



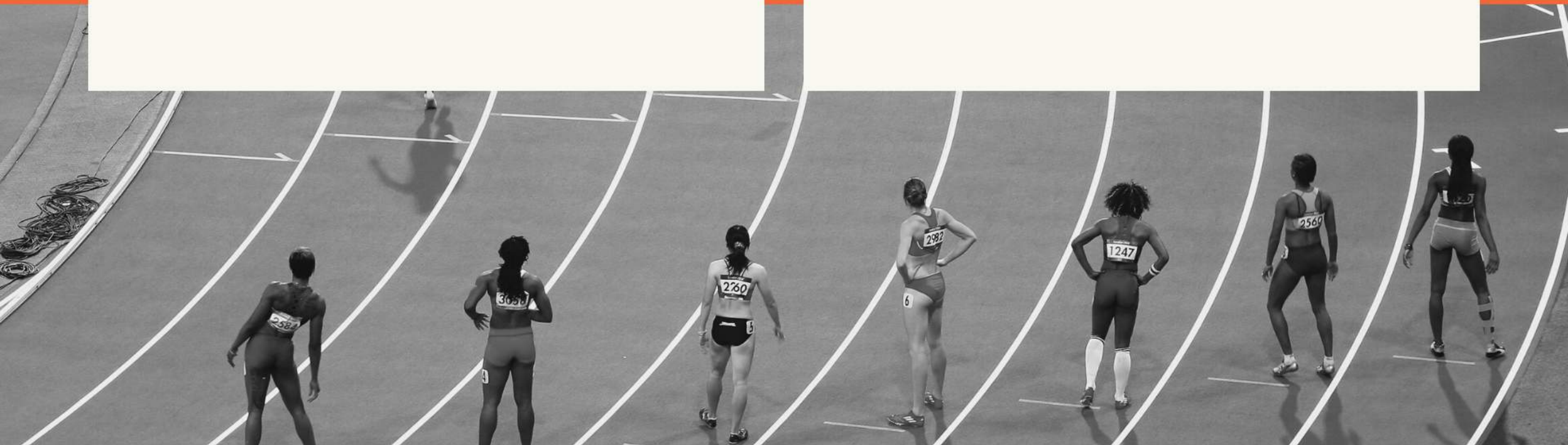
# HOW SHOULD ATHLETES BE SUPPORTED BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER ATHLETIC RETIREMENT?

**5-7%**

ATHLETES ANNUALLY TRANSITION OUT  
OF ELITE SPORT

**15-20%**

OF RETIRED ATHLETES MAY BE FACED  
WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS



# ATHLETIC RETIREMENT

= TRANSITION PROCESS CONSISTING OF THREE CONSECUTIVE CAREER PHASES



## ACTIVE PHASE

Athletes who are still active in elite sport (i.e., full-time sporting career or a DC 'elite sport and study' or 'elite sport and employment').



## RETIREMENT PHASE

Athletes who voluntarily or involuntarily ended their elite sporting career and are not yet in a new post-athletic career.



## NEW CAREER PHASE

Retired athletes who are in a new, post-athletic career

# PROJECT AIMS



## *Psychological health & well-being*

Gain insight in the perceived impact of athletic retirement on athletes' psychological health and well-being.

## *Facilitators & challenges*

Provide insight in the facilitators and challenges athletes face before, during and after athletic retirement.

## *Guidelines*

Develop phase-specific guidelines for career support stakeholders.

# METHODOLOGY

## THE PROJECT ENTAILED TWO DISTINCT RESEARCH PHASES



### PHASE 1

Using criterion sampling, **24 athletes** (8 active, 8 retired, and 8 retired athletes in a new professional career) participated in **semi-structured face-to-face interviews**.

