



Single Case Study

Supporting Athletes in Career Transition: The *Sport2Next* Protocol as a Model for Post-Sport Identity Reconstruction – A Single Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: This single-case study explores the application of the *Sport2Next* protocol to support an elite athlete in transitioning away from sport during the final phase of his professional basketball career. Developed within a multidisciplinary and preventive framework, this protocol integrates psychological, educational, and career development strategies to promote life after sport readiness, financial stability, and psychological well-being. Organized into four progressive phases – initial assessment, targeted training, job market preparation, and traditional working-world integration – the intervention can facilitate a smoother and more meaningful post-career transition.

Case Study: The participant had previously attended economic studies and stated that his target would have been to become a financial advisor. Nonetheless, because he was experiencing uncertainty and apprehension about his future after sport, he decided to pursue the *Sport2Next* pathway. Gradually, he was able to delve into himself, to better understand his potential, and eventually managed to shape his professional identity, which was confirmed as being adequate to the economic and financial fields. Psychological assessments revealed high levels of self-regulation, autonomy, and proactive learning, while also indicating areas for improvement, such as limited critical self-reflection and a tendency to assume excessive responsibility. Through structured support, the participant developed greater clarity, resilience, and motivation to pursue a career path aligned with both his personal skills and values.

Conclusions: This case study underscores the potential of the *Sport2Next* protocol as a replicable model for supporting athletes – regardless of their sport, age, or gender – through career transitioning. By emphasizing early preparation, personalized support, self-assessment, and interdisciplinary collaboration, the protocol addresses the complex emotional, cognitive, and practical challenges athletes face upon retirement, facilitating sustainable and meaningful reintegration beyond sport.

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ABSTRACT in ITALIANO

Contesto: Questo caso di studio esamina l'applicazione del protocollo *Sport2Next* nel supportare un atleta d'élite, durante la fase finale della sua carriera nel basket professionistico. Sviluppato all'interno di una cornice teorica multidisciplinare e di tipo preventivo, il protocollo integra strategie psicologiche, educative e di sviluppo professionale con l'obiettivo di promuovere la preparazione alla transizione di carriera, la stabilità economica e il benessere psicologico. Strutturato in quattro fasi progressive – valutazione iniziale, formazione mirata, preparazione al mercato del lavoro e integrazione nel mondo reale – l'intervento mira a facilitare una transizione post-carriera più fluida e significativa.

Presentazione del Caso: A fronte di incertezze e timori riguardo al proprio futuro, il paziente ha intrapreso il percorso previsto dal protocollo *Sport2Next* ridefinendo progressivamente la propria identità professionale e individuando potenziali sbocchi occupazionali nei settori della finanza e del management. Le valutazioni psicologiche hanno evidenziato alti livelli di autoregolazione, autonomia e attitudine all'apprendimento proattivo, unitamente all'evidenza di alcune aree di fragilità, tra cui una ridotta capacità di autoriflessione e una tendenza ad assumersi un eccesso di responsabilità. Grazie a un supporto strutturato e integrato, il paziente ha sviluppato maggiore chiarezza, resilienza e motivazione nel perseguire un nuovo percorso professionale coerente con le proprie competenze e i propri valori.

Conclusioni: Questo caso di studio conferma il potenziale del protocollo *Sport2Next* come modello replicabile per supportare gli atleti nella transizione dalla carriera sportiva a quella post-sportiva. Attraverso un approccio fondato sulla preparazione anticipata, sul supporto personalizzato e sulla collaborazione interdisciplinare, il protocollo affronta le complesse sfide emotive, cognitive e pratiche che gli atleti si trovano ad affrontare al momento del ritiro, favorendo una reintegrazione sostenibile e significativa oltre il contesto sportivo.

Parole chiave

Transizione di carriera degli atleti, Protocollo *Sport2Next*, Identità post-sportiva, Supporto psicologico, Sviluppo di carriera, Intervento di psicologia dello sport.

INTRODUCTION

We present a case study of a young athlete who participated in the *Sport2next* protocol at the end of his sporting career. In this life stage, the patient felt the need to start a new and concerned chapter in his life by entering the “traditional working world” in the most consistent way possible.

