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Transitioning from Elite Sport: An Empirical Study on Coping and Well-Being

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Abstract

This study investigates how different coping strategies influence the psychological and social well-being of former elite Slovak athletes during their transition from professional sport to post-sport life. Grounded in the transition models developed by Taylor and Ogilvie (1994, 2001) and Stambulova (1997), as well as Ryff and Keyes's (1995) theory of well-being and Carver's (1997) Brief COPE framework, the research explores mechanisms that facilitate successful adaptation following athletic retirement. A mixed-methods design was employed. In the first phase, semi-structured interviews with 20 former athletes were thematically analyzed to identify key coping mechanisms and transition experiences. The second phase utilized a questionnaire completed by 200 former elite athletes, measuring the use of 11 coping strategies and their associations with five domains of well-being. Statistical analysis through factor analysis and MANOVA revealed five core coping strategies: sport-related, self-distraction, proactive, denial, and escape. Sport-related and self-distraction strategies were positively associated with higher levels of well-being, suggesting their role as adaptive responses during career transition. In contrast, denial and escape strategies were linked to reduced well-being across multiple domains. Notably, proactive strategies such as planning and information seeking - typically viewed as constructive - were associated with increased anxiety in this context. These findings underscore the complexity of coping during athletic retirement and highlight the importance of personalized psychological support. By conceptualizing coping strategies as independent variables affecting transition outcomes, this study contributes novel empirical insights to the field and emphasizes the need for tailored interventions to support athletes' mental health and long-term adjustment after sport.

Keywords: Coping Strategies, Athletic Retirement, Psychological Well-Being, Career Transition, Elite Athletes.

Introduction

The transition from elite sport to post-athletic life represents a major psychological and social turning point in the lives of professional athletes. After years of systematic training, high expectations, and identity shaped by athletic performance, retirement from sport often brings emotional strain, uncertainty, and the challenge of redefining one's life role. Athletes may struggle with the loss of structure, identity, and social support previously embedded in their sporting environment (Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994; Stambulova, 2000). Although some individuals adapt successfully, many report difficulties related to anxiety, depression, or reduced life satisfaction in the years following career termination (Lavallee et al., 2014; Park et al., 2013). In this context, coping strategies - defined as cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 2013) - play a vital role in shaping the outcomes of this life transition.

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While the importance of coping in athletic retirement has been acknowledged, there remains a significant research gap in understanding how specific coping strategies affect distinct domains of well-being, such as social functioning, mental health, and career satisfaction. Most previous studies treat coping as a secondary or dependent variable, rather than analyzing its direct impact on post-career adaptation (Stambulova et al., 2007; Grove et al., 1997). Furthermore, limited attention has been paid to how coping strategies function in particular cultural settings, such as Central Europe. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how different coping strategies influence perceived well-being among former elite Slovak athletes during their transition from sport. Using a mixed-methods approach, it identifies key coping mechanisms and evaluates their role in five areas of well-being.

The purpose of this research is to determine which coping strategies contribute to or hinder well-being in retired athletes, and to inform targeted psychological support and career transition programs. The mixed-methods design - combining interviews and large-scale questionnaire data - enables a comprehensive understanding of both individual experience and generalizable trends, making the findings applicable in practice by sport organizations, psychologists, and policymakers.

Literature Review

The termination of a professional sports career constitutes a significant psychosocial milestone for elite athletes, often accompanied by heightened stress, emotional instability, and uncertainty. This transition entails not only a loss of athletic identity - frequently deeply rooted in competitive performance - but also a radical shift in lifestyle and social integration. Research indicates that this phase can lead to considerable cognitive, emotional, and behavioral challenges (Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994; Dvouletý et al., 2025). As Stambulova (2000) emphasizes, the quality of this adaptation largely depends on the availability and effectiveness of coping mechanisms. The ability to access and utilize adaptive coping strategies can serve as a key protective factor, facilitating a smoother adjustment and mitigating long-term psychological distress. According to Lazarus and Folkman (2013), coping strategies are “*constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific demands that are perceived as stressful or exceeding the individual's resources.*” In this context, the athlete's well-being is shaped by how effectively stress is managed throughout the transition process.

Well-being itself can be conceptualized in multiple ways. Wassell and Dodge (2015) define it as “*a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being,*” while Ryff and Keyes (1995) view it as a multidimensional construct comprising autonomy, purpose in life, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, personal growth, and positive social relations. In this framework, coping strategies serve not merely as responses to stress but as active mechanisms influencing well-being trajectories after career termination.

