



Changing Lanes

With one last touch of the wall, retiring swimmers are finished – stripped of their routine, their community, their whole identity

BY MATTHEW PARISELLI

Lungs screaming and muscles burning, Annamay Pierse surges toward the wall in the final of the women's 200-metre breaststroke at the 2012 Canadian Olympic swimming trials. She summons every last ounce of power and drives into the touchpad. Whipping her head around to check the scoreboard, she's confronted by sinking dreams.

Her eyes tell her brain something she cannot compute. The number five stands next to her name, indicating her placing in the race. She has failed to earn herself a ticket to the London Olympics.

With a flood of emotions coursing through her, the former world record-holder exits the same Montreal pool where she won the event and qualified for her first Olympic team four years prior.

Heartbroken and in disbelief, the realization that her career as a professional swimmer has ended washes over her. Before she can process it herself, she is ushered into a press room where reporters thrust their mics at her and fire away with a question she has no answer to: "What are you going to do now?"

Canadian competitive swimmers rarely dive into the thought of retirement. In fact, for some, like Pierse, it crashes into them unannounced and uninvited. According to Judy Goss, mental performance consultant at the Canadian Sport Institute – Ontario, it is

the "unanticipated and unplanned" retirements that are particularly challenging for swimmers and most athletes.

The retirement transition for swimmers has garnered some attention in the swimming-captivated nation of Australia. But, aside from Mark Tewksbury, the Canadian gold medalist from the 1992 Olympics who was candid with his troublesome transition, the subject matter has fallen under murky waters in Canada. However, the winds (or waves) of change may be blowing through.

With Toronto hosting the 2015 Pan Am Games this summer, and the introduction of Game Plan, a program designed to assist Canada's athletes as they transition into, within, and beyond sport, this topic is finally getting dredged up from the deep end to the surface.

In Jeff Pearlman's 2004 *Psychology Today* article "After the Ball," sports psychologist Steven Berglas wrote that elite athletes go "from the pinnacle of adulation, excitement and the confirmation of worth to nothing." High-performance athletes live a slightly coddled life, but with retirement, all safety nets are withdrawn. For elite athletes, retirement

When Canadian swimmer Annamay Pierse failed to qualify for the 2012 Olympic Games, her career ended in a split second and she was left floating in a pool of uncertainty.

It takes time and I'm still learning. I'm still learning how to be a real human being.

signifies a loss of structure, a challenge to one's identity, a loss of physical fitness and a dissolution or transformation of one's support network. Additionally, as was the case for Pierce, the daunting "what now?" question sets in and demands an answer.

In a sport as enveloping as competitive swimming, Canada's swimmers experience these challenges to a high degree. As retired two-time Canadian Olympic swimmer Alexa Komarnycky said, being an elite swimmer means, "living, eating, breathing swimming." After retiring in 2013, she is still navigating the adjustment period: "It takes time and I'm still learning. I'm still learning how to be a real human being."

One of the adjustments Komarnycky is still making relates to the loss of structure that comes with retirement. Kirsten Barnes, lead mental performance consultant for the Canadian Sport Institute – Pacific, and a retired Olympic gold medal-winning rower herself, alludes to this and argues that routines form the basis of a swimmer's environment. Practice and competition schedules demand strict adherence to structure, and if the swimmer is enrolled in school while competing, the value of structure is even more pronounced.

Komarnycky's Olympic teammate, Tobias Oriwol, reiterates Barnes' assertion. Oriwol swam for Canada at the 2008 Olympics, retired and enrolled in graduate school. He completed his studies and then returned to swimming in 2010. His return was a successful one. He went on to swim in the London 2012 Games before retiring permanently.

Oriwol said framing time in the context of a school year is akin to knowing when practices and competitions are in swimming. During his first retirement, the clear path that school paved was crucial to his smooth transition out of swimming. "There was no searching around or finding my way," he said. Having "something that structured ... and finite as a swimming season or swimming cycle," offered him a familiar and comforting sense of direction.

