# RE-LIFE: an educational perspective on reconstructing life after sport through the experience of former footballers

*RE-LIFE: una perspectiva educativa de reconstrucción vital después del deporte desde la experiencia de exfutbolistas*


## Authors

Jose Cela-Ranilla[1]

[1] University of Valladolid (Spain)

Corresponding author:
Jose Cela Ranilla
Josemaria.cela@uva.es



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## Abstract

Introduction: retirement from elite sport was identified as a critical phase in an athlete's life, during which identity, emotional balance and life project were profoundly challenged.
Objective: the study aimed to present the RE-LIFE (Reconstruction of Life after Sport) framework as a conceptual lens that built upon established psychological models of career transition and extended them into an educational framework of response, addressing three underaddressed aspects: the educational processes of competency reconstruction, the sustained temporality of adaptation, and narrative identity in biographical continuity.
Methodology: a qualitative interpretive approach was adopted, combining theoretical synthesis with the analysis of five in-depth interviews with former professional Spanish footballers; data were analysed through an abductive approach combining reflexive thematic analysis with narrative interpretation.
Results: findings were organised around six conceptual dimensions, self-awareness and self-regulation, training development and competence transfer, identity reconstruction, support ecosystem, comprehensive well-being, and social projection, and indicated that retirement involved not only psychological adjustment but also sustained educational processes of learning, identity renewal and social contribution; five emerging categories, delayed grief, meaningful mentoring, self-directed learning, renewed enthusiasm for life, and pedagogical transfer, enriched the original conceptual architecture.
Discussion: the RE-LIFE framework was discussed as an integrative educational lens that complemented existing psychological approaches to career transition by foregrounding how athletes learn, adapt and grow through the transition experience.
Conclusions: RE-LIFE provides a conceptual basis for facing themes such as the design of sport entities' organization, coaches education, dual career programmes, or athlete welfare policies.



## Keywords

Career transitions; identity reconstruction; lifelong learning; post-career adaptation; sport retirement.



## Resumen

Introducción: la retirada del deporte de élite es una fase crítica en la vida de la persona deportista, que afecta elementos como la identidad, el equilibrio emocional y el proyecto vital.
Objetivo: el estudio tuvo como objetivo presentar el marco RE-LIFE (Reconstruction of Life after Sport) como una lente conceptual que, apoyada en modelos psicológicos sobre la transición de carrera, se extiende hacia una orientación educativa, abordando aspectos como la adquisición de competencias o la identidad narrativa.
Metodología: se adoptó un enfoque interpretativo cualitativo, que combinó síntesis teórica con análisis de entrevistas en profundidad a exfutbolistas profesionales españoles; los datos se analizaron mediante un enfoque abductivo combinando análisis temático reflexivo con interpretación narrativa.
Resultados: los hallazgos se organizaron en seis dimensiones: autoconciencia y autorregulación, desarrollo formativo y transferencia de competencias, reconstrucción identitaria, ecosistema de apoyo, bienestar integral y proyección social, e indicaron que la retirada también implica procesos educativos sostenidos de aprendizaje, renovación identitaria y contribución social; cinco categorías emergentes, duelo diferido, mentoría significativa, aprendizaje autodirigido, renovado entusiasmo vital y transferencia pedagógica, enriquecieron la arquitectura conceptual original.
Discusión: RE-LIFE se discutió como una visión educativa integradora complementando los enfoques psicológicos existentes sobre transición de carrera, priorizando cómo las personas deportistas aprenden, se adaptan y crecen durante la experiencia de transición.
Conclusiones: RE-LIFE proporciona una base conceptual para abordar temas tales como la organización de las entidades deportivas, la formación de entrenadores, los programas de doble carrera y las políticas de bienestar del deportista.



## Palabras clave

Adaptación post-deportiva; aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida; reconstrucción de la identidad; retirada deportiva; transiciones de carrera.

## Introduction

Retirement from high-level sport is one of the most complex transitions in an athlete's life cycle. Far from representing only the end of a professional career, this process involves redefining one's life project, personal identity, and the network of meanings that have sustained the athlete's career for years (Park et al., 2013). Research in this field consistently shows that leaving elite sport generates a period of psychological and social vulnerability associated with the loss of status, temporal structure, and community (Kuettel et al., 2017; Stambulova, 2017; Stambulova et al., 2007; Torregrosa et al., 2004; Garcia-Naveira et al., 2025). Yet beyond the psychological dimensions of this process, retiring athletes face challenges that extend into education, professional reorientation, competence transfer, and long-term social reintegration -dimensions that require sustained accompaniment over time rather than crisis-focused intervention alone.

Several conceptual frameworks have made significant contributions to understanding athletes' career transitions. Taylor & Ogilvie (1994) proposed a model identifying five sequential stages of adaptation to retirement, offering an early systematic account of the psychological processes involved. Stambulova's (2003) Athletic Career Transition Model emphasised the dynamic interplay between transition demands, coping resources, barriers, and outcomes, distinguishing between successful and crisis transitions. More recently, ecological and developmental perspectives have broadened this understanding. The Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE; Henriksen et al., 2010) and the Dual Career Development Environment (DCDE; Henriksen et al., 2020) frameworks illustrate how holistic approaches can be applied to athlete development contexts, while Wylleman (2019) has advocated understanding retirement as an evolutionary transition within the athlete's lifelong development. Collectively, these models provide essential insight into the psychological and contextual processes of career transition.

However, these frameworks tend to focus on the psychological dimension of adjustment and on risk or protective factors operating during or immediately after the transition. Three aspects of post-career adaptation remain comparatively underaddressed. First, the educational processes through which athletes develop, transfer, and reconstruct competencies acquired in sport for use in new professional and personal contexts (Gould & Carson, 2008; Pierce et al., 2017). Second, the sustained temporality of the transition -the fact that adaptation unfolds not as a discrete event but as a prolonged learning process extending years beyond retirement (Ronkainen et al., 2021). Third, the role of narrative identity in enabling athletes to integrate their sporting past into a coherent biographical trajectory that supports ongoing development (Douglas & Carless, 2015; McAdams, 2001). These aspects are not absent from the literature, but they have not been systematically integrated into a single conceptual lens.

