

# When the final whistle blows: Retirement for Elite Athletes

Retirement from professional sport can be problematic with some sports people reporting considerable psychological distress and reduced well-being as a result. Increasingly we are starting to recognise the role that *identity change* plays in these transitions, particularly change in:

- **athletic identity** and
- **social identity** — our sense of belonging with the groups in our lives i.e., family, team, community, and interest groups, among others

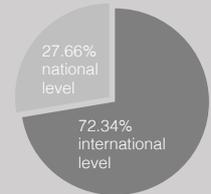
This research investigated the extent to which these factors impacted on adjustment to retirement from professional sport.



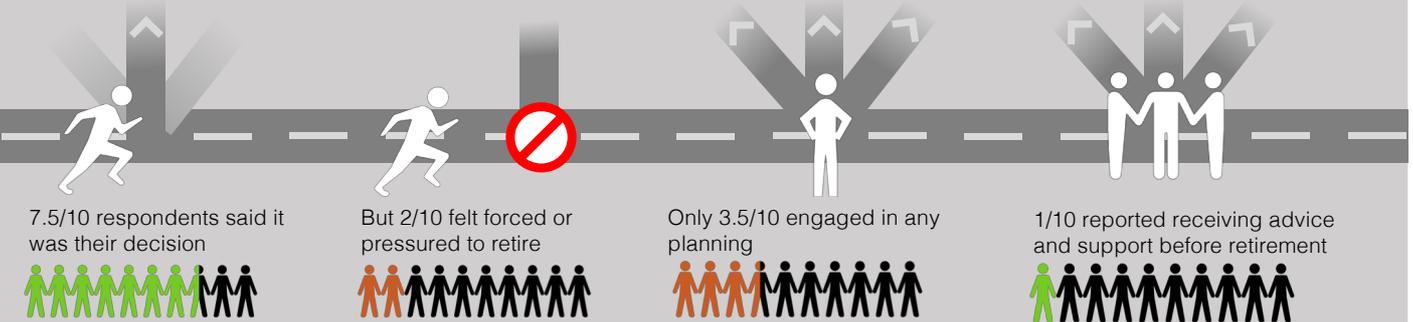
67% of people reported experiencing loss of their professional athletic identity, and every one point increase in identity loss was associated with a 10% increase in depression.

**METHOD** Sample: 150 retired elite athletes [75% Belgian; 7% Dutch; 7% Australian; 10% other]

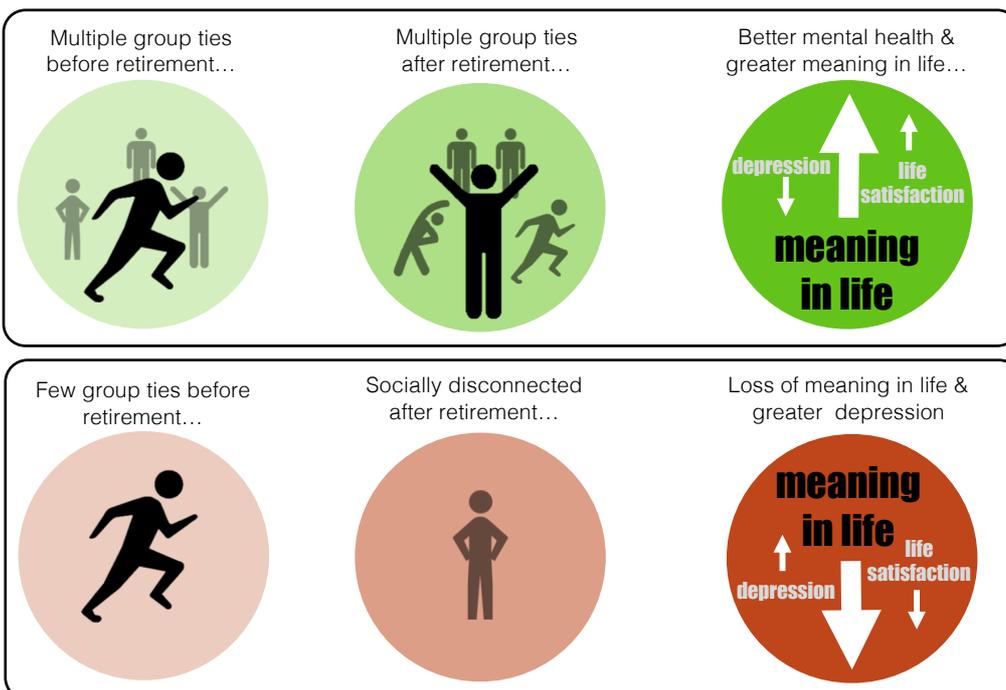
- Average age: 27.63 years
- Age range: 16 to 48
- 60% female
- Average age since retirement: 3.18 years



## CAREER TERMINATION EXPERIENCES



## IDENTITY MANAGEMENT PATHWAYS



## CONCLUSIONS

There are two key predictors of poor adjustment to retirement:

1. **Athletic identity loss**
2. **A lack of meaningful group ties (i.e., weak social identity)**

Both contribute to increasing depression, reducing meaning in life, and undermining well-being.

As the data demonstrate, identity management is critical in sport retirement, and needs to be the target of intervention to ensure a smooth transition.