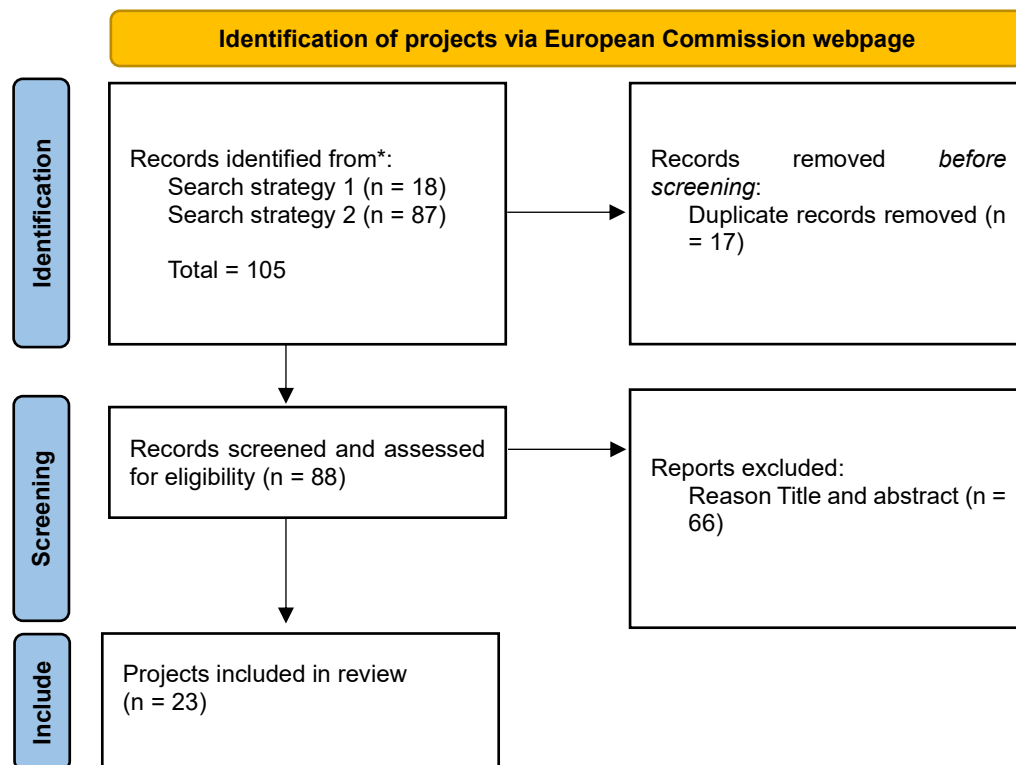


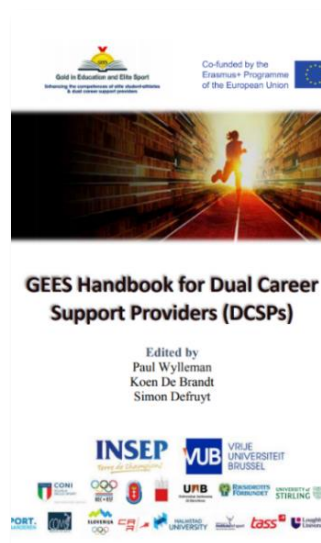
Figure 2. Flowchart representing the steps and results of the search strategy.

Research Projects Findings

The results of review research projects show 33 projects aimed at exploring the combination of sport with study and/or work. Specifically, 19 projects (see [Annex 2](#) for projects and available outputs) explored the combination of the sports career with an academic career, four were focused on the combination of sports and work, and 10 explored the combination of sports with both studies and work.

In this section we present some examples of resources generated in these projects, which contribute to both the scientific and applied development of the field.

- **GEES Project:** The Gold in Education and Elite Sport (GEES) Project was a 2-year project (2015-2016) and was co-funded by the Erasmus+ Sport programme. The main impact of the GEES project on the dual career support practice came from three main outputs: (a) the Dual Career Competency Questionnaire for Athletes (DCCQ-A; De Brandt et al., 2018), (b) the Dual Career Competency Questionnaire for Support Providers (DCCQ-SP; Defruyt et al., 2019), and (c) an overview of methods and instruments that can be used by dual career support providers to develop their own and the athletes' competencies. Several types of methods and instruments are hereby provided, such as a GEES Handbook for Dual Career Support Providers:

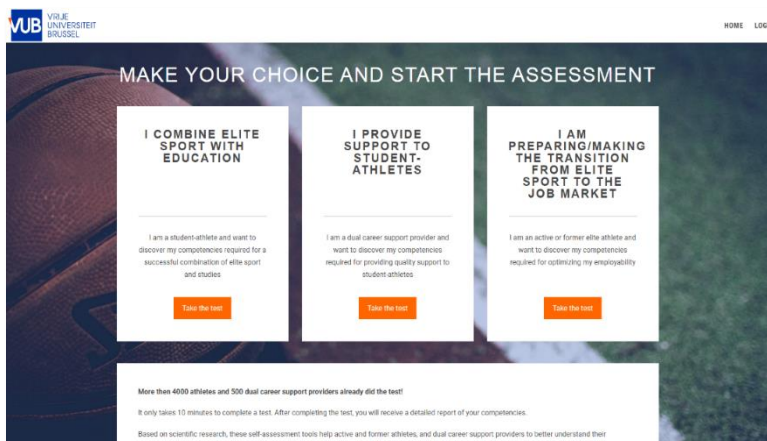


- **B-Wiser Project:** Be a Winner In elite Sport and Employment before and after athletic Retirement' (B-WISER) was a 2-year project (2017-2018) and was co-funded by the Erasmus+ Sport programme of the European Commission. It provides dual career support providers with: (a) understanding the current systems and actions that support "elite sport and employment", (b) a summary of the competencies that athletes need to balance "elite sport and employment", as well as the competencies they need to transition successfully from elite sport to the job market at the end of their elite sports career, (c) understanding how employers view the benefits and challenges of hiring current or former athletes, and (d) evidence-based practices that can be put into action and assessed by dual career support providers. Several types of methods and instruments were hereby provided, such as final report entitled "From Elite Sport to the