The significance of psychological well-being in elite athletes is further underscored by Schinke et al. (2018), who represent the International Society of Sport Psychology. Their position paper stresses that mental health is fundamental to both peak performance and sustainable personal development in sport. Their findings advocate for continuity-based psychological models, structured support systems, and long-term interventions to ensure that athletes maintain mental balance throughout their careers - including during and after transition.

Several studies have demonstrated that adaptive coping mechanisms can buffer against the adverse effects of retirement. Lavalley et al. (2014) and Diener et al. (2017) confirm that

effective coping can preserve psychological resilience and emotional stability post-career. Similarly, Park et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of coaching programs and structured counselling in promoting successful adaptation. Ryff (2014) argues that promoting well-being through such programs prevents burnout and enhances life purpose, while Seligman (2011) stresses the centrality of social well-being and supportive interpersonal relationships.

Specific cognitive and emotional strategies - such as mindfulness and cognitive reframing - can play a central role in managing stress. In a longitudinal study, Torregrosa et al. (2015) found that Olympic athletes using these strategies reported lower anxiety and stress. Alfermann and Stambulova (2007) highlight the protective influence of positive self-perception, emotional regulation, and self-worth beyond athletic performance. These findings align with Ryff and Keyes (1995), who emphasized that coping contributes to a resilient psychological profile in the face of transition-related stressors.

Professional psychological assistance also emerges as a key support component. Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) proposed a conceptual model that incorporates therapeutic consultations and cognitive-behavioral interventions to help athletes accept and manage change. Cecić Erpić et al. (2004) similarly identify counselling as instrumental in exploring new life paths and regulating emotional reactions to the end of a sports career.

Physical activity, often underappreciated in transition contexts, has been widely recognized as a contributor to post-retirement well-being. Torregrosa et al. (2015) demonstrate that recreational sport fosters emotional stability and helps athletes maintain a structured lifestyle. Wylleman et al. (2013) further note that staying physically active sustains one's athletic identity. Penedo and Dahn (2005) found that physical activity improves subjective well-being by reducing stress hormones and enhancing endorphin production. Kadlčík (2008) extends this insight by showing that athletes who perceive retirement as an opportunity for renewal exhibit greater psychological well-being, particularly when coupled with purposeful planning.

The literature consistently identifies core strategies that support well-being in this context: proactive preparation for retirement, cognitive and emotional regulation, utilization of social support networks, and access to professional psychological care. Schine et al. (1986) classified coping into two categories: problem-focused and emotion-focused, while Endler and Parker (1990) introduced avoidance-oriented coping. Roger et al. (1993) later added the concept of detached coping, in which individuals emotionally disengage from stressors.

The COPE Inventory developed by Carver et al. (1989), along with its shorter form, the Brief COPE (Carver, 1997), has been widely used to assess coping behavior in transitioning athletes. Grove et al. (1997) confirmed the reliability of most subscales, with only minor limitations. Alfermann et al. (2004), however, noted variability in test-retest reliability. Other studies, such as those by Sinclair and Orlick (1993), emphasized practical strategies, including developing interests outside of sport, maintaining activity levels, seeking supportive communication, and preserving connections with the sports community.

Recent research offers additional insights. Küttel and Larsen (2020) identified both risk and protective factors in elite athlete mental health, offering a comprehensive overview of systemic influences. Walton et al. (2020) found that athletes with a strong sense of self-understanding experienced lower psychological distress. Knights et al. (2016) identified four essential coping facilitators: career planning, robust social networks, adaptability, and a constructive outlook on transition. Torregrosa et al. (2015) similarly highlighted that active strategies like identity

reconstruction and long-term planning improve outcomes, while avoidance behaviors predict poorer adjustment.

The social context of retirement has also gained attention. Brown et al. (2018) examined the perspectives of athletes' close relations - such as parents and partners - who face their own emotional adjustments. Their findings underline the necessity of open communication and mutual emotional processing within family systems. Reiterating previous points, Schinke et al. (2018) underscore the role of interventions that focus on strengthening coping competencies as a way to buffer stress and enhance long-term mental stability.

Current theoretical models encourage an individualized approach to coping, acknowledging the personal, situational, and cultural dimensions of transition. Stambulova et al. (2025) argue for tailored psychological services and interdisciplinary collaboration among mental health professionals, sociologists, and sport practitioners. They call for more empirical studies that measure the effectiveness of specific coping interventions and identify best practices across diverse populations.

