



Jumping Hurdles From the Stadium to the Corporation: How Top Athletes Convert to Business

By Antoine Tirard and Claire Lyell

Many of us may idolise great sporting stars and see them as forever young. But we tend to forget to wonder about what the future brings for them, beyond their last Olympic podium, as it is a subject that is not often talked about and almost taboo. These sports men and women stay engraved in our minds, at their peak performance age, and we give little thought to the next chapter. However, for most of them, there must be a next chapter, once their bodies are no longer able to cooperate with the demands of top-level training, and the transition into this chapter is seldom managed well, as we discovered, in talking to four former elite athletes who transitioned into the world of business.

Eric Brodnax grew up in the US Virgin Islands, and his pioneering spirit in sport and work no doubt derive from the driven and adventurous family environment in which he grew up. Eric's family of high achievers were all involved in equestrian sports, and so it was natural that he ride with his older brothers and sisters from an early age. His father had been a member of the US Olympic team, and was now involved in the local federation, along with his mother. As he says, "I was steeped in it from birth".

He enjoyed riding so much that he did push himself, and found success in junior show-jumping and then three day events. He carefully planned his choice of university to allow him to continue in his sport, and luckily this took

him to a wonderful Ivy League school, Princeton. During those undergraduate years, he thoroughly enjoyed his riding, and qualified for the world championships during his final year, though he chose not to attend, to ensure his academic success.



Eric Brodnax

- *Country:* United States
- *Sport:* Equestrianism
- *Job:* Chief Digital Officer at CoStart Group

On leaving the world of classrooms and coursework, Eric was able to focus more exclusively on his sport, and set himself a very clear agenda. If, after a defined period, he was not in the top ten in the world, he would retire, and set new targets for himself. His progression was spectacular, and he joined the team for the Pan-American Games in 87, followed by the 88 Olympics. However, with a 35th place at the Olympics, it was strikingly clear that he had not reached the threshold he had hoped for. He says that he realised he was “good but not extraordinary”. It was time to act on his agenda and leave his sporting career behind him.

This Sporting Life

According to Eric, most who transition out of equestrian sports do so fairly young, especially as it is not a high-profile, sponsored sport that “pays the bills”. On leaving, despite all his family connections with the Federation, he received no support at all from them. He looked, instead, to family and friends, who were already well connected to companies and individuals in the City of London, and other big international markets. Along the way, he received the advice to try to join a graduate training scheme of some kind, in the hope that this structured development would give him choices in the future.

While Eric says that it was clearly useful to have been an Olympian to get doors opened,

once the door was open, he was on his own in trying to persuade future employers to take him on. He had a lot more “chats” with companies than he received offers! He also was suffering from not really knowing what he wanted to do, as he had been so focused on his sport until then. In a stroke of luck, he was invited to join the graduate training programme at General Electric, and was able to try on lots of different hats for a few years. While the pure corporate environment he was in probably did not suit his entrepreneurial spirit all that well, he definitely received the basic training and the “mainstreaming” he had needed, and felt encouraged to develop himself further by taking an MBA, at Wharton.

As he finished up at Wharton, and watched many of his friends enter the usual channels of investment banking and management consulting, Eric felt the call of the entrepreneurial wild. His summer job between the two years of his MBA was working on privatization strategies in the former Czechoslovakia, and one of his clients was the Slovak wine industry. This drove the idea of starting a company to import wine from Eastern Europe, but due to quality control issues, he refocused his energies to importing South African wines, another emerging wine market at that time and one on which the US had just lifted economic sanctions. This ability to spot opportunities and run with them is one we found to be absolutely constant throughout the people we interviewed.

From this first enterprise, Eric has moved on to multiple entrepreneurial activities, sometimes as founder, sometimes as early joiner. Either way, he thrived on the energy and dynamism of this area, and during a stint of several years at National Geographic, he was eventually tired by the less spirited environment he found there, however wonderful the brand.

His most recent venture is in partnership with a former classmate from Princeton, in a company that still feels like a start-up, despite being 30 years old! He loves the possibility of “contesting the field to win”, and finding the vision and resources to be number one in their field. But Eric is not a constant thrill seeker. As

he says, “I am not always looking for new or different challenges, but I am definitely inspired by pursuing to its logical end whatever I undertake”.

