

How to Cope With School Sports Ending

Here's how to stay mentally and physically fit.

By [Brittney McNamara](#) February 6, 2019

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During the 2017–18 school year, nearly 8 million young people played a high school [sport](#), [according to](#) the National Federation of State High School Associations. Of those 8 million, the [National Collegiate Athletic Association](#) estimates about 480,000 will go on to play sports at the collegiate level. Of those who go on to play college sports, very few will go pro. The [benefits](#) of playing sports in school are many, from better grades to increased self-esteem to staying active and fit. School sports can also foster a [sense of belonging](#), helping young people make friends and form bonds. And that's not even to mention that playing sports in school can be totally fun. But, what happens when it's all over?

Whether you have to stop playing sports because of an injury or you're just graduating from high school or college and don't plan to continue your game, it can be a hard transition away from constantly training, hanging with your team, and having a set fitness regimen. According to Dr. Hillary Cauthen, PsyD, of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology, it's not uncommon for athletes to feel a loss of identity after they stop playing their sport of choice at a competitive level.

"I think it's confusion, it's sadness, it's the unknown, it's uncertainty of who they are," Dr. Cauthen told *Teen Vogue* of what young athletes might feel as they transition away from competitive sports. "We look at it like a grieving process. They didn't realize this sport consumed who they were, versus being something they do. Their peer groups, family members, everyone around them identified them as that sport. That can be a pretty hard thing when you are no longer doing that."

Of course, some people feel happy when sports end, and some even feel relieved. But to feel a sense of loss totally makes sense, and it's pretty well documented. In an [essay for ESPNW](#), Prim Siripipat wrote about how she struggled leaving competitive tennis after she graduated college, and gathered the words of other athletes who have left their sports. Former NFL player Troy Vincent called it an "identity crisis." Former gymnast Shannon Miller said she "didn't know how to be a regular person" after gymnastics, and mostly sat around and watched TV. For Siripipat, leaving tennis felt "like mourning a loved one."

One of the big hurdles athletes might face after competitive sports end is figuring out how to stay active — this can manifest not only from body image issues, but also the attempt to find a new community, establish autonomy, and more.

"The hard part for some athletes is they spent the majority of their time being told what to do and how to do it," Dr. Cauthen said. "It goes back to taking ownership of what makes them feel happy and makes their body feel good. And it goes hand in hand with identity — they are athletes, they are supposed to look a certain way. You're still the athlete, you're just wearing a different uniform."

So, how do you find what makes you feel good outside of organized sports? Luckily, there are a lot of ways to find community, build identity, and stay active while doing it.

Join a Gym

Dr. Cauthen advised hitting the gym to stay active after sports and find what feels good for your body. As an athlete, she added that you likely already have the skills to know which exercises work best for you and which you'd rather skip.

"The biggest thing is understanding your body," Dr. Cauthen said, adding that fad diets or get-fit-quick schemes should be avoided. "It's not all about a physical appearance. [Athletes should] remember they have so many strengths they learned...and tap into the knowledge they already had."

With so many workout classes out there, going to the gym doesn't have to be a solitary endeavor. If you liked being told what moves to do when training for sports, you can take a class like cycling or boxing. For Rumble Boxing trainer and CPT Juliana Estrella, boxing is a way to feel empowered, and it has helped her learn to use exercise as a way to heal. While she wasn't an athlete in high school, Estrella said she's used working out as a way to practice self-care.

"Working out felt like something I had to do," Estrella said about how she used to view fitness. "At that time, I didn't know that what I needed was to heal and to learn how to love myself exactly as I was. I decided to change the way I looked at my workouts by calling them 'self-care session.' It took time and effort but giving back to myself through

fitness was one of the best ways I coped."

If you're looking to reframe how you view working out, boxing or other group classes that focus on strength can be a great option.

Find a Local Sports League

Just because you aren't playing at the competitive level anymore doesn't mean you can't play. Joining an intramural team or a pick-up game can help you find community, Dr. Cauthen said, something that can be helpful in moving on.

"Whether it's a gym, Crossfit, the YMCA, a kickball league," Dr. Cauthen said, "there are plenty of activities you can still find to get connections with your peer groups."

Joining a league might also help you distance yourself from having sports as your identity while still keeping you active and involved in the thing you loved. It might even just be a recurring dance class in your neighborhood! And, you'll definitely be in good company if you decide to transition away from competitive sports to more casual ones. David Beckham reportedly [now enjoys fencing](#) in his off time.

Pick Up a Hobby

If you're looking for something outside the athletic space, it might be helpful to find a hobby or something new to study or pursue as a career.

According to [Olympic.org](#), reflecting on what you want to do in the future and what you're passionate about aside from sports can help

you figure out a new path. That path, Olympic.org advises, can be guided by the skills you learned as an athlete, like "dedication, motivation or the ability to perform under pressure." But it could also just be something you like, or something fun to do with friends.

The most important thing to do, Dr. Cauthen said, is remember that there's much more to who you are than sports — it's just about reconnecting with those other parts of yourself.

See a Therapist

If leaving sports is causing you distress, Dr. Cauthen recommended seeing a professional. This is particularly important because she noted that the transition away from sports isn't one we're mentally prepared for beforehand, which is why it can catch so many people off guard.

"I think with us not teaching the proper emotional identification and processing of feelings in sport world — it's [being told to] feel one specific way to make you be the best athlete. The first step is helping them with emotional identification," she said.

In an article for the [Northwestern Helix](#), Caroline Silby, a sports psychologist and former athlete, backed Dr. Cauthen up.

"Unfortunately, we don't really talk about it very much or prepare athletes for it," she said of sports ending.

With such a lack of preparation, it's not shocking that athletes might end up feeling pretty lost at the end of their sports career. So, just like you wouldn't have hesitated to see a trainer to hone your athletic skills, you shouldn't hesitate to see a therapist post-sports to hone your

mental skills.

At the end of the day, Dr. Cauthen said moving on from sports is about remembering how much more there is to you. Whether it's a matter of picking up a new hobby or seeing a professional for help, there's no shame in that journey — and you're definitely not alone.

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