

When it was game over, it was difficult to accept': Robert Pires on finding life after football

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. How much do you know about football? Decide whether these statements are True (T) or False (F).

1. In the USA, *football* means *American football*, a sport similar to rugby.
2. Real Madrid is the oldest football club in the world.
3. The biggest football stadium in the world is in Brazil.
4. The most expensive player in the world in 2024 is Spanish.
5. The youngest player to win the World Cup was 18 years old.
6. The oldest player to win the World Cup was 40 years old.

2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

bakrupt challenge charity cross your mind declining
dressing room hang up your boots miss out passionate
pundit stubborn transition

1. _____ is the process of changing from one situation to another.
2. If you _____, you retire from playing football professionally.
3. When things _____, you think about them but not for very long or very seriously.
4. A(n) _____ is something that needs a lot of skill, energy and determination to deal with or achieve.
5. If a person is declared _____, they officially have no money and cannot pay what they owe.
6. If something is _____, it is getting less or worse.
7. If you _____ on something, you lose the opportunity to do or have it.
8. A(n) _____ is the place where sports players change their clothes to prepare for a game.
9. A(n) _____ is someone who is an expert in a subject and is often asked to talk to the public about that subject.

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10. A(n) _____ is an organisation to which you give money so that it can help people who are poor or ill, or who need advice and support.
11. If you are _____, you show or express strong beliefs or enthusiasm.
12. A(n) _____ person is not willing to change their ideas or to consider anyone else's reasons or arguments.

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.

1. When Messi and Cristiano _____, it will be the end of an era.
2. With the appearance of MP3s, many record stores went _____.
3. Dedicated athletes often _____ on holidays and family events due to their regimes and frequent competitions.
4. My new boss is really _____ and never listens to me or my co-workers.
5. Footballers that have dedicated their life to the sport find it difficult to _____ into a "normal" life when they retire.

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The former Arsenal midfielder has sought help from UEFA's career transition expert, to navigate the world outside the dressing room

Ed Aarons

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- 1 Robert Pires will never forget what it was like coming to terms with being a retired footballer. "You don't want to say stop because I had been playing for 19 seasons and football meant everything to me," says the ex-Arsenal star, who was part of the France team that won the 1998 World Cup and Euro 2000. "Even now, football is my life and it's in my blood, so that's why when I said it was game over, it was very difficult to accept."
- 2 Luckily for Pires, help was at hand. He first met Stéphane Ehrhart – a former player who is now UEFA's career-transition expert – in 2009 while playing for Villarreal, when the decision to hang up his boots had barely even crossed his mind.
- 3 "I always said: 'I have time.' But time goes very quickly," Pires says. "When you are playing, it's the best job in the world. You are very focused on your club and you need to be very good every game, so you aren't thinking about life after football. So that's why when I met Stéphane, it was very important for me – he made me think about what will happen when everything is over. He gave me good advice and explained to me what the challenges were going to be."
- 4 "When I first talked to Robert, I was quite surprised – this guy had played at the highest level in several countries but really had no clue what he wanted to do when he retired," Ehrhart says. "I thought that if someone at the stage of his career doesn't have any idea what to do next then there are definitely some holes in the system."
- 5 "Not every player is ready to receive it. But all my career, I've had players asking me for that kind of advice and they didn't really know where to find information. Some clubs and national associations do have some kind of support for their players but I thought it would be useful just to have one place where they can find some good tips."
- 6 About 30 per cent of former players end up getting divorced after retiring, and it has been estimated that 40% of former professionals are declared bankrupt after five years. According to Ehrhart, three particular areas are an issue: declining physical health because they are no longer training every day, missing out on the network of friends provided by being in the dressing-room environment and the effect on family life.
- 7 "For many years, you have been the family's provider but now you're at home with nothing to do and feeling a bit lost. You have to reinvent your social position. We're trying to help players realise that it's a bit more complicated than just trying to find a new job. For most, all three of these things are going to happen at the same time within six months of retiring so it's not a good moment to think strategically about what they are going to do for the next 20 years. That's why we explain to the players: 'This is what is coming and why it's so important to plan in advance.'"
- 8 Pires, who works as a pundit for French television and is an ambassador for Arsenal, admits his transition was helped by training with the Arsenal first team after he had retired. "My contract with Aston Villa came to an end and the day after I said: 'No, come on. I want to play football.' I may have lost my speed but I still thought I could play. So I said to the Arsenal manager: 'Boss, can I train with you every morning please?' And he said: 'Yes, of course.'"
- 9 "It was very good for me but very hard to not be a real player any more. For me, it was very special to be in the dressing room every day. But now I don't have that every day and it feels like I've lost something."
- 10 At 50, Pires still plays charity matches – "playing makes me feel alive," he says – but believes more advice should be given to players about life after football. "You have to be very careful because money goes very fast – you earn a lot when you're playing but

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the second life is very long and you need to prepare for that," he says. "That's why it's important that young players are given good advice about how to invest sensibly."

- 11 As for Arsenal, Pires has been impressed with their progress. "I'm very positive and believe in Mikel Arteta. He's a very good manager, one of the best managers in the Premier League. He's very passionate and sometimes a little bit stubborn, but I like that."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. Why didn't Robert Pires want to stop playing football?
2. What kind of advice does Stéphane Ehrhart offer?
3. Why, according to Pires, don't players think about life after football?
4. Why was Ehrhart surprised when he first met Pires?
5. What happens to around 30% of footballers after they retire?
6. What three areas does Ehrhart identify as specific issues?
7. What two jobs has Pires got now?
8. What did he do the day after his contract at Aston Villa came to an end?
9. How does playing charity matches make Pires feel?
10. What does Pires think of the current Arsenal team?

4 Key language

a. Complete the phrases from the text using prepositions.

1. come _____ terms _____
2. _____ hand
3. (the/a/an) effect _____
4. plan _____ advance
5. come _____ an end
6. believe _____ (someone)

b. Use the expressions from task A to complete the sentences. You may have to adapt the expressions accordingly.

1. All good things must _____.
2. Losing his job was difficult to _____.
3. You must _____ if you want to eat at a famous restaurant. They can be reserved for months!
4. Help is _____ for children in need at the local hospital.
5. Sleep and diet have _____ huge _____ a person's overall health.
6. Many professional athletes and artists were motivated by parents or teachers that _____ them.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- "Professional footballers are paid far too much."
- "Doctors and scientists are more useful to society than sportspeople."
- "Sport should be amateur, not professional."

6 In your own words

a. Use an internet search engine to find information about a footballer (or another professional sportsperson) who has successfully changed career as Robert Pires has done. This sportsperson could be one from your country or a well-known international figure.

b. Report your findings to the class.