Eric’s number one piece of advice is to create and use networks to the hilt. Obviously in his case, the family environment helped him to be relatively well-connected from the very outset, but he has continued to knock down doors and build authentic relationships wherever he goes, making him a popular manager, colleague and fellow-businessman.

He also has strong words on the “typecast” roles that are so frequently offered to sports people as they retire – sport commentators, brand ambassadors, etc. While these may work for some, there is no guarantee, and it is an awfully exposed way to fail, if that is the outcome.

Field of Dreams

Andrew Noble was probably a little too young when he “retired” from the British ski team to be offered a typecast role, but, while having good connections and some experience of his own entrepreneurial initiatives, he did not have a classical pattern of study and work in business. Luckily he had a big brain and a lot of natural resources, that carried him through his transition.

Andrew also came from a family of entrepreneurs, and successful businesspeople, his father having created a merchant bank in Edinburgh, and built it to a substantial business. So, from a young age, he was encouraged to think about how a business works, and about what defines success. This helped him as he entered the sport of skiing, by a fairly chilly route... He and his older brothers and sisters got on a bus weekly, to go and ply the slopes in the nearby Cairngorm hills, with the local ski club. Although he was very good at and keen on many other sports, it turned out that Andrew had a gift for skiing and was already thoroughly enjoying competing at extremely high levels by the time he was in his early teens. Both parents had a philosophy of pursuing excellence, and Andrew, like Eric, may well have been expressing his position as

youngest sibling, out to prove himself, as he pushed himself to greater levels.

The first test of his resilience came at the age of fifteen, when he broke his back. Ironically, he was not even training at the time, but “messing around” off-piste, “probably showing off to a girl”, when he was caught out and fell very badly. An injury is a terrible thing for any of us, but even more of a challenge for a young person used to being highly active all the time. The recovery period was long and trying for Andrew, but did serve to allow him to reflect on things, and to decide to return ever more determined once he was better.



Andrew Noble

- *Country:* Great Britain
- *Sport:* Alpine skiing
- *Job:* Associate at McKinsey & Company

Shortly after this, he was given the opportunity to “go pro”, and, inspired by the unusually high performance of the British ski team at the time, he pushed himself further and further. When it came time to decide whether to take up the place he had won at Bristol University, he deferred it, first once, then twice, and then a third and final time! While he valued academia, his focus all that time was clearly on reaching the peak of his performance. One of the big challenges for Andrew was that there are not many university campuses based on Alpine hilltops!

Andrew’s rankings went up and up, and he started to make money from the sponsorship and product endorsements that went with his place in the UK team. He narrowly missed qualifying for the 2006 Olympics, and this was another call on his resilience. Especially with the additional embarrassment of his family having booked to go and watch him compete in this event!

However, he was able to move on quickly, and focus on how to use the next four years to achieve the Olympian objective.

Olympia

In the build-up to the 2010 Olympics, Andrew qualities as a team player and a natural leader were called upon in a way he would never have expected. He had already qualified, but some of his teammates were not yet quite there. Four weeks before the opening ceremony, it was announced that the British Ski Federation had gone bankrupt, and there would be no further support for the skiers in the team, either financial or logistical.

As one of the older members of the team, and a natural action-taker and motivator, Andrew recalls calling sponsors and logistics suppliers, in the hope of rescuing something from the situation. This called on every resource he had, including a high resistance to pressure. He also got to understand the functionings of a team more intimately, describing the situation as follows: “this was a very ambitious group of people, with intrinsically individual motivations, but who needed to function as a team!” Curiously, this clarity of mind was useful not only then, but also in his future career at the notoriously competitive strategy consultancy, McKinsey!

Having competed at the Olympics, and recognising that his performance had not been as strong as he had hoped, Andrew was feeling more than a little disappointed, after the Federation debacle. It did not take much for him to feel that it was time to move on. This time, once again, it was family and friends who saw him through it, offering material and emotional support.

The strategic planner attitude that we see throughout our subjects came to the fore, and with advice from his father, Andrew mapped out a five year plan, bearing in mind that he wanted a serious job in business, but did not even have a degree, let alone any obviously relevant work experience. What he needed was an opportunity where his colleagues would recognise and value his transferable skills and competencies!