This need motivates the development of the RE-LIFE (Reconstruction of Life after Sport) framework. RE-LIFE is proposed as a conceptual lens that builds upon established psychological models of career transition and extends them into an educational framework of response -one that addresses the temporal, relational, and competential dimensions of post-career adaptation. The framework does not aim to replace existing approaches but to complement them by making explicit the educational processes through which athletes navigate and learn from the transition experience. This paper serves a dual purpose: first, to develop and theoretically ground the RE-LIFE framework, placing it within the contemporary debate on retirement from sport and human development; and second, to explore and illustrate the framework through the narrative analysis of five former elite Spanish footballers, whose experiences allow the examination, contrast, and enrichment of the theoretical dimensions proposed.

The preceding review identified three aspects of post-career adaptation that remain underaddressed by existing models: the process of meaning transformation, the contextual systems that enable or constrain adaptation, and the narrative reconstruction of identity. Each of these aspects informed the selection of one of the three theoretical foundations of the RE-LIFE framework.

### *Theoretical Foundations of the RE-LIFE Framework*

The RE-LIFE framework is based on three interdependent theoretical foundations that allow the sporting transition to be reinterpreted as an educational, ecological, and narrative process. Other relevant perspectives (self-determination theory, identity theory, or grief models) address important aspects of the transition but operate primarily within a psychological explanatory logic. The three

foundations selected were chosen because they provide the basis for an educational framework of response: transformative learning addresses how individuals change, the bioecological approach addresses where and with whom change occurs, and the narrative perspective addresses how change is given meaning.

- Transformative learning. Based on Mezirow (1991) and Cranton (1994), this approach conceives of the athlete's vital change as a process of transforming their personal frame of reference. Through critical reflection and dialogue with themselves and their environment, individuals reconstruct the meaning of their experience and redefine their identity beyond performance. This principle positions athletes as active agents of their own learning and life transition. Within RE-LIFE, transformative learning addresses the process of change -how individuals revise their frames of reference through disorienting experiences and critical reflection -and is reflected in the dimension of self-awareness and self-regulation(D1) and the dimension of competence transfer(D2).

- Bioecological approach to development. Inspired by Bronfenbrenner (1979), this approach recognises that the athlete's development emerges from the dynamic interaction between person, context, and time. The post-sport transition does not depend solely on individual characteristics, but also on the systems surrounding the athlete-family, sporting institution, educational institution, or community-which can function as support networks or sources of tension. Within RE-LIFE, the bioecological approach situates the transition within nested systems of support, shaping dimensions of support ecosystem(D4) and social projection(D6).

- Narrative identity. In line with McAdams (2001) and Carless & Douglas (2013), narrative is understood here as a methodological and conceptual resource for identity reconstruction and biographical continuity. Through storytelling, athletes reorganise their experience and give meaning to moments of transition, integrating achievements, losses, and lessons learned into a coherent story. While both transformative learning and narrative involve reflexive processes, they operate at different levels: transformative learning explains the mechanism of change; narrative identity explains how that change is integrated into a life story. Within RE-LIFE, the narrative perspective informs the dimensions of identity reconstruction(D3) and well-being through biographical continuity(D5).

The three foundations thus operate at complementary levels within RE-LIFE. Transformative learning provides the process through which athletes reconstruct their understanding of self and purpose. The bioecological approach situates this process within nested systems of support that enable or constrain adaptation. The narrative identity provides the integrative mechanism through which transformation and context are woven into a coherent identity. Together, they offer a framework that is educational in scope -addressing how athletes learn, adapt, and grow -while building upon the psychological understanding of what athletes experience during the transition.

### *Structure and Levels of the RE-LIFE Framework*

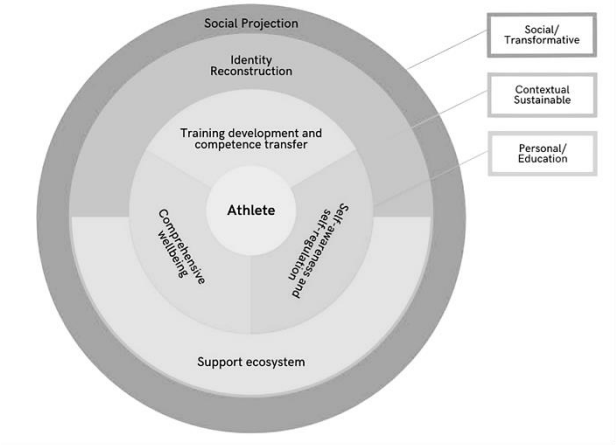
Based on these three foundations, the RE-LIFE framework articulates the sporting transition on three levels of analysis, generating a conceptual structure of continuous development that combines personal growth, relational balance, and social commitment. The personal-educational level focuses on self-knowledge, emotional self-regulation, and reflective learning, promoting the development of transferable competences and the acquisition of resources for personal well-being. The contextual-sustainable level integrates the role of family, sporting entities, and educational institutions as supporting agents, conceiving sustainability as the ability to generate supportive ecosystems that promote balanced and lasting change. The social-transformative level addresses the athlete's potential contribution to society, including mentoring, training, leadership, and social commitment actions through which the athlete transforms their experience into contribution and legacy.

### *The Six Conceptual Dimensions of the RE-LIFE Framework*

The framework is organised around six interdependent conceptual dimensions (see Figure 1), which act as analytical categories for interpreting the life transition process. Dimension 1 (Self-awareness and self-regulation) addresses athletes' capacity to recognise and manage their own process of change. Dimension 2 (Training development and competence transfer) encompasses academic training parallel to the career and the transfer of skills acquired in sport to professional life. Dimension 3 (Identity reconstruction) focuses on redefining the self after the end of the sporting stage. Dimension 4 (Support

ecosystem) highlights the importance of the relational and organisational environment. Dimension 5 (Comprehensive well-being) addresses the physical and emotional dimensions of personal balance. Dimension 6 (Social projection) represents the most external and transformative dimension, encompassing the symbolic legacy and professional projection beyond sport.

Figure 1. RE-LIFE conceptual dimensions and their levels of analysis.



