

For sporting greats, knowing when to quit is the hardest challenge of all

June 29 2015, by Tony Westbury

When the men's seedings for Wimbledon [were published](#), they contained something that was both telling and inevitable. Rafael Nadal, winner of the tournament in 2008 and 2010, was ranked just 10th. No one could doubt that the Spaniard is one of the most formidable players ever to have held a tennis racquet. His 14 grand-slam wins stand second equal with Pete Sampras in the [all-time men's rankings](#) behind Roger Federer's 17. But at the age of just 29, the growing sense is that his best years are behind him.

To draw an analogy with another sport, it reminds me of the [famous quote](#) from the great Liverpool manager Bill Shankly: "Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that".

How true his words have been for many who have tried to walk away from the game. Take the sad case of Clarke Carlisle, the former Blackpool and Burnley defender, who finished playing in 2013 and went on to chair the Professional Footballers' Association. The following December, suffering from depression, [he attempted to](#) take his own life by stepping out in front of a lorry.

Carlisle is far from alone. Many high-profile sportspeople face profound psychological struggles at the conclusion of their careers. Retirement comes much earlier than in other professions, where not so long ago people didn't retire at all. In most sports, even relatively late retirements

such as footballer [Sir Stanley Matthews at 50](#) and cricketer [Brian Close at 55](#) are of a bygone age. Nowadays it is rare for the "oldies" in any sport to play in the same draw as the best in the world.

Gravity catches up

The longevity of a player's career is largely determined by the physical demands of the sport, of course. Rugby players can lengthen their career by carefully limiting the number of games played each season. But for most by the time they reach their mid-30s, the repeated collisions have taken their toll. They are likely to be being outperformed by younger players, who inevitably recover more quickly.

Endurance sports such as running and rowing demand such heavy training that early retirement is a wise long-term health decision. More than 25 years of training have left marathon-runner Paula Radcliffe with a [chronic foot injury](#), for example. Each mile for Paula is around 450 foot strikes – and during heavy training periods she runs more than 100 miles a week for months on end. She will carry that injury for the rest of her life.

Regardless of whether you are forced out by injury, however, retirement from sport is rarely simple. There are no clear statistics on what proportion of players make the choice to end their career, but in all cases the implications are the same – to withdraw from an activity which has given day-to-day life meaning and structure from childhood is incredibly difficult.

Not surprisingly, the [early research linked](#) retirement from sport with the emotional grieving process experienced by people who have received a terminal diagnosis. It [argued that](#) you could apply the famous [Kübler-Ross](#) stages of grief from 1969 in the same way: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. This [has been criticised](#)

by many researchers and applied practitioners, but they do help us to understand the emotional complexity of the experience.

For many, the big hurdles to overcome are psycho-social – the extent to which the performer viewed themselves as a performer, the loss of their "sporting identity", the structure the sport gave them and the social contact with people with whom they have shared a very significant part of their emotional lives. Such people often feel irreplaceable, at least in the short term. And to make all this worse, by withdrawing from regular training, players are not getting their neurochemical "fix" of endorphins, dopamine and serotonin. The world seems a bleaker, less exciting and more stressful place as a result.

When to go

The public spectacle of players coping with the end of their careers can be painful. Putting his [personal life](#) to one side, watching Tiger Woods' [current struggle](#) undermines the memories of when he dominated the world of golf. His body has been battered into submission and he needs to stop.

There are always a lot of retirements after a major game – partly because goals have been achieved, but also because there is a "pause" to reflect on how much commitment and sacrifice is required for the next peak. There is often a sense of relief that it's over. The question I pose to athletes at this stage is, are you ready for this? To approach that I begin with a simple decisional balance of the push factors and the pull. This can be extremely revealing as it clarifies the performer's motives in their mind and how much commitment is required.

This is exactly the sort of thought process that Rafael Nadal should begin. [His knees have been](#) his Achilles heel for almost a decade now. He has to take regular time out for treatment. Despite his [recent victory](#)

on the grass at the Mercedes Cup in Germany, he is on borrowed time. Retirement at 29 having achieved everything he set out to achieve is certainly not a failure. The same could be said of Roger Federer, who is ranked second for the tournament a few weeks short of his 34th birthday. If he announced that Wimbledon 2015 was his final appearance, the crowds would flock to salute his achievement and wish him well as he began the next chapter of his life.

And so back to Bill Shankly, a man who, to the surprise of no-one, coped very poorly with retirement. In the years after he [stepped down](#) from Liverpool in 1974 at the age of 60, he regularly turned up to watch his team train through the fence of the Melwood ground. This is a stark reminder that for many, [retirement](#) from a sporting role needs to look beyond sport. The worst thing that you can have is a daily reminder that you are no longer doing what you did best.

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