Using connections, and having sat his GMAT, he found a first role in a venture capital company, as an unpaid intern. True to type, he read, took courses, and applied himself far

harder than most would have during this time. The focus of the sportsman came to the fore...

Then followed almost three years of full time, properly paid work in both venture capital and private equity, in which he learnt, stretched himself, and gobbled up all opportunities that came his way. He also identified and found a new support network, and became very interested in EQ, or emotional intelligence.

In 2014, despite not having the academic qualifications required, Andrew persuaded the selection committee at INSEAD to admit him to study for an MBA. This was a giant breakthrough for him, and the early weeks and months were a huge challenge, in which he tried to combine academic and social agendas by burning the proverbial candle. Having missed out on university, Andrew was keen to ensure he expanded his network.

A League of Their Own

Having promised his girlfriend before going to do his MBA that he would not go into strategy consulting, due to the long hours and resulting emotional strain, it was ironic, but somewhat inevitable that Andrew would be attracted in the direction of this very collegiate but competitive elitist profession! Like Eric he found that being an Olympian allowed him to open a lot of doors, but as he said, I had, until then, had an awful lot of “chats” that led ultimately to nothing.”

It is now a few months since Andrew joined McKinsey, and he is excited by the speed, the challenge, and the strong team spirit. He says of his new career: “it is like pressing the reset button and going back to ground-zero. There is an incredible amount to learn, and relearn, but I’m hugely enjoying the expectation of excellence”. He also enjoys the autonomy that is afforded to him, allowing him to find the individual motivation that he derives from his sporting background.

One final advantage that Andrew feels he has brought with him from sport is his ability to create and build significant relationships. He sees that he is more experienced and effective than his peers in this area, and is comfortable building rapport with clients. He describes this

as a result of his being “somewhat all-rounded with life experiences to drawn upon”. At this point, he is ready to fly ever faster through the ups and downs of this very challenging career choice, safe in the knowledge that his earlier years are serving him every day.

John Garrett had a more solid plan behind him than Andrew, with regard to his career, and is a mine of advice for younger sports people. But this did not prevent him from having a very difficult transition emotionally out of his sport, rowing.



John Garrett

- *Country:* Great Britain
- *Sport:* Rowing
- *Job:* Senior Policy Analyst at WaterAid



Like the other two, he chose his sport early, and had immense success even as a young schoolboy. By the time he went to Cambridge University, he was already a national champion at schoolboy level, and had tremendous experience of different racing conditions all over Europe. By his second year at Cambridge, he was a member of the British team, as well as of the “Blue Boat”, and feeling increasingly dedicated and fulfilled.

One thing John learned to handle very fast, from this early time, was speed, and not just that of a beautiful sleek boat sliding through the water! He had risen extremely swiftly, and found the momentum helped him to feel thrilled and honoured at every new opportunity.

Having foregone the opportunity to compete on the national team during his final exams, John went on to combine a career first in the city for a merchant bank and then in the civil service with full time training for the national squad. To say that he was stretching himself thinly would be an understatement! It proved ultimately too demanding, and with increased sponsorship for the team available, he made

rowing the priority in his life, combining it with postgraduate study in economics, leading to a Masters’ degree at LSE. He uses this experience to recommend to all young sportsmen and women that they keep their options open by ongoing study. Some of the rowing coaches encouraged John in this decision, although ultimately it was his decision. The additional time also allowed John to take the time to think about what would come next.

The Economics degree had really turned John on to international development issues, especially international debt, which at the turn of the millennium was at unsustainable levels for many low income countries and the subject of a major international campaign. The experience of travelling round the world to compete in varied locations had opened his vision even further, and so it was a natural step to turn in this direction at the time he gave up his sporting career.

From this it is clear that John, of all three of our interviewees, had done the most planning. Perhaps because he was just naturally suited to that, or also because his career was a little longer than both Andrew and Eric’s. He recognises that 99% of elite sportspeople are so focused on their performance goals, that they cannot see past those to a future career, and was very pleased to share with us that the British Olympic Association is starting to build initiatives in this direction, to establish links and mentors for the members, while still young and not yet keen to think about this.

