

I AM A
RETIRED
ATHLETE ...

WHAT NOW?



JANAE WHITTAKER ALI
Foreword by Drew Bledsoe

I Am a Retired Athlete...What Now?

The Five Secrets of Winning in Life Beyond Sport

Janae Whittaker Ali

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Praise for I'm a Retired Athlete ... What Now?

“I just really felt like I was on my own. I would've felt quite a load off to have a mentor, it would have been a huge help. You are doing such needed work. There are so many out there that would benefit from your work. I wish I had it. Thank you Janae.”

-Mary Lou Retton USA Olympic Gold Medal Gymnast, Top 10 most admired public figure

“This book is essential for the athlete transitioning into the next phase of his or her life. Whether the end of a sports career was voluntary or involuntary, many athletes are left with questions and uncertainty. This book is an easy-to-navigate, step by step guide to allow you to understand who you truly are and what will guide the next phase of your life. Janae Whittaker Ali is candid with her fears, frustrations, and future questions. You are not alone as you navigate, “What's Next?”. Janae will make you feel like you are taking this journey together by giving you a chance to reflect and create viable solutions to your future.”

-Tracey (Larson) Arndt USA Field Hockey

“The best-kept secret in sports is that most athletes don’t know how hard life can be when the glory days end. It’s a frightening circumstance – one that often leads to despair and devastation – but Janae Whittaker Ali has created an essential tool for helping people answer such difficult questions. The beauty of this book isn’t that it simply details the problems associated with life after sports. The true benefit is that it offers valuable solutions for those former athletes moving into the real world.”

-Jeffri Chadiha ESPN.com senior writer and “E:60” correspondent

“This book fills an important piece of the puzzle that is rarely dealt with and Janae Whitaker Ali is the perfect person to fill that void. Her experience, insight, and inspiration can help retiring athletes from all sports take the lessons they’ve learned and give them big success outside of sport. It is a must-read for any athlete making the transition. Thank you Janae for writing this book, all of us get to experience the rewards when these athletes give their gifts in life!”

-Alison Arnold Ph.D. Founder Head Games Sports

Foreword

Facing retirement from a sport is a daunting task. As a professional football player it was especially daunting. Outside observers have little sympathy for those of us who have been blessed to get paid to play a game (nor should they, it is an amazing blessing!). That doesn't change the fact that there are some unique and difficult challenges we face. Most successful career paths require years and years of climbing through the ranks to achieve status and financial stability. Most successful careers also have a longer lifespan than professional sports and if you face corporate transition you can usually find a similar position in another company. If you are a retired NFL offensive lineman it's awfully hard to find another job where you're required to push giant men around for a living. The statistics clearly show that transition in sport can be problematic. That is why this book is so important.

I have found that many of the skills I used as an athlete have been applicable in my second life. Those same skills were important in my transition. Skills like planning, practice, work ethic, perseverance and leadership can all be applied to your next phase in life; if you take the time and use resources like Janae's book to figure out how to best implement them.

Planning

We always had a game plan going into a game right? I developed a plan fairly early in my football career for my next phase (very few athletes do this). The plan, however, was far from perfect and has continued to evolve but at least I had a plan to work from.

Practice

None of us arrived at athletic success without years and years of practice. We can't expect to be successful immediately in our next phase.

Work Ethic

Remember, when we start our next phase of life we are rookies again. Sometimes you have to grind it out [again] to become successful once more. None of us had it handed to us in sports. Why should we expect the next phase be any different?

Perseverance

There will be setbacks. There were setbacks in sports. To expect everything in the second phase to go completely smoothly is foolish. Embrace the inevitable challenges and take pride in working through them.

Leadership

One thing I've found to be very rewarding is leadership. The platform we have as athletes is powerful. We can make a huge difference, particularly in the lives of young people. The magic part of choosing to utilize our platform is that it can also give us great feelings of empowerment and satisfaction. Every time I have had the opportunity to work with young people I've come away feeling like I gain more than I gave.

Please take the time to read through this important book. We have been given a head start in life through sports. We all need to make sure we capitalize on this head start seeking guidance instead of pridefully attempting to get through this hard time alone and find ourselves going backward.

Go Cougs!!