Job Market: Toolbox for career practitioners to work with active and former athletes” and infographics for their dissemination:



- The development and Evaluation of Training Modules for Dual Career Support Providers: A European pilot:** The development and Evaluation of Training Modules for Dual Career Support Providers: A European pilot (IOC) was a 1-year project (2018) and was co-funded by the IOC Olympic Studies Centre. The main objective of this study was to contribute to the practice of dual career support provision by demonstrating how the quality of support to dual career athletes can be optimized in an evidence-based manner. Consequently, the specific objectives of this study were: (a) to develop three evidence-based training modules for DC support providers, and (b) to implement and evaluate these training modules in four different countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden). One of the practical results was the development of a website (<https://www.dualcareertools.com/>) with the objective of collecting competencies evaluation questionnaires for three types of profiles: (a) dual career athletes; (b) dual career support providers, and (c) athletes preparing/making the transition from elite sport to the job market:



- ECO-DC Project:** The Ecology of Dual Career: Exploring Dual Career Development Environments across Europe (ECO-DC) was a 2-year project (2018-2019) and was cofounded by the Erasmus+ Sport programme of the European Commission. Adopting an ecological approach, this research project aimed at enhancing the dual career support by (a) developing a comprehensive understanding of the dual career development environments (DCDEs) across Europe. As a practical resource for this project, a holistic ecological approach model was developed (Henriksen et al., 2020):

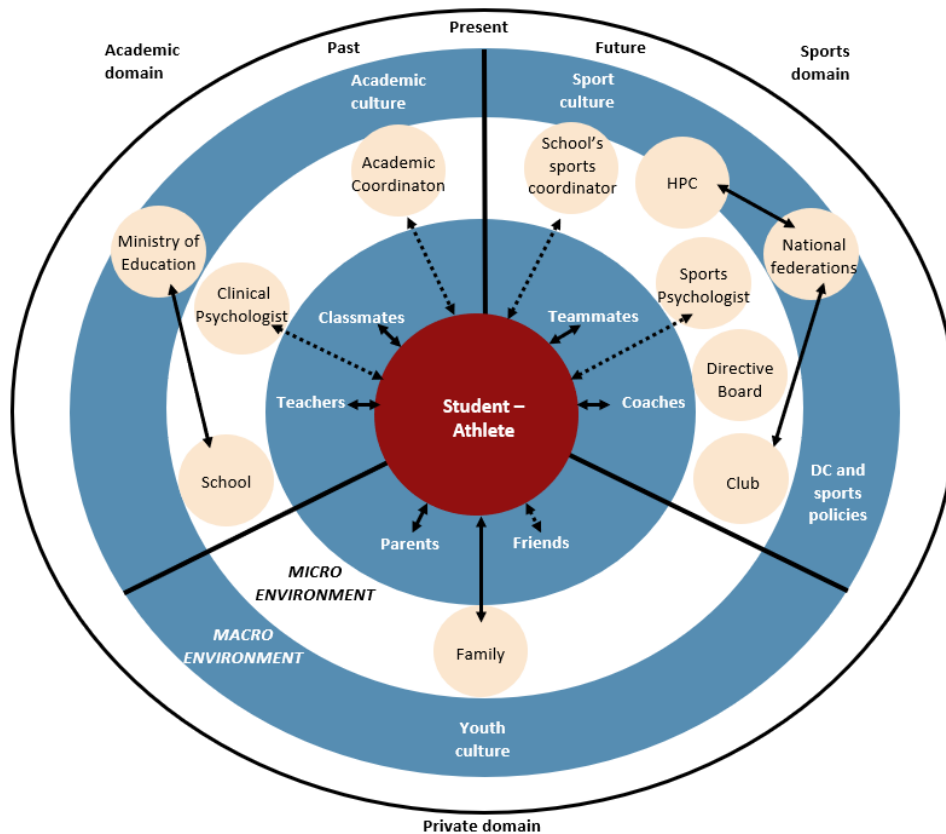


Figure 2. Dual Career Development Environments (Henriksen et al., 2020).

EU policies

We reviewed the existent policies and programs focused on supporting athletes' transition to the job market following four stages: (a) detection of the main policies and programs available in each participating country; (b) analysis of the main characteristics and specificities of each policy/program; (c) discussion on best practices and improvement areas; and (d) reflecting on a common European perspective. Both the coordinating team and the panel of international experts participated in each of the stages, with the coordinating team assuming the integration of the information.