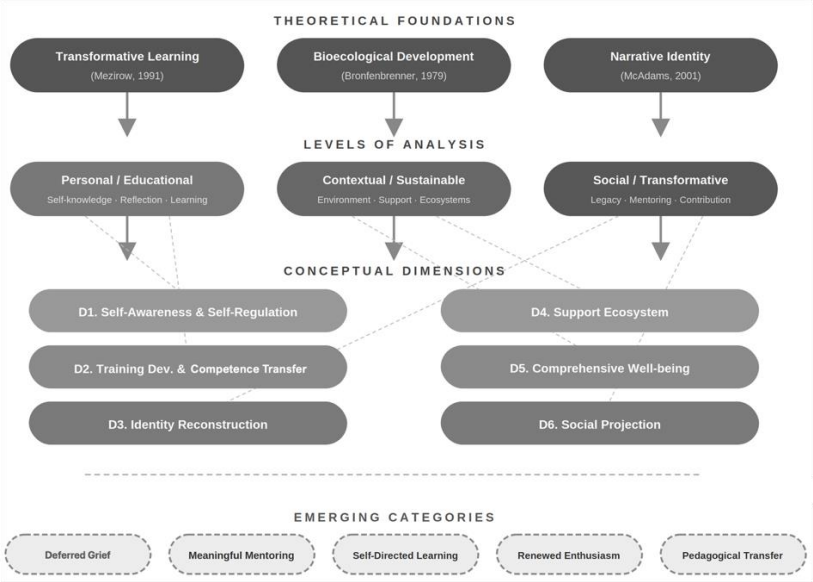

Each dimension is grounded in existing empirical evidence. Dimension 1 draws on evidence that emotional management capacity is a key predictor of transition quality (Kuettel et al., 2017; Stambulova, 2017). Dimension 2 is supported by research on dual career engagement and life skills transfer (Agnew et al., 2019; Pierce et al., 2017; Checa et al., 2025). Dimension 3 reflects findings on the centrality of identity continuity (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Ronkainen et al., 2021). Dimension 4 is consistent with ecological evidence on support systems (Henriksen et al., 2020; Mossman et al., 2021). Dimension 5 aligns with literature on consequences of career termination (Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2007). Dimension 6 resonates with research on mentoring and social contribution (Young et al., 2024).

The six dimensions are analytically distinct -each captures a different facet of the transition process - but they are interdependent in practice: self-awareness (D1) enables competence transfer (D2), which in turn supports identity reconstruction (D3); the support ecosystem (D4) facilitates comprehensive well-being (D5), which provides the stability from which social projection (D6) becomes possible. This interdependence reflects the ecological premise that development occurs through dynamic interaction between person, context, and time.

From a pedagogical standpoint, these dimensions can be read as interconnected areas of learning and educational practice. Dimensions 1 and 2 relate to the personal-educational processes through which athletes develop and transfer competencies. Dimensions 3 and 5 concern the identity and well-being outcomes of these educational processes. Dimensions 4 and 6 address the relational and societal contexts that enable or constrain learning-what might be termed the 'pedagogical environment' of the transition. This reading aligns RE-LIFE with a broad conception of pedagogy as encompassing knowledge, learners, and the educational contexts in which they develop (Kirk, 2010).

The RE-LIFE framework offers an integrative and educational vision of the sporting transition, building upon approaches focused on psychological adaptation and extending them into the domains of learning, competence development, and sustained social contribution. Its multi-layered structure and tripartite theoretical foundation allow retirement to be understood not as a loss, but as an opportunity for growth and vital learning (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. RE-LIFE framework: theoretical architecture and emerging categories.




## Method

This study is positioned within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which assumes that knowledge is co-constructed through the interaction between participants' lived experiences, the researcher's interpretive lens, and the theoretical frameworks brought to the inquiry. Constructivist epistemology informed the study at three levels: in the research design, through the use of open-ended narrative interviews that invited participants to construct meaning around their transition experience; in the analysis, through an interpretive process that prioritised participants' sense-making rather than objective categorisation; and in the relationship to prior theory, by treating the RE-LIFE dimensions not as fixed hypotheses but as provisional, revisable constructs shaped by the dialogue between framework and data. The design adopted an abductive logic (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), in which theory and empirical evidence informed each other iteratively. Abductive logic was preferred over grounded theory because the study did not seek to bracket prior disciplinary knowledge, as grounded theory requires, but rather to begin from existing theoretical understanding and remain open to its modification through empirical engagement (Thorne, 2016). Specifically, the six conceptual dimensions of RE-LIFE were initially derived from existing theoretical literature and subsequently refined through engagement with the empirical data. This iterative process involved returning to the theoretical framework after each round of analysis, adjusting the conceptual dimensions where participant narratives revealed tensions, extensions, or nuances not anticipated by the initial formulation.

The overall approach can be characterised as qualitative interpretive description (Thorne, 2016), which provides a methodological home for studies that seek to generate an interpretive account of a phenomenon grounded in existing disciplinary knowledge while remaining open to new insights from participants' experiences. Interpretive description acknowledges the researcher's disciplinary perspective as a legitimate starting point, distinguishing it from grounded theory's emphasis on emergence from data alone and from phenomenology's focus on the essence of lived experience. In this context, the abductive element did not reside in a single 'surprising' observation but in the cumulative process through which empirical engagement revealed dimensions of the transition that the initial theoretical synthesis had not anticipated -including deferred grief, self-directed learning, and pedagogical transfer -prompting iterative revision of the framework.

The six conceptual dimensions of RE-LIFE served as sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954)-that is, as orienting categories that guided but did not constrain the analysis; the analysis sought to identify coincidences, tensions, and extensions of the theoretical framework based on the participants' discourse. This approach is distinct from deductive hypothesis testing: the dimensions provided an initial analytical orientation, but codes were generated inductively from the data, and the framework was revised where the data warranted it.

The principal researcher has extensive experience in the field of sport and education, having worked as educator in sport environments for over a decade. This dual background in sport and pedagogy provided situated understanding of the cultural norms, relational dynamics, and institutional pressures that characterise elite sport environments, facilitating rapport with participants and sensitivity to the nuances of their narratives. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research process to document interpretive decisions and potential biases.