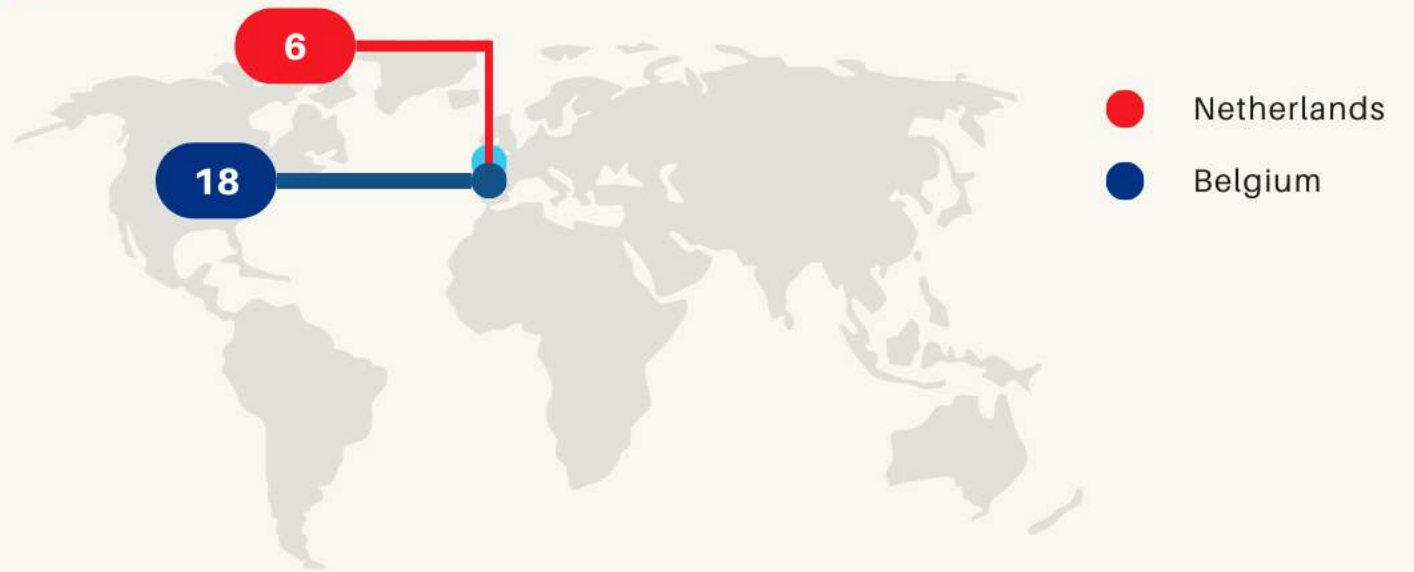
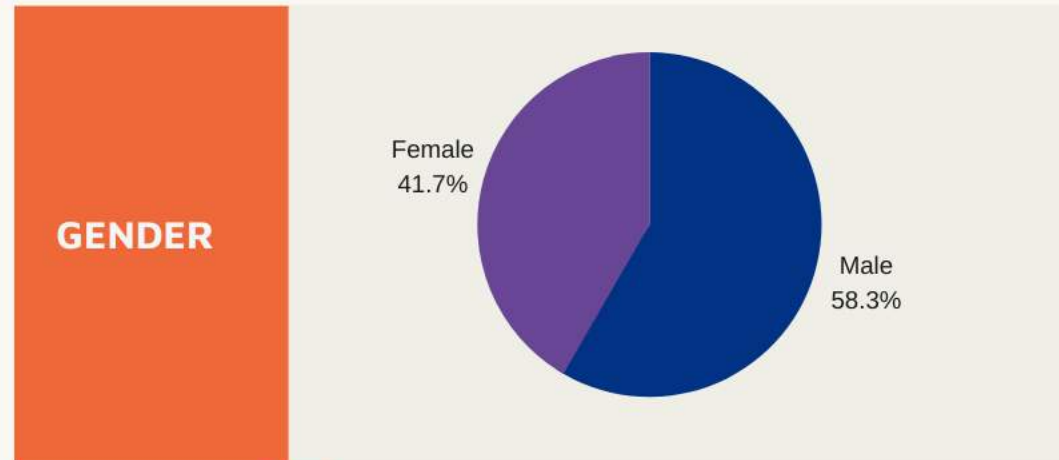


### PHASE 2

A total of **28 Subject Matter Experts** were involved in five **focus groups** being held with homogenous sub-groups (e.g., coaches, lifestyle coaches) and two follow-up expert groups with heterogeneous groups.

