

Career Support Activities for Professional Athletes and Future Issues

—A look at the case of J.League—

Kozaburo Shigeno

(Japan Professional Football League)

With the establishment of the J.League Career Support Center in 2002, efforts to think about the careers of athletes, primarily in the world of professional sports, and to provide specific support to them changed from a topic of interest to reality. Domestically, the efforts have expanded to include the JOC, professional baseball and other sports.

This paper introduces a case study on the activities of J.League, which has acted ahead of other sports organizations in its current provision of career support services to athletes. The purpose is to examine the issue of career support for athletes.

1. Establishment of the J.League Career Support Center
2. Activities of the J.League Career Support Center
3. Positive results of activities implemented by the J.League Career Support Center
4. Future issues

Many professional athletes, for whom sports are a daily occupation, are particularly unprepared when it comes to not only losing their jobs but also life planning in general with respect to what happens when their days as athletes are over and how to survive outside the world of sports. The individual as well as those around them are sometimes reminded of this at the turning point of retirement or thereafter, in other words, when they come face to face with difficult circumstances after losing their jobs. For that reason, when they reach this turning point, it is anything but a disadvantage to have someone around who can act as a mentor, but often the athletes would not actively seek them out.

The term “career support” has become a familiar one of late, but career support for athletes is not something that can be summed up in a phrase. It goes without saying that the method of offering the necessary support as well as the contents will vary depending on the attributes (amateur or professional) and upbringing of the athlete to receive the support, and sometimes a measured approach is required.

In this paper, the author will bring up the background that brought about the J.League Career Support Center along with specific career support efforts and link them to future issues.

1. Establishment of the J.League Career Support Center

Behind the establishment of the Career Support Center was the voice of the athletes themselves. Athletes in the world of Japanese soccer first went professional in 1985, eight years before the establishment of J.League. They were registered from the Japan Soccer League (as it was then called) the following year, but there was no specific professional care provided to athletes after retirement or any organizational support for long-term life planning afterwards. Moreover, there were no cases where any particularly large movement arose on the athletes' side to come up with measures to raise awareness or address post-retirement life.

After that, in 2000, the J.League Pro-Footballers Association (known as "JPA" at the time) conducted a survey targeting 740 players in the 27 clubs of the first and second leagues ("J1" and "J2") entitled the "2000 JPA Comprehensive Survey of Athlete Awareness" (Figure 1). According to the survey, 76.2% of the athletes felt "insecure about life after retirement," and the latent uneasiness of the athletes came to the surface.

Based on these results, the J.League Pro-Footballers Association sought organizational support from J.League. As a result, the J.League Career Support Center was established in March 2002.

The J.League Career Support Center receives 4% of the transfer fee when a J.League player transfers between clubs as the funds for its operation.

-76.2% of the athletes say they "feel insecure about life after retirement," and a second career is a major interest among them, but the survey also showed that there are

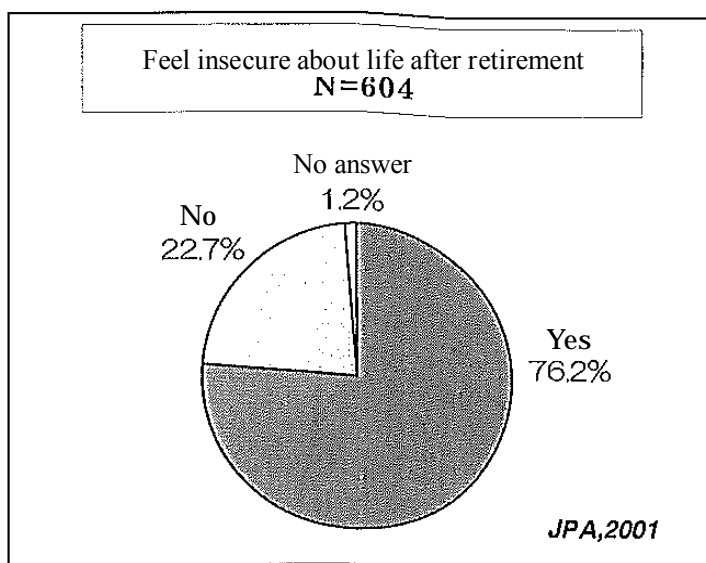


Figure 1

2. Activities of the J.League Career Support Center

The Career Support Center divides its work into “efforts for active players” and “efforts for retiring players.”