Remember The Titans

However, despite the planning, and the clear interest and knowledge that John had for the next stage in his career, the transition was nevertheless tough. After his third Olympics, in which he had been somewhat less successful than in the second, he felt the time had come to get down to more “serious work”, and stopped rowing rather suddenly, as many do. This abrupt change was a challenge to manage, in terms of identity, even if it was not so difficult professionally, as John managed to find various roles, including for a small business, for local and central government and currently in a

return to international development.

The initial switch, then, was tough emotionally and psychologically. John missed the excitement and “special” nature of travelling internationally to compete in international sporting events. He says that it felt strange to switch to introducing himself as “I’m John Garrett, and I work at...”, as opposed to what he had become used to, introducing himself as a rower! Friends and family were important in helping him shift to the new life.

He also managed to continue his rowing activity and links to some extent, being an umpire for The Boat Race, and rowing in veteran crews from time to time. Indeed, the rowing world allowed John to meet his wife!

On balance, John feels that although there was no systematic support from his team or federation, he certainly was helped through his transition by his clear professional plan, and encouragement from rowing coaches, family and friends. He recognises that this transition is difficult for all, and is particularly keen for more sportspeople to receive help. His primary recommendation for all of them, however focused they might be, is to stay interested in other areas at all times. Not only does this help a competitor to be dealt more effectively in emotional terms with injury or setbacks, but also because it can offer a path forward after the period of competing.

Our final subject, Kavitha Krishnamurthy, is a Canadian, who grew up with a supportive family, and played tennis on the ITF and WTA tours, for several years. She also managed to get herself a great education, at both Princeton and Oxford Universities. Kavitha competed at junior grand slams such as Wimbledon, the US Open and the Australian Open and reached a junior career high of around 40 in the world. Like all the others, she got an early start, and expresses a great deal of passion and enjoyment for the sport. She, too, had older siblings who played the same sport, and inspired her on all kinds of fronts. And, like two of the three others, as the youngest of the group, went further and higher than the older brother and sister! However, what comes through in this particular story is

the bond of the family. Kavitha spoke with great fondness of how they trained and played as a family: “we did tennis together – it was a family thing!”



Kavitha Krishnamurthy

- *Country:* Canada
- *Sport:* Tennis
- *Job:* Commercial Leadership Manager at Coca-Cola Ltd

As she reached the status of four-time junior national champion in Canada, Kavitha took the decision to put education first, and to follow the path of her sister to Princeton University, where, like Eric, she was able not only to take classes from brilliant professors, but also to train with the superb athletic program on campus. It was here that she really discovered the camaraderie of being part of a team, despite playing an individual sport, and enjoyed the closeness and determination of her tennis clan. During this time in college sport, she reached number thirteen in the NCAA, which reinforced her conviction that her next step was to “go pro”, and so on graduation, she made the transition, without so much as a thought of a career in business, beyond the “planes, trains and rackets” of the international circuit, and the rigour that goes with it.

Point Break

On discovering how much playing on the circuit was a labour of love, Kavitha realised that “she was a grown-up” all of a sudden, competing around the globe and managing the pain and occasional loneliness became another challenge she learnt to handle. However, the pleasure far outweighed these negative niggles, and she is very thankful to have played as part of a great community, in extraordinary and sometimes remote locations and big name tournaments. Her proudest moments include being coached by sporting legend Louise Gengler, training with Martina Navratilova, as she was making her

comeback, and playing in the pre-US Open WTA event, the Rogers Cup. Wisely, Kavitha sees her exploits in tennis as being about the hard work and discipline required to excel and “more about the experience, and the stages you get to play on”, than about pure win or lose. This attitude has no doubt set her up well for her more recent career in business.

Like the others, Kavitha used academia as a transition route out of sport, pursuing a Master’s degree in Oxford. While writing her dissertation, she was introduced to the Tata Corporation, and offered a role in their Consulting arm. She started in the management leadership and training program, and then evolved to a business development role at the Canada subsidiary. After almost three years at Tata, other areas seemed tempting, and she used an MBA at INSEAD as the leverage to go and find them.

The INSEAD year was the “most uniquely challenging” she feels she has ever experienced. She realised that her relatively small experience of the business world left her exposed compared to some, and immersed herself fully in the learning all around her. Kavitha received much support from the Careers Service, and defined her search carefully, ending up in a position at the Coca Cola Refreshments, whose products she had always loved. She has been at Coca Cola in various roles for the subsequent years, putting her top three transferable skills into action: discipline, equanimity or “tomorrow is another day”, and globally aware adaptability.

