

Stress and depression in retirement from high-performance sports: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this systematic review, using the PRISMA guidelines, was to analyse the effects of retirement from sports and how these affect mental and physical health. The PubMed, PsycARTICLES, and Web of Science databases were used, and a total of 13 articles were selected in the final screening. It was concluded that retirement from sports is a complex phenomenon with mental health effects related to stress, anxiety, depression, loss of identity, and the physical challenges associated with detraining; this suggests the need to develop specific programs tailored to each individual case.

KEYWORDS: retirement in sport; mental health; stress; depression.

INTRODUCCIÓN

Retirement for professional athletes is a stage full of changes and adjustments that marks a turning point in their lives (Lorenzo & Bohórquez, 2013).

Several psychological variables influence retirement from sports, such as stress, understood as a physiological and psychological response that the body experiences in the face of situations it perceives as threatening (Peris-Delcampo, 2021); and anxiety, characterised by emotional responses linked to fear, mistrust, dread, unease, and pressure in the face of a real or perceived threat (Rice et al., 2019). Depression, a mental disorder characterized by a depressed mood or loss of pleasure or interest in activities over extended periods (Kim et al., 2015; Sarmiento et al., 2025), involves difficulty concentrating, excessive guilt or low self-esteem, hopelessness about the future, thoughts of death or suicide, sleep disturbances, changes in appetite or weight, and feelings of extreme fatigue or lack of energy (World Health Organization, 2025). These three aspects are particularly

relevant in retired athletes and high-performance athletes (Stambulova & Schinke, 2025).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the influence of these psychological variables on retirement from sports and to develop guidelines for promoting adequate psychological well-being (Peris-Delcampo et al., 2024) during this important stage of retirement.

METODOLOGÍA

The PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021) was used in a search between February and March 2024, with the following inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1):

The advanced search strategy was initially as follows: retirement in sport mental health AND stress AND depression, which initially returned 415 articles in PubMed (21), PsycARTICLES (354), and Web of Science (35), plus 5 from other sources. Only 40 were considered after removing duplicates, reading the title and keywords and the abstract. In total, 13 were selected (Figure 1).

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RESULTS

The following table (Table 2) lists the main characteristics of the 13 final selected items.

DISCUSSION

This study concludes that retirement from sports presents several demanding emotional challenges related to stress and anxiety,

which can lead to depression. Other challenges include loss of identity, physical problems, and an abrupt lifestyle change with varying effects. Therefore, it is necessary to promote a smooth, planned, and well-managed transition from a sports career to retirement, maintain an active lifestyle by participating in exercise programs to improve cardiovascular health and muscle function, and seek employment opportunities that allow the transfer of previously developed skills and educational background.

Table 1. Study inclusion and exclusion criteria.

	Criterios de inclusión	Criterios de exclusión
Type of study	Systematic reviews, quantitative studies, and qualitative studies.	Case studies, narrative reviews
Population	High-performance athletes who have retired from competitive sports.	Studies that did not focus on high-performance athletes.
Variables	Stress and depression.	Studies that did not include stress or depression variables.
Language	Spanish, English, and Portuguese.	Languages other than Spanish, English, and Portuguese.
Publication date	Published between January 2004 and March 2024.	Studies conducted before 2004 and after March 2024.

