

# MIND THE GAP!

## Examining the steps being taken to address the issue of transition in elite sport and its impact on the mental health of athletes

On the 11th March 2019, the BBC Sport website carried the shocking story that another international elite sportswoman had died. A day later it was reported that American Cyclist Kelly Catlin had in fact taken her own life, unable to cope with the pressures of living as one of the best Cyclists in the world. A three-time World Champion, and Olympic silver medalist, Catlin was studying for a postgraduate degree at Stanford University alongside her cycling career. Only two weeks before her tragic death, she had described the stresses of coping with her commitments as like 'juggling knives'.

In July last year, Ellie Souter, a rising star of British Snowboarding took her own life on her 18th birthday in the Swiss Alps. Her father believes she was struggling to cope with the pressures of high performance sport. "She wanted to be the best," he said. "She didn't want to let anybody down. Unfortunately it all came

about from missing a flight which then meant she didn't go training with the GB squad. She felt she'd let them down, felt she'd let me down and tragically it just takes one silly little thing like that to tip someone over the edge, because there's a lot of pressure on children."

Tony Souter added: "Mental health awareness needs to be really looked at and made more public".

Such devastating losses for families, friends and team mates are thankfully still relatively small in number but just one is surely too many? Although mental health awareness is improving, elite sport almost inevitably continues to function in an environment where the pressures to perform are huge; A win at all costs approach can still be seen to prevail; An athlete's focus, drive and will to win often overrides their own ability to see the bigger picture and draw a distinction between the athlete and the person.

Clarke Carlisle is a former professional footballer in England and a former Chair of the player's union - The Professional Footballer's Association. After a period of deep and dark struggles which Clarke kept secret from family and friends, Clarke first attempted to take his own life whilst recovering from a long term injury as a 21 year old player at Queens Park Rangers. The system failed Clarke and in his own words, he failed himself, and in 2014 he tried to prevent himself being a burden any longer by stepping in front of a truck on a dual carriageway near his home in York. Intent on attempting to take his own life again in 2017, Carlisle was found wandering the streets of Liverpool looking for a "responsible place to die".

Carlisle now considers himself to be in the healthiest state of his life and has become a powerful advocate for mental health awareness, working closely with his wife Carrie, inside

"Being a graduate student, track cyclist, and professional road cyclist can instead feel like I need to time-travel to get everything done. And things still slip through the cracks," she wrote. "So how do I balance three competing careers? Easy. I don't balance them."

and outside of sport. He believes that any dramatic change and most importantly, transition out of sport, is so often the trigger for depressive episodes amongst elite sportsmen and women. He believes the system doesn't mitigate enough against these triggers and drop off points and although mental health issues are clearly not exclusive to sport, "the system needs to help the individual be prepared for being exposed to the conditions and triggers that are in many cases unique to elite sport". He believes a capacity to cope is key and that early intervention and prevention through coordinated education and awareness programmes must be the way forward.

"Football has the finances and the powers of leadership to be able to create a template of support that can be then translated into any other industry in the world. Not only can they be flag-bearers and leaders but [football] can underpin a mental

health revolution by creating the template that other industries use. How powerful could that be?"

Gail Emms devoted every day of her life to Badminton in pursuit of success on court. Her Olympic silver medal in Athens 2004 was reward for years of dedication and commitment but now looking back she feels the system exploited that commitment and she lost her identity in chasing that dream within a sport that was so heavily reliant on success to secure future funding. Emms is only too aware that the funding model and 'no compromise' approach in place at the time was successful when adding up the medals won, but remains vocal about the need to protect athletes from themselves and the system by establishing a national framework and guidelines, which all National Governing Bodies can implement appropriately in their own sport.

Emms is now working for LAPS (Life after Professional Sport), a

resource and advice platform for future, current and former athletes, helping them prepare for a life and career beyond elite sport. By her own admission, she wasn't thinking that far ahead when she was on the podium at the Olympic Games or as World Champion in 2006!

Personal identity has become a recurring theme as I have talked to a number of high performing sportsmen and women over recent months. Recently retired Springbok World Cup winner Bryan Habana was very clear about the balance he needed to find between the athlete and the person.

"Rugby was part of my life, but certainly not defined as my life. I wanted to be the best rugby player in the world so sacrifices were inevitable, but I had to develop a culture of self-education".

