ABSTRACT

ATHLETE RETIREMENT: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY AND COMPARISON

by

Scott P. Tinley

San Diego State University, 2003

Few areas of sport are as misunderstood by the mainstream as that of the plight of retired professional and world class athletes. And while the subject has been often studied, modeled and theorized, the case of the retiring professional or world class athlete has yet to be fully explored in a detailed qualitative study that includes intimate access to some of the most successful athletes in the world from many different sports. This paper will include the findings from an eighteen month long qualitative research study of 16 professional athletes, including world champions, Super Bowl MVPS and Olympic gold medal winners from 11 different sports. The semi-structured interviews resulted in over 356 raw data themes that were ultimately collapsed into two general dimension constructs. The higher order themes that emerged from the raw data was inductively analyzed and compared to several existing models and theories on athlete retirement. Additionally, there was discussion on the level of achievement in sport, length of career and the specific sport played as variable factors in the career termination experience.

A. The results of the study validated much of the findings in prior literature. In particular there was corroboration with themes induced from this study that correlated to such areas as self-identity, positive coping, ego fulfillment and socialization--areas of focus and theory in prior literature. The style of qualitative methodology allowed the researchers to induce tow newer themes surrounding the concept of *love of the sport and appreciation for its benefits* as elements of the higher order theme of *mastery*.

Additionally, the findings as induced supported the conclusions as discussed in Coakley's (1983) study that the athlete retirement paradigm is more contextual and individual-based than has been discussed in more recent literature. The inductive analysis of the athlete's raw data supported Coakley's claim that it is difficult to separate the effects of retirement from the effects of other significant events.

B. It was deduced that there is insufficient data to empirically conclude that professional athletes have different retirement experiences than Olympic, world class or national team members. But the results as analyzed suggested that there was no observable difference.

C. Finally, taking advantage of the numerous sports represented, the analysis of data offered six conceptual ideals for further study that pertained to potential differences by sport in the athlete retirement experience.

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Introduction

. While the phenomenon of the professional athlete as superstar, the shiny, cartoon action figure who is idolized by the masses becomes more of a fixture in our society, a concurrent interest has risen in what happens to that athlete after their sporting career has ended. Researchers in the late 1980's and early 1990's devoted considerable focus on athlete retirement, and the topic of retirement has now resurfaced as a point of interest, gathering steam and spilling over into the mainstream sports-related media. This study begins with a brief explanation of the transitional paradigm that some retiring athletes face upon their exit from sport.

Most athletes who reach professional, world class and Olympic levels, do so as a result of a long term commitment to training and competing in that sport; often skipping areas of the overall maturation process due to their sports-related focus and a "shielding" of external anxieties and stresses by coaches, parents and team managers (Hill & Lowe, 1974). From a young age, they receive preferential treatment for their talent and potential improvement, even as their personal motivations for competing change over time (Baillie & Danish, 1992). Crook and Robertson (1991) state, "This vast commitment, both physical and emotional, is often made at the expense of education, work, family, and other interests." (p.115). No doubt, athletes must make severe sacrifices to reach the world class and professional levels within their sport.

While most of the mainstream anecdotes relating to emotional trauma of retiring athletes are focused on the professional athlete, the statistics show (1% of all student athletes) that the vast majority of student athletes who dream of playing professional sports are de-selected and never play at the professional level (Figler and Figler, 1984). If they do make it and become over-identified as an athlete, face the daunting task of redefining their personal identity.

Upon exit from sport, there is potential for athletes to experience a variety of emotional feelings different from those they had become accustomed to as an athlete. As one study participant stated, "I was totally lost and confused. I was no longer an elite athlete. I was a 'has-been'. I realized that my career was going to have to be a part of the past and I could not conceptualize the impact that would have on me."

The data suggest that for those who experience marked changes in mood and psychological state, the vast majority of these alterations are considered negative (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993). For example, athletes

experiencing some type of psychological crisis upon exit from sport have reported such feelings as depression, confusion and loss of identity (Blinde & Stratt, 1992; Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1991; Weiss, 2001). Others have confessed having serious difficulties resulting in attempted suicides and substance abuse (Ogilvie, 1987; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982). One early study (Werthner & Orlick, 1986) found that 78% of the elite Canadian athletes interviewed confessed to some emotional difficulty upon leaving their sport, and 32% went on to label their transition as "extremely difficult."