## *Participants*

Five former Spanish professional footballers, aged between 40 and 45, participated in the study (see Table 1). Purposive sampling was used, based on the following inclusion criteria: having had a long professional career in high-level football (at least ten years of dedication), having retired between five and ten years prior to the interview, and maintaining stable post-sport activity in work or training environments. Participants were identified through the researcher's professional network in Spanish football and contacted directly. Of eight individuals initially approached, five agreed to participate and met all inclusion criteria.

Table 1. General characteristics of the participants.

| Code | Sport / competitive level | Retirement age | Main reason for retirement | Current professional situation | Sports career (years) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| E1 | Professional Football | 37 | End of cycle / burnout | Coaching staff | 18 |
| E2 | Professional Football | 38 | End of cycle / burnout | Professional coach | 20 |
| E3 | Professional Football | 32 | Loss of motivation / physical decline | Own sport business | 12 |
| E4 | Professional Football | 33 | End of cycle | Doctor at professional sports club | 13 |
| E5 | Professional Football | 32 | Knee injury | Own family business | 14 |

The criterion of ten or more years of professional experience was established to ensure that participants had developed a consolidated athletic identity-a factor consistently identified in the literature as central to the quality and complexity of the retirement experience (Park et al., 2013). The five-to-ten-year post-retirement window was selected to allow sufficient temporal distance for reflective narrative construction, consistent with the principles of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), while remaining close enough to the experience to enable detailed recall. The requirement of stable post-sport professional activity was included not to select 'successful' transitions but to access participants who had achieved sufficient distance and reflexive capacity to produce rich retrospective narratives about the full arc of their transition experience. A narrative research design depends on participants' ability to construct and reflect upon their biographical trajectory; individuals still navigating acute crisis may not yet have the temporal perspective needed for this form of account (Riessman, 2008). This criterion is acknowledged as a limitation that introduces a positive bias towards more resolved transitions, discussed further later in the Discussion. After their retirement, the interviewees had been involved in various activities related to sport, in the fields of education, training, management, or entrepreneurship. The names of the participants were replaced by codes (E1–E5) to preserve confidentiality.

Data collection took place in 2020, prior to the routine institutionalisation of formal research ethics committees for qualitative studies of this kind in Spain. Informed consent was obtained from all five participants prior to the interviews, and confidentiality was preserved throughout the study through participant coding (E1–E5) and the removal of any identifying information from the transcripts and analysis.

The sample size of five participants reflects the stringent purposive criteria applied within a bounded population (former Spanish professional footballers meeting all three inclusion criteria) and is consistent with the study's positioning within interpretive description, where the goal is not statistical representativeness but analytical depth and richness of account (Thorne, 2016).

### *Instrument*

The instrument used to collect information was a semi-structured narrative interview script, developed and administered in 2020 with the aim of exploring the personal and social meanings of the five participants' retirement from sport. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and followed

a semi-structured script consisting of five thematic blocks and around 18 guiding questions. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, video-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the principal researcher. No translation was required, as both researcher and participants share the same first language. Transcriptions were reviewed against the audio recordings for accuracy. Data were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team. The script was constructed taking as reference the predominant theoretical models at the time of administration-specifically the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003), the conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among athletes (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994), the dual career model (Wylleman, 2019; Debois et al., 2015), and the post-sport transition quality factors proposed by Kuettel et al. (2017). The deliberate grounding of the interview guide in established psychological models is consistent with the study's abductive logic: data collection was informed by the best available understanding of the phenomenon at the time, while the interpretive and analytical phases applied the educational lens that subsequently became the RE-LIFE framework. The pedagogical perspective thus operates at the level of theoretical interpretation, not at the level of data elicitation -a sequencing that is methodologically coherent within abductive approaches (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

These models guided the structure of the script, which included five thematic blocks: (a) sports career and construction of athletic identity; (b) circumstances, emotions, and preparation for retirement; (c) personal resources and contextual support during the transition; (d) subsequent learning, training, or adaptation processes; and (e) new meanings, projects, and social contribution after retirement. Although the term 'narrative' does not appear explicitly in the thematic block labels, the interview was designed to elicit narrative accounts: questions were formulated as invitations to tell, recall, and reconstruct ('Tell me about...', 'How did you experience...', 'What meaning do you give to...'), and the semi-structured format allowed participants to develop their stories at their own pace and in their own sequence.

It is important to note that the RE-LIFE framework in its current form did not exist at the time the interviews were conducted. The interview script was designed on the basis of established transition models, and the data generated proved highly compatible with the conceptual dimensions that were subsequently developed. The RE-LIFE framework thus emerged from the iterative dialogue between the theoretical synthesis and the empirical material, rather than being imposed a priori onto the data or derived exclusively from it. This abductive process is detailed in the following section.

### *Procedure and Analysis*

The data analysis followed an abductive and narrative approach, combining reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) with narrative interpretation (Riessman, 2008). This combination was adopted because the research questions required attention to both thematic patterns across participants (what dimensions of the transition are salient?) and the temporal, relational, and identity-constructing features of individual accounts (how do athletes narrate and make meaning of their transition?). Reflexive thematic analysis was selected for its capacity to generate themes through a recursive process of coding, theme development, and refinement, while narrative interpretation provided tools for attending to the temporal, relational, and identity dimensions of participants' accounts. The procedure was carried out in four main phases:

Phase 1-Familiarisation: An intensive familiarisation with the narratives was carried out through the literal transcription of the interviews, repeated reading, and initial noting of observations about narrative structure, emotional tone, and turning points in participants' accounts.

Phase 2-Initial coding: Open coding of units of meaning linked to the transition experience was carried out. Codes were generated inductively from the data, attending both to semantic content and to narrative features (e.g., temporal shifts, identity claims, relational dynamics).

Phase 3-Theme development and theoretical dialogue: Codes were grouped into provisional themes, which were then brought into dialogue with the six conceptual dimensions of the RE-LIFE framework. This abductive phase involved systematically examining where the inductively generated themes converged with, diverged from, or extended the theoretical framework. For example, codes related to 'feeling lost after retirement', 'delayed emotional reaction', and 'grief surfacing years later' initially clustered under Dimension 5 (Comprehensive well-being) but revealed a temporal pattern not anticipated by the original formulation: grief was not immediate but deferred, emerging only after the

initial relief of retirement had subsided. This led to the incorporation of 'deferred grief' as an emerging category that extended Dimension 5. Similarly, codes related to participants' descriptions of teaching younger athletes drew simultaneously on Dimension 2 (competence transfer) and Dimension 6 (social projection), prompting the identification of 'pedagogical transfer' as a bridging category. New categories that emerged from this process-deferred grief, meaningful mentoring, self-directed learning, renewed enthusiasm for life, and pedagogical transfer-were incorporated as refinements to the framework.