Habana embraced thoughts about transition early in his career and built a network of support around him,



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taking full advantage of the guidance offered by his Players’ Union. His final professional Club contract was with Toulon in France and formal Club links with Toulon Business School meant Habana could develop further skills and experiences in preparation for life after Rugby. Setting up the Bryan Habana Foundation was also an integral part of the transition process, offering him a focus and platform from which to give back through rugby and live out the values that he believes Rugby gave him.

“Change has to be athlete led and has to be focused on the realities and inevitability of retirement and transition”

This clear and powerful summary was from double Winter Olympic Champion Lizzy Yarnold, when she spoke on the day she was announced as a lead Ambassador for the English

Institute of Sport’s (EIS) #more2me campaign earlier this year. Education was always the key for Yarnold and she was driven to make sure that she remained ‘someone beyond the athlete’.

The #more2me campaign seems symptomatic of a shift in the environment across high performance sport in the UK, driving awareness of and engagement with the broad range of services offered by the EIS’ Performance Lifestyle programme. UK Sport continues to invest heavily in the performance system through the Olympic and Paralympic sports but is also now implementing its own Mental Health Strategy and has recently appointed a Head of Mental Health and a Head of Culture. Many would argue this is a vital and much needed step forward after a number of reported athlete welfare cases in what

have been seen as ‘successful’ sports including cycling, para-swimming and canoeing.

In response to growing awareness surrounding transition based issues and challenges, and perhaps partly as a reaction to some of the more high profile failings in duty of care and governance in sport, there are a significant number of programmes being announced, delivered, refined and rolled out across sport – all making a real difference to people living their lives in the dynamic and ever-changing world of high performance sport. Back in 2005, a year after winning double gold in Athens, Dame Kelly Holmes opened up to her own mental health journey and admitted to self-harming. Fourteen years on she is still outspoken about the issues surrounding mental health and the Dame Kelly Holmes Trust continues

to support athletes struggling to cope with retirement, encouraging their involvement with mentoring programmes alongside disadvantaged young people. Holmes continues to keep mental health part of her everyday conversation, and ahead of the launch of a new podcast series focusing on the mental health journeys of a range of different celebrities, she was interviewed by The Guardian;

“We’re all just people trying to get through life, and life gets tough sometimes,” she says. “Everybody’s aware of people who have struggled. But whether we open our eyes to it is a different matter.”

With some similarities to the work that Holmes began back in 2005, Switch the Play has been established as a social enterprise, dedicated to improving the support offered to elite and aspiring athletes and players

as they transition to a life outside of sport. Talking to Leon Lloyd, the former Leicester Tigers and England Rugby Union International and now a Director at Switch the Play, it is clear that their whole approach is defined by the life outside of sport and NOT after sport. The focus, the planning, the awareness and the support offered to athletes and sporting organisations is purposefully about early intervention and prevention rather than cure. Academic research backs up the claim that ‘better people make better athletes’ and Leon is another advocate of the athlete needing to take the responsibility as the ultimate beneficiary of early action. But Switch the Play are playing their part in supporting Clubs, sporting bodies and players by developing and delivering programme to enable a smooth transition out of sport but also

reaching into other connected areas such as emotional wellbeing, own-brand development and performance parenting.

The role of coaches and officials cannot be forgotten or ignored in this complex process. All Coach Education activity being undertaken by UK Coaching now focuses on the person before the athlete. UK Coaching’s Director of Coaching, Emma Atkins believes that the role of coaches was largely forgotten in the Government’s recent Duty of Care in Sport report, but that all coaches have a crucial role to play at the heart of the transition, duty of care and mental health framework.

Furthermore, when considering the support network around the athlete, and given the vital role of Performance Directors within the high performance sport system and the unique pressures placed on them, the question could be



asked as to who is looking out for them when the medals and performances are being analysed and the budgets are being awarded?

The business world has long recognised the value of recruiting elite sportsmen and women and nurturing the wide ranging transferable skills, passion, commitment to excellence and resilience honed within a high performance environment. Ex Professional Footballer Scott Ward, leads EY's Personal Performance Programme - designed as a preventative learning and development programme to enable athletes to transition when their sporting career comes to an end. Scott's view is clear:

"Athletes are taught to view themselves purely from a sporting context. By having a focus on personal development away from sport, it can improve clarity of mind, sense of self, and optimism for life after competitive sport. Personal development isn't a quick fix; it should be viewed in the same way as competitive development - a long term strategic process."