- Detection of the main policies and programs available in each participating country. One of the topics discussed in the group of experts was related to the existence of policies that facilitate the access to the job market.
- Analysis of the main characteristics and specificities of each policy/program. Experts discussed around the different programs available in each participating country. After the group of experts, the coordinating team analysed the information and elaborated an excel sheet with the purpose of analysing the main characteristics and specificities of each policy/program. The excel sheet was delivered to each member of the expert group for its completion about each policy/program's following information:

	Theme	Description
GENERAL INFORMATION	Name	Name of the policy or initiative
	Link	Link to the description of the policy
	Country	Country(ies) of application
	Area of application	Local, regional or national
	Context	Public or private dependencies
	Organization/Institution domain	Sports, private company/enterprise, NGOs...
	Duration	Number of months/years of duration
	Services offered	Economic support, training, counselling...
	POLICY SPECIFICITIES	Target user
Requirements to apply		Conditions to apply
Career moment		Active athletes - former athletes - retiring athletes - not specific...
Services offered		Description of the services offered (use all the space you need)
Follow-up		Follow-up after the service has ended
Other information		Any aspects that have not been covered

- (c) Discussion on best practices and improvement areas. Once the excel sheet was completed by each participating country, the coordinating team integrated all the information and summarized the main discussion points. The discussion on best practices and improvement areas was carried out in an online meeting celebrated the last 6th of June 2023.
- (d) Reflecting on a common European perspective. To reflect on a common European perspective the coordinating team integrated all the information generated in the excel file and in the online meeting to then present the main results in this report.

EU Policies Findings

The results of the process followed to review the existing policies and/or programs on sports retirement and transition to the job market are explained in this section.

The first step towards the identification of the main policies and programs available in each participating country was carried out in the group of experts. One part of the discussion was dedicated to this purpose, and results highlight great differences across the participating countries. Participants from Spain and Belgium mentioned they have specific public laws and

programmes at a governmental level and high-performance athletes are supported in specific aspects of their dual career. For example, in the Second Section, Article 24th of the Spanish Law of Sport ([Ley 39/2022, Spain](#)) there is the following statement which highlights the importance of developing measures to facilitate the professional development of high-performance athletes:

The General State Administration, in collaboration, where appropriate, with the Autonomous Communities, will adopt the necessary measures to facilitate the technical preparation, incorporation into the educational system, and the full social and professional integration of high-performance athletes during and at the end of their sporting career (p.31).

In the same line, the [Topsport](#) (Belgium) is a programme coordinated jointly by the Flemish Sport Agency (governmental) in collaboration with the Social Fund for Sport. This program offers individualized support to elite athletes who (a) want to prepare for life after sport, and (b) elite athletes who are effectively quitting or have already quit, including career counselling by career counsellors from Sport Vlaanderen and dedicated Career Counselling Centres.

On the other hand, the expert from Italy stated that high-performance athletes are not considered by the Italian law:

No, there is not (any specific law for high-performance athletes). The only part protected by laws is the military and civil group of athletes that have of course, all the support that all dependents of public bodies and department and structure institutions have, so they have full protection in terms of rights and in terms of also laws and they are, I would say, public employees in a way so they can benefit from all the public supports that our laws indicate. And we spend a lot, and when we say a lot it's 51 millions of euro each year. For example during the last Summer Olympics all the Italian athletes were enrolled in civil or military groups.

Experts also identified other policies and programmes in the public system aimed at specifically support the transition of sports retirement. The coordinating team analysed all the information on policies and programmes collected during the group of experts and asked the experts to fill an ad-hoc elaborated sheet with the purpose of delving into each policy/program. Information collected is depicted in [Annex 3](#).

Once the information from each partner was collected and analysed by the coordinating team, the project partners participated in an online meeting (6th of June 2023) to discuss the results of the policies/programs analysis, with the aim of identifying best practices and improvement areas across the different participating countries.

All partners agreed in the need of giving credit to already existing initiatives. For example, participants highlighted that the public system supports athlete's employability, an expert on the field of dual career and retirement explained how it is important to make value of what is already being done:

I think that when you make the question, you ask how to improve, the temptation in this case is always asking for more things. But I think that probably one of the things that it should be done as well is to make value of things that are being already done. I mean it's not always asking for more programs and then being honest and having been working in this field for some years, I think that lots of resources have been put in this field. I mean, we should be honest about the amount of money that has been invested on the dual career and in the retirement from sport. I mean, this is not something that has been hidden and not taken into consideration. Neither at a European level, nor at a local level (Expert on the field).

In this line, the Head of the Career Assistance Programme Service at the High-Performance Centre of Sant Cugat stated that there is *'specific training for the labour market. We work on helping athletes find a professional field and provide education about the CV, interview... We also mediate between athletes and public and private companies and disseminate the added value (e.g., competences) that an athlete can bring to a company'*. The expert from Belgium added that the situation is similar in that country, as *'every user of the career counselling program (i.e., Topsport) have eight hours of counselling'*. Moreover, participants discussed how there is a need to make more visible positive examples of adaptive retirement. The following quote exemplify this idea:

Should we share more public positive cases? because we talked about how the narrative of bad experiences is always present in the media. Only one athlete that has problems following retirement goes to the media and has a Netflix series [...] We are always focused on negative. So, my question related to that would be, would it be possible to have a more open approach to positive cases and positive politics? (Expert on the field)

Experts discuss how there are many cases of positive examples of positive and successful retirement:

when we go to clubs and work with sports and then you discover, because you didn't know that, that a former athlete that you were following when he was a player, and so, he or she has an important position in a club and it's working well, and you never knew about it. And it's interesting because uh, he or she has a success, a successful life in sport, still in sport, and I think that at some point we need to discuss the transition into the labour market, into sports or outside from sports because I think that realities are different, but thinking about the sport world we are not aware about successful transitions or successful careers from former athletes that are now, uh, if they are coaches, you know them, but if they are in direction board or have other kind of administrative positions, you never know so I think we could do better in explaining those stories (Expert on the field).

Focus group with a panel of experts

Reviewing the evidence (i.e., scientific literature, research projects, EU policies) allowed us to analyse the accumulated knowledge on the topic and to detect its current gaps. We developed a focus group with a panel of experts to complement the information gathered and to delve into the topic.