~Drew Bledsoe

WSU QB, No. 1 NFL draft pick

14-year NFL QB for the Patriots, Bills, and Cowboys

About Janae Whittaker Ali

Janae Whittaker Ali is a transition specialist. In her journey, she has conquered many transitions. Through her process she developed a passion for sharing her insights, helping you thrive in the “What Now’s” of life. We have all experienced feeling alone or lost during a transition in life. Janae’s “Transition...What Now?” series of books and materials are meant to come alongside and guide you during various phases of transition.

A former captain of the Penn State University gymnastics team, Janae suffered a devastating career ending knee injury competing in her senior year. She persevered through this transition, honoring her commitment to her team; earning awards named in her honor, for her display of true grit and attitude, that are still given to athletes to this day. Janae is a warrior for supporting others in minimizing suffering to live a life on purpose. She left the corporate world to pursue her vision of working with athletes and families. Powerfully bold and positive, her passion for life is highly contagious.

Her career highlights include:

- Featured coach on NBC’s award winning T.V. show - Starting Over
- Worked with and interviewed many celebrity athletes
- USA Gymnastics National and Regional Congress presenter
- Elite/Tops Camp Clinician
- National speaker for Olympic, professional, NCAA and club level teams.
- Published “Mental Minute” Columnist for International Gymnast Magazine
- Mental Toughness trainer for 15+ years
- Leads weekly live Mental Toughness Webinars for athletes
- Is a Sports Expert for The Athletes Village
- Founder of Transition...What Now?
- Author of I am a Retired Athlete...What Now?
- Author of I am an Injured Athlete...What Now?
- Homeschooling Mom of five children

Most importantly she enjoys an adventurous family life with her loving husband and incredible children- continuing to take on life’s magnificent transitions along the way.

Chapter One

Introduction

I authored this book six years after facing the harsh unexpected struggle with no longer being a competitive athlete; and realizing I was not alone. The book never felt fully complete. I spent the next few years gaining wisdom- getting married, deepening my faith, having four kids, growing my business with current athletes and beginning my masters degree. I felt the nudge to continue with this work. The time was right to step forward in support of many athletes out there who need to figure out what is next without sport defining their life.

I have gone through involuntary retirement, gained wisdom and have come out balanced, on purpose and thriving.

There is a lot of work to do, and everyone's journey is their own. You are accustomed to that in being an athlete. If you feel a bit off path, lost or unsure about your future without sport, this is for you. If you stay awake at night plagued with the "what ifs" of your career, or are haunted by dreams of unresolved athletic endeavors, this is for you. If you just want to make the best of the incredible skills you have; I am excited to see how this book helps you get back on top of your life. Back to winning, back to a life of meaning.

This book is designed to get the large ball rolling. No news to a star athlete like yourself; you will get out what you put into it. If you skim the words, you may catch a nugget you need. But if you devote yourself to this training for the sport of life, do the exercises, take the time to watch the movies and earn the points, your life will be on a very different trajectory than now.

This work is intended for overall healthy people who need support taking life to the next level. It is not intended for those with mental illness, addictions or other psychological issues. Please seek professional help and come back to this program when you are ready.

It may help to pick a consistent time to devote to this (e.g. first thing in am, lunch hour, before bed, Saturdays). If you don't have room to write everything with space provided, use margins or your own paper/computer. Also, I suggest having a fellow athlete go through this with you. It will give you a sounding board, equip you with built in accountability and helping others, helps yourself!

As athletes, you have acquired the tools to win. All of us were meant to do life, side by side. Swallow any pride and get excited to thrive.

Chapter Two

Getting Started

Congratulations on suiting up for another big game - your life! It may be hard to believe, but there are games to win in life after sport, too. If you are like I was after a severe knee injury ended my career, you may not have thought about retirement in that way. Even though you knew in the back of your mind that you would face retirement someday, you may not feel fully prepared for what you actually face in this transition today.

In your life beyond sport you may be feeling lost—the “Who am I and what do I do now?” syndrome. You may feel like something is missing, or that any new venture isn’t quite the same as being an athlete. You might feel unfulfilled, bored, depressed, lost, confused, or nostalgic. Retirement from sport, especially when it is unplanned, has been referred to as a social death. (Baillie, P. H. F., & Danish, S. J., 1992)

If your retirement was not by choice, chances are you weren’t ready for the “glory days” to end. You had unfinished business. Perhaps you did not accomplish everything you set out to do, or maybe you made it to the top of your game and were just about to reach that lifelong goal, and now your career is over; suddenly you are no longer an athlete.

When the initial shock settles, you probably find it hard to imagine being anything other than a prized athlete. Even if it was planned there may be loss and tough transition ahead.

