



Athletic Identity and Youth Sports Resource Page

»»» What is athletic identity?

As a part of normal development, student athletes will see themselves through many different lenses or identities. One identity that can arise through sports participation is an athletic identity. Athletic identity (AI) is defined as “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role”.¹ It is pertinent to recognize that AI can develop in youth athletes in a variety of different ways.

The first way involves individuals becoming more involved in and committed to a particular sport, thus leading them to take on a higher AI during their playing careers and in turn leading them to develop a self-concept that does not extend beyond their athlete role.² Additionally, athletes may not explore alternate self-roles that are available, and the athlete may develop a constricted identity that can limit changes and adaptations to life challenges, potentially contributing to mental and social distress in retirement.³ Typically, once AI has developed, it is only discussed from a perspective of having a high AI.

Does my child have a high AI?

Athletes with high AI tend to see themselves as athletes, have many goals related to sports, have friends who are majority athletes, make sports the most important part of their life, spend more time thinking about sports than anything else, feel bad about themselves if they do poorly in sport and would be depressed if they were injured and could not compete in sport.⁴ This is not true for individuals who have low AI. Those with low AI tend to utilize and align with other identities beyond athletics, such as scholastic achievement, familial identity and religious identity.

The effects of high AI in athletics

While athletes with high AI may have this limited self-concept, AI also has many positive effects on youth athletes. When specifically looking at positives related to athletics, there are positive links to athletic performance and psychological benefits such as enhanced social interactions, more positive athletic experiences and increased motivation for positive performance in those with higher AI.^{1,5} Furthermore, having this higher AI can result in an endorsement of athletic goals with a stronger link to task orientation (feeling successful when they apply effort and learn something new).⁶

On the other hand, AI also has negative effects on youth athletes. In athletics, youth with high AI may have a mentality to “win at all costs.” This win-at-all-costs mindset of sports can have negative consequences that extend beyond compromised moral reasoning. If winning in sports is so vitally important to these athletes, it may pressure them to dedicate their time, energy, focus and even their very identity to being an athlete.⁷ Additionally, winning at all costs may lead these athletes to neglect

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their injuries and continue to play through pain, which can result in higher risk acceptance.⁸

The effects of AI in academics

Further, these negative effects can extend into the academic domain. Athletes with high AI might prioritize identification with the athletic domain over identification with the academic domain.⁹ This high AI can also lead to low academic achievement motivation. Low academic achievement motivation tends to appear as striving for grades just to maintain eligibility for sport, but not pushing beyond that.⁶

The transition out of sport

»» What does the transition from sport look like in athletes with high AI?

Aside from the positive and negative effects of AI on the athlete, it is important to recognize that athletes with high AI experience a number of negatives regarding their transition out of sport. These athletes may find it difficult to adapt during the transition away from sport. Transition periods may occur in many forms and may affect youth athletes in different ways. Transition periods in sports are events or nonevents “that result in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles”.¹⁰ Examples of transitions out of sports are after having to stop playing sports due to injury (medical disqualification, forced removal and/or involuntary retirement), leaving one athletic level and not continuing to the next (e.g., leaving high school and not playing in college) or natural retirement. The most commonly researched or discussed type of transition from sport is retirement from professional sports.

»» Involuntary retirement.

Athletes that are medically disqualified or experience some type of involuntary forced removal from athletics experience the transition differently than those who voluntarily retire. These involuntary retirements can be associated with adverse long-term mental health outcomes. Athletes forced to retire are more likely to report symptoms of distress, depression, sleep disturbances, adverse nutritional behavior, and have worse quality of life and lower life satisfaction compared with athletes retiring on their own



volition. These athletes may report a sense of loss, unfinished business, physical complications of injury impairing exercise and lifestyle, and social displacement.¹¹ Additionally, involuntary retirement is likely difficult because of the sudden change in AI, which encompasses loss of personal and public identity and social support networks, resulting in feelings of worthlessness, depression, anxiety, hostility, anger and maladaptive coping strategies such as substance abuse.¹¹