Building on this body of knowledge, the current study addresses a critical gap by examining how former elite athletes in Slovakia experience and utilize coping strategies during career termination. Although coping has been extensively studied internationally, there remains a lack of research focusing on the Central European context, despite cultural and structural specificities in athlete development and support systems. In line with the findings of Knights et al. (2019), who emphasize the interconnectedness of "career," "sport," "transition," and "coping," this study aims to provide empirical insights that reflect the lived experiences of Slovak athletes, enriching the global understanding of athlete transition and mental well-being.

Materials and Methods

The main objective of the research is to analyse to what extent and in what way coping strategies influence the perceived well-being of former Slovak athletes during the termination of their elite sports careers.

Below, we present hypothesis formulated based on theoretical knowledge, research findings published in the context of the EEIG EU/P-Kr/06.12/23 project *Are elite athletes good project managers?* and the first phase of the research.

H1: The perceived quality of well-being in the post-sport period in the dimensions of psychosocial, social, professional/educational, health, and overall life satisfaction will be significantly influenced by the extent and type of coping strategies used during the transition process.

A mixed research paradigm was chosen for the study, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, as recommended by Hendl (2023), enabling an effective analysis of the complexity of the examined phenomenon. The research can be classified as an observational study.

The target research sample consists of former elite athletes who have already terminated their careers and transitioned into post-sport life. The exact size of the population cannot be determined because there are no official records in the Slovakia.

The research was carried out in two phases, as recommended by Kadlčík (2008). The objective of the first research phase (January – June 2024) was to obtain fundamental insights into the phenomenon examined and its structure, leading to the formulation of hypothesis. Data

collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews with 20 open-ended questions supplemented by 10 questions using a Likert scale, based on the study published in Kadlčík (2008) and Kadlčík, Flemr (2008). Respondents answered questions about their well-being in three time periods: active career, transition, and current post-sport life.

The interviews were conducted online via the ZOOM platform. All invited respondents (N = 20) agreed to participate in the research. The interviews lasted between 30 and 44 minutes and were recorded with the consent of the respondents. The recordings were transcribed into text using the Google Speech-to-Text application. Each interview produced 8-10 pages of text. The textual data were analysed by hierarchical content following the methodology described in Patton (1990). The key statements of the respondents were organised into thematic units and theoretical concepts were subsequently identified using both inductive and deductive approaches. Data were categorised based on transition models in sports careers according to Stambulova (1997), (2003), Taylor and Ogilvie (1994), (2001).

The selection was carried out using the 'snowball sampling' method, as recommended by Breakwell et al. (2012), by coaches or other respondents. Selection was concluded when theoretical saturation, as defined by Hendl (2023).

The research sample consisted of 10 men and 10 women from various sports disciplines: athletics (N = 2), football (N = 2), ice hockey (N = 2), basketball (N = 1), rowing (N = 1), judo (N = 1), tennis (N = 4), beach volleyball (N = 2), sports aerobics (N = 3), weightlifting (N = 1) and powerlifting (N = 1). The ages ranged from 33 to 35 years (M = 34.3). The age of career termination ranged from 28 to 33 years (M = 29.8) and the length of their sports careers ranged from 10 to 20 years (M = 16.6). Respondents began their sports careers between the ages of 3 and 8 (M = 5.9), achieving their greatest success between the ages of 18 and 26 (M = 22.2).

The content analysis of data from the first phase of the research identified ten key categories related to the process of termination a sports career and transitioning into post-sport life. These categories correspond to the theoretical models described in Stambulova (1997), (2003), Taylor and Ogilvie (1994), (2001), Kadlčík (2008), Kadlčík and Flemr (2008), which define the key variables of the transition process. However, in the further research, we were interested only in the category of Coping strategies during career termination.

The second research phase (July – November 2024), following the methodology of Kadlčík (2008), focused on the operationalisation and testing of hypothesis formulated in the first phase.

The respondents were presented with a list of 11 activities that could be perceived as supportive during the transition from an elite sports career to post-sport life. The selected activities were identical to those in Kadlčík's (2008) study, with their relevance confirmed by both the results of the first phase of this research and previous studies, including Alfermann et al. (2004), Sinclair and Orlick (1993), and Stambulova (2012). Respondents evaluated these activities using a five-point Likert scale. Ten of the activities were derived from the "COPE Inventory" questionnaire (Carver, 1997; Carver et al., 1989). However, one additional activity, "maintaining contact with sport," was included primarily based on the findings of Kadlčík (2008). This activity was not originally part of the COPE Inventory or its Brief COPE version (Carver, 1997; Carver et al., 1989). The items selected in the original Brief COPE questionnaire corresponded to the following coping:

- Planning ("I tried to come up with a plan for what to do in the future.")