The bottom line is that for as long as you can remember, your life has been about training to excel in sport, and now that sport has fallen out of the equation, you have some re-evaluating to do. You realize that you miss the team aspect, the recognition, the structure, the goals, the encouragement, the meaning, and, of course, the rush of game time!

Athletes who have a love for their sport may avoid dealing with the sudden transition, and that may play out in many ways:

- A series of unfulfilled jobs.
- Trying to stay involved in your sport (competing or coaching) not because this is what you feel called to, but to hang on as long as possible.
- Buying time to avoid the “real world” by getting an advanced degree or something similar even though you don’t yet know what you want to do.
- Reckless behavior.

One sport in which retirement has been studied more extensively is professional football. Ken Reuttgers of Gamesover.org found that of players who retired from the NFL:

- 25% are bankrupt one year after retirement
- 50% of all divorces occur within the first year after retirement
- 65% lack a college degree and marketable job skills
- 78% are bankrupt, divorced, or unemployed two years after leaving the game
- 100% of players will experience career termination

While the NFL has increased focus on player development for active players, that support seemingly diminishes once the players are out of the game. But does that mean all retired players are destined for bankruptcy, divorce, unemployment, and other negative outcomes? Absolutely not.

“The literature suggests that problems arise when career transition is involuntary. Mihovilovic (1968) contends that athletes may have no control over their retirement because of injury, being cut, conflict with management, or family reasons. Injuries and health problems often play a negative role in the career transition of athletes. Those who face injury are often unable to control when and how the retirement process transpires (Werthner & Orlick, 1986), and career-ending injuries often do not allow athletes to accomplish their goals and plans for life outside of sport. Athletes who are involved in involuntary retirement are often more resistant and less prepared than are those who retire voluntarily (McPherson, 1980)” (Journal of Excellence, p.67).

Whether your retirement was voluntary or involuntary, one thing is certain: if you love your sport, you will experience grief and loss without it—including physical, social, spiritual, emotional, and mental consequences.

I designed this What Now book to support you through this period and to launch you into a winning life beyond sport. Think of this as your new playbook for creating a life beyond sport that is even more rewarding and glorious than your life as an athlete. If you cannot even fathom this concept, you are in the right place. You will discover true glory and fulfillment beyond anything a gold medal or championship ring can bring. Athletes at all levels, sports, and backgrounds have been successful in life beyond sport. I have interviewed many celebrity athletes and I am going to share some secrets with you—including my own story.

This is a workbook. It is not designed for you to sit back, read, and hope for some insight. Insight is powerful, but insight without action is inconsequential. You must be ready to get into action.

The great news is that, after you work your way through this book, you will no longer be saying, “Life as an athlete was as good as it gets.” You have your whole life ahead of you, no matter your age. There is no point in living with the mindset or perception that it will never be better than the past. That is a very common misconception among athletes. Gear up—your greatest wins are ahead of you!

Most athletes have based their personal significance on praise and status, and for this reason it is hard to imagine fulfillment without it. It was for me even as a collegiate gymnast. But as Charles Colson (2006) says, “Living a life of significance does not depend on the prerogatives that belong to high position; it depends even less on others’ esteem and praise. Living a meaningful life consists simply in embracing the responsibilities and work given to us, whatever they are.” It will take some work to deconstruct a dependency on esteem and praise. This book will help you with that, with the focus on getting you to lace up your boots and get out there. Something so great about athletes is that you already have the drive to work and win!

The best part about being an athlete—retired or not—is that not only do you have the drive to win, but you are also physically designed for greatness! Like a car is designed to drive, you are designed for greatness; you have proven you are willing to make sacrifices and do what it takes.

As you trained in your sport, you accomplished much more than skill acquisition. “Dedicating your life to training was really dedicating your training to life.” (Dan Millman, 2006)

Here is an illustration of how you are designed for greatness. Think of the first time you learned a new motor skill or play in your sport (e.g., a new jump, throw, play, shot, style, twist, or flip). The first time you did this maneuver it seemed awkward, slow, and choppy. With repetition it became easier and easier to complete the skill or play. Then you could add some flair to it, and eventually you felt like you could do it in your sleep.

As a young gymnast, I remember learning a back handspring (a back bending flip with hands touching) on balance beam. It was awkward, hard, and extremely scary. I first had to learn how to safely perform it on the floor. Years later, as I perfected my motor skills, I learned to perform it along a straight line on the floor, being very sure to keep my hands on the line. If I didn’t learn to keep my hands on that line, progressing to high beam with my hands apart would result in, well, flipping backwards onto my head!

