

## **Life After Football Will Suck ... Only If You Let It!**

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"What are you doing now?" For many years after hanging up my boots this is the one question I've had to deal with over and over and over again. It did not matter where I was – I could be at a garage, doing some shopping or simply having some social time with family and friends – the question was bound to come up. There would always be that one guy who, out of the blue, would ask: "Hey, Howard what are you doing now?". I would be attending class at university or at school teaching, attending work-related events or meetings and I would be asked the question. Some of my colleagues at work would often come up to me and ask; "Hey Howard, what are you doing now?".

It's a question that I, and many other ex-football players, have to deal with when our football playing days come to an end. It can be a nasty, or a good experience, depending on your circumstances when you must respond to this question. Very often the people asking the question, mean no harm, they do not mean to expose or embarrass you, it is out of curiosity that they ask the question. At face value it's an innocent question until you must respond to it and it's a question you cannot run away from.

"What are you doing now?" is about transitioning or reintegrating into society. But in the language of football – are we able to transition from defense into attack and succeed? Simply put, are we able to cope with life after football? Much research has been conducted over the past few years on how footballers have coped with life after football. The results are not good at all and show that the economic sustainability of a footballer is somewhere between two to three years. Thereafter, the wheels start coming off. Almost weekly we read about some of our football players and our football heroes falling on hard times because they are not ready for life after football. Research has indicated that many of our football players are not able to cope financially just two years after their careers come to an end. This is bad news.

This question is critical because of the uncertainty in football right now. SAFA and the PSL cannot agree on when to restart the game. PSL on the one hand feels that it is ready to restart the season and complete it before the end of August, while SAFA on the other hand is cautious and wants the government, through the Minister of Sport to give the green light that all is safe for the game to restart. ABSA has also thrown a spanner in the works by announcing that the bank will end its involvement in football after many years. The PSL is under serious pressure to restart the league because the bulk of the revenue coming into the league is from broadcasting and the longer the restart is delayed the more pressure will build from the sponsors.

Whilst all this has been going, on let's spare a thought for our players. They have been removed from the game they love for almost four months now and being in isolation is the last thing that a soccer player wants. Give him a soccer ball and see the smile on his face. Just like the SAFA and the PSL the players are also starting to feel the pressure of the isolation.

Looking back over the past decade or so, there is no denying that football has had a good run of fortune, especially financially. It now seems a like a long time ago when the PSL announced that it had reached the R1billion mark in revenues. This financial success has also been good for the players. Some of our top players are earning very good salaries. Whilst 2010 was the catalyst for this financial upswing, 2020 is about to pick the pockets of the players and football in general. We have been reading recently that the salaries of players have been affected. Some salaries have been halved, some players have not received their salaries and one of the dailies has reported that a coach was paid a stipend of R1,000.

To add to the misery, many teams are now dumping players whose contracts came to an end at the end of June.

As a player depending on your teams' position on the league log or the terms of your contract or whether you are coming to the end of your career, I can guarantee that there are many sweaty palms around. I've been down this road many times during my playing career. Administrators, players, sponsors and supporters are down on their knees praying for some divine intervention that will favour their own positions or that of their teams. No player likes uncertainty. This is all because the career of a football player is very short and before you know it you are out and then you have to deal with the dreaded question: "What are you doing now?".

Perhaps one of the biggest mistakes of the modern South African football player is that they still see football as a sport. Something that they enjoy doing and earning huge sums of cash while doing so. On the other hand, football stopped being a sport while I was playing – football is now big business and has been so since the 1990s. It's just that the football players have not been paying attention to what has been going on outside the field of play. Many players are easily distracted by the trappings of success. When I think of this, I'm reminded of these words by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow when he wrote: "The heights by great men reached and kept were not attained by sudden flight, but while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night". That's what happened to football. While the players were sleeping the game changed. Dare I say that the game has long been captured by big business and soccer agents! They are now in full control of the bus and the players are just passengers.