- Humour ("I joked about the situation I found myself in.")
- Faith ("I prayed to God/meditated.")
- Seeking support ("I tried to obtain information from people who had experience with sports career termination (other athletes, experts, etc.).")
- Denial ("I could not admit that my sports career had really ended.")
- Self-distraction ("I engaged in more activities that I had limited during my sports career (entertainment, culture, spending time with friends, hobbies, etc.)." and "I focused on other aspects of life.")
- Substance use ("I drank alcohol or used other drugs to feel better.")
- Disengagement ("I gave up trying to cope with the end of my sports career.")
- Self-blame ("I blamed myself for the situation I found myself in.")

From the above, it follows that the list of activities presented to respondents for evaluation was highly diverse and covered a total of 10 different coping strategies:

- Maintaining contact with sport.
- Planning.
- Seeking instrumental support.
- Self-distraction.
- Humour.
- Faith.
- Denial.
- Self-blame.
- Disengagement.
- Substance use.

Subsequently, a factor analysis was performed. Measurement using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test (0.557; with a minimum recommended value of 0.5) confirmed the suitability of using factor analysis to evaluate the dataset matrix. The test result indicates that the data can be reduced to a smaller number of factors.

The assumption of the suitability of factor analysis was further verified by Bartlett's test, which confirmed the existence of relationships among the observed variables. The correlation matrix and communalities (that is, the squares of the correlation index) of individual items indicated a high variability among individual items. In general, the higher the communality of an item, the more common properties it shares with other items. Especially item 8 exhibited low communality, which indicated its uniqueness within the analysed dataset.

Furthermore, the perceived quality of well-being of former elite athletes after the termination of their sports careers was analysed in the following areas:

- Psychosocial
- Social
- Occupational/educational
- Health
- Perception of life satisfaction according to the extent of the use of individual coping strategies.

The observed relationship was determined using multivariate analysis of variance, where, in addition to describing the differences between the levels of the independent variables, the relative practical significance of the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable was also examined, expressed by η^2 (eta squared). The extent of the use of individual coping strategies was always defined at two levels. We identified the mean, standard deviation, and z-score values at the observed levels of the use of individual coping strategies concerning the observed areas of post-sport life.

To test the formulated hypothesis, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed using the MANOVA test for the hypothesis variables.

The research sample for this phase was a subset of the target population, selected based on availability. The sample included 200 respondents who voluntarily participated and completed the questionnaire. Representatives of various sports disciplines were included: football, ice hockey, basketball, volleyball, athletics, swimming, skiing, rowing, cycling, tennis, biathlon, gymnastics, judo, figure skating, beach volleyball, sports aerobics, and wrestling. To be included in the sample, individuals had to meet all characteristics of the target population, with no restrictions on age or the age at which they ended their career.

The average age of the respondents was 45.6 years. The age distribution exhibited a bimodal pattern, with significant groups formed by individuals in their 30s and 60s. The average time since retiring from a professional sports career was 17.3 years. Regarding current occupations compared to the general Slovak population, our research indicates that former elite athletes often secure more prestigious employment, a trend also confirmed by Conzelmann and Nagel (2003), with a strongly positive distribution strongly positively skewed ($\gamma_1 = 1.43$).

The research sample demonstrated a high level of education. A total of 55.1% of respondents had attained higher education, significantly above the national average in the Slovakia, where in 2022, 26.67% of the population aged 25 to 64 had completed higher education, compared to the EU average of 37.67%. Additionally, 78% of the respondents were part of the state sports training system and 22% had international experience.

The average age of starting a sports career was around 8 years, while the average age of retirement from sport was approximately 30 years. The variation between different sports was evident, particularly in the age of career termination, where the range was 15.15 years, compared to a range in career start age. These differences suggest that career termination is more influenced by sport-specific factors than its initiation. The findings support the conclusions of Wylleman et al. (2004), which highlight the parallel development of athletic and non-athletic aspects of an athlete's life. The most common career start age was 6 years, corresponding to the beginning of compulsory schooling.

The analysis of the findings provided a basis for verifying the established hypothesis. The results were interpreted not only graphically and in tables, but also in verbal form. Due to the scope of the findings and evaluations, the presented study provides a summary of the most significant findings, while individual graphs and tables are not included. During the preparation of this study, artificial intelligence was used to correct linguistic and stylistic errors in the study's terminology.