Phase 4-Narrative synthesis and final interpretation: The final interpretation was organised around the six dimensions of RE-LIFE, integrating thematic patterns with narrative vignettes that illustrate the biographical processes underlying each dimension.

Analytical rigour was supported through collaborative interpretation between researchers with experience in psychology and education, who independently reviewed coded fragments and engaged in reflexive dialogue to examine divergences and refine interpretations. This process was oriented towards deepening analytical insight rather than achieving inter-coder reliability in a positivist sense (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Formal member checking was not conducted; however, preliminary findings were discussed informally with two participants, who confirmed the resonance of the interpretations with their experience. The entire process followed the quality criteria of credibility, resonance, and transparency (Tracy, 2010). Table 2 provides an illustrative example of this analytical progression, showing how selected participant excerpts were coded, linked to RE-LIFE dimensions, and, where applicable, gave rise to emerging categories.

Table 2. Example of the analytical progressions from data to RE-LIFE dimensions and emerging categories.

| Illustrative excerpt | Initial codes | RE-LIFE dimension | Emerging category |
|---|---|---|---|
| "It's a painful time… it's like a scar on your body" (E2; 2:05) + grief resurfacing at match days | Identity grief; non-linear emotional trajectory; contextual triggers | D5: Comprehensive well-being | Deferred grief |
| "My wife was key… She helped me to establish a routine" (E4; 11:20) | Partner as structuring agent; routine reconstruction; informal mentoring | D4: Support ecosystem | Meaningful mentoring |
| "The biggest mistake I made was not finishing my studies" (E5; 9:43) + "I always wanted to be a doctor" (E4; 4:05) | Autonomous learning pursuit; self-initiated formation; regret as motivator | D2: Competence transfer | Self-directed learning |
| "Suddenly you have to re-enchant yourself…" (E2; 1:36) + "I have no frustrations" (E1; 1:22) | Recovery of purpose; vitality after crisis; biographical reframing | D1 + D3: Self-awareness + Identity | Renewed enthusiasm for life |
| "Being able to work with kids and teach them what I have learned" (E3; 14:28) | Sport knowledge as pedagogical resource; teaching as legacy; competence mobilisation | D2 + D6: Competence transfer + Social projection | Pedagogical transfer |

## Results

The analysis of the narratives suggested that retirement was experienced as a prolonged process of personal transformation rather than a specific event, shaping a journey of lifelong learning. In addition to illustrating the six conceptual dimensions of the framework, the inductive examination of the narratives revealed five emerging categories that were not initially anticipated: delayed grief, meaningful mentoring, self-directed learning, renewed enthusiasm for life, and pedagogical transfer. The results are organised by dimension, combining thematic interpretation with illustrative quotations and, where relevant, contrastive analysis of variations across participants. Participant codes are followed by the timestamp of the relevant interview segment (e.g., E1; 1:25 refers to participant E1 at minute 1:25 of the recording).

### *Dimension 1: Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation*

The testimonies reflect different degrees of anticipation and control in the process of retirement from sport. Some participants describe conscious decision-making linked to personal planning: "I thought about it: I could continue for another year, but I was tired. I stopped playing to move on to another facet of football" (E1; 1:25). In other cases, the disengagement was imposed by external factors: "It was unexpected, my knee made the decision for me" (E5; 3:17).

In the emotional management of change, experiences vary according to the level of preparation. Some report a significant psychological impact-"I had a really hard time until I accepted that I had to quit. Psychologically, I was quite affected" (E5; 2:19)-while others express a more serene experience: "I don't have a bad experience, I was more or less prepared" (E1; 1:10). The emotional difficulty intensifies when retirement coincides with other life challenges: "Giving up football coincided with studying for the MIR; psychologically, it was hard" (E4; 8:20).

This emotional dimension is characterised by a feeling of loss due to the void left by routine. One interviewee describes the initial impact: "I remember those first few months, I felt pain because something was missing. I didn't go to training every morning, Sundays came and I didn't go to play, and I was in Valladolid, living near the stadium. I felt pain" (E2; 1:46).

In relation to life readjustment, two strategies can be observed. Some opt for a quick return to the sporting environment: "I was lucky to be able to get hooked the next day as a coach" (E1; 3:50), while others prefer a period of pause and reflection: "The first year I decided not to do anything, maybe it wasn't the right decision, but I needed to stop" (E5; 8:13). This readjustment phase can lead to personal instability: "It was a year of great instability emotionally, and also in terms of order in my life. Suddenly I had to adapt to new schedules, to having more free time" (E2; 3:37).

The contrast between E1's immediate reintegration and E5's prolonged disorientation illustrates how the degree of anticipation and planning shapes the emotional trajectory of the transition. E1, who had actively prepared his post-career role, describes continuity; E5, whose retirement was imposed by injury, describes rupture. This pattern suggests that self-regulatory capacity before retirement is not merely a protective factor but a mechanism that shapes the entire quality of the subsequent adaptation process.

### *Dimension 2: Training Development and Competence Transfer*

The testimonies show that academic training and the skills acquired through sport act as protective factors in the transition process. The existence of a parallel training path is associated with a smoother adaptation: "I always wanted to be a doctor. When I left football, I had already finished my degree" (E4; 4:05). In contrast, the lack of training is perceived as a major limitation: "The biggest mistake I made was not finishing my studies" (E5; 9:43). The contrast between E4 and E5 is particularly instructive: E4, who completed a medical degree during his playing career, describes the transition as an opportunity to begin a vocation he had been preparing for; E5, who lacked formal qualifications, describes it as a period of vulnerability and improvisation. This variation suggests that educational preparation functions not only as a practical resource but as a source of identity continuity -providing a narrative thread that links the sporting self to a post-sport self already in formation.