Co-production strategy

The general aims of the focus group were (a) exploring the perceptions of experts on the needs regarding sports retirement, (b) advancing on the assessment of the current existing EU public policies, and (c) identifying evidence-based examples of good practices to suggest potential areas of development.

This part of the project was framed within an interpretative philosophical paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), which draws from a relativist ontology (there is no common reality, and each interpretation differs depending on its credibility and perspective), and a constructivist epistemology (our knowledge cannot be separated from human experience, as it is built upon our experiences and perspectives).

We used semi-structured focus groups to collect information because this method is useful for the generation of rich information based on the synergies of group discussions (Kitzinger, 1994). Focus groups has shown to be effective in the field of Health and Sport Sciences due to (a) the flexibility in questions and the synergy created in group conversations, and (b) the climate created between the researchers and the participants (Aelterman et al., 2013). We decided on this methodology due to its (a) alignment with the philosophical assumptions of the interpretative paradigm, and (b) approach in providing a deep understanding of the complex and multifaceted social phenomena while preserving the characteristics of the context. Focus groups offer participants the opportunity to share individual experiences and emphasize their (dis)agreement with others, appreciating alternative points of view and recognizing at the same time the social and cultural factors that can influence other's opinions (Thorne, 2016).

Participants

Five participants from three different countries (Spain = 3; Belgium = 1; Italy = 1) were selected through criterion sampling (Suri, 2011). In line with the objectives of the project (i.e., needs assessment and perception of international experts) participants were selected based on their relationship with the topic, hence the members composing the project team were also the expert group participants. The criteria to be included as an expert on the topic were (a) having scientific experience in conducting leading research on the topic (i.e., participation on Erasmus+ projects, e.g., Stambulova et al., 2024; Kegelaers et al., 2022), and (b) having experience as practitioners working with athletes that had been through the transition to an alternative professional career after sports retirement (e.g., Kegelaers et al., 2024).

Procedure

The coordinating team developed an expert group semi-structured guide based on the updated and current evidence (i.e., scientific evidence, EU policies, EU projects) reviewed. Two members of the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* (Spain) led the expert group, which was carried out through a hybrid format the 13th of April 2023. Four participants attended in-person and one participant attended on-line through the software Microsoft Teams.

The first part of the focus group was focused on exploring retirement from sport and the transition to an alternative professional career, exploring the (a) the main challenges related to (former) elite athletes' insertion in the labour market, and (b) the main benefits/resources and barriers of elite athletes that can be transferred to their employability. The second part of the session explored the (a) main needs of (former) elite athletes when entering and adapting to job market, (b) the policies to facilitate the access of this group in each country (i.e., Belgium, Italy, Spain), (c) the reasons for the lack of policies, (d) strengths and weaknesses of the policies, and (e) future recommendations to policymakers.

The session lasted 90 minutes approximately and its audio and video were recorded and then transcribed *verbatim* following Jeffersonian guidelines (Jefferson, 2004) with the purpose of ensuring that transcripts identified each participant's voice to interpret non-verbal language in discussions if needed.



Image 1. Picture of the development of the hybrid expert group

Data Analysis

Data was analysed through reflexive thematic analysis due to (a) its utility in capturing the complex, contradictory and sometimes chaotic nature of psychological and social meanings, and (b) its coherence with the interpretative philosophical paradigm as it serves as a useful tool for the identification of themes and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016). We followed Braun et al. (2023) steps to analyse the data: (a) familiarisation, (b) coding, (c) initial theme generation, (d) reviewing and developing themes, (e) refining, defining and naming themes, (f) producing the report.

The project’s coordinating team shared the preliminary results with the international panel of experts for a revision to ensure scientific rigour (see Smith & McGannon, 2018). The coordinating team adopted the role of *critical friends* during both the development of the research and the elaboration of this report to guarantee a reflexive analysis process. Data analysis produced three themes: (a) Perception on European Policies, (b) Need for support, and (c) Personal Challenges.

Results of the focus group with experts

In the following section, we organize the results into the three main themes coproduced through thematic analysis: (a) Perception on European Policies, (b) Need for Support, and (c) Personal Challenges.

MAIN THEMES	CODES
Perception on European Policies	Existing policies
	Weaknesses
	Strengths
	Improvement areas
Need for Support	Strategical

	Psychological
	Vocational
	Financial
	Entourage responsibility
Personal Challenges	Financial expectations
	Adaptation to a new lifestyle
	Attentional and intentional blindness
	Goal settings and identity

Perception on European Policies

This theme integrates the narratives about the policies that facilitate the access of this group in each country, strengths and weaknesses of the policies, and future recommendations to policymakers. The following codes were identified through inductive reasoning: (a) existing policies, (b) weaknesses, (c) strengths, and (d) improvement areas.