The intervention was based on the need to support post-sport athletes, using the *Sport2next* protocol as a guide. This procedure was used to develop targeted support strategies, including workshops, training modules, and individual psychological support sessions, each aimed to help athletes move through and beyond transition in a more positive and meaningful way.

This case is consistent with a body of research literature that identifies athletic retirement as a problematic and challenging psychological phase that involves uncertainty, disorientation, frustration, and difficulty adjusting to a new lifestyle [1-7]. The lack of early planning and the absence of awareness for an after-sport life have been identified as principal risk factors [8, 9].

In addition to emotional and psychological challenges, retiring athletes face the same practical issues of any career transition, such as financial insecurity, social isolation, inactivity, and loneliness [6,10-12]. However, there are other specific transitions to the élite levels of sport that athletes might consider, including loss of identity and difficulties in career redirection despite being professionally active by age [13, 14]. The intensity of athletic identity plays a crucial role. While it can be a source of motivation and resilience during this career, it can later become a barrier to adaptation and a risk factor for psychological distress [11, 15-18].

In this case, the intervention was positioned in an integrated context. The protocol itself is based on a developmental and preventive perspective, aiming to increase athletes' self-awareness and preparation for career transition. Psychological support was based on a life-design framework, focusing especially on meaning-making processes, identity reconstruction, and emotional consequences of leaving the athletic role.

This case demonstrates a successful use of the *Sport2next* protocol and its potential

to support athletes managing the complex emotional, cognitive, and practical challenges of retirement from competitive sport. By presenting this experience, the research provides a model for future programs on career transitions in athletic populations.

METHODS

The *Sport2Next* protocol was developed to create an integrated support system to assist athletes for life after sport. This protocol adopts a multidisciplinary and evidence-based approach, combining psychological, educational, and career-focused components. Its highest goal is to provide athletes with structured tools to transition out of a competitive sport while preserving their sense of identity and emotional well-being.

The intervention described in this single case study was not conducted by the authors whose role was exclusively observational and analytical, but by an external *Sport2Next* team composed of sport psychologists, HR specialists, mentors, and training experts.

The methodological robustness of the *Sport2Next* protocol is substantiated by the use of a multi-modal assessment architecture combining psychological tools, including validated psychometric instruments capturing constructs such as psychological wellbeing, identity restructuring, metacognitive functioning, and transition-related distress (ex. SF-36 for quality of life, Likert Scale for satisfaction, SWOT analysis for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) and behavioral indicators, derived from systematic observational coding of performance, engagement, adaptive coping behaviors, and task-related regulatory patterns across the intervention such as simulations, measurable outcomes of successful job placement, financial self-sufficiency. This integrated measurement strategy enables high-resolution monitoring of both intrapsychic processes and externally observable change trajectories, thereby strengthening the empirical validity of the case analysis.

Objectives of the Intervention

The *Sport2Next* protocol was structured with the following purposes:

- identify and analyze the main challenges athletes have to deal with during the post-career transition;
- provide a personalized athlete-mentor

program, relying on the personal and professional experience as former athletes of *Sport2Next* teams;

- measure the program's impact on athletes' quality of life, psychological wellbeing, and career satisfaction.

The program was expected to last one year, a duration that ensures each athlete has sufficient time to complete all the planned activities of the protocol. Indeed, the actual duration very much depends on the athlete's attitude, approach, and pace.

Sport2Next Protocol's Structure

The *Sport2Next* protocol is organized into four progressive phases. The first phase is characterized by an assessment aimed at increasing self-awareness and finding out the athlete's current resources and strengths. This phase begins with a team workshop, followed by individual meetings with sport psychologists to develop a performance profile and frame their personality. These elements contribute to the creation of an initial report that would serve as the foundation for all phases that follow.

The second phase builds on the insights gathered in the first phase and focuses on specific training and the development of new skills. Based on the initial report, athletes may be recommended to specific courses or professional opportunities with specialized institutions and experienced figures. This allows the intervention to stay flexible and responsive to individual needs, updating the personal plan as soon as new goals and skills emerge.