The causes contributing to crises in career termination are many and varied. Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) list factors such as age, de-selection, injury, self-identity, perceptions of control, social identity, social support, pre-retirement planning and socio-economic status as contributory. While there is some research into specific counseling methods for retiring athletes (Baillie, 1993; Lent, 1993; Wolf & Lester, 1989), there are few works detailing the specific opportunities for the athletes themselves to come to understand the transition process, one that many athletes report as one of the most difficult periods of their lives (Petitpas & Danish, 1992; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). As Baillie and Danish (1992) state, "Depending on the degree of self-esteem the athlete derives from participating in sports, the loss may be, for the emotionally unprepared, as great as any disability or terminal illness." (pp. 91-92)

The remainder of this chapter will discuss the purpose behind this study and the theories of the subject published in the literature in an effort to understand what research on the subject has shown. Researchers have developed specific models, structural designs and patterns in an effort to create predictable feelings, behaviors and actions that emulate from an athlete's transition out of sport. The available theories and models are an important foundation for comparison of the data that resulted in this study and necessitates a subsequent review.

Definition of Terms

Models: The term "model" in this study is used in a variety of contexts, sometimes as a descriptive component, sometimes as a specific strategy and other times as an unproven developmental construct. The author regrets the ambiguity but found it unavoidable yet not problematic in his attempt to compare the findings to the other identified research.
Theories: The various theories of athlete retirement referenced in this study reflect the standard definition of systematically organized knowledge applicable to a wide variety of circumstances.

Key Words and Phrases: transition, emotional crisis or trauma, acceptance, life fulfillment, self-identity and contextual

Statement of Purpose

The literature has shown us that much theory, both non-athlete and athlete specific, has been published over the past 15 years. Based on early work by researchers such as Kubler-Ross (1969), Sussman (1971), Rosenberg (1982) and more recently, scientists such as Kerr & Dacyshyn (2000), Orlick (1980), Crook & Robertson (1991), Taylor & Ogilvie (1993) and Weiss (2001), extensive work has uncovered many factors related to the athlete retirement and transition process. We have also seen a few well designed qualitative research studies, studies accessing athletes and the creation of a handful of athlete retirement models developed out of the existing theories. However, few studies of professional athletes from multiple sports have been conducted in which the athletes themselves have been interviewed in a semi-structured interview format focusing on their retirement/transition experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to interview 16 retired professional athletes from 11 different sports using a qualitative design to identify issues experienced after retirement from sport. The data were analyzed with careful attention paid to how the athlete's response might compare to similar studies, noting in particular if there were obvious cross sport differences from the previous single sport-derived research results.

Coakley (1983) says, "In the future, the transition out of sport should be analyzed in terms of such factors as the age, race, gender, etc." (p. 9). Taking the contextualization of

individual athlete retirement further by including a larger number of athletes from 11 different sports--athletes who laid claim to the quintessential fame and fortune of high profile sports as well as those who struggled against numerous setbacks in relatively lower profile sports--the intent was to determine if gaps exist between what the athletes told us and what the published models suggest.

Additionally, since no study of athlete retirement to date has utilized as many high profile and successful athletes (NFL All-Pro team member, Major League Baseball Hall of Famer, multiple world record holders and Olympic medal winners) from as many different sports, the results will discuss but not conclude, variables in athlete retirement experiences by sport and level of success achieved. These potential differences may present unique opportunities for future study of athlete retirement as it pertains to different sports and their corresponding cultures.

Theories

Theoretical perspectives of athlete retirement have most often arisen from theoretical frameworks used to explore general career retirement. One of the theoretical perspectives offered by Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) is grounded in thanatology, or as Rosenberg (1981) has suggested, that sports retirement is a form of social death, including isolation from former teammates and players. This is supported anecdotally by experiential athlete accounts and in forms of popular mainstream literature such as Bouton's *Ball Four* where the athletes reveal the difficulty that retired athletes have in staying connected to the newer, younger players (Bouton, 1970; Deford, 1981; Kahn, 1972). It has also received some criticism. Blinde and Greendorfer (1985) argue that social death is fraught with melodrama and excessive negativity, focusing some of their commentary on the intentional pathos developed around the sentiment of death. Social gerontology, an area of study with an emphasis on aging and life satisfaction through the experience, is another focus of the sport retirement experience. It has been proposed by Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) this category consists of: Disengagement theory (Cumming, Dean, Newell, & McCaffrey, 1960), Activity theory (Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953), Social Breakdown theory (Kuypers & Bengston, 1973) and Continuity theory (Atchley, 1980). The theories are described here in better detail. 1.) Disengagement Theory: the thought that both the