Results and Discussion

In the first phase of the research, respondents were asked to describe how they coped with the termination of their sports careers. Within this thematic category, the most frequently mentioned concepts (38 out of a total of 43 references) were activities related to maintaining contact with the sports environment, indicating a clear dominance of this coping strategy. The most frequently cited activity (24 responses) was continued participation in sport at a recreational level or engagement in leisure-time physical activities such as running, tennis, recreational squash, volleyball, skiing, or other forms of aerobic exercise. This ongoing involvement in sport was also described as a means of maintaining physical fitness (12 responses), even after the conclusion of a professional athletic career.

Another frequently mentioned subcategory included taking on new roles within the sporting context (13 responses), such as working as a coach, assistant coach, group fitness instructor, sparring partner, or referee. Additional strategies perceived as beneficial during the transition period included stress relief activities - such as attending concerts or clubs - followed by the pursuit of new social connections and engagement in alternative life activities, including MBA studies, professional development, or the establishment of personal training studios.

	Cop ing 1	Cop ing 2	Cop ing 3	Cop ing 4	Cop ing 5	Cop ing 6	Cop ing 7	Cop ing 8	Cop ing 9	Cop ing 10	Cop ing 11
Cop ing 1	1.00	0.65	-	0.12	0.17	0.42	0.22	0.05	0.02	0.12	0.06
Cop ing 2	0.65	1.00	0.03	0.12	0.31	0.55	0.20	0.02	-	0.20	0.16
Cop ing 3	-	0.03	1.00	-	0.13	0.04	-	0.04	0.43	-	0.07
Cop ing 4	0.12	0.12	-	1.00	-	0.05	0.38	0.02	0.04	0.01	0.07
Cop ing 5	0.17	0.31	0.13	-	1.00	0.16	0.22	0.08	0.01	0.31	0.36
Cop ing 6	0.42	0.55	0.04	0.05	0.16	1.00	0.16	0.16	-	0.09	0.10
	0	2	0.05	1	4	2	1	3	3	5	1
	2	0	3	9	5	2	1	9	0.01	1	2
	0.05	3	0	0.04	6	1	0.05	3		0.10	5
	1	9	0.04	0	0.01	9	6	1	9	31	1
	4	5	6	0.01	0	9	2	1	8	7	3
	2	2	1	9	9	0	3	3	0.05	1	1
			2	7	4				8		

Coping 7	0.221	0.201	-0.052	0.386	0.222	0.163	1.000	0.112	-0.089	-0.112	-0.059
Coping 8	0.053	0.029	0.043	0.021	0.081	0.163	0.112	1.000	-0.124	-0.072	0.089
Coping 9	0.023	-0.013	0.431	0.049	0.018	-0.058	-0.089	-0.124	1.000	-0.059	-0.143
Coping 10	0.125	0.201	-0.101	0.011	0.317	0.091	-0.112	-0.072	-0.058	1.000	0.241
Coping 11	0.061	0.162	0.075	0.071	0.363	0.101	-0.059	0.089	-0.143	0.241	1.000

Table 1 Correlation Matrix

(Source: own)

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.61	23.552	23.552	2.34	20.553	20.553	1.702	15.356	15.356
2	1.506	13.597	37.049	0.983	8.563	29.116	1.134	10.235	25.591
3	1.400	12.639	49.688	0.815	7.099	36.215	0.992	8.954	34.454
4	1.206	10.885	60.573	0.652	5.677	41.892	0.838	7.563	42.108
5	1.113	10.040	70.613	0.284	2.477	44.369	0.456	4.113	46.221
6	0.756	6.823	77.436	-	-	-	-	-	-
7	0.668	6.023	83.459	-	-	-	-	-	-
8	0.555	5.008	88.467	-	-	-	-	-	-
9	0.511	4.613	93.082	-	-	-	-	-	-
10	0.451	4.069	97.151	-	-	-	-	-	-
11	0.315	2.846	100.0	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 2. Total Variance Explained

(Source: own)

	Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
Coping 2	,889				
Coping 1	,692				
Coping 6	,621				
Coping 5		,675			
Coping 11		,498			
Coping 10		,483			
Coping 3			,712		
Coping 9			,692		
Coping 7				,632	
Coping 4				,609	
Coping 8					,503

Table 3: Rotated Factor Matrix

(Source: own)