Ward and his team are working with a number of stakeholders in sport and recently announced a formal partnership, creating a two-year pilot of its e-learning and development platform with West Indies Cricket. Johnny Grave, Chief Executive for Cricket West Indies (CWI), commented:

"CWI is investing heavily in developing and providing the resources so that cricketers have the opportunity to perform at elite level and have the support to develop during and after their career in the game. The partnership with EY is an

illustration of how CWI is supporting every aspect of the game and this pilot is hopefully the prelude to ongoing support for the players after they leave professional sport behind them."

UK Sport has supported the development of a number of Athlete Futures events, providing advice and support for athletes as well as delivering a number of Careers Fairs with over 20 employers exploring opportunities with over 70 athlete attendees at a recent event in October 2018. Lane 4, the management consultancy run by Olympic Gold Medallist Adrian Moorhouse, delivers a scholarship programme for athletes preparing them for transition out of sport. Furthermore, enlightened professional clubs are working hard to deliver sustainable education and business development opportunities for their players. Saracens' Chairman Nigel Wray recently sent a very strong message via the Club's website:

"As a Club, we want and actively encourage all of our players to consider their futures beyond playing the sport we all love. A professional rugby career can be short-lived and we have a responsibility to educate, prepare and support all of our players in carving alternative career pathways for their lives after rugby. We are a Club that cares.

Education is a crucial part of our culture. It's a Club wide ethos. Approximately, 75 per cent of the squad are involved in either university education, an industry qualification, meaningful work experience or an entrepreneurial venture."

Saracens are not alone in seeking to create an environment within

which players and athletes can take some responsibility for taking the earliest possible steps for their own life beyond sport - not just after it! There is a huge amount of work being undertaken in the UK and around the world designed to offer support and guidance to those immersed in high performance sport but the question does remain whether the sporting establishment has been able to close the gap sufficiently to meet the needs of everyone! Flexibility remains crucial and Vicki Aggar, Chair of the British Athletes Commission insists that the responsibility for focusing on the person not just the athlete during a sporting career is a shared one. Aggar is clear that:

"One of the British Athlete Commission's key roles is to influence UK Sport in such a way that the return on investment is measured beyond just medal success and that developing better people to make better athletes should be the goal."

Aggar agrees that sport has to find a collective solution that normalises a situation in which athletes have a choice to exist outside of the bubble. Training and competition schedules, the expectations of fellow athletes and team mates as well as coaches, self-imposed targets and a total commitment to producing that perfect performance, all seem to conspire against devoting time and energy towards reflection on 'what else and what next?'

Perhaps the rapid rise and potential influence of the new Global Athlete movement is a sign of what is to come. A movement established and developed by athletes for athletes,

seeking greater influence and control of their own sporting careers and lives. Already making waves across the international landscape of Athlete Commissions and other representative bodies, it remains too early to assess just how much influence and change will follow, but sport clearly has a responsibility to listen to the voices of the men and women who make high performance sport so special,

and an obligation to help create an environment in which they can continue to thrive as wonderfully talented and committed individuals. Perhaps in some cases, until such an environment is accepted as the norm, we need to recognise that the drive, focus and belief found in abundance in athletes, means that some might need protecting from themselves.



**Closing the Gap! You can find more information about some of the key partners featured in this article:**

- Switch the Play - [switchtheplay.com](http://switchtheplay.com)
- UK Coaching - [www.ukcoaching.org](http://www.ukcoaching.org)
- EY Personal Performance Programme - [www.ey.com/uk/en/services/tax/people-advisory-services/ey-pas-personal-performance-programme](http://www.ey.com/uk/en/services/tax/people-advisory-services/ey-pas-personal-performance-programme)
- LAPS - [www.laps.careers](http://www.laps.careers)
- #more2me - [www.eis2win.co.uk/service/performanceclifestyle](http://www.eis2win.co.uk/service/performanceclifestyle)
- British Athletes Commission - <https://britishathletes.org>

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**Pete Rhodes' career in sports management has taken in roles from grass roots to the high performance system in the UK, with management roles at three world University Games, two Commonwealth Games and two Olympic Games. In 2005, he established All for Good Ltd, a consultancy specialising in the use and power of sport as an agent of change and as a force for good, working with sporting personalities, charities and corporate partners. He has acted as a sponsorship and events consultant for Sportscover Europe since 2012.**