

# ATHLETES IN TRANSIT

How athletes cope with life after sport

Story by Karen Clark / Photography by Ewan Nicholson

It can be the hardest time in an athlete's life, a time of turmoil, confusion, and loss. In the sporting world, it's called transition, a harmless sounding word that marks the time between when an athlete leaves competition and finds their way in the world outside of sport.



**ERYN BULMER BARRETT  
WITH HER SON, CONNOR**  
Two-time Olympian and  
former World Diving Champion

## FROM ATHLETE TO JOURNALIST: My Story of Transition

*The author of "Athletes in Transit" Karen Clark, 1996 Olympic Silver Medallist and 2004 CBC Olympic Commentator, explains what she went through after her competition days.*

Transition plummeted on my shoulders like a Jupiter-sized asteroid. One day I was an Olympic medalist, ranked number two in the world and heading to the World Championships at the top of my game; the next I was crippled by a back injury that obliterated my athletic career and ended my life as I knew it.

At first I convinced myself I was just happy to be alive and able to walk—the fourth back surgery left me with a spinal infection that could have robbed me of both. As time passed, I felt a growing sense of confusion and loss. If I wasn't an athlete, who was I? If I wasn't working towards being an Olympic and World Champion, where was I going?

Without sport I had no identity, no compass to guide me on my journey. The very centre of who I was no longer existed. I was completely lost and I thought I would never find my way.

One day the fog cleared, the sense of loss abated, and I found a new goal and a new passion. While I was no longer a world-class athlete, I still possessed the attributes of one. I still have drive, determination, and the will to succeed. I still want to spend my days working towards something I am proud of.

It wasn't a matter of a picking a new challenge out of a hat. I had to look deep inside myself and think about what I wanted to do. It was a time of colossal insecurity and delight in discovery.

The world is an amazing place with vast possibilities, and only when you embrace it can you uncover its treasures.



Karen Clark

**"IT CAN BE A HUGE LIFE CRISIS FOR some athletes,"** says Dorothy Holden, a psychologist and career and transition consultant for the Canadian Sport Centre Calgary (CSCC). "Some athletes lose their identity and sense of who they are. Actually, going through a transition can feel like a tornado."

Olympic bobsledder Ahmed Marshall felt like his life was over when an injury stopped him from competing after the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics. "I felt lost for the first time in my life," says Marshall. "I was so used to hav-

ing goals, being focused. It was like being dropped off in the middle of a dark forest in the night and bumping into trees everywhere you turn."

community leaders. We value athletes for the rest of their lives and we want to support them in good times and bad."

The CSCC has a number of workshops, counseling, and mentoring programs for athletes—Career Planning, Resume and Interview Preparation, Public Speaking, Self-Marketing, and Transition.

According to Holden, transition is not an experience unique to athletes. Everyone is likely to go through transitions as their life changes. Transition is defined as the person-

al process of adjusting to changing circumstances; it is an intensely individual process, which involves psychological, emotional, and behavioural reorientation.

"Transition is hardest for athletes whose identity is very narrow," says Holden. "Those who don't know themselves in any other aspects have a difficult time figuring out who they are outside of sport."

Kevin Crockett, Olympic bronze medallist in 1998, used the skills he'd developed as a world-class speed skater to find his career as a coach. "I set specific goals for myself to achieve in starting another career," says

Crockett. "I didn't get caught up in moping. I was proactive and took risks. I figured out what I loved and found a way to do something connected with that."

Two-time Olympian and world diving champion Eryn Bulmer Barrett, had no difficulty adjusting to life after sport. "It wasn't hard for me," says Bulmer Barrett. "I didn't define myself by my Olympic results. I prepared for retirement by having a relationship, working towards a degree, and having a job." After the 2000 Sydney Games, Bulmer Barrett married former teammate Neil Barrett, and they now have a 20-month-old son, Connor. Bulmer Barrett is also less than a year away from completing her commerce degree at the University of Calgary. "I knew I was going to retire after 2000 or sometime in the next year," she says. "I prepared myself for that."

Holden says that athletes with a more balanced life and identity tend to have an easier transition. For those who don't, there are some strategies to move forward. "The main point is for anyone going through a transition to know that what they are feeling is normal, and they will get through it," says Holden.

For athletes like Marshall, Crockett, and Bulmer Barrett, their transition is complete.

For more information on how the CSCC is helping athletes, contact Karen Strong, CSCC life services manager, at (403) 220-8184 and [karen@canadiansportcentre.com](mailto:karen@canadiansportcentre.com). 