Athletes who are leaving high school and not playing in college fall in a transition that can be either involuntary (i.e., not making a team or getting into a school that doesn't offer the athlete's particular sport) or voluntary. Those who experience the involuntary transition out of sports following high school tend to experience similar characteristics as those medically disqualified or forcefully removed. On the contrary, an athlete that follows a natural course to retirement and chooses for themselves to not play in college may have a gradual decline in participation and reduced access to social networks.¹¹ This inherently makes the transition out of sport easier on the athlete.

»» Voluntary retirement.

When looking closely at this voluntary retirement from sports, there are still many factors associated with distressful reaction to athletic retirement that are similar to those associated with other types of loss that have been investigated outside of sport.² Individuals with a high AI at the time of retirement tend to experience a higher degree of emotional adjustment difficulties.²

»»» What leaving sport may look like for your athlete with high AI

When looking at these transition periods, there are a number of positive results from transition periods in sports. Transition from sport can be an opportunity to identify skills gained from sports that are applicable and useful throughout the athlete's life. Specifically, retirement is an opportunity to frame career goals, skills and interests as well as establish new structured routines, goals for continued physical fitness and personal resilience to change.¹¹

On the contrary, there are also a number of negative outcomes from transition periods in sports. Athletes going through the transition process, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, tend to experience some grief from the loss of sports. It has been recognized that unexpected loss can be met with a grief-like response to the transition out of sports.¹² Grieving the loss of sports during the transition away from a high school sports environment is typically represented in athletes with high AI. The feelings that athletes experience include but are not limited to feelings of loss, sadness and anxiety.¹² Further, when athletes are grieving the loss of sports, it may manifest through the five stages of grief.¹³ Youth athletes with high AI may experience these stages as they discontinue sport by any mechanism: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. This grief manifests as experiencing feelings of loss, sadness and anxiety; lack of motivation; and loss of interest in activities at the end of their sports careers, and athletes may be unprepared to deal with those symptoms. Their assumptive world had changed, and they experience difficulty constructing a new identity.¹²

»»» What resources are available to athletes with high AI leaving sport?

If your child experiences these difficulties after leaving sport, there are support resources available to aid in the transition and decrease the negative outcomes associated with grief, loss or change. Discussions are one of the easiest support strategies to prepare for the change out of sport before the transition begins. These discussions should include developing future goals; expectation of new work, school and life schedules; and evaluating skills that transfer to areas outside of sport. Further, the athlete should be encouraged to discuss the feelings associated with their retirement from sport.¹⁴ It is important that during this time, discussion is aimed at enhancing the athlete's perceptions of who they can become outside of sport and can contribute to more robust career-transition outcomes.³ Further, the transition out of sport is one area where athletes can benefit from the assistance of a sports psychologist or other mental health professionals.¹²

Additional support and resources include counselors and sport psychologists, who can help with this preparation by holding these discussions about career-related topics with student athletes regularly, as well as addressing emotional and social changes that are likely to occur. These professionals can also address sports teams during a team meeting and can make student athletes aware of their services and the opportunities available to them. Mental health professionals such as psychologists and psychiatrists can also provide individualized support to youth athletes focusing on resources to cope with transition and grief after leaving sport.

Another tool readily available to these athletes is their school counselors.¹⁵ Research suggests that educational counseling positively affects changes in the AI of adolescents by examining the importance of physical activity, and possible incentives to undertake physical activity increased among adolescents facing problems staying connected with physical activity.

Athletic identity (AI) is defined as “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role”.

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Tamerah Hunt, Ph.D., LAT, ATC, FACSM, Kylie Roberts, BA, LAT, ATC, Kiersten Kuhlman, BS, LAT, ATC, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA. Developed in collaboration with the ACSM Strategic Health Initiative on Youth Sports & Health