# PARTICIPANTS RESEARCH PHASE 1

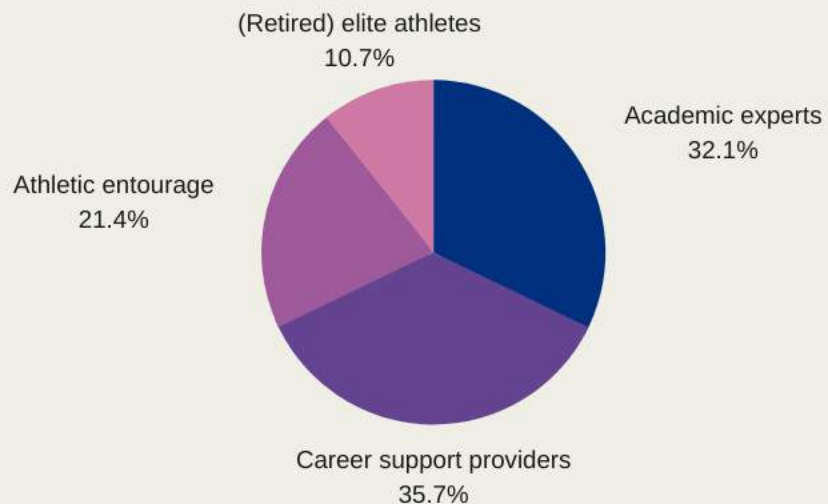
(N = 24)



# PARTICIPANTS RESEARCH PHASE 2

(N = 28)

## SUBJECT MATTERS EXPERTS



53%



Male

# FINDINGS



PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH  
MENTAL WELL-BEING



Positive impact  
Negative impact



THE ACTIVE PHASE  
BEFORE RETIREMENT



Perceived challenges  
Needed support services  
Practical guidelines to support elite athletes



THE RETIREMENT PHASE  
DURING RETIREMENT



Perceived challenges  
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THE NEW CAREER PHASE  
AFTER RETIREMENT



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# NEGATIVE IMPACT

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## UNHAPPINESS

Participants stated that athletic retirement will make them unhappy.



## EMOTIONAL IMPACT

Participants mentioned feelings of suppression, insecurity, fear, overwhelming, and missing sports



## IDENTITY CRISIS

Participants stated they encountered an identity crisis following athletic retirement.



## PHYSICAL ADAPTATIONS

Participants mentioned physical changes such as an increase in weight.



## IDENTITY CRISIS

*"I thought in advance that I had other things and I would not end up in the so-called 'identity crisis'. But finally, I just noticed that it was, yes, that I had collapsed. That it just did not work. I started then for six months to have in-depth conversations with a psychologist on things like: Who are you? What are your qualities? What is your new identity? I had to cry a lot, but in the end, this gave me the chance to build up my energy again."*

## PHYSICAL ADAPTATIONS

*"I have always been trained and then suddenly your weight and size increases. Actually, it was a very healthy weight, but not desirable at all for me. Everything actually changes when retiring from elite sport. Physically and emotionally. And that is very intense."*



# POSITIVE IMPACT

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## FREE TIME

Participants mentioned having more free time.



## NEW LIFESTYLE

Participants indicated having a less strict lifestyle.



## SOCIAL LIFE

Participants highlighted more opportunities for a rich social life.



## RELIEF

Some participants described athletic retirement as a relief.