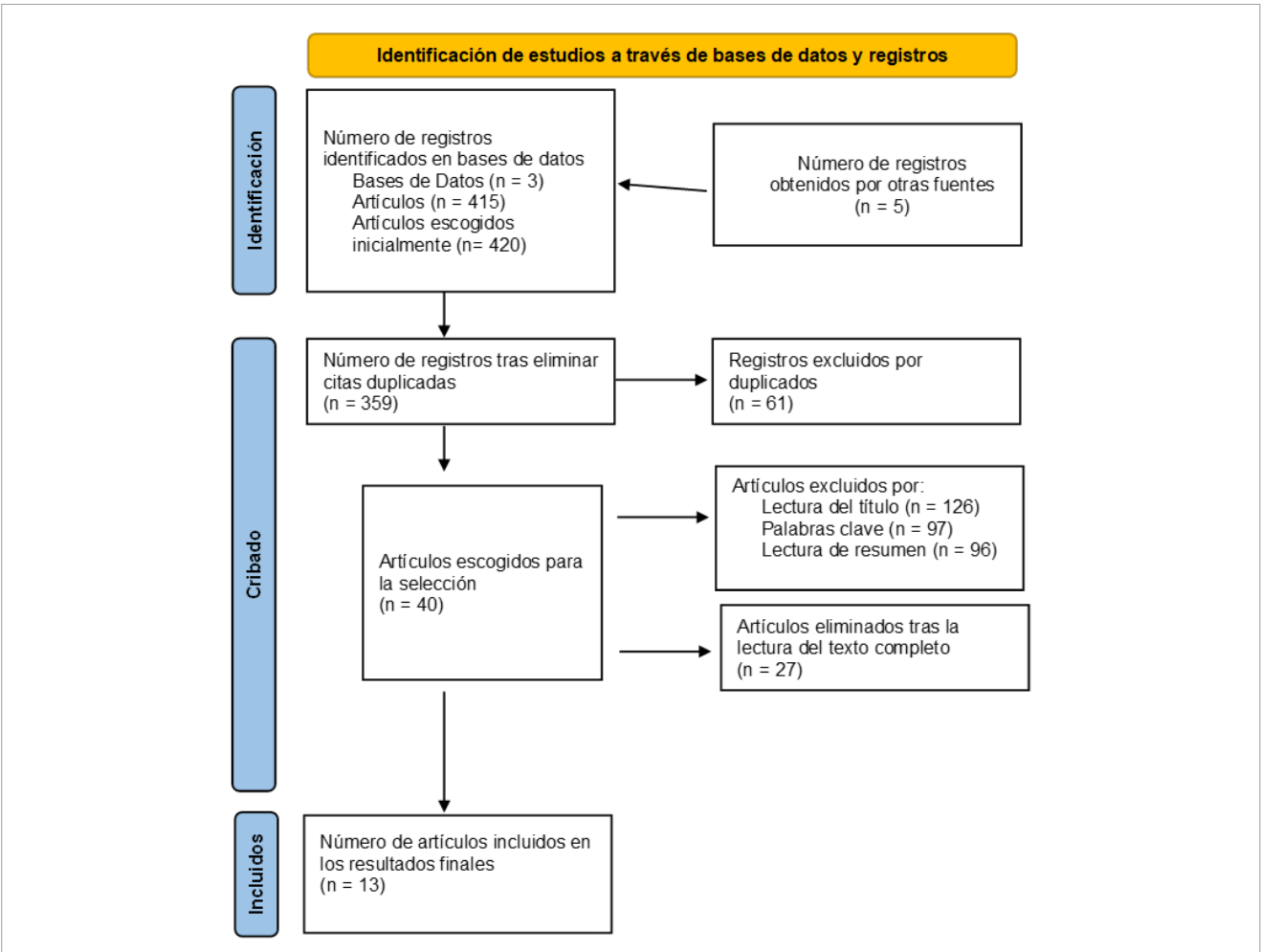


Figure 1. Flowchart of the study conducted.

Table 2. Characteristics of the selected studies.