The difficulties of balancing a sporting career with academic training emerge as a recurring theme. The sports system is described as inflexible: "Asking a professional footballer for permission to go to class or to go to training is not very well regarded. So, well, you had to find a way to get by" (E4; 13:10). Added to this is the complexity of combining professional practice with other areas of development: "It was difficult to work on a career while playing" (E1; 7:05).

The transfer of sporting skills appears as symbolic and practical capital that facilitates post-sport adaptation. The skills developed at the elite level are reconfigured as useful resources in new professional spheres: "Planning, teamwork, trust in the group. Everything I learned in football I apply to my work" (E5; 20:44). Another participant highlights: "I have resources that are unique. The way of dealing with stress, responsibility, the point of compromise, the sense of teamwork" (E2; 17:35). Along the same lines: "Sport taught me discipline and effort, which later served me well as a doctor" (E4; 14:20).

### *Dimension 3: Identity Reconstruction*

The testimonies reflect that the reformulation of the 'self' after retirement involves integrating the loss of identity associated with the role of professional athlete. In many cases, identity continuity is maintained through links with the sporting world: "Staying connected to sport was what I wanted after being a professional" (E1; 3:58); "I started coaching kids, it was my way of staying close to football" (E5; 11:50).

Retirement creates the need to find a new purpose: "Suddenly you find yourself in a situation where you have to re-enchant yourself with something that can fulfil you as much as your professional career has fulfilled you" (E2; 1:36). Other interviewees express the need for temporary distance: "I had to distance myself from professional football for a while to rediscover myself" (E5; 11:50). Furthermore, redefining the self involves accepting the loss of visibility: "The moment you stop being in the public eye […] that fades away, it happens less and less and you notice that from the first month" (E3; 4:16).

Finally, narrative identity emerges as a resource for biographical re-signification: "I have no frustrations, I remember it as a good retirement" (E1; 1:22); "My career gave me experiences and people. I feel fortunate" (E4; 23:40). These accounts illustrate how the construction of a coherent life narrative enables former athletes to integrate their sporting past into a broader biographical trajectory, transforming what could be experienced as a rupture into a source of continuity and meaning.

### *Dimension 4: Support Ecosystem*

The testimonies show that the emotional and relational environment plays a decisive role in the quality of the transition. The family is the main source of emotional balance: "At home it's a little harder, your moods aren't as good as you'd like, but your family keeps you balanced" (E4; 10:30). The figure of the partner appears as an agent for structuring new routines: "My wife was key: when she went shopping, she would tell me, 'you stay here and study'. She helped me to establish a routine" (E4; 11:20). Meaningful friendships act as a space for support: "I've had very good people around me, supportive people who gave me a hand when I needed it" (E4; 13:05).

In contrast, there is a noticeable absence of institutional structures: "The clubs organise themselves to squeeze you dry while you're there. When you leave, they no longer count on you" (E5; 23:59); "Clubs don't devote much time or resources to preparing players for that moment. I don't think they see a return on investing time or resources in all that" (E2; 15:06). In this context, the strength of the personal environment becomes decisive: "No one helps you prepare to leave football. If you don't have a strong environment, you're lost" (E3; 9:25).

The contrast between the richness of informal support and the absence of institutional accompaniment constitutes one of the most salient findings across participants. While family and friendships provided the emotional scaffolding necessary to sustain the transition, the sporting institutions that had been central to the athletes' lives for decades offered little or no structured guidance for life after competition. This finding reveals a tension within the support ecosystem: the same institutions that develop athletes' professional capacities systematically neglect their post-career development, creating a structural gap that is filled -when it is filled at all -by informal, uncoordinated personal networks. The pedagogical implication is that transition support cannot rely solely on individual resilience but requires institutional structures designed for sustained accompaniment.

### *Dimension 5: Comprehensive Well-Being*

The testimonies reveal that well-being after retirement is closely linked to the management of grief and the physical consequences of professional practice. On an emotional level, the end of a career involves identity grief: "You can't imagine that football is going to end, and when it does, it catches you with your pants down" (E4; 2:35). Grief is perceived as inevitable pain: "It's a painful time, because you've lost something […] you undoubtedly go through a period of grief, and when there is a period of grief in your life, it's like a scar on your body" (E2; 2:05). Notably, the emotional impact does not follow a linear trajectory; rather, grief resurfaces at different points in the post-career journey, triggered by contextual reminders such as match days, media exposure, or encounters with former teammates. This pattern is consistent with the emerging category of delayed grief identified in the analysis.

From a physical perspective, physical rebalancing acts as a trigger for retirement: "My knee told me to stop, and I had to quit" (E5; 1:36); "There comes a time when your body tells you enough is enough, even if your head wants to keep going" (E3; 6:42). The physical consequences serve as a constant reminder of the cost of elite sport: "It has destroyed my knee […] my hips start to creak when I stand up. In short, it's not all good" (E4; 23:10).

Finally, establishing new routines helps restore stability: "I had more time to spend with my family. You're much better, more relaxed" (E1; 3:15); "The routine of studying helped me to find direction and serenity" (E4; 11:15).

### *Dimension 6: Social Projection*

The accounts show that social reintegration is oriented towards mentoring and social contribution. The symbolic legacy acts as a thread of identity continuity: "We will be footballers for life. We are not former footballers, we are retired footballers" (E4; 15:12). Gratitude becomes a driving force for reciprocity: "Football has given me so much… I feel indebted and I want to give back some of what it gave me" (E4; 23:40).

This desire materialises through training and value transmission: "I want to help others. What makes me happy? Enjoying what I like, feeling comfortable with what I do, but also being able to help others a little bit" (E2; 22:56); "I want to give football everything it has given me" (E4; 23:50); "Being able to work with kids and teach them what I have learned from my time" (E3; 14:28).

Finally, professional prospects are linked to the ability to reinvent oneself: "We set up a small business… It was the start of a new chapter" (E5; 12:15); "I was able to study and have another career. That gave me peace of mind and the opportunity to continue contributing" (E3; 6:15). Across these accounts, a common thread emerges: the desire to transmit knowledge and values acquired through sport to new contexts. This pedagogical transfer positions former athletes not merely as recipients of support but as active educational agents who contribute to the development of others through mentoring, coaching, and community engagement.