The quotes for every code are presented below:

CODES	QUOTES
Existing policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>“At CAR, we have a professional profile and specific training for the labor market. She works within a public system and is knowledgeable about both the public and sports systems. Our focus is on enhancing competencies for the labor market and providing education on CVs, interviews, and job search related to their sector. We have a special program for athletes called “CAR speakers,” where they recognize their competencies and value in the labor market and engage with various enterprises or public systems such as municipalities and universities to convey these competencies and their value. This is part of PROAD, the network connecting companies and mediating with the labor market. Additionally, METAS focuses on retired individuals, providing them with competencies for job searching.”</i> - <i>“The only part protected by laws is the military and civil group of athletes that have of course, all the support that all dependents of public bodies and department and structure institutions have so they have full protection in terms of rights and in terms of also laws and they are, I would say, public employees in a way so they can benefit from all the public supports that our laws indicate.”</i> - <i>“In Belgium, one thing that we started to do is having role models athletes coming to speak in the last years of universities, not only on their Olympic trajectory but also on their working trajectories and also the networking with organizations.”</i>
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>“I think that the Dutch story is a very good example in this, from the let’s say the sport organization. They actually keep supporting the athletes for at least two years financially in the same contract that they have as an athlete. So they consider it, at least those two years as part of their athletic careers so it's coming from the public sector to those athletes financially, and of course also with the competency support. But I think that was a really nice initiative. And in this way is also structurally anchored, because I feel this is a huge problem sometimes.”</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"In Spain, there are some academic institutions that already have this flexibility for the athletes who demand it. Afterwards, that is for the access, right? For the combination of sport and studies."</i> - <i>"But I think that probably one of the things that should be done as well is to make value of things that are already being done. I mean, it's not always about asking for more programs, and then being honest and working in this field for some years. I think that lots of resources have been put into this field. I mean, we have to be honest that a lot of money has been invested in dual career, retirement from sport. I mean, this is not something that has been hidden and not taken into consideration."</i>
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"So, I wanted to ask you, how many athletes and use this kind of programs? Because this is something I noticed in Belgium, these funds are available for the Olympic and the high-performance athletes. I don't know if the numbers, but it's a minority who will use this specific support. I don't think, because they are not aware, but also because they don't see it as something structural or something, as everyone is using it more voluntary? it's optional?"</i> - <i>"We don't have anything, we don't have a clear law".</i> - <i>"In Italy we will really need a comprehensive project to support from the start the possibility of having a path where rights are granted, so the possibility to have a dual career, the possibility to have support for every sphere. When you talk about psychological support we have also stigma yet in Italy. We know that also thanks to dual career for mental health project, the stigma is still present. In Italy you don't have a Public psychological support granted when you are in a sport career and my opinion is to give this possibility and also to make this possibility clear."</i> - <i>"In Italy we really need a comprehensive holistic system which supports all the phases of career, in particular the retirement one."</i> - <i>"I think we still get new more work on what if they leave the university, what happens then?"</i> - <i>"I think it's important that they are informed about what's going on, especially when youngsters right there. Uh, but also communication outside, publicly inform about what's going on, what are the policies, this good practices, what happens after sports? and making relevant for society. because uh, these are people that are investing their -Some part of their life for an interest for the Community or the country or the nation or whatever you call it. But then, uh, they need to have backing from the society as well."</i> - <i>"For Paralympic support, there would be some specificities in Belgium that they are addressing, but not much, especially in relation to transition to the labour market. And in relation to gender, I'm sure there is, there is no difference- more differentiation."</i>
Improvement areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"A public psychological & mental health program to face retirement is very important"</i> - <i>"Retirement must be understood as a structural part of a sports career, and the sport-work combination must be as organized as the sport-study combination (dual career)"</i> - <i>"Public money could be really invested to support also all the transitions, not only for elite but also to those who are dedicating a lot of time and effort to sports"</i> - <i>"Could we do something from a real European perspective? thinking in terms of Europe instead of thinking in terms of countries"</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"Is retirement the same if we speak of the male sport than in women's sport? or we should adapt our programs, our realities (e.g., female, paralympic)?"</i> - <i>"Psychology tend to hide practices and to be probably sometimes too much aware about confidentiality and then we don't share our positive experiences. We don't share our positive cases and we are only at the expenses of the negative cases and the cases in the media so. But one of the things that we could do, we would probably to provide more transparency on how to work with uh. generally speaking with normal athletes with normal population."</i>
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Need for Support

This second theme integrates the information about the main needs of (former) elite athletes when entering and adapting to job market. The inductively identified codes for this code were: (a) strategical, (b) psychological, (c) vocational, (d) financial, and (e) entourage responsibility.

Quotes for each code are presented below:

CODES	QUOTES
Strategical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"When the athlete says 'nobody told me about this'. Is like... What? It's part of the process, no? Start your career and finish your career."</i> - <i>"During the dual career, we always expect that this is the logic path and, they go into 'rotation'. But what for those who have not followed the dual career, we'll get into it I think, also with the support policy that we have in place for them also might be yeah, very hard also to indicate in the beginning what are my options after my career? Well, for those in dual career, they might have some more perspective on that."</i> - <i>"You know it, but you postpone it and you think that it's not today, it's the decision that you have to cope tomorrow."</i>
Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"You need to explore the different athlete life areas in the process to retire. You need always to work with the emotional aspect."</i> - <i>"I think one of the general challenges is always whether it's predictable or unpredictable. So if it's an injury, it would be due to an injury, it could be a very short process and also for the athlete to go into retirement. And of course it's totally different than expected retirement."</i> - <i>"It's assuming that my career is- has reached that part. So, in terms of how many competitions, how many achievements, how many things I might won in my career, so it's assuming that's the end. I'm not getting more competitions, more and more achievements, more and more. So I think that, uh being you the one deciding 'I'm not winning anymore or I'm not competing anymore'."</i> - <i>"Yeah, but nobody wants to retire. This is the big challenge. Because I don't want retirement. We talked about the illusion of retirement, and people don't want to retire, don't accept the retirement."</i> - <i>"And I think that there are also emotions, you know, like fear, for example, or anger in a way because you start realizing that you are all for your sport or 'OK. It's time to quit', but it's a cognitive-but on the same time it's something that is really emotional for you."</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"The first day they go to that labour market is negative. Because the translation and still going in the negative and the positive feelings. Uh, I didn't- but I understand, totally agree to explain that are positive cases, no?"</i>
Vocational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"It's important to work in the final years; it helps to accept the sports retirement process, it's a process. It's important to start defining a new sector or occupation before the end of the sports career."</i> - <i>"Entering to the labour market, it's never easy, not for former athletes, but for anyone. It might be exciting at the beginning, but the first stages are challenging and you don't feel comfortable."</i>
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"It is important to think that you have financial support insurance in case you do not find a new job. You know, for the competencies' development, and financial support in case they don't find a new job."</i>
Entourage responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"It's a very complex position. I have the feeling that responsibility should not be only in the individual, it should be all the entourage helping to make this decision"</i> - <i>"I think about the role of federations, coaches, companies, family. I think the challenge is to give (change) a support role to the entourage"</i> - <i>"The social environment must be a protective factor"</i> - <i>"It's a bit surprising that the athletic career is related to the public sector, and then for the transition to an alternative career we always speak about companies"</i> - <i>"The first one would be to take responsibility, being aware we have the responsibility of working in career termination as a part of the career"</i>