athlete and the society withdraw for the good of both. 2.) Activity Theory: when lost roles are exchanged for new ones and an individual's level of activity is maintained. 3.) Continuity Theory: where people with varied roles reallocate time, energy and focus to remaining roles. 4.) Social Breakdown theory: the idea that some individuals withdraw from the activity and internalize negative evaluation. The work done by researchers Baillie and Danish (1992) conclude that over-identification with the role of the athlete may lead to limited development in other career possibilities, that athletes acknowledge their own limited pre-retirement training but appreciate the support they get in transition, that the process of athlete retirement is multifaceted, complex and specific to the individual, and that specific programs to support and assist retiring athletes are needed. On a general note though, Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) do find fault in the use of social gerontology as applied to the study of athlete retirement, indicating that there is no empirical support for the relationship between sport-retirement and non-sport retirement; the belief that the differences in age, life experience and expectations between athletes and mainstream retirees is too great to share the same model.

Transition as termination was first explored by Hill and Lowe (1974) in the realm of sport retirement. The origins come from work done by Sussman's (1971) analytical model of the sociological study of retirement. Sussman (1971) asserted that retirement will be affected by several factors: the individual's motives, values and goals; the situation surrounding one's retirement (i.e. retirement planning, income); structural elements such as social class and marital status; social factors such as support of family and friends; and boundary constraints (economic cycles, employer attitudes, etc.).

Kubler-Ross's (1969) model defines five stages in the grieving process of loss that have become well accepted in the literature (Ogilvie & Howe, 1986; Wolf & Lester, 1989). The theoretical model is a stage theory and includes denial against the initial trauma, anger about the injustice and control, bargaining to delay, depression over loss, and complete acceptance of one's new life. Kubler-Ross's early work was done within the framework of her study of death and dying. It could be considered a model as it is intended to define patterns and create predictable feelings or behavior surrounding grieving and loss. It is listed here within the other theories since most researchers have used her early work as loss theory, adapting it to the loss experienced in athlete retirement.

Coleman and Barker (1991), whose theoretical framework has antecedents in the work of Super's (1957) developmental self concept theory of vocational behavior, offers a look at two elements of athlete retirement theory: self-concept development and self- esteem. Following the work of Super, Starishevsky, Matlin, and Jordaan (1963), define self-concept development as the time an individual begins to develop his or her identity as a person, beginning as a childhood event and continuing through to adolescence. Role playing is discussed, as is reality testing in real life situations. Translation is defined as transfer of self-concepts into vocational terms either by choice, accident or the discovery of personal attributes. Implementation is defined as the period when the person actualizes the self-concept within formal education, professional training or new occupation.

Coleman and Barker (1991) continue to cite the work of Super et al. (1963) in their definition of self-esteem as a type of self-acceptance or a dimension of self-concept. They conclude that people with high levels of self-esteem feel a sense of value and worth, while those with low levels of self-esteem see themselves are doubtful about their worth and can experience feelings of anxiety and depression. From the research, they develop a list of factors entitled Strategies: A model of career development (Coleman & Barker, 1991a). The factors include introduction, self-assessment, decision, educational, occupational, and community information, preparation for work, leisure, and retirement, and research and evaluation. The descriptions of these factors, while validated in the research of others, are not expanded upon to any degree.

Coakley (1983) concludes that the development of theory, no matter where its origins or basis, is still a multi-factorial episode. "It is argued," he says, "that the dynamics of the sport retirement process are grounded in the social structural context in which retirement takes place. Factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic status and social and emotional support networks shape the manner in which one makes the transition out of sport. Therefore, retirement from sport sometimes may be the scene of stress and trauma but, by itself, it often is not the major cause of those problems." (p.1)

Literature Review

There have been several specific models of career retirement created for the retiring athlete. The intent and purpose behind the research vary, but not often does it appear that the goal is to ultimately provide counseling and intervention for the retiring athlete.

