

Staying in the race

by Manikavasagam Jegathesan

“ Dr Jegathesan poses an important question to all athletes – what follows when their active careers in athletics are over? He presents the problems, both physical and psychological, brought about by what may be a quite drastic change in their life style and gives his views on the many options open to them.

He emphasises the responsibilities of the athletic federations and suggests ways in which they can assist retired athletes to continue their contribution to athletics as administrators or coaches. ”

Dr Jegathesan (Malaysia) is a member of the IAAF Medical Committee. He is very active in athletics in Asia and his many articles of a philosophical nature demonstrate a keen and wide interest in athletics which goes far beyond the realms of sports medicine.

They say an old soldier never dies, he just fades away. What do old athletes do? They retire and go to seed; they retire but lead a physically fit and healthy lifestyle; they continue a competitive lifestyle through the Veterans' movement; or they may return to the sport as administrator, official or coach.

Retirement from top level sport is psychologically and physically no different from retiring from a high paying job. Both involve a severe lifestyle change and, to the mentally and financially unprepared, can be highly stressful. The athlete has to cope with elimination from the limelight, with its attendant loss of adulation and fame and nowadays, also loss of income. Thus, this may become a time of very difficult adjustment.

Athletes should be prepared for retirement. Monies earned through sport should have been carefully invested; alternative careers nurtured pari passu with their sporting activities or new careers prepared through appropriate training.

Counselling should be provided about stepping down gracefully from centre stage. Governments and sports associations can assist by providing roles for retired athletes, which will serve the purpose of helping them retain their feeling of self worth, tapping the resource of their rich experience and exploiting their potential as role models.

The physical effects of withdrawing completely from high levels of activity can be quite dramatic, aided and abetted by the ageing process and compounded even further by bad habits such as over-eating, drinking and smoking. Muscles atrophy, generally to be

replaced weight-wise by fat. Blood vessels shut down, the heart muscles become clogged up by atheromas and joints become stiff. Ex-athletes even more so than ordinary people need to follow a healthy lifestyle, based on good habits, sensible eating and a rational exercise programme.

The benefits of exercise are many; they include physical benefits such as improved muscle strength and neuromuscular coordination, decreased risk of heart disease, lower blood pressure and deceleration of age related decline in cardiorespiratory fitness and strength. Loss of lean body mass and accumulation of surplus fat may be prevented, good posture and looks maintained and the circulation stimulated. In addition, there are the mental benefits of an improved sense of well being, better concentration and memory, a brightening of temperament and the emotional satisfaction derived from physical competence and independence.

An exercise programme to maintain cardiorespiratory fitness will involve an appropriate form of continuous aerobic activity, lasting 15-30 minutes on at least three days a week, the intensity of the exercise being at a rate that will raise the pulse rate to between 130-150 beats per minute.

It is clear, therefore, that, to remain fit, one does not have to run the marathon, swim the Ganges or climb the Everest. However, the above mentioned exercise prescription, which is based on the recommendations of the American College of Sports Medicine, does not guarantee weight control. That will depend on food intake, type of lifestyle and routine energy expenditure.

Exercise should be a lifelong activity and can be considered not only to add years to one's life but also life to one's years. Those who are dedicated to exercise also find themselves motivated to avoid unhealthy lifestyles, such as over-eating, smoking and drinking.

However, for many ex-athletes, though seldom for the top ones, this level of activity is not enough and they still yearn for the

thrills of the competitive atmosphere. For them there is the veterans' movement, which organises age group competitions, from the age of 40 for men and 35 for women. This movement, which started as recreational and social in character, has now escalated to such competitive keenness that the controlling organisations are beginning to talk about introducing doping control at their championships. I feel that veteran athletes can enjoy these competitions but should realise the limitations and participate in them with sensible attitudes. Overuse and chronic injuries, super-imposed on the physiological and physical effects of aging, can extract a heavy toll.

Generally athletes, on retirement, should be encouraged to channel their competitiveness into furthering their careers and professions and consider physical activity as recreation and a means of maintaining general fitness and recreation.

One would also have thought that the most natural thing for ex-champions to do would be to come back to the sport in an administrative capacity, as technical officials or as coaches. This does happen, of course, but not to the extent that one would have expected. More must be done actively to increase this involvement, so that this pool of talented resources will not be wasted. Suitable athletes can be sent on appropriate courses to equip them for extended involvement in the sport, albeit in different capacities. Livelihoods can be made for those who want to make it their careers. For the others, who have careers of their own, this continuance allows them to enjoy the amenable lifestyles of the sporting fraternity.

The message is 'there is life after retirement from high level competition'. Prepare for this and accept the opportunities that abound for fit, healthy and satisfying lifestyles through exercise programmes, veterans' events or in involvement with the controlling bodies of sports.