### *Emerging Categories*

The narrative analysis allowed us to establish meaningful connections between the conceptual dimensions of RE-LIFE and five emerging categories derived from the interviews: delayed grief, meaningful mentoring, self-directed learning, renewed enthusiasm for life, and pedagogical transfer. These categories are not proposed as new dimensions or rival constructs to the existing six. Rather, they represent empirically grounded elaborations that emerged from the abductive dialogue between data and framework: some extend existing dimensions by revealing unanticipated facets (e.g., delayed grief extends Dimension 5 by uncovering the non-linear temporality of emotional adjustment), while others bridge dimensions by capturing processes that operate across multiple areas simultaneously (e.g., pedagogical transfer bridges Dimensions 2 and 6). Their status is interpretive, not confirmatory: they are patterns identified through systematic qualitative analysis that enrich the framework's capacity to account for the complexity of the transition experience, and they require further investigation across different populations and contexts.

Specifically, delayed grief enriches Dimension 5 by revealing the non-linear temporality of emotional adjustment. This finding resonates with the observation by Ronkainen et al. (2021) that identity transitions in sport unfold over extended timeframes. Meaningful mentoring extends Dimension 4 by highlighting the formative role of trusted figures beyond the family. Self-directed learning deepens Dimension 2 by foregrounding athletes' autonomous pursuit of knowledge after retirement. Renewed enthusiasm for life connects Dimensions 1 and 3 through the recovery of vitality and purpose. Finally, pedagogical transfer bridges Dimensions 2 and 6 by illustrating how sport-acquired competencies are actively mobilised in educational and community roles.

## Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing debate on the sustainability of athletes' careers and their well-being after retirement, a growing field that links sports psychology with lifelong learning, incorporating aspects such as holistic education, narrative identity, and comprehensive well-being (Douglas & Carless, 2015; Camiré & Santos, 2019). The RE-LIFE framework offers an integrative lens that connects these strands, positioning retirement not as a critical or traumatic episode but as a process that, alongside its psychological dimensions, involves educational and ecological learning. The framework does not contest that retirement processes are fundamentally psychological in nature; rather, it takes psychological understanding as its foundation and extends the scope of response into educational domains -addressing how athletes learn, adapt, and reconstruct meaning over extended timeframes and across multiple life contexts. While the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003) describes retirement as a sequence of coping phases conditioned by personal and contextual

resources, RE-LIFE reframes the transition as a spiral of continuous learning in which crises may serve as catalysts for development. This perspective connects with the ISSP position stand on career development and transitions (Stambulova et al., 2020), which called for broader, culturally sensitive approaches to understanding athletes' post-career adaptation.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings underscore that post-career transitions involve the same interdependent elements that define pedagogy in movement cultures (Kirk, 2010): knowledge acquired through sport is mobilised, learning occurs through reflection and new experiences, and the quality of the process depends on the educational environments available to athletes. The RE-LIFE framework makes this pedagogical structure explicit, providing a language for understanding how sport-acquired competencies-discipline, leadership, teamwork, stress management-are not merely 'transferred' but actively reconstructed through pedagogical processes of reflection, mentoring, and narrative identity work. It is important to emphasise that this educational reading does not minimise the psychological distress or structural disadvantage that many retiring athletes experience. The participants in this study described grief, identity loss, emotional instability, and physical deterioration in vivid terms. The educational framing complements rather than replaces the psychological account: it addresses what happens after and alongside psychological adjustment -how athletes mobilise learning processes to navigate, not merely cope with, the transition.

This educational reframing partially converges with the Life Development Intervention approach proposed by Lavallee (2005), which also emphasises the educational-rather than exclusively psychological-dimension of career transitions. However, while Lavallee's intervention focused on structured developmental programmes, RE-LIFE extends this logic by situating educational processes within an ecological and narrative framework, thereby attending to the relational and identity dimensions that shape the quality of the transition.

Pierce et al. (2017) proposed that life skills transfer depends on the individual's awareness, confidence, and the availability of supportive contexts. In RE-LIFE, this is reflected in the dimensions of training development and social projection. The notion of delayed grief qualifies the emotional phases described by Park et al. (2013), showing that acceptance of retirement does not occur in a linear or immediate manner. This extended temporality coincides with the findings of Ronkainen et al. (2021), who highlight the ambiguity of the boundaries between sporting and post-sporting life.

The emerging category of self-directed learning connects with Camiré & Santos' (2019) conceptualisation of sport as an educational space, and with Gould & Carson's (2008) work on life skills development. This aligns with recent literature on Career Adaptability (Stambulova et al., 2020), which emphasises athletes' capacity to navigate career changes through flexible, self-regulated strategies. In the context of professional football, the findings resonate with the observation by Rebelo et al. (2025) that career path characteristics shape retirement conditions, with Carrillo Trujillo & Paz Llanos' (2024) findings on transition preparedness among professional footballers, and with the demonstration by Young et al. (2024) that social-identity processes are central to effective transition support. The RE-LIFE framework's emphasis on educational agency and sustained accompaniment aligns with Stambulova & Schinke's (2025) concept of athletic retirement literacy and with the identification by Schinke et al. (2026) of transition literacy as a core professional competence. These convergences suggest that the field is moving towards a broader understanding of post-career adaptation that encompasses educational, developmental, and contextual dimensions alongside the psychological.

The findings of this study are situated within the specific context of Spanish professional football, and several aspects of the participants' experiences may be shaped by contextual factors that limit direct transferability. At the same time, several dimensions of the framework -identity reconstruction, competence transfer, the role of narrative in meaning-making -address processes that the broader literature identifies across cultures and sports (Stambulova et al., 2020; Kuettel et al., 2017). Future research across different sporting, cultural, and gender contexts will be necessary to distinguish between context-specific manifestations and more generalisable dimensions of the framework.

The practical implications of this study are illustrative rather than prescriptive, given the exploratory nature of the empirical component and the need for further investigation across diverse populations. They are offered as pedagogical orientations that emerge from the dialogue between the RE-LIFE framework and the participants' narratives, organised around three domains. In coach education and

training, the RE-LIFE framework can inform the design of modules that prepare coaches not only for performance enhancement but for accompanying athletes' holistic development, including anticipatory work on post-career transitions. Coaches, as key pedagogical agents in athletes' lives, are uniquely positioned to foster the self-knowledge, reflective capacity, and skills awareness that the framework identifies as central to adaptive transitions.