Landers (1983) argued nearly 20 years ago for more theory driven study of the important issues surrounding athlete retirement. The literature offering theory on athlete retirement is extensive. However, Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) suggested that, "there is a noticeable lack of empirical data to substantiate the positions held by leading thinkers in the area…; as a consequence, a program of empirical research based on a sound working model of the career termination process should be the goal." (p.771)

Prior to 1993, models for athlete retirement were already being constructed. Several researchers before and after that period have cited Kubler-Ross' (1969) model as particularly useful (five stages to loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance). These include studies by Wolff and Lester (1989), Grove, Lavallee and Gordon (1997) and Taylor and Ogilvie (1994). Others (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) have referred to the work of Schlossberg's model (1981). Schlossberg analyzed human adaptation to transition, using such subject areas as crisis, coping and stress in various life transitions to generalize her findings. She defines transition as an "event or nonevent resulting in change or assumption and change of social networks resulting in growth or deterioration." (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). She designed a schematic model that lists the factors affecting transition and adaptation in a flow chart form. The three main headings are: perception of the particular transition (role change, source, timing, onset, duration and degree of stress); characteristics of pre-transition and post-transition environments (internal support systems: relationships, family unit, network of friends, institutional supports and physical setting); characteristics of the individual (psychosocial competence, sex, age, state of health, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, value orientation and previous experience with a transition of a similar nature). These mid-level hierarchy factors are used in her final description of the adaptation process or what she calls the movement through phases following transition; the pervasiveness through reorganization. They depend on balance of an individual's resources and differences, and pre and post transition environments.

Kerr and Dacyshyn's (2000) study reflects their use of Schlossberg's methodology. The researchers interviewed the participants, allowing them to describe their experience from a phenomenological perspective, endeavoring to capture the complexity and contextuality of the athlete retirement paradigm. They gathered raw data themes from their interviews and created general descriptive terms to provide a framework for the discussion of their findings. Kerr and Dacyshyn discuss the retirement process by use of a label they call, "nowhere land." This is sub-headed with a description of disorientation, feelings of void and reorientation.

While Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) do not go so far as to label their findings a "model" of athlete retirement, the fact that the data were qualitatively gathered and induced sets it apart from other models. Many of the first studies in the area of athlete retirement focused on retirement as a type of loss as opposed to a major period of change. This may have stemmed from the anecdotal evidence derived in athlete observation, the small sample sizes or simply that there had not been enough work done to uncover other factors and elements in the transition process. McPherson (1980) stated that actual studies of the *process* of transition are rare. Baillie and Danish (1992) cite Haerle (1975) and Mihovilovic (1968) as early evidence of this. Allison and Meyer (1988) also reference the scarcity of studies of retired female tennis players. However, it is important to note that comprehensive work has been done using athletes, with the results listed in the various literature defined as factors, concepts, implications and conclusions. This published material may not be written as a specific model, per se, it can still be considered valuable in understanding the subject.

Ballie and Danish (1992) used several studies that accessed athletes in their review article, synthesizing the data to develop the extensive material in this journal article. They quote Kleiber and Greendorfer's (1983) study to examine reactions of former intercollegiate athletes to leaving college sports. Questionnaires were developed and mailed to former basketball or football players from Big Ten universities. They focused on issues related to psychological difficulty upon retirement, whether the reactions to retirement were varied, and if so, what affected those reactions, and whether the athletes thought that data could be generated to profile the athlete retirement process. The authors found that most athletes still had a good attitude toward sport yet they felt a sense of loss of identity, friends and opportunity, and an additional sense of unfinished business. Ballie and Danish (1992) also cite Haerle's (1975) survey of 312 former baseball players regarding their preparations for post athletic career finding that many felt

unprepared for life beyond sport. Allison and Meyer's (1988) survey of 28 retired female tennis professionals, using open-ended items in a mailed questionnaire and Werthner and Orlick's (1986) similar open-ended interview questions used to gather information about the transition of 28 Canadian Olympians are further examples of athletes being used for direct response data collection. Analysis of the transcripts from those interviews identified seven factors determining the nature of an athlete's exit and transition out of sport. They are listed as 1)a new focus, 2) a sense of accomplishment, 3) coaches, 4) injury/health problems, 5) politics/sport-association problems, 6) finances, and 7) the support of family and friends.