In its efforts for active players, it engages in measures designed to help the athletes to recognize their position as a professional soccer player with a limited career and provide them with support so that they can lead more enriching lives as professional soccer players.

The measures are also designed to help them consider a career path that encompasses their whole lives. Specifically, the players are provided with opportunities to experience various different professions through internships during the off-season.

At the same time, as part of the efforts for retiring players, the Center has set up a system for providing individual consultations by phone or in person to support players whose contracts were not renewed. This takes place around the end of November each year when notifications are sent concerning contract renewals for the following year. Many players desire to transfer and continue their activities as an athlete. However, there are also players who have begun thinking about their post-retirement life plans and post-retirement employment opportunities outside of soccer that had put it off during the season, so support is provided on an individual basis.

J.League replaces the old with the new every year, registering and deregistering more than 100 players. More than 60% of the new players have signed professional contracts right out of high school. At the same time, the average age of the deregistered players is around twenty-six. That the players are signing contracts right out of high school means that they have never had part-time jobs and are lacking in those and other types of career experiences. Based on reasons such as that, the aforementioned internship program is taking hold among the players year after year as an opportunity to experience other professions, helping them develop work values from a different angle and giving them a chance to simply find out what is out there in terms of work.

The Center also actively organizes lectures by former soccer players and former athletes from other sports to show the players what post-retirement life is like and bring clarity through opportunities to share experiences as both a speaker and a listener.

3. Positive results of activities implemented by the J.League Career Support Center

The positive results of the activities implemented by the Career Support Center are not found in the numbers of job placements following retirement but rather that during the season, when retirement approaches or after retirement, there is a place for players to go with questions, and that players can actually go in for advice.

Up until now, players have considered uneasiness about post-retirement life something that had nothing to do with them (if they even considered it at all). Before 2002, former high school and university teachers were at the top of the list of the few people that players could go to for advice

and were a sort of lifeline, but through the activities of the Center, the players can get objective opinions and have their uneasiness lessened. These are positive results of the activities.

Additionally, the Center publishes a support magazine and introduces case studies on post-retirement life. The magazine also introduces organizations looking to hire retiring players. By providing information such as this, the Center places the spotlight on former players again, and this has raised understanding.

When it comes to uneasiness, there are many down-to-earth things like the loss of financial security after retirement, but surprisingly, one of the biggest anxieties is not having built up hopes and dreams for the new post-retirement world like they had when they were aspiring to become professional athletes. The Center has a function of sharing opportunities to spend time and think about the future to address these anxieties in a capacity other than that of a family member, former teacher or close friend.

4. Future issues

As it is the nature of things for professional athletes to be faced with the need to select a new profession upon retiring from their sport, it is easy to point out that preparations should be made in advance and that it is a problem that should be handled by the parties involved.

At the same time, however, in reality the author has seen many cases where athletes in the world of sports begin thinking about such things for the first time when the career turning point comes.

One must understand that there are frequently cases where the results obtained through the efforts (time and action) expended along the way to becoming a professional athlete have been given in exchange for opportunities to acquire a wide and long-reaching perspective on life and specific skills.

Athletes live in a world of competition where skills are honed and only a few from among the total number of competitors actually get in. Not all of them are engaged in preparations for the day when they can no longer play.

Moreover, there are the following facts:

- (1) The sports world is not the only path for professional athletes after retirement, and in many cases they have a large impact on other fields (promotion and development).
- (2) Many of the athletes go straight from high school to the professional world, so in many cases they lack work values.

The parties concerned and those around them should be aware so that they can reset the situation up to that point (not forgetting their past as an athlete) and create opportunities for re-learning so that they can pursue a new path in their own right. Specific measures need to be created for that purpose.

Reference

1. Press release by J.League Pro-Footballers Association on February 13, 2001: "JPA conducts first questionnaire survey in Japan to clarify J.Leaguers' thoughts: 2000 JPA Comprehensive Survey of Athlete Awareness"
2. "LIFE IS PITCH." J.League Career Support Center. 2008.