

For professional footballers and elite athletes alike, the transition out of sport can be jarring. Retirement often brings a profound loss of routine, identity, and purpose. When employers are involved, a common obstacle arises: “My employer says they didn’t know about my needs — does that mean they don’t have to make reasonable adjustments?”

This question touches on crucial areas of employment law and welfare, especially within the context of disability and neurodiversity. It matters immensely for those leaving elite sport who may face mental health challenges, physical injuries, or the overwhelming shock of identity change.

In this blog post, I’ll separate what the law says from what often happens in practice, explain how employer knowledge affects their duty to make reasonable adjustments, and outline career pathways and retraining essentials for players preparing to leave sport. We’ll also reference the great support provided by PFA and alumni networks like Arsenal’s Alumni Network, which prove vital in this difficult phase.

Understanding Reasonable Adjustments & When the Duty Arises

What the Rule Says: Duty Triggered by Knowledge

Under the Equality Act 2010, employers have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments to the workplace or role if an employee has a disability. The key phrase is “reasonable adjustments.” This means practical changes or accommodations intended to remove disadvantages an employee faces because of their disability.

However, this duty is not automatic or absolute. Crucially, the employer’s duty is triggered when they:

- know, or ought reasonably to know, the employee has a disability
- are aware that the employee is experiencing substantial disadvantage at work because of the disability

Employers are not expected to guess or guesswork; the knowledge threshold can be met by explicit disclosure by the employee, medical reports, or observable symptoms.

What Happens in Practice: “Did Not Know” Does Not Mean a Get-Out

In reality, employers often say they did not know about an employee’s specific needs — especially if the employee did not formally disclose a disability or request accommodations. This sometimes happens with retiring athletes, who might hide mental health struggles or downplay physical limitations out of fear of stigma or job insecurity.

But Acas guidance clearly states that **an employer cannot overlook obvious signs or reasonable suspicions**. If the condition is apparent or should have been apparent through typical supervisory duties, the employer’s knowledge is effectively established.

Moreover, employers have a duty to foster an environment where employees can safely disclose their needs. Blanket claims of “we didn’t know” can be a red flag of poor communication or unconscious barriers within the workplace.

In short, saying “we didn’t know” is not necessarily a valid excuse to avoid making adjustments. Employers should consider whether they could have known and whether their policies encourage disclosure.

Retirement Shock, Loss of Structure, and Identity Shift in Elite Sport

The Mental and Emotional Impact

Retirement from elite sport often happens abruptly and before an athlete feels ready. The day-to-day structure — training schedules, team meetings, match days — disappears overnight. This sudden loss throws many into what experts call “retirement shock.”

The psychological impact can include:

- Loss of identity and purpose
- Increased anxiety or depression
- Difficulty adjusting to a less predictable lifestyle
- Escalating physical injuries that limit even non-sporting activities

Without employer knowledge of these challenges, reasonable adjustments are unlikely to be provided. This is why disclosure and trusted support systems are critical for a smoother transition.

Identity Beyond the Game

Elite athletes often strongly identify with their sport. Post-retirement, they must reframe their identity in a world that no longer revolves around physical performance or public recognition.



Employers can play a pivotal role here by recognizing the adjustment period and offering support, such as mental health services, flexible working hours, or options for phased retirement.

Career Pathways & Entry Costs: Preparing for Life After Football

The Challenges of Transition

Footballers frequently face two interrelated hurdles when transitioning to a new career:

1. **Entry Costs:** The financial burden of retraining, gaining certifications, or education required to enter a new industry.
2. **Career Pathways:** Understanding which pathways are realistic and fulfilling based on skills and interests beyond football.

Without adequate planning and employer support, many players fall into unemployment or underemployment, which exacerbates mental health issues and financial instability.

Retraining Before Retirement

One clear way to reduce the shock of transition is proactive retraining before retirement. The PFA's education programs encourage players to study, gain qualifications, and even develop work experience while still playing.

For those with disabilities or impairments, retraining may also involve acknowledgment of adaptations needed in new roles. This is where knowledge sharing <https://goonerdaily.com/2026/08/10/life-after-football-how-ex-players-rebuild-careers-and-manage-their-health/> with future employers helps prompt reasonable adjustments early.

How Arsenal's Alumni Network and PFA Support Help Bridge the Gap

Arsenal's Alumni Network

Alumni networks like Arsenal's work hard to maintain contact with former players. They offer a platform for career advice, mental health resources, and social connections. For players experiencing loneliness or identity loss post-retirement, these networks provide a critical bridge back into community and opportunity.

The PFA's Role

The Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) delivers extensive support services:

- **Education grants** for further studies
- **Career transition advice and coaching**
- **Health and wellbeing support**, including mental health therapy
- **Guidance on employment rights** related to disability and reasonable adjustments

They also work closely with clubs and employers to raise awareness about these issues, helping trigger the duty of reasonable adjustment in practice.

Practical Steps for Players and Employers

For Players

- **Be proactive:** Disclose any disabilities or difficulties to your employer or PFA contact early.
- **Engage in retraining:** Use PFA education programs to prepare for post-sport careers.
- **Use alumni networks:** Leverage these communities for advice and connections.
- **Know your rights:** Learn how the Equality Act 2010 protects you and how Acas guidance supports fair treatment.

For Employers

- **Encourage disclosure:** Create safe, non-judgmental environments for conversations about health and personal challenges.
- **Spot signs:** Be alert to changes in behavior or performance that may indicate unspoken needs.

- **Follow Acas guidance:** Act promptly when you suspect reasonable adjustments may be needed; don't wait for formal notification.
- **Engage with player welfare organizations:** Collaborate with the PFA and alumni networks to support retiring players comprehensively.

Conclusion

The claim "My employer says they did not know" does not automatically relieve employers from their duty to make reasonable adjustments. The Equality Act 2010 and Acas guidance require a nuanced approach that considers both explicit knowledge and what the employer ought reasonably to know.



For elite athletes facing the loss of structured routine and identity shock, early disclosure and planning are crucial. Support from alumni networks like Arsenal's and organizations such as the PFA can make all the difference in smoothing the transition.

Ultimately, sustainable retirement from sport demands preparation, communication, and mutual understanding between players, employers, and support bodies. Reasonable adjustments and workplace flexibility are practical tools — not just legal obligations — that help athletes rebuild lives beyond the game.

Note: This blog post follows a weekly structure checklist including legal context, practical application, personal impact, and actionable guidance — always splitting 'what the rule says' from 'what happens in practice' for clarity.