References (authors/ year)	Study	Sample	Objective	Instruments	Total sample	Age of participants (years)	Sport	Resultss
Shander and Petrie (2021)	Cross-sectional	College athletes	To assess life satisfaction, depressive symptoms, and body satisfaction	Satisfaction questionnaires, depressive symptoms, body satisfaction	200 retired athletes	18–25	Various sports	Retired athletes reported lower levels of life satisfaction and body satisfaction, and higher levels of depressive symptoms compared with active athletes.
Vidaurreta-Lima and Rojas-Vidaurreta (2020)	Descriptive	Cuban athletes	To investigate the process of athletic detraining and its psychological impact on Cuban athletes	Semi-structured interviews	50 retired athletes	20–35	Various sports	Significant psychological benefits were associated with appropriate detraining among Cuban athletes.
Aston et al. (2020)	Cross-sectional	Hockey players	To compare depressive symptoms in active and retired hockey players	Depressive symptoms questionnaire	150 retired players	25–40	Ice hockey	Retired players reported significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms compared with active players.
Coleman and Roberts (2021)	Descriptive	Volunteer and involuntary athletes	To explore aspects of mental health in sports retirement	Semi-structured interviews	30 athletes (voluntary and involuntary)	20–35	Various sports	Differences were identified in the retirement experiences of voluntary and involuntary athletes, with distinct implications for mental health.
Lorenzo and Bohórquez (2013)	Descriptive	Soccer players	To analyze soccer players' perceptions of the sports retirement process	Semi-structured interviews	50 retired soccer players	30–45	Soccer	The main factors influencing football players' perceptions of their retirement process were identified.
Iverson et al. (2021)	Cross-sectional	Rugby players	To identify predictors and correlates of depression in retired rugby players	Depression questionnaires	100 retired players	25–35	Rugby	Several predictors and correlates of depression were identified among retired rugby players, highlighting the importance of mental health during sports retirement.
Van Ramele et al. (2017)	Longitudinal	Professional soccer players	To investigate the incidence of mental health issues in retired soccer players, including adverse events and support received	Interviews, questionnaires	150 retired soccer players	30–40	Soccer	A high incidence of mental health problems was observed among retired football players, influenced by adverse life events and the support received.
Jones and Watson (2023)	Qualitative	Retired athletes	To explore the experience of sports retirement from a philosophical perspective	Semi-structured interviews	20 retired athletes	30–50	Various sports	The study provides an in-depth exploration of the sports retirement experience from a philosophical perspective, highlighting the emotional and existential complexity of this process.
Barcza-Renner et al. (2020)	Qualitative	Former NCAA Division I athletes	To examine sports retirement in former NCAA Division I athletes	Interviews	15 former NCAA athletes	NA	NCAA	The study provides an in-depth understanding of the sports retirement experience among former NCAA Division I athletes.

Continue...

Table 2. Continuation.

References (authors/ year)	Study	Sample	Objective	Instruments	Total sample	Age of participants (years)	Sport	Resultss
Agresta et al. (2008)	Descriptive	Retired athletes	To investigate the physical and emotional causes and consequences of sports retirement	Questionnaires	100 retired athletes	25–40	Various sports	The study identifies multiple physical and emotional causes and consequences of sports retirement among retired athletes.
Schwenk et al. (2007)	Descriptive	Former soccer players	To explore the relationship between depression and pain in former professional soccer players	Questionnaires	75 former soccer players	30–50	Soccer	A significant association was observed between depression and pain in former professional football players.
Bundon et al. (2018)	Qualitative	Elite para-athletes	To explore the experiences of elite para-athletes at the end of their sports careers	Interviews	12 elite para-athletes	NA	Para-sport	The study highlights the struggles and challenges faced by elite para-athletes at the end of their sporting careers.
Lavallee (2019)	Quantitative	Athletes	To examine how participation in sports career transition planning improves performance	Questionnaire	200 athletes	NA	Various	Participation in sports career transition planning was found to improve athletes' performance.

Limitations of the study include potential selection bias, as the samples may not be entirely representative; information bias, which can affect the accuracy of athletes' responses; a lack of consensus regarding the definitions of "retired athlete" or "sports career transition"; the lack of longitudinal follow-up in some studies; a focus on specific sports while neglecting others; and the risk of selective reporting, where positive results are more likely to be highlighted. Further longitudinal and prospective research is recommended to better understand each factor that influences this adaptation to retirement from sport, as well as the influence of different contexts on it.

Therefore, pre-retirement planning, developing transferable skills for their new life, maintaining an active lifestyle, and the appropriate role of coaches, sports staff, and other healthcare professionals (all properly trained) in addressing these emotional and physical challenges are fundamental to a successful and healthy retirement from sport.

CONCLUSION

The main conclusions of this study highlight the need to adequately prepare for retirement from sports in order to support athletes' mental health, thereby facilitating the transition from active athletic life to a major life shift for those who are no longer athletes. Failure to do so can lead to psychological difficulties that may escalate into serious problems.

Hence the importance of promoting appropriate programs—developed through an interdisciplinary approach by professionals in psychology and other fields—to ensure this transition is as smooth and well-adjusted as possible.

CRediT authorship contribution statement:

Guillermo Sancho-Biosca — Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Writing; Formal Analysis.

Paula Ortiz-Marholz — Conceptualization; Validation; Visualization; Writing.

Alberto Gil-Galve — Conceptualization; Validation; Visualization; Writing.

Mario Reyes-Bossio — Validation; Data Curation; Visualization; Drafting.

David Peris-Delcampo — Conceptualization; Methodology; Research; Drafting; Supervision.

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