## NEW LIFESTYLE

*"The normality. If you want to go out with your girlfriend on a weekend trip, you can just do that. During the athletic career, that is not possible because your performance will suffer from it. That certainly is pleasant about athletic retirement. You can stay up late once in a while when you feel like watching a movie. Those are things you cannot do during your athletic career."*

## RELIEF

*"It was a relief that I did no longer had to and that it was actually over."*



# FINDINGS



PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH  
MENTAL WELL-BEING



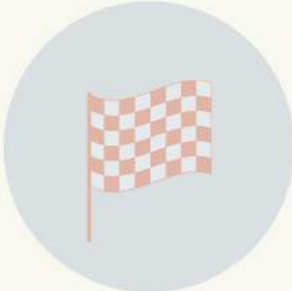
Positive impact  
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SPORT PSYCHOLOGY  
& MENTAL SUPPORT  
RESEARCH GROUP

# SUPPORTING ATHLETES **BEFORE, DURING** AND AFTER ATHLETIC RETIREMENT

Active athletes preparing their retirement have to cope with a set of specific **challenges and barriers**.



Single-minded focus on sport



Bad timing of career support services



Limited autonomy in compiling study programme



Lack of knowledge of career support services



Lack of duality in a DC



Lack of uniform DC services







## CHALLENGES

### LIMITED AUTONOMY IN COMPILING STUDY PROGRAMME

*"Anyway, in terms of studies, you can only take up the half of your study credits (ECTS). But that did not go so well for me. I always had problems with certain courses as I did not take up the right prerequisites for example while I could and would have taken up more credits than recommended if they allowed me to."*

### LACK OF UNIFORM DC SERVICES

*"The educational institution where you study determines so much about what is possible and what is not possible. I think the quality of your school's guidance during your athletic career has such an enormous influence on whether you keep doing it or stop."*

### SINGLE-MINDED FOCUS ON SPORT

*"I regret leaving education for sports. Because that was already – I have been cycling in competition since my eight years and everything must make room for sports. I have regretted that in the course of my career."*

### BAD TIMING OF CAREER SUPPORT SERVICES

*"That is our busiest period. Then I am not going to go to career support. That is in the middle of the season, you are not yet thinking about quitting your elite sporting career, you are not there yet, you want to enjoy your time that you still have."*



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Lack of free choice and autonomy



Lack of knowledge of career support services



Lack of duality in a DC



Lack of uniform DC services

## RATIONALE

**Personal development** is a part of the elite sporting career.

- Developing **resources** in various areas
- Support athletes in their **broader development**
- Support athletes in the exploration of **professional interests and talents**



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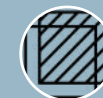
**Personal development** is a part of the elite sporting career.

- Developing **resources** in various areas
- Support athletes in their **broader development**
- Support athletes in the exploration of **professional interests and talents**

**Preventive guidelines** targeting athletes' entourage, career support providers, and athletes themselves.



Personal development plan



Transparent DC guidelines



Development of competencies



Individual career support trajectories



Tailor-made educational trajectories



Job/internship opportunities



E-learning options



Role models



Career coaching



Athletes' broader development as part of sport organisations' vision

# FINDINGS



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# SUPPORTING ATHLETES BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER ATHLETIC RETIREMENT

During their retirement, former athletes have to cope with a set of specific **challenges and barriers**.



Needing support is taboo



Lack of interests outside of sport



Physical, psychological, and social adaptation



Lack of transition period





# CHALLENGES

## PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL ADAPTATIONS

*"Those who retired from elite sport, they have sometimes difficulties to – yes, their fat percentage increases, their physical condition is extremely changed, heart diseases are more common than people think. And physical support can play a major role in this, which, I think, also affects mental health."*

*"I actually thought at the end: 'Now I have filled everything in correctly. I have a job, I have nice friends. I am really looking forward to continue with my new professional career.' But then I started to get a bit of a problem after the summer. I missed the team, I missed the group feeling. I thought in advance that the so-called 'emptiness' would not bother me, because I had other things. I was prepared and ended my sporting career with a very good season. I had a lot of fun weekends away, with friends, family, and my boyfriend. I also travelled a lot. And finally, I think, early November, I completely collapsed."*

*"Never see each other during the elite sporting career, or even if she went to see competing me in a game, or sometimes I was home for two days but then I was away again for a month. And suddenly, I was at home every day, that was most difficult actually."*

## NEEDING SUPPORT IS TABOO

*"I was like: Boy, you do not know who I am. I will make my own plan and I will certainly not ask for help."*

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## RATIONALE

The **retirement period** is a part of the entire (sporting) career.