After mastering a back handspring on the line, the next steps were bringing it to the low beam with mats on the side, perfecting that, then taking away the mats,

then moving to the medium beam, and finally taking it to the high beam—again with mats to start. At each stage of the process, it seemed like a whole new skill all over again.

When I was learning this skill on high beam, I wasn't allowed to leave the gym until I practiced it. I would dread the moment all through the workout, if not the entire school day, knowing what was to come (I am sure you can relate to dreading a practice, drill, or opponent). But every time I completed a successful back handspring, I was connecting more and more neurons (nerve cells), which were telling my body how to execute this skill. Creating neural pathways is how habits form, both good and bad.

The goal is to repeatedly execute the skill until it is no longer scary or difficult. I began perfecting my ability on high beam to the point where I could execute a back handspring in competition, confident I would stay on the beam. This move became so natural that I soon started adding connecting flips and jumps.

There are several training tools for life in this. The awkwardness and inability to do the skill in the beginning did not become a brick wall that I couldn't get past, but a hurdle to get over. I may have failed a few times, but I kept going. I progressed. I received feedback from my coach, implemented it, and I eventually began perfecting the skill. I listened to my coach and made the necessary shifts. And all the while, my nervous system was carving and memorizing the technicalities of this movement.

We each have had this experience in our sport, on different stages and with different skills. The ability to do a back handspring is just one of the hundreds of skills I learned as I attempted to master the art of winning. Although athletics is obviously not the only arena that practices winning, it is a large focus in sport. To be clear, though, when I say "winning," I am not referring to competition, or the comparison between you and other athletes; I am referring to doing your best and reaching your highest potential.

In your sport, winning is something you have practiced and can tap into and apply to your life. This mental and physical process of winning is ingrained in you as a seasoned athlete. Your specialized body and mind, my friend, are already built to win! Even though I haven't done a back handspring on beam in a while, if I attempted one right now I would not have to start from scratch and relearn the skill from drills on the floor, my body has the memory of how to perform this skill (though as we age, we can't quite physically do what we use to). Your past training experiences and successes are available for new challenges; they are your proven track record, your springboard.

Through rigorous years of training you learned the elements of winning: how to be disciplined, committed, connected, powerful, goal oriented, focused, faithful, and so on. Do you know how invaluable that is . . . or better yet, how valuable you are?

For you, going for your goals may have occurred very naturally because you were actively pursuing your dreams and you were inspired. For instance, you didn't have to think about being committed, you did the work because you wanted to improve your game and would do whatever that required.

According to dictionary.com (2005) inspiration means:

To fill with enlivening or exalting emotion.

In spirit, breathing life into.

Most likely you felt this inspiration in sport, and it came from action.

Are you ready to take action?

Are you ready to say YES to the game of life?

Just because you have retired from sport does not mean you have to sit on the bench for the rest of your life and think about the glory days. If you are ready to get back in the game of life, and be coached to a new way of thinking, using some trained behaviors, let your life begin!

“We should be taught not to wait for inspiration to start a thing. Action always generates inspiration. Inspiration seldom generates action.” - Frank Tibolt

Chapter Three

Beginning Assessment

Because most athletes like to keep score, I've developed a questionnaire and point system that will track your progress as you work through this book. Here, you are only competing against you, striving to be your best. Go for gold!

How inspired are you currently about your life beyond sport? (0 is not at all, 10 is absolute inspiration)

Rate your ability to exist in this world without your sport defining you. (0 is I am completely defined by my sport, 10 is I am not at all)

How confident are you in your ability to win in life overall beyond sport? For example: financially, relationally, emotionally, physically, and professionally? (0 is not confident at all, 10 is extremely confident)

Do you have a clear direction and plan for your life beyond sport? (0 is I feel completely lost, 10 is I feel completely clear)

List three results you would like to accomplish in your life now.

What is the #1 thing that stops you from achieving those results currently?

What are your top 3 challenges in facing the transition beyond sport?

Ready to Win in Your Life Beyond Sport?

I hope you have enjoyed this sample of I Am A Retired Athlete... What Now?

Keep the momentum going!

Learn the Five Secrets to winning in life beyond sport. Continue your work and development in the full workbook!

Order the book now:

I am a Retired Athlete...What Now?

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