Models

As far back as 1968, researchers were developing frameworks for athlete retirement constructs. Milhovilovic (1968) asked 44 former first league Yugoslavian soccer players a series of six questions through interviews and questionnaires in hopes of answering two questions. What is the situation of former athletes and members of teams under investigation? And what are the reasons and mechanisms of their retirement from sport? He concluded that: 1) there is a harmful striving by active players to stay on the team as long as possible, 2) a retiring player who lacks non-sport vocational training feels conflict and frustration that often results in substance abuse, 3) loss of social contacts causes feelings of abandonment and neglect, and 4.) sportsmen feel that the inclusion of numerous tactics such as re-involvement with team duties and pre-retirement training would help to alleviate some of the painful effects of retirement.

In 1994, Taylor and Oglivie (1994) combined much of the previous research on athlete retirement as well as anecdotes brought forth in mainstream publications, and developed a five step model of adaptation to athlete retirement. Their model begins with the causes of retirement (age, de-select ion, injury, free choice) and moves through hierarchal order to factors related to adaptation to retirement (developmental experiences, self-identity, perceptions of control, tertiary contributors). Lower hierarchal levels included available resources (coping skills-what helped them in retirement, social support-the importance of others, pre-retirement planning-how did they prepare, if at all). The above factors resulted in what they called quality of adaptation to retirement—if an athlete had a healthy career transition or if they didn't, they had a retirement crisis (psychopathology, substance abuse, occupational abuse, family/social problems. Finally,

their suggestions for intervention were headed by cognitive, emotional, behavioral and social categorization.

Grove, Lavallee and Grodon (1997) polled 51 retired members of Australian national and/or state teams, mailing them a questionnaire (48 of 51 replied and were included) asking them descriptive information about their careers. Specifically, they were to complete the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993) and the COPE inventory list of coping strategies (Carver et al., 1989). The aim of the study was to relate athlete identity with coping abilities post retirement. They found various coping mechanisms used by athletes in transition. Of 15 separate items listed as coping mechanisms in the COPE inventory, the study found (listed highest to lowest): acceptance, positive reinterpretation, planning, active coping, mental disengagement, seek emotional support, focus on and vent emotions, suppress competing activities, seek instrumental support, restraint coping, behavioral disengagement, humor, denial, alcohol/drug abuse, and turning to religion. Acceptance rated a mean of 14.69. Seeking instrumental support was in the middle at 7.65 and turning to religion at the bottom with 5.23.

In an athlete-based qualitative study, Jackson, Dover and Mayocchi (1998) interviewed 18 Olympic gold medal winners from various sports between 1984 and 1992, focusing on the changes they faced in several aspects of their lives after having won the gold medal. While this particular study dealt mainly with the athlete's lives post Olympic performance and was not specific to their retirement/transition, their use of qualitative methodology allowed the authors to gather data directly from the athletes response's. The authors used a structured interview guide and then allowed the athletes to discuss all aspects of how their lives had changed after winning an Olympic gold medal. The results included how the athletes coped with new roles and what suggestions they had for other champions in dealing with such a high degree of success. This was done to identify the effects of various coping strategies used after an Olympic win. An example of how the data were summarized includes the noting of raw data themes such as "time demands for gold medal winners" and "other things started to take precedent over training." These were grouped into higher order themes including "training a lessened priority" and "less time to train", all of which built the general dimension theme of "preparation or training negatively affected." This type of qualitative methodology has the potential to produce richer, deeper meaning content in the behaviorist area of athlete study. The discussion section confirmed this with the summarized findings and suggestions from the athletes themselves for the

development of future programs designed to help successful athletes deal with their accomplishments.

The most recent study of athlete retirement was published by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000). The authors interviewed seven former elite female gymnasts in a series of face to face and telephone interviews, asking open-ended questions regarding their experiences during their career and throughout their exit/transition from sport. Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000, p.118) state, "allowing athletes to describe their experiences from a phenomenological perspective maximizes our attention to individual differences in cognitive appraisal and coping, and better captures the complexity of the retirement transition (Brewer, 1994; Koukouris, 1994). Essentially, they were following the style of Schlossberg's model (1981), considering the context in which each transition takes place. The collected data were systematically analyzed for meaning and content. Following the qualitative work of Patton (1990), the authors claim that, "The process was inductive in that the patterns, themes and categories emerged out of the data rather than being pre-determined prior to data collection and analysis." The data were then coded, categorized into meaning units and sequentially numbered within each transcript. The results showed that five of the seven athletes described their transitions as very difficult. While the authors did not endeavor to create a model based on their findings, they did list their findings in several descriptive categories:1)Nowhere Land: disorientation, feelings of void and reorientation, and 2) New Beginnings: a period of exit from Nowhere Land and emergence in their new existence. The discussion section covered areas that are familiar to the subject: reasons for retirement, pursuit of self-identity, and issues of control in their lives. What made this study unique was that a focus on young female gymnasts had not been done before and much was uncovered regarding the importance of bodily self-image in this group. Additionally, their qualitative method of allowing the athletes to drive the theory development added to the raw authenticity of this study. This study could be faulted by some for its small sample size and resultant difficulty in drawing generalizations from five athletes, regardless of how personally compelling their stories are. However, the growing acceptance of qualitative study also exposes the logistical difficulty in the procedural aspects.