In dual career programme design, the framework offers a structure for integrating educational, identity, and well-being dimensions into institutional support services. Rather than treating academic and athletic pathways as parallel but separate tracks, RE-LIFE suggests that effective dual career programmes should explicitly address the pedagogical connections between sport-acquired competencies and broader life learning.

In sport organisations and policy, RE-LIFE can serve as a diagnostic and orientation tool for clubs, federations, and educational institutions seeking to develop structured transition pathways. The emphasis on social projection positions former athletes not as retired individuals, but as potential agents of community development-mentors, educators, and leaders capable of contributing pedagogically to new generations of athletes. This need is reinforced by a contrast with the current legal framework: Spain's Ley 39/2022, del Deporte extends the formal status of high-level athlete for five years after an athlete stops meeting the sporting performance criteria, explicitly to preserve access to institutional support during the retirement period (BOE, 2022). Yet participants' accounts of institutional neglect during their own transitions suggest that this legal safeguard does not automatically translate into structured accompaniment in practice. This positioning resonates with Garratt's (2010) concept of sporting citizenship, which frames athletes' post-career social engagement as a form of civic and pedagogical contribution. To facilitate the translation of the framework into practice, Table 3 offers an illustrative mapping between RE-LIFE dimensions and guiding questions for transition support contexts. These questions are intended as starting points for reflection and programme design, not as validated assessment items.

Table 3. Pedagogical Connections Between RE-LIFE Dimensions and Transition Support Contexts.

| RE-LIFE Dimension | Guiding Questions for Practice |
|---|---|
| D1: Self-awareness and self-regulation | How can athletes be supported in recognising and managing the emotional impact of career termination? What reflective practices might help athletes develop anticipatory awareness before retirement? |
| D2: Training development and competence transfer | What structures can facilitate dual career engagement during the athletic career? How can sport-acquired competencies be explicitly identified and translated into post-career professional contexts? |
| D3: Identity reconstruction | How can athletes be encouraged to develop narrative resources that integrate their sporting identity into a broader life story? What spaces exist for athletes to explore identities beyond the athletic role? |
| D4: Support ecosystem | What institutional structures could provide sustained accompaniment beyond the moment of retirement? How can informal support networks (family, peers, mentors) be recognised and strengthened? |
| D5: Comprehensive well-being | How can transition programmes address the non-linear nature of grief and emotional adjustment? What provision exists for the physical consequences of long-term elite sport participation? |
| D6: Social projection | How can former athletes be positioned as pedagogical agents -mentors, educators, and community contributors? What pathways exist for athletes to transmit sport-acquired knowledge to new generations? |

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the empirical exploration is based on a small group of five elite male former footballers who transitioned into stable professional roles. While this sample size is consistent with qualitative research designs oriented towards depth of understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2019), the findings are not generalisable and should be understood as illustrative insights rather than definitive conclusions. The exclusive focus on male footballers who transitioned into stable post-career roles introduces a positive bias that must be explicitly acknowledged: the framework has not been explored with athletes experiencing prolonged difficulty, unemployment, mental health crises, or social isolation after retirement.

The dimensions and emerging categories identified may therefore reflect a particular trajectory of adaptation rather than the full range of post-career experiences. Future research should incorporate female athletes, para-athletes, athletes from individual sports, and athletes from different cultural and economic contexts. Of particular importance would be research with athletes whose transitions have

been marked by sustained difficulty, to examine whether and how the RE-LIFE dimensions apply when the conditions for reflective learning and narrative reconstruction are compromised.

Second, although the interviews were retrospective, conducted between five and ten years after retirement, this time lag was methodologically intentional. The narrative design required key informants with sufficient distance to rework their trajectory. However, retrospective accounts are subject to recall bias and narrative smoothing: participants may reconstruct their experiences in ways that emphasise coherence, resolution, and growth, potentially understating the confusion, ambivalence, or distress they experienced at the time. Longitudinal studies that follow athletes during the transition process would be of great value.

Third, because the RE-LIFE framework was developed after the interviews were conducted, the data were interpreted through a lens that participants were not aware of during data generation. While the abductive approach provides methodological justification for this process, future studies could be designed to explicitly test the framework's dimensions as guiding constructs from the outset, or to implement RE-LIFE-based pedagogical interventions and evaluate their effectiveness in coach training or dual career programmes. Finally, the researcher's professional background in football coaching and education, while facilitating access and rapport, also carries the risk of insider bias -a tendency to interpret participants' experiences through the lens of one's own professional socialisation. The reflexive journal and collaborative interpretation were employed to mitigate this risk, but it cannot be fully eliminated.

## Conclusions

This study has presented and explored the RE-LIFE framework as an integrative, educationally grounded lens for understanding the complexity of retirement from elite sport. The participants' narratives suggest that the post-sport transition involves comprehensive pedagogical processes in which athletes rework their meanings, skills, and bonds from a perspective of lifelong learning (Agnew et al., 2019; Checa et al., 2025). The empirical exploration illustrates the relevance of the six conceptual dimensions and generated five emerging categories-deferred grief, meaningful mentoring, self-directed learning, renewed enthusiasm for life, and pedagogical transfer-that enrich and refine the framework.

From a theoretical perspective, RE-LIFE provides a synthesis between psychological theories of transition (Stambulova, 2003), narrative approaches to identity (Douglas & Carless, 2015), and the concept of sporting citizenship (Garratt, 2010), introduced in the Discussion as a lens for understanding athletes' post-career social engagement as a form of civic and pedagogical contribution. This integration gives the framework heuristic value and potential applicability -to be tested in future research -in coach training, dual career programmes, higher education, and athlete welfare policies. The emphasis on social projection positions former athletes not as retired individuals, but as agents of community development. In summary, RE-LIFE consolidates a vision of the athlete as a subject in permanent transition, whose identity and well-being are sustained by lifelong learning. The framework does not aim to replace existing frameworks, but rather to offer an integrative pedagogical lens that connects and complements them from an educational, ecological, and humanistic perspective.

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## Authors and translators' details:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Jose Cela Ranilla | josemaria.cela@uva.es | Author |