Personal Challenges

The last identified theme integrates the narratives about experts' perceptions and detected needs in relation to athletic retirement, and the main challenges related to (former) elite athletes' insertion in the labour market. The following codes were identified through inductive reasoning: (a) financial expectations, (b) adaptation to a new lifestyle, (c) attentional and intentional blindness, and (d) goal settings and identity.

In the following table we present the quotes for each code:

CODES	QUOTES
Financial expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"I think identify this is one of the crucial ones, and they also, from the moment they didn't put a new job or when looking for a new job, like financial expectations could also be something very challenging."</i>
Adaptation to a new lifestyle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"There is this kind of belief of a fair world in which if I invested that much then I should get much- as much from this sport world, as invested. So when retirement comes there is this cognitive process in which you decide, you make a decision in which you have to disengage from these prioritization you have to change priorities, so it's, at least how we understand the athletic career nowadays in general, it's always a perception of, I'm not sure if failure, but at least resignation. It's assuming that my career is- has reached that part."</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"Then another one is social adaptation. One thing also we notice there's a lot of athletes that they start to spend more time with their partners and then most of the time this is OK, but sometimes it's also a really big challenge. Or with the household in general"</i> - <i>"But you have a work, you have a partner, you have a more comfortable life, is a positive or negative? 'Well, I don't have sport, I don't have the same facilities, I don't gain the same money, I loose my friends. I don't know if is positive because- and to cut the relation to sports, the row to sport, is very difficult. And also the relation with food, physical activity, adrenaline when people compete..."</i>
Attentional & Intentional blindness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"After more than 20 years working and doing research on retirement from sport, athletes are still surprised when the actual time of retirement comes".</i> - <i>"We should reflect in this project how and why do we have this attentional and intentional blindness".</i> - <i>"Probably it's a cognitive form of protection. A protective factor. You think that it's not today, it's a decision that you must cope with tomorrow".</i> - <i>"They don't expect, or they don't know when to retire. You need to keep in mind during the whole career that the final is very close".</i> - <i>"They don't want to play the game of 'What's going to come afterwards' because they need the resources to focus on getting better as an athlete".</i>
Goal settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"To find new goals for the short or long term future, which is another important challenge in this moment of transition. So new haze, new target in terms of personal but also professional..."</i> - <i>"So, we see very much of a delay there. And more into the personal challenges I think what we said earlier are crucial ones; identity, but also new goals starting at the, at the bottom actually of the ladder, it is also crucial. I was last week giving a workshop with one of our Olympic athletes, who has now, like uh, been retired for six months and he challenges, he indicates that 'I have to find a new challenging goal in my life. I know you will not be that challenging as- or different the new challenge as in my Olympic trajectory."</i> - <i>"I have the feeling that developing an athletic career It's always demanding, it requires a prioritization process. So, sport has to come first before all the things. And this prioritization arrives, I would say, I don't- at an early age of development, which is not easy so we have people that pass that path, uh, let's say made the decision, dedicate efforts, time and so on."</i> - <i>"The new job or the new occupation must be exciting somehow. I need to want to go to this new job. It's the responsibility of everyone to make it exciting."</i>
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>"In my opinion, one personal challenge is the identity. You have to turn to an athletic or sports identity towards a former athletic identity and I think that this means a lot because sport is really part of your identity and life in every perspective. So it's a really change of mind faced at a very young age in some sports because there are long term sport but of course also very short career sports. And I think that this point, identity, is a really important because in terms of personal view and personal perspective change a lot."</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>“I mean the owner of the decision on a way, but on the same time there are emotional, you know, reason for being attached to the past, to the athletic history that you have in the past, back of your shoulders.”</i> - <i>“And in the case of former athletes they might have the feeling that they are stepping backwards from what they were and what they are now.”</i>
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Testimonial videos

After developing and analysing the focus group with a panel of experts we considered the development of testimonial videos to disseminate the results of the project. The recording of the videos was led by the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* (Spain) together with the High-Performance Centre of Sant Cugat (Spain). A total of four people (two women) took part in the video recording.