Heather MacLean, a recently-retired member of the 2012 Canadian Olympic swim team, echoes Oriwol's sentiments on the influence of structure, but also calls the re-identification process that comes with retirement tumultuous. Having retired in the fall of 2014, she currently finds herself in the throes of this stage, and, according to Gretchen Kerr, professor and

vice dean of academic affairs in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto, her case is not an isolated one. "Retired athletes have to renegotiate their identities.... For so long, they've been identifying themselves and others have been identifying them as athletes. So when they're no longer athletes, what are they at that point?" she said.

This is a difficulty reinforced by Ashwin Patel, Sport Management professor at Humber College. Patel, who has worked with elite swimmers and has helped guide several athletes through the retirement process, said those who self-identify solely as swimmers encounter the toughest transitions. In his experience, "the ones that really struggled with it were the individuals whose identities were so strongly tied to the sport of swimming."

For MacLean, losing swimming from her self-image has been the scariest part of her retirement transition. She sees herself as a person of lesser value and frequently questions who she is now that swimming is part of her past. She admits she worried about how people would perceive her decision to retire. "I was really nervous about what my teammates would say, what my coaches would say, what my friends would say," she said. "Swimming was who I was

and I was really nervous that people would view me ... as a lesser person."

Swimming keeps its athletes impeccably fit. With between eight and 10 workouts a week, the body becomes sculpted and trimmed. When a swimmer retires, it is natural for this shape to fade, and this can be a hurdle in the retirement journey as well. Not wanting to completely get out of shape is a common fear.

Oriwol said juggling graduate school and the need for physical activity was incredibly frustrating. MacLean revealed her fear of gaining 30 pounds and how she is trying to strike a balance between healthy eating and exercise. Komarnycky delved into how badly she missed intense physical exertion and how it led to a new job as a personal trainer at Goodlife Fitness. As Goss mentioned, it is essential for retired swimmers to find a means of exercise, both for their physical and mental stability.

Drawing on her experiences with athletes through her work with Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS), Goss also suggested a loss of community may be problematic in the retirement transition. There is a sense of camaraderie that develops when swimmers compete and train together, and when a swimmer exits the pool, that support system may also be left behind.

This is a condition of retirement that both Kerr and Barnes relate to. Barnes said in extreme cases, some swimmers are



The London Olympic pool was the sudden end for many swimming careers, a shock-filled transition that often proves damaging to athletes' mental health.

struck with a feeling of “abandonment” when they retire. If a swimmer has to return to his or her hometown following retirement, contact with former teammates is often severed and this can be a source of shock and grief.

Despite all of the pitfalls with retirement, there are ways to mitigate the struggles during a swimmer’s transition. The key is planning and preparation, or as Goss phrases it, as “one wheel stops turning with [a] sport career, the other wheels [should] already [be] moving.” This notion is substantiated by Barnes, Patel, and Kerr.

To properly do this, Kerr stressed planning at a very early age by developing interests and friends outside of swimming. Identifying preferences, hopes and personal characteristics can expose young swimmers to a variety of avenues to follow after their athletic careers.

Martha McCabe is a current Canadian national swim team member and 2012 Olympic finalist and has qualified for the 2015 Pan Am Games. She has always taken it upon herself to prepare for her future. With an interest in the human body, she studied kinesiology at the University of British Columbia. After she completed her undergraduate degree, she explored the

You need to be so dedicated. You need to expend so much time towards that singular focus that you basically become defined by your sport.

possibility of working in medicine and investigated writing the MCATs.

Once she learned of the RBC Olympians program, which funds Canadian Olympic and Paralympic athletes and provides them with skills to better prepare for life beyond sport, she educated herself on it, applied for selection, and was accepted. She now works part-time at their head office in Toronto where she gains valuable work experience while still training full-time.

After seeing teammates struggle with retirement in the wake of the 2012 Olympics, McCabe knew she did not want to confront the same obstacles. “I want to have something that I’m passionate about when I’m done swimming ... I want to put that energy toward something,” she said.