In the second phase of the study, factor analysis was conducted (see Tables 1–3) based on the Kaiser-Guttman criterion, which identified five key factors. These factors had eigenvalues greater than 1, indicating that they explained more variance in the data than would be expected from a single variable. The factor loadings in the rotated matrix revealed the following associations between items and identified factors:

- Factor 1 was most strongly associated with items 1, 2, and 6, which correspond to the coping strategies of denial, self-blame, and disengagement.
- Factor 2 showed a strong correlation with items 5, 10, and 11, which are linked to coping strategies involving substance use, faith, and humour.
- Factor 3 was most closely associated with items 3 and 9, reflecting the self-distraction coping strategy.
- Factor 4 was linked to items 4 and 7, representing planning and seeking instrumental support.
- Factor 5 correlated with item 8, which relates to maintaining contact with the sports environment.

For research purposes, the extent of use of the coping strategy was defined at two levels for each strategy. The median Likert scale score was used as a dividing value.

Based on the distribution of coping strategies, the newly identified coping strategy types were assigned the following names:

- Factor 1 – "Denial" coping strategy
- Factor 2 – "Escape" coping strategy

- Factor 3 – "Self-distraction" coping strategy
- Factor 4 – "Proactive" coping strategy
- Factor 5 – "Sport-related" coping strategy

Analysis of Perceived Well-being Quality After the Termination of an Elite Sports Career in Relation to Selected Coping Strategies

The analysis of the data revealed that the use of the denial coping strategy acted as a clear barrier to a successful transition from elite sport to post-sport life. Respondents who relied more frequently on this strategy reported considerably greater difficulties across all domains of post-sport adjustment and consistently lower levels of perceived well-being compared to those who used this strategy less often. Coping activities falling under this category included:

- Denial of the reality of career termination,
- Self-blame,
- Disengagement or withdrawal from coping efforts.

The most pronounced negative impact of this strategy was observed in the social domain, where the difference between groups (expressed in z-scores) reached 0.69 z-points, followed by the psychosocial domain (0.71 z-points). Substantial differences were also found in perceived life satisfaction (0.56 z-points), the occupational/educational domain (0.51 z-points), and the health domain (0.41 z-points). These findings consistently suggest that the denial strategy is maladaptive and should be discouraged in support programs aimed at athletes in transition.

Similarly, the escape coping strategy - particularly substance use and humour—was also associated with suboptimal adaptation to post-sport life. Respondents who more frequently engaged in this strategy reported greater challenges especially in the social and occupational/educational domains, and a lower overall sense of well-being. Although slight positive effects were observed in the psychosocial and health domains, the magnitude of these differences was negligible. The most significant negative impact was recorded in the social domain (0.52 z-points), followed by lower ratings of life satisfaction (0.19 z-points) and difficulties in the occupational/educational domain (0.18 z-points). The psychosocial (0.05 z-points) and health (0.04 z-points) domains showed minimal positive outcomes. Overall, similar to denial, the escape strategy appears inadequate for supporting well-being following athletic retirement.

In contrast, the self-distraction coping strategy emerged as a clear facilitator of positive adjustment and enhanced post-sport well-being. Respondents who frequently reported "engaging in activities previously limited during their sports careers (e.g., entertainment, culture, time with friends)" and "shifting their focus to other life domains" demonstrated fewer issues across all areas assessed. The most pronounced benefits of this strategy were found in:

- The psychosocial domain (0.41 z-points),
- Overall perceived well-being (0.39 z-points),
- The occupational/educational domain (0.37 z-points).

Less prominent, but still positive effects were recorded in the social (0.07 z-points) and health domains (0.03 z-points). These findings indicate that encouraging athletes to broaden their life

focus beyond sport can effectively support smoother psychosocial and professional reintegration.

Unexpectedly, the proactive coping strategy, which included planning for the future and seeking information or advice from experienced individuals (e.g., former athletes, experts), was associated with greater difficulties during the transition. Respondents who made more use of this strategy reported lower well-being in the psychosocial, social, and occupational/educational domains, as well as overall lower life satisfaction. The most notable negative effects were found in:

- The social domain (0.42 z-points),
- The occupational/educational domain (0.39 z-points),
- The psychosocial domain (0.28 z-points),
- Life satisfaction (0.18 z-points).

Interestingly, the only domain where this strategy yielded a positive outcome was health, with a difference of 0.28 z-points. These mixed results suggest that while proactive efforts may support certain health-related behaviours, they do not necessarily translate into a broader sense of well-being, potentially due to heightened expectations, pressure, or unfulfilled outcomes.