The High-Performance Centre of Sant Cugat was the partner in charge of making the first contact with the participants, mainly because of their network with athletes and companies that work on the employability of athletes. The *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*, together with the High-Performance Centre of Sant Cugat, worked on the sampling criteria for the participants who were, (a) athletes or former athletes who have had contact with the labour market outside the sport’s context, or (b) representatives of companies interested in (and facilitating) the hiring of athletes and former athletes. The protagonists of the videos were:

- **Sílvia Balcells:** General manager of Synergie Spain, a French multinational company with its headquarters in Paris dedicated to the field of human resources, working both with companies and candidates for employment. They offer recruitment, training, consulting, outsourcing and temporary work services. Their main values are commitment, responsibility, client orientation, and people development. They are a human resources company and one of their main values is hope.
- **Abril Conesa:** Artistic swimmer. She entered the High-Performance Centre of Sant Cugat with a scholarship when she was 17 until she retired from sport in early 2023. She participated in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games and several world and European championships. Her entire athletic career has been based and focused on artistic swimming. She recently decided to step aside of the team, and she’s combining swimming and triathlon. She is also finishing her degree in nutrition and dietetics, that she will finish online while she works for different centres as a nutritionist.
- **David Torelló:** Former athlete that lived in the High-Performance Centre. Current office manager in Nationale-Nederlanden. He runs an office in Barcelona and another in Madrid for the Dutch multinational insurance company. Nationale-Nederlanden has the philosophy of hiring current and former high-performance athletes based on the added value that they have acquired through their athletic careers. For example, working towards objectives, decision making under pressure and teamwork.
- **Jordi Morales:** Paralympic table tennis athlete. He has participated in six Paralympic Games. He has a degree in Physical Activity and Sport Sciences, and he works as a financial advisor. Since 2010 he has combined sports and work, having labour experience in different workplaces such as Decathlon, Nationale-Nederlanden, Catalan Federation of Table-Tennis and Catalan Federation of Physically Disabled Sports. He also participates in the CAR Speakers program where he shares his experience in the transition to the labour market.

Procedure

Once the interview participants were selected, an email was sent from the High-Performance Centre of Sant Cugat inviting them to participate in the research. Upon agreeing to participate, it was agreed to carry out short interviews in person on October 9 in the High-Performance Centre's sports complex in Sant Cugat.

Specifically, the short interviews were carried out in the artistic gymnastics room (Image 2) and in an outside location near the tennis court (Image 2). Before beginning, each participant signed an informed consent before the interview which was professionally recorded on audio and video.



Image 2. Picture of the development of interviews

The script for the interviews was designed and elaborated from the analysis of the evidence (i.e., scientific, research projects, and policies) and the focus group with experts, covering the following topics: (a) positive skills for the employability of athletes compared to other profiles, (b) job placement, (c) mental health, and (d) knowledge of public policies that favour the employability of athletes. The interviews had an average duration of six minutes and fifty seconds and were transcribed *verbatim* and then subtitled into English with the aim of achieving greater dissemination of the videos.

Final Version of Videos Four videos have been generated as dissemination results that can be consulted through this [link](#). In Image 3 and Image 4 you can see pictures of the videos. These videos will be disseminated through the social networks of each collaborating partner with the project (i.e., Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Centre d'Alt Rendiment de Sant Cugat, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Università di Verona, Greens/EFA), as well as the personal and professional networks of both the people who appear in the videos and the companies they represent (i.e., Synergie España, Nationale-Nederlanden). An event to disseminate the project will be held at the European Parliament's office in Barcelona where the main results of this report will be presented.



Image 3. Picture of the interview videos



Image 4. Picture of the interview videos

The following quotes stand out in the interviews:

Sílvia Balcells:

- "These types of profiles have very important values, which have many synergies with the labour market. Typical values such as the collaborative ability of teamwork, ethics, overcoming (...) they know how to manage their emotions and change very well."
- "They are people who contribute to an environment that is more diverse, a more equitable environment. From what I've said about their values and their capacity for effort, they provide our teams with great leadership."
- "Beyond experience, fortunately, nowadays many other skills, other abilities, other capacities are taken into account. And precisely athletes and former athletes have them. Therefore, this is a value that they already bring from minute 1 when they start working in organizations."

Abril Conesa:

- "I think that every athlete and student, must be aware when she needs external help. You must be aware that, sometimes, help and psychological support is very necessary.
- I always say that I wouldn't be who I am if I hadn't been an athlete, because of the values that sport has brought me."
- "When you leave the National team, you really get out of the bubble. And I remember that the first thing I did was: 'okay Abril, apart from a great sports record, what do I have?'"
- "Many places are also looking for work experience. So, I think it's very important to play my cards and also to sell myself with everything I can contribute to a certain company."

David Torelló:

- "The added value that athletes bring to our company is that, well, they are people who have been working towards goals all their lives, in their sports. And well, they are very committed people."
- "I think it is essential that there is work and schedule flexibility. That the company can adapt to the athlete, and not the athlete to the company."
- "The skills and abilities that I would highlight in an athlete or what we want when he joins us, I could make an endless list here, okay? But if I could pick a few, at the end of the day it's commitment, it's attitude, it's, in this case, empathy, it's working towards objectives, there are so many."

Jordi Morales:

- "I think that the three characteristics that make me the best candidate for a job can be: empathy, empathy towards other people; also, the will to succeed in the face of great difficulties; and the resilience to overcome when there is a difficult situation."
- "I think that the two things that should be improved regarding the recruitment of athletes are, on the one hand, the combination that these athletes can have with their athletic career (...) And the other, to take into account what is the added value that these athletes can bring."
- "To a company, what I would definitely tell you is that you take advantage of this added value that athletes can bring, that this will make them grow a lot as a company in the future, and that surely you will not find this with other professionals."
- "The advice I would give to athletes who are starting out is to get academic formation educationally from the beginning of their sporting career."