The third phase, also called "career warm-up," shifts the focus from skills to job-market preparation. Athletes participate in dedicated sessions with work psychologists to refine and adjust their CVs, presentation letters, and interview skills. These sessions are followed by meetings with specialized HR specialists, who support them in updating their application materials and ensure they are ready to present themselves effectively in new professional contexts.

Finally, the fourth phase of the protocol proceeds to real-world integration. Athletes are guided through the process of finding internships, job placements, or further training opportunities. While also continuing to work on personal values, coping strategies, and identity transformation. The program concludes with a final review session, offering a

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space for feedback, a summary of achievements, and, ideally, a successful entry into a new career path. The *Sport2Next* protocol is organized into four progressive phases, as summarized in Table 1.

However, even when a new job is not immediately identified, athletes tend to value the protocol positively. They often describe the process as transformative, as it provides them with a deeper self-consciousness and concrete tools for professional transition. The generation of a personalized profile report, the guidance offered by a mentor, often an ex-athlete and with experience in sport transition, the possibility of specific training, and the opportunity to simulate job interviews all contribute to building resources and skills useful for the future, and that athletes often report as new in their educational path.

A strength and innovative point of the *Sport2Next* protocol is the mentorship program with a matching algorithm that associates each athlete with a mentor whose career trajectory aligns with their aspirations and psychological profile. This long-term relationship provides emotional support, career guidance, and a sense of continuity, which are proven to be essential for handling athletic retirement and identity restructuring.

In addition to the structured phases, athletes have access to a unique process of skill recognition and official certifications. Through a digital platform managed by an external provider, participants can identify their personal skills and take courses and lessons recognized by institutions such as universities and sports organizations to improve their CVs and strengthen their positioning in the traditional job market.

To minimize potential methodological biases, all operational phases of the *Sport2Next* protocol are supervised by an external professional not affiliated with the *Sport2Next* team. This supervisor verifies adherence to standardized procedures, coherence between goals and activities, and congruence of the collected materials, thereby reducing the risk of subjective or confirmatory interpretations.

In this case study, a multi-level triangulation strategy was also adopted, including:

- standardized psychological measures,
- clinical interviews conducted by psychologists not involved in the analysis,
- longitudinal qualitative observations,
- behavioral indicators (job interviews and placement outcomes),
- final participant feedback.

This approach strengthens the internal validity of the case by limiting dependence

Table 1. Four progressive phases of *Sport2Next* protocol.

Protocol's phase	Objective	Tools	Main result
Phase 1 - Assessment & Self-Awareness	Increase self-awareness; identify resources, strengths, and critical areas; construct the athlete's initial profile.	Team workshop; individual psychological interviews; personality and performance profiling; mentor's initial support.	Development of an initial report outlining personal resources, vulnerabilities, and transition needs.
Phase 2 - Targeted Training & Skill Development	Develop new skills aligned with the athlete's goals; enhance employability; strengthen identity beyond sport.	Specialized training courses; professional development sessions; mentoring; referrals to external institutions.	Acquisition of new competencies; updated personal development plan; emergence of new goals and learning pathways.
Phase 3 - Career Warm-Up & Job Market Readiness	Prepare the athlete for the job market; refine professional presentation; increase autonomy in job-seeking strategies.	Sessions with work psychologists; CV and cover letter revision; mock interviews; HR specialist meetings.	Updated application materials; improved interview readiness; clearer professional self-presentation.
Phase 4 - Real-World Integration	Facilitate actual entry into the professional world; support identity transition and emotional adaptation.	Internship/job search guidance; networking; real-world placements; final review session; ongoing mentor support.	Job interviews and placement opportunities; strengthened professional identity; transition plan finalized and enacted.

on a single data source. Furthermore, all four phases of the protocol follow predefined tools, checklists, and criteria that limit evaluator discretion, ensure replicability, and allow comparability across different cases.

Intervention's Goals

The primary goal of the *Sport2Next* protocol is to promote a successful and sustainable transition from sport to post-career life, with a particular emphasis on the search for a new personal identity after sport, professional reintegration, economic stability, and psychological well-being. We adopted a mixed-methods evaluation approach, combining quantitative and qualitative measures and participant feedback, to ensure the program's effectiveness.