The sport-related coping strategy, represented by statements such as “I tried to continue exercising, training, and staying in contact with sports,” proved to be a valuable resource in several areas of post-sport life. Notable positive effects were observed in the:

- Occupational/educational domain (0.29 z-points),
- Perceived life satisfaction (0.28 z-points),
- And to a small extent, the social domain (0.03 z-points).

On the other hand, this strategy showed slightly negative associations in the health domain, though the differences were marginal, and almost no effect was observed in the psychosocial domain (0.01 z-points). Overall, maintaining a connection to sport—whether through physical activity or engagement with the sporting community—appears to support a positive sense of continuity and identity, making this strategy a generally beneficial element of the transition process.

Despite these observed tendencies, it is important to note that the use of individual coping strategies did not produce statistically significant effects across all areas of post-sport life when examined in isolation. That is, while certain strategies—especially when combined - contributed to variability within domains such as social well-being, no single strategy or combination demonstrated a large effect size. Among the observed strategies, denial had the most consistent and negative impact across multiple domains, highlighting it as a particular risk factor during the transition process. From a practical standpoint, special attention should be paid to the identification and mitigation of denial-related behaviours in retiring athletes, as these significantly hinder the attainment of post-career well-being.

Discussion

The results of our study provide clear and compelling evidence in support of hypothesis H1: the extent and type of coping strategies employed by former elite athletes during the transition from

sport significantly influence the perceived quality of well-being across psychosocial, social, occupational/educational, health, and life satisfaction domains. Among the various strategies analysed, the most effective for achieving positive well-being were the sport-related coping strategy and the self-distraction strategy. These were positively correlated with enhanced adjustment and well-being in post-sport life, reinforcing findings from previous literature (Torregrosa et al., 2015; Penedo and Dahn, 2005; Wylleman et al., 2013).

The sport-related strategy - continuing to engage with the sporting environment through recreational participation or new roles such as coaching - proved particularly beneficial in sustaining occupational/educational engagement and life satisfaction. Similarly, the self-distraction strategy - where athletes refocused on new activities and relationships - was associated with improvements across all well-being domains. These strategies provided psychological continuity, reduced perceived loss of identity, and created new meaning structures after retirement.

In contrast, denial, self-blame, and disengagement strategies significantly hindered successful adaptation. Respondents who employed these maladaptive strategies reported greater difficulties across nearly all domains of life and lower overall well-being. This mirrors findings by Lavalley et al. (2014), Diener et al. (2017), and Knights et al. (2016), who emphasise the adverse effects of avoidance-based strategies during career transitions. Similarly, the escape strategy—including substance use and reliance on humour - was associated with negative impacts in the social and occupational domains, even though minimal support was observed in psychosocial and health aspects.

A particularly noteworthy and somewhat counterintuitive result emerged in relation to the proactive coping strategy. Though typically considered adaptive, in our study it correlated with increased levels of anxiety and lower well-being. Athletes who engaged in structured planning and information-seeking reported more stress during the transition. This contradicts findings from Park et al. (2013) and Cecić Erpič et al. (2004), which suggest that planning facilitates adjustment. However, our findings are in line with Ryff (2014) and Stambulova et al. (2025), who caution against excessive future-orientation, suggesting that overemphasis on planning may amplify uncertainty and perceived lack of control.

Furthermore, our study confirms the vital role of social support in sustaining psychological well-being, echoing the conclusions of Seligman (2011), Walton et al. (2020), and Schinke et al. (2018). Athletes who preserved strong interpersonal connections reported smoother transitions, while isolation and social withdrawal were linked to reduced well-being. While the explicit role of professional psychological services was not measured, the qualitative findings suggest that respondents with access to such support managed their transitions more effectively. These observations are consistent with recommendations by Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) and Cecić Erpič et al. (2004).

Importantly, our research advances existing literature by treating coping strategies as independent variables and well-being as the dependent outcome—a perspective rarely adopted in prior studies. Although Stambulova (2000) and Alfermann et al. (2004) explore coping, they typically analyse it as an outcome influenced by demographic or planning variables. Our approach thus fills a crucial gap, offering novel insights into the directional influence of coping on long-term well-being.

This contribution is particularly significant within the Czech research context, complementing earlier findings by Kadlčík (2008), Kadlčík and Flemr (2008), Jech (2023), Krupařová (2021), and Hanuliaková et al. (2024), while introducing new understanding of the nuanced and sometimes ambivalent effects of strategies typically labelled as adaptive.