- It builds on **personal** and **holistic** development
- **Intensive and active support**
- Close monitoring if **crisis transitions** occur



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## RATIONALE

The **retirement period** is a part of the entire (sporting) career.

- It builds on **personal** and **holistic** development
- **Intensive and active support**
- Close monitoring if **crisis transitions** occur

**Intervention guidelines** targeting athletes' entourage, career support providers, and athletes themselves.



Personal development plan



Mental support for crisis transition



Development and awareness of (transferable) competencies



Facilitate contact with employers



Networking



Job search competencies



Continued financial support in specific cases



Career coaching





# FINDINGS



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# SUPPORTING ATHLETES BEFORE, DURING AND **AFTER** ATHLETIC RETIREMENT

After their retirement, former athletes in a new, post-athletic career have to cope with a set of specific **challenges and barriers**.



Unrealistic expectations of job opportunities



Occupational delay



Lack of job experience



(Implicit) pressure towards elite sport functions





## CHALLENGES

### OCCUPATIONAL DELAY

*"I often said that it would be more obvious that I would have looked for a job immediately after graduating. That is also the reason that I do not apply for a job in education. Because I think there, yes, that changes very quickly and you have been out there for a really long time. In itself, the content of courses is one thing, but all the didactic matters, that is too long ago".*



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## RATIONALE

Build **autonomously** on the broader personal development

- Invest in building a **sustainable, new career**
- Support and guidance should remain accessible for at least **two years** after ending the sporting career
- Support has a more **reactive** character





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- Support has a more **reactive** character



Continued access to a multidisciplinary support team



Mentorship in the workplace facilitated by the employer



Networking



Enhance interaction opportunities between the labour market and retired athletes



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# SUPPORTING ATHLETES BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER ATHLETIC RETIREMENT

## GENERAL GUIDELINES

### Information & awareness

Provide information on and awareness about available career support services towards elite athletes and their environment.

### Support from the sports world

Create support and engagement from the sports world.

### Tailor-made & holistic approach

Focus on the specific needs of an elite athlete, taking into account the whole person.

### Proactive approach

Focus on preparation, strengthening competencies, and broad development during the athletic career.

### Positive approach

Approach preparation for a post-athletic career as a positive, (new) challenge for the broader development.

### Personal contact

Use of personal contact moments to sufficiently trigger the awareness of elite athletes (and their environment).

### Online solutions

Provide online solutions to promote the personal development.

### Importance of follow-up

Emphasize the continued availability of both formal and informal support and guidance, as well as the creation of openness.

### Monitoring & evaluation

Monitoring and evaluating the provided support, as well as the holistic progression of the elite athlete via both soft, and hard measures.

### Continued support

Continued support from various organisations and agencies during, and after the athletic career.

### Integration & coordination

Clear coordination and integration of the various support services and initiatives offered by different types of organisations.

### Context

Contextualization must be considered when implementing the basic principles.



# CONCLUSIONS



## *Supporting athletes before, during and after athletic retirement*

Adopting a **holistic** and **phase-specific** perspective advances elite sport stakeholders' understanding and increases awareness on the different factors influencing athletes' ability to successfully cope with the athletic retirement process and maintain psychological health and well-being. The developed guidelines can aid in gaining more insight in the opportunities for support linked to the athletes' developmental pathway.



# THANK YOU!

## Q&A

# HOW SHOULD ATHLETES BE SUPPORTED BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER ATHLETIC RETIREMENT?