Throughout the program, athletes were encouraged to reflect on their progress and share thoughts and considerations about the support they received, supported by measurable outcomes such as successful job placements or interviews, financial self-sufficiency, and improvements in psychological health.

On a psychological level, the program aims to reduce stress and anxiety typically associated with ending careers and identity transition, and to improve emotional resilience and self-efficacy [19, 20].

From a financial perspective, the intervention helps athletes gain awareness and control over their economic resources, supporting long-term stability and confidence in managing personal finances.

Professionally, the protocol is designed to open up new career opportunities, helping athletes strengthen their skills and actively pursue career opportunities aligned with their interests and values.

Case Selection Criteria

He was selected as the focal case because he represents an emblematic and methodologically relevant example of athletic career transition. His profile and circumstances allowed the research team to illustrate the protocol's full operationalization and assess concrete psychological and professional outcomes. Given these characteristics, his case serves as a paradigmatic lens through which the broader applicability of the *Sport2Next* model can be examined.

RESULTS

The participant's profile is characterized by high interpersonal energy, communicative tendencies and a vivid relational style, particularly evident in familiar and comfortable settings. He displays a proactive attitude and a moderate degree of self-confidence in approaching tasks, expressing his viewpoints assertively without adopting a directive approach.

In interpersonal exchanges, the participant demonstrated his ability to engage in meaningful dialogue, although he tends to adopt a conciliatory approach to avoid conflict. He is concerned with maintaining a positive self-image, even if he does not exhibit a strong drive for competition. From a relational point of view, the participant demonstrates a strong ability to recognize others' emotional states and responds adequately to both explicit and implicit requests for support. He usually behaves politely and exhibits selectivity in relationships, being cautious to trust individuals with whom he does not feel a natural affinity.

He performs more effectively in contexts that prefer order, sequential task management and multiple tasks at a time. He demonstrates determination in pursuing his goals, particularly when he receives positive feedback. He reports a preference for independent challenges and tasks, even if this requires more time.

Finally, he appears selective in his cognitive engagement, showing interest primarily in learning skills he perceives as practically applicable and aligned with his goals. He demonstrates moderate openness to novelty and tends to rely on previously acquired experience in familiar or structured environments.

Based on the interviews and assessments conducted by the *Sport2Next* team's psychologists, it emerges that the participant has personal resources and characteristics that make him well-suited for a professional role in the finance or management sector. These are fields where he could take on responsibilities that involve a good level of decision-making autonomy and accountability.

Although it remains uncertain whether a traditional office job involving computer work would be fully satisfying for him, the participant has expressed a desire to maintain a connection with the sports environment, which he still considers a part of his identity, and a connection with past expe-

riences actively. A reduction in competitive basketball commitments is also planned as part of the process to create space for this new professional phase.

The participant has demonstrated a strong capacity for self-directed action: when pursuing a goal, he is able to identify knowledge gaps and work to fill them, using a range of sources, including online tools, educational opportunities, and a well-established personal and professional network. This attitude, combined with self-consciousness and confidence in his own abilities, helps him remain resilient in the face of potential obstacles. The direction he has chosen appears to be consistent with his personal inclinations and abilities, forming a solid basis for the next stage of his career.

The participant had the opportunity to attend two job interviews with two different companies associated with *Sport2Next* Protocol as partners, both looking for someone with his professional and personal characteristics. Both job interviews ended with positive outcomes and the mentioned companies. Yet, right after the second interview, he signed a contract with a new team in a lower category, close to his wife's place, and then received, through a close friend, an offer to start an internship as a finance controller at an insurance agency near his new team's location.

Thanks to the protocol, the patient improves his skills, self-esteem, and awareness, factors that help him in this transitional phase of life and guide him in deciding to accept this job offer and to start a new professional role alongside his basketball career.

Limitations

Despite the promising findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the intrinsic subjectivity of single-case designs restricts the generalizability of the results. Although a multi-level triangulation strategy was implemented, qualitative observations inevitably retain an interpretative component. The absence of standardized pre- and post-measures further limits the ability to quantify change over time. Moreover, broader longitudinal studies involving larger samples of transitioning athletes are needed to strengthen empirical validation and better capture inter-individual differences in career transition pathways.