Research Limits

Several limitations must be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the retrospective nature of the study may have introduced recall bias, as the average time since retirement was nearly 18 years. Respondents may have selectively remembered or unintentionally altered details of their transition experiences, affecting the reliability of their responses.

Second, although the sample size (N=200) is robust compared to similar studies, uneven representation across subgroups (e.g., sport type, gender, education) could have affected statistical reliability in subgroup analyses. Consequently, some results, particularly those involving specific coping strategies or domains, should be interpreted with caution.

Third, the subjectivity of coping strategy interpretation could have influenced results. Despite using validated tools, respondents may have interpreted items based on personal experiences, leading to varied understanding of similar concepts.

Fourth, the sampling method - based on availability and voluntary participation - limits the generalizability of findings. Due to the absence of a national database of former elite athletes, random sampling was not feasible. The resulting sample may therefore reflect specific characteristics not representative of the broader population.

Finally, while the study successfully identifies relationships between coping strategies and well-being, it does not establish causal relationships. Further research using experimental or longitudinal designs is necessary to clarify causality.

Future Research Directions

This study offers several promising avenues for future investigation. First, the ambivalent role of proactive strategies merits deeper exploration. While commonly viewed as beneficial, planning and information-seeking were associated with reduced well-being in this study. Future research should investigate moderators of this effect - such as personality traits, resilience, or the perceived controllability of the transition.

Second, longitudinal studies are needed to address limitations associated with retrospective recall. Real-time tracking of athletes during their career transition would offer dynamic insights into the evolving effectiveness of coping strategies and the trajectory of well-being.

Third, future work should expand to include cross-cultural comparisons, exploring how national contexts, social expectations, and support systems influence coping and adaptation. This would help determine the generalisability of our findings beyond the Slovak context.

Fourth, while sport-related and self-distraction strategies emerged as beneficial, further research is needed to examine their long-term sustainability. For instance, does ongoing recreational sport participation continue to enhance well-being, or do benefits diminish over time? Similarly, can excessive distraction delay necessary adaptation?

Fifth, targeted studies on the role of professional psychological support are warranted. This study only indirectly observed the potential benefits of therapy and counselling. Future research should

assess the efficacy of specific interventions and determine the optimal type and timing of support.

Sixth, expanding the diversity of samples - including athletes from different sports, genders, career lengths, and retirement reasons (e.g., injury) - could provide a more comprehensive picture. In particular, the inclusion of para-athletes or those forced into early retirement would broaden the understanding of adaptation challenges.

Finally, future research should focus on developing evidence-based frameworks for career transition support, tailored to the individual needs of athletes. These should be rooted in empirical data and tested across diverse athletic populations to ensure efficacy.

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide valuable contributions to understanding the role of coping strategies in post-career adaptation among elite athletes. The results confirm the working hypothesis and contribute to both theory and practice by identifying which strategies foster well-being and which present barriers. Despite the study's limitations, the insights gained represent a meaningful step forward and form a solid basis for future inquiry and practical interventions aimed at supporting athletes during one of the most critical transitions in their lives.

The results of this Slovak study correlate closely with the findings of research conducted within the same EEIG project in the Czech Republic. Both analyses, based on samples of former elite athletes from Slovakia and the Czech Republic, revealed similar patterns in the use of coping strategies and their impact on perceived post-sport life well-being. In particular, maintaining contact with the sporting environment and self-distraction strategies were identified as the most effective for achieving a positive subjective sense of well-being in both national contexts. Conversely, denial, avoidance, and excessive planning strategies were consistently associated with lower levels of adjustment and well-being.

This alignment can be professionally justified by the historically and culturally shared background of the two countries, which operated under a unified sports system until 1993. Both nations retain comparable structures in athlete development, coaching philosophies, and approaches to high-performance sport. The Czech and Slovak sporting communities also share similar value systems, mental frameworks, and expectations concerning both athletic careers and their termination. Furthermore, the level of institutional support and access to psychological services is similarly developed in both countries.

From a psychological perspective, it is reasonable to assume that athletes from geographically and culturally proximate regions tend to share similar identities, value orientations, and stress-coping mechanisms (Ryff, 2014; Stambulova et al., 2025). These factors strengthen the comparability and transferability of conclusions drawn from the two national contexts, supporting the view that the Slovak and Czech populations of former elite athletes constitute a regionally and mentally cohesive group for the purposes of this research.

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