Patel emphasizes this idea of transferring energy. He said it is vital that swimmers, and elite athletes in general, pinpoint other interests or passions to explore so the energy they once reserved for sport

can be shifted towards something else upon retirement. Rechanneling that energy is of the utmost importance.

Although McCabe has been proactive in her efforts to locate a passion beyond swimming, this has proven extremely difficult for others.

To achieve her great heights in the sport, Pierse, for example, had to entirely dedicate herself to swimming. In hindsight, she sees how this may have been a hindrance to her future, but still believes that excellence in swimming comes from having it as the sole focus: “If you’re thinking about what you’re doing after swimming, you’re not really thinking about what you’re doing while you’re swimming.” This is reiterated by former swimmer Sandy Lockhart.

Lockhart, who never competed at the Olympic stage, but represented Canada internationally and won events in the pool at the university level, retired in 2008 and admits to never fully developing an outlet from swimming. Even though it was



Photo by Blake Worsley

his choice, swimming consumed his life. When he unexpectedly reached retirement's doorstep, he said that he was ill-prepared for his future.

He had an undergraduate degree, but it was in an area he was growing further and further disinterested in, and recognized that he now needed to, "go back and put those blocks in place to do what it was that (he) wanted to do." Having a resource to help identify this would have been welcome, he said.

Following the 2010 Olympics, Barnes was asked to put together a debriefing report. Her findings were startling and sparked a move toward better assisting Canada's athletes with the various transitions they encounter in their careers.

One of Barnes' more alarming discoveries was that two of Canada's gold medalists from the 2010 Olympics were struck with distressing realizations days before their final performances at those Games. These epiphanies came from recognizing they were at the end of their careers without the faintest clue as to where they were headed after the Games.

Clearly, something needed to be done to help better prepare athletes.

September 2014 served as the launch pad for Game Plan, a program aimed at assisting athletes with integrating life and sport through all phases of their athletic careers, including their segue into post-athletic endeavours. Rolf Wagschal, athlete career transition advisor for Game Plan, said planning and preparation are what Game Plan strives to emphasize. "Let's not build the house; let's just lay good foundation," he said.

As it pertains to swimmers, Wagschal understands their struggles when competing at a high level. "You need to be so dedicated. You need to expend so much time towards that singular focus that you basically become defined by your sport. Your entire support structure is made up of swimmers. Your entire daily routine, your financial life, your physical life revolves around swimming. And when you remove that person from swimming it can be very traumatic if they haven't done any preparation There's a massive hole there," he said.

Pierse, who said she was "basically just dumped by Swimming Canada," calls Game Plan and its benefits invaluable. Following her disappointment at the 2012 Olympic trials, she emphasized her need to consult a sports psychologist in the aftermath, but her efforts to have that service covered by the governing body were denied. In her most vulnerable state, lost in a "dark, dark space," as she called it, she was stranded. She turned to food and alcohol, lost sight of herself, and handled the entire process in an irrational, unhealthy manner. But she knew no other way.

Game Plan ensures that there is another way, and, as Wagschal said, it aims to help athletes "find their way" beyond sport.

Although retirement has proven challenging for some notable swimmers like Ian Thorpe, the Australian superstar and multiple Olympic gold medalist, who publicly grappled with depression following his competitive career, it is not an agonizing process for all. As Goss underlined, the number of elite swimmers who wallow in despair for an extensive time following retirement is quite low. After two years, most manage to swim through the retirement wave successfully.

It would appear that Goss's estimate rings true for Pierse. Three years out of her failure to qualify for the 2012 Olympic Games, Pierse is back in school to become a teacher.

"I'm so happy. I absolutely love being in school, I love teaching. It's absolutely what I'm supposed to be doing," she said. Pierse did not have an answer for reporters when they asked her what her plans were in 2012, but it is clear that she has now found a new life for herself in a different lane. ♦



Photo by Matthew Pariselli

Pierse hasn't been back in the pool since that fateful day three years ago, but she's now found herself and knows not only where she's going but how to get there.