Being at home for the past three months has not been easy for most players, and being told that your contract will not be renewed and that you will be without a team for the next few months must be devastating, both mentally and financially. But as the saying goes, all good things come to an end. For many, football played an important role in taking us out of a life of poverty and presented a multitude of opportunities. It is our responsibility to use these opportunities. Football has played its part, now it's your turn to play yours.

Life after sport will suck, but only if you let it. Life after sport is tough, the competition for job opportunities is just as tough. While playing you competed for game time, after football you face a new kind of competition called job seeking, looking to establish yourself in a totally different environment. While you were playing and entertaining large crowds, people out there were studying, creating job opportunities for themselves, climbing the corporate ladders and cementing their positions in their jobs. The world is different out there and you must be ready when the time comes. The past three months spent at home was just a taste of what you can expect when it's time to hang up your boots.

Who would have predicted that a tiny virus could cause so much chaos and panic around the world and that it could bring the beautiful game of football to a virtual halt. No one saw it coming. But what this does bring to the fore is that the life of a footballer can come to a sudden end without any warning. As frightening as this may be, footballers need to learn that retirement is a reality and that they should avoid defining themselves purely as footballers. Instead, they must view themselves as being in this chapter of life earning a living from football but understanding that there are many more chapters left to be written when their lives as footballers come to an end.

As an ex-player myself, I cannot tell you what to do, but I have travelled this way before and I'm sure that I can offer you some pieces of advice:

Firstly, congratulations, you have made it this far, enjoy the fruits of your labour, but don't waste your time with irrelevant distractions and the trappings of your success.

But always remember this:

1. To succeed you must be prepared to endure some pain. In the movie *The Equalizer 2*, Denzil Washington speaks of two kinds of pain. He says the first pain is the one that hurts while the second pain is meant to alter you. You are hurting right now, alter your action and press the reset button. You still have time to prepare for the future outside of football.

2. Learn to take responsibility for your actions. Dave Chappel, the great American comedian, teaches us to take responsibility for our actions. He tells a moving story of how we often refuse to take responsibility for our action and when things go bad, we often look for someone else to blame. We often read about our ex-players blaming their managers, coaches, the teams and the whole world but never taking full responsibility. He says that we would often say, “we messed up” instead of “I messed up”.
3. Don't take your sport for granted. 2pac the late American rapper raps that we should not live large when things are going our way, because if you do not make it in the end, it's because you did not play the game right and life will fall on you like an avalanche.
4. You have the power, use it correctly. The former American President, Barak Obama advises us not to be afraid to you use the power that we have. He says that the pandemic has shaken the status quo and should awaken in us the realisation that the old ways of doing things just don't work. It's time to set yourself on a different path.
5. Don't let this crisis go to waste. Joel Netshitenzhe, in his article “Big Picture About A Tiny Virus” provides us with some sound advice when he writes that, “we should not allow a corona crisis to go to waste and that we should take the gap.” For the football players the lockdown has provided them with a unique opportunity to take the gap and to take stock of their careers. This is important because they are not immune to what is happening in the country and all over the world. These past few weeks they have been exposed to life outside the football bubble and for many players I'm sure this has been a scary period. This period of inactivity has provided them with a great opportunity to take stock of their careers, their contracts and the progress they are making and devising some future plans now that the lock down has given them a taste of what could happen when their careers end.
6. Play each game as if it were your last. The late Ted Dumitri once called me aside and said: “Howard, today you must play as if it's your last game, because you will never know when it will be your last game.” That is so true, today you will be on top of the world and just one injury and all your dream will come crashing down. Play each game as if it were your last.
7. Lastly, find yourself a mentor. Find someone to whom you can speak and who you trust will give you sound advice. The late Jeff Butler was my mentor. He was very rude, cruel and harsh, but I trusted his advice. When I messed up, he would call me aside and say: “Don't be an ass@#%\$ sonny.” That pulled me straight. Find your Jeff Butler, you need one.

These days it's a different question that I have to answer, and the question is: Is it true that...? Is it true?

Yes, it is true, I am Dr Howard Freese and thank you to football!