CONCLUSIONS

This case is a valuable starting point for the potential effectiveness of the *Sport2Next* protocol in supporting elite athletes during the critical phase of career transition, and also for seeing it as a tool for accompanying them throughout their entire career.

The psychological assessments, combined with qualitative observations during all interventions, suggest that the participant demonstrated significant strengths, such as emotional self-regulation, autonomy in learning, and a structured goal orientation, which served as a protective factor amid the uncertainties of retirement from competitive sport. These personal resources enabled him to actively engage in the process of redefining his professional identity and to approach new career opportunities positively.

The challenges that emerged were in line with findings in the literature on athletic retirement: the participant's limited capacity for critical self-reflection and his tendency to assume excessive responsibility reflect common psychological characteristics and risks associated with a strong athletic identity [16, 17]. The *Sport2Next* protocol, thanks to its integrated and multi-phase design, encourages the identification and elaboration of these dynamics, providing targeted psychological support and mentorship to balance the participant's strengths and vulnerabilities. The participant's evolution throughout the program highlights the importance of a structured and yet flexible framework that combines self-exploration, skills development, and access to professional reintegration opportunities. Moreover, the ongoing mentorship component appears to have been a protective and key factor for the athlete's confidence and support for a realistic yet aspirational vision for his future beyond sport.

Taken together, the results of this case suggest that the *Sport2Next* protocol can be considered not only a valuable therapeutic and developmental tool but also a structured intervention model that addresses the multifaceted needs of athletes in transition. By addressing emotional, cognitive, and practical dimensions in an integrated tool, the protocol facilitates a smoother passage into post-sport life, fostering long-term wellbeing and career satisfaction.

Future Directions

The promising results emerging from this case encouraged the application of the *Sport2Next* protocol with other athletes undergoing post-competitive career transitions. Preliminary outcomes from these interventions have proven consistent with those observed in this case, suggesting a reproducible trajectory of psychological adjustment, identity redefinition, and professional reintegration. These converging outcomes contribute to building a coherent evidence base that supports the scalability of the model.

The following section outlines possible directions for the development, validation, and dissemination of the model within the fields of sport psychology.

- Empirical validation and comparative studies: conduct comparative analyses across larger athlete samples to identify recurring patterns, strengthen external validity, and map the relationship between individual characteristics (e.g., sport type, level, age, educational background, mental well-being) and transition outcomes.
- Enhanced athlete-mentor matching systems: develop a personalized matching algorithm integrating psychological, motivational, and career-related variables to optimize compatibility between athletes and mentors, thus improving intervention effectiveness.
- Long-term monitoring and structured outcome assessments: introduce standardized pre-, mid-, and post-intervention measures to track psychological well-being, identity development, and professional progress over time, enabling more robust evaluation.
- Digital infrastructure for implementation and scaling: create a dedicated digital platform where athletes can access personalized dashboards, monitor their progression throughout the protocol, update their reports and CVs, and participate in individual sessions, group meetings, trainings, and webinars.
- Institutional endorsement and dissemination: encourage national and international sport federations to adopt, support, and promote the *Sport2Next* protocol as a structured system for managing career transitions. Such institutional integration would not only provide athletes with a clear pathway beyond sport but could also contribute to shaping future generations of managers and sport professionals.

These directions collectively outline a roadmap for the continued development, validation, and dissemination of the *Sport2Next* model within the fields of sport psychology and athlete career development.

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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and the Ethical Code for Research in Psychology of the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP), approved in 2015 and updated in July 2022 to comply with GDPR regulations (aipass.org). All procedures adhered to ethical standards to protect the participant, data confidentiality, and obtain informed consent.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from the subject involved in the study for the publication of this single case study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are not available from the corresponding author due to privacy and ethical considerations.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The authors were not directly involved in the implementation of the *Sport2Next* intervention. All activities were conducted by the official *Sport2Next* team. The authors contributed only to data analysis and scientific interpretation.

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