CONCLUSIONS

The general objective of this project was to contribute to the field of sports retirement and the transition to an alternative professional career by carrying out an European needs analysis on the employability of athletes after retirement. This objective made special sense in the European context, which has developed common initiatives on retirement from elite sport and dual career, as well as highlighting the need of researching and sharing good practice experiences (Stambulova et al., 2024). The project was organized around two central aspects: (a) the importance and need of updating the current scientific evidence on the topic, and (b) the development of an applied phase through a group of experts that base their knowledge on the most recent evidence to contribute to the advancement of the field. The idea of basing research and applied practice on updated systematic reviews, which summarize evidence through a standardized and rigorous process, contributes to a scientific progress of quality in the field (Ramis et al., 2019; Tod et al., 2019). The systematic review process offers a guide so researchers and practitioners generate an accurate understanding of the most updated and quality evidence in the Sport Psychology field, with the aim of minimizing possible biases in decision making processes and in the generation of knowledge.

In the following section we present the main conclusions of the project in form of good practices examples and recommendations for five key stakeholders: (a) policymakers, (b) employers, (c) sport entourages, (d) sport psychology researchers and practitioners, and (e) active and former (semi)professional athletes. The recommendations are based on the needs detected during both the review of the evidence (i.e., scientific literature, EU research projects, EU policies) and the analysis of the focus group with experts. Lastly, we highlight the strengths of the project.

Recommendations to meet the need analysis

Policymakers

- To invest resources aimed at combining work and sport balancing those currently destined to support the combination of sport and education.
- To generate public programs to support insertion and adaptation to the job market for retiring athletes.
- To analyse and make more visible the successful initiatives that are already being carried out in the different European countries.
- To invest not in elite-level only but also in athletes from different athletic realities.
- To offer tailored support to minorities and underrepresented contexts (e.g., women's sport, parasport), as well as supporting other type of transitions (e.g., motherhood)
- To organize actions from a European perspective and not only from individual countries' policies.
- To develop and offer public health care programs providing psychological support to prevent and act on mental health and wellbeing issues. These programs should have the purpose of tackling the stigma on psychological counselling in the sports context.
- To foster a holistic system that supports the different career stages, especially the retirement from sport.
- To promote the professional role of career support providers within the public context. This professional profile should know and understand the labour and sports contexts to be able to help (semi)professional athletes transition to the job market.

Employers

- To review, update and inform athletes about the existing public policies in the field to combine sport with the transition to the job market, and ensure the implementation of those existing policies.
- To make 'successful stories' more visible so these former athletes that were able to find a job (normally within the sports context) can serve as mentors and role models to athletes facing retirement.
- To offer internships/scholarships adapted to the final stages of the sports career (e.g., internships in part-time, short-term jobs or internship system for graduates).
- To propose meetings between employed retired athletes and report on specific vacancies in certain companies and see how athletes can contribute to these companies.
- To offer flexibility in terms of work schedules. Employers should be able to adapt the workload and schedule to athletes, not the other way around.
- To value (former)athletes' competencies more than their job experience. Athletes develop competencies such as the effort they put into things, their continuous desire to improve, and skills to (a) work under pressure, (b) to overcome difficulties, and (c) to face challenges.

Sport entourages

- The context in which athletes develop their sports career should have the knowledge and resources to act as a protective environment during the preparation for retirement and the transition to the job market. Sport entourages should review, update, and inform athletes about the existing public policies so athletes are aware of their existence.
- Prioritize optimizing and improving the effectiveness of existing resources.
- The need for greater transparency in the practice of sports psychology and in the dissemination of positive cases is emphasized.

Researchers

- To explore in depth the realities of (semi)professional athletes facing their transition to the job market.
- To work in women's coach development studies and the experiences of women who make the transition from athlete to high-performance coaches.
- To include understudied and underrepresented populations (e.g., paralympic athletes), as their needs and experiences may differ from conventional athletes. In this study we include the testimony from one paralympic athlete, but the complexity of adapted sport and the problems of job placement of people with disabilities make this an important topic to delve into.

Active and former (semi)professional athletes

- To understand and anticipate sports retirement as a structural and predictable stage of their sport careers.
- To be aware and assess their mental health and to explore the available services in case they need support in this area.
- To be aware of the importance of developing an academic career since the early stages of their sport careers.
- To be aware of (and use) the services provided to them in the sports entourage (e.g., economic, psychological, counselling).

- To recognize and appreciate the efforts and resources invested in dual career and retirement programs.

Strengths of the EP-NEST Project

The systematic and exhaustive evidence-based process, as well as the collection of data from a group of experts (i.e., focus group) and the final users of the project (i.e., videos for dissemination), represent an important strength of this project. This project emphasized the importance of accumulating scientific knowledge and applied practice recommendations through a wide range of experiences from the final users. In this line, both the analysis and the creation of the materials have been based on the co-construction of the outputs generated. Moreover, all the stages have been reviewed by the coordinating and the multinational research teams involved acting as *critical friends* to ensure the relevance and rigor of the knowledge generated.

We also consider a fundamental contribution to have generated a narrative about a common European perspective to support the transition to an alternative professional career, in contrast to the understanding of individual countries with idiosyncratic resources (i.e., economic, social) and possibilities to tackle this issue. Cross-cultural psychology can be defined as “the boundaries of knowledge about human behaviour by comparing it in two or more cultures” (Matsumoto & Jones, 2009, p. 323) and aligns with the funding objectives of the European Union to tackle global challenges considering a European social and financial unification (e.g., Maastricht Treaty, 1993). The assistance to active and former (semi)professional athletes can benefit from understanding the needs and demands from a collective point of view regardless of their dual career system, and reflect on minimal adjustments in the assistance depending on the individual context and culture.

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