Invincible

There is one potential liability that Kavitha talks about, which is the competitive nature of many sports champions. She can see that some former sportspeople may find it very difficult to be “reasonable or moderate” about their competitive streak, once they move into business. Fostering a team environment that is conducive to success is not necessarily compatible with the desire to win at all costs. She believes that she has made the transition easily because of her natural make-up, and that it was no coincidence that she sought out team tennis! Her transition is a great success, and

10 Transferable Skills Athletes Bring to the Corporate Table

1. Speed, energy and dynamism
2. Self-Motivation, reliable autonomous performance
3. Focus, discipline and dedication
4. Passion and determination
5. Flexibility and adaptability
6. High resistance to pressure, resilience
7. Strategic planning
8. Pioneering spirit, ability to spot opportunities
9. Teamwork and collaboration
10. Relationship building and networking

she says, “professionally I am so happy, doing mind-opening and valuable work. I am passionate, proud and privileged to be at Coke”. This feeling is key to the transition, and is based on the advice she gave to herself and would give to others wanting to move out of sport: “be equally excited and passionate about it every single day”.

Our four subjects’ stories highlight an obvious gap in our examination of how people transition from sport to business: one in which many hundreds and thousands of former sports players sit, having failed to make the shift. We, personally know of several former Olympic champions who only manage to get by with occasional gigs as personal trainers, or who have even slumped into depression or worse after their career was over. What we believe may be the case is that it is as much about the person they were psychologically and socio-economically before their sport career, as it is about the transferable skills nurtured by sport. In other words, if you were going to go to an Ivy League college anyway, in addition to doing your sport, you were probably going to have a good chance of success in business too. So, we are aware of the bias this article presents in this area. Our research did not lead us to subjects who have had dazzling business careers after

sport, and who were not predisposed to this kind of outcome, though we know these exist. Some names spring to mind, like Bjorn Borg in fashion, Venus and Serena Williams in design and sports teams, George Foreman with his barbecue business, Michael Jordan and more.

Nevertheless, we can see some clear patterns in these stories, with much evidence that it is the nature of and the acquired extra competencies in these impressive characters that allows them to move on through to the next stage in their lives successfully. There actually appears to be remarkably little support or even thought in that direction, both on exiting sport, and entering the workplace. What is very obvious, however, is that there is a collection of transferable competencies that these sportspeople develop in greater proportion than their more sedentary peers, and that if these are put to good use by the companies they join, they can rapidly develop into extraordinarily successful businesspeople too.

Fortunately, a growing number of initiatives have recently emerged to support athletes' careers. The International Olympic Committee Athlete Career Programme (ACP), delivered in cooperation with Adecco, supports athletes, while they prepare for and go through their career transition. It provides resources and training to enable them to develop their life skills and maximise their education and employment opportunities. In 2013, the professional services firm Ernst & Young launched the "Women Athletes Business Network" to help more elite women athletes become exceptional leaders as they retire from sport. By building a bridge between athletes and top women leaders, EY aims to create a "support network that will contribute to individual success, inspire the next generation, enrich communities and spur economies around the world." More recently, the French subsidiary of the life insurance company Allianz launched an "Athletes and Careers" recruitment programme aiming to promote the integration

Advice to Successfully Move Out of Sports

- Keep your options open by ongoing studies
- Develop alternative career plan while you are performing as athlete
- Look for a business career that will make you equally excited and passionate
- Be prepared to lose admiration and develop a new identity
- Get expert advice and personalized counselling to prepare your transition
- Involve and seek help and support from your family and friends
- Build early awareness of your transferable skills
- Grow and leverage professional networks
- Once into business, channel your competitive nature toward team and collaboration

of top athletes into the enterprise. Allianz, who hired the French Olympic freestyle swimmer Malia Metella, put forward the "performance culture, dynamism and perseverance" of athletes as essential qualities to succeed in commercial roles, which they recruit by the hundreds every year.

Clearly, the opportunity is there today for anyone who finds themselves working with these people, to help them develop their exceptional skills, for their own wellbeing, the benefit of the companies they work for, and, in some cases at least, for the good of the whole world.

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