Methods

The primary researcher in this study meets the criteria for inclusion in the study, having spent 21 years competing as a professional triathlete; a profession that was his primary source of income, time commitment and self-identity. The researcher acknowledges his understanding of, and relevance and bias toward the subject, but has taken steps to insure validity in the research. Any relationship that may have existed between him and potential participants was redefined clearly by discussing the issue at length and emphasizing the need for unprompted, truthful and unbiased data to emerge from the interview process. Data were triangulated by a further analysis of the data by the secondary researcher (who did not fit the inclusion criteria), specific critiquing of the data for any signs of judgmental or subjective analysis by the primary researcher and thorough follow-up call backs. If it appeared that the researcher's former involvement would inhibit the validity of the data, the athlete was not included in the selection process. This only happened in one case and the athlete was disallowed from the interview due to the inability of the researcher and the athlete to redefine the relationship to allow for validity.

Participants

Sixteen retired athletes participated in this study with the mean age being 42 years old. Each athlete competed as either a professional athlete (defined as having relied solely on their sport for compensation), competed at and won a medal during an Olympic Games, held a national record within his or her sport, or had been selected to an elite national-level team that would signify their position as one of the best in the country at the time. The criteria were established so as to study the athlete retirement process in athletes having reached the very apex of their sports. There were no criteria as to the length of time retired or time in their sport. The scope of this study did not focus on length of retirement or time in sport as factors in the retirement experience. Any sport was accepted so long as it allowed the participants to meet inclusion criteria. Athletes were randomly selected by the chief researcher from a list of approximately 50 athletes collected and developed by the researcher and the co-coder and who met inclusion criteria. Age and gender were not a consideration in this study, as it was felt that requiring these inclusion criteria would broaden the scope of the study beyond the logistics to complete it within a reasonable time frame (one year—start to finish). Gender and mean age records were separated and reported however (mean age under participants, gender in the results section), for possible use in further study. The initial list of athletes was developed by the primary researcher by contacting the athletes personally or through their assigned agent representatives. No more than three athletes from any one sport were chosen and a total of 11 sports were represented in the final selection. This criterion for inclusion was established because one of the areas the researcher was intrigued by, was to determine if the retirement experience was notably different by sport as opposed to much of the prior literature that utilized athletes from the same sport. The number of athletes (16) was considered a large enough sample size to provide for validity, yet not so large, given the logistical difficulty of a thorough qualitative study (Patton, 1990), that the study became too large in scope to be undertaken by one primary researcher and one additional results coder. Each athlete was contacted by the investigator, initially by phone, email or in person, and was given a description of the study purpose and procedure and asked if the athlete was interested in participating in the study. Upon agreement the athlete was sent an informed consent that explained the procedures and had the opportunity to ask any additional questions prior to participating in the study. They were told that the interview would be conducted by phone or in person as had been done in previous qualitative

studies (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) and discussed in qualitative methodology texts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). The primary researcher was trained in the interview process through prior occupational skill training and became familiar with the details of successful qualitative study through graduate research and consultation with published researchers experienced in qualitative methodology. The athletes were contacted after the interview (within 60 days) to review their responses and clarify any problem areas. They were assured confidentiality. Fifteen of the16 athletes were reached on call-backs and three made slight alterations to their initial statements, creating triangulation. The remainder were in agreement with the interpretation of their responses as presented by the researcher.

Human Subject Committee approval was sought and given.

The following represents the breakdown of athlete participants by sport: cycling, n=1, track and field, n=1, long distance running, n=2, professional surfing, n=1, football, n=2, baseball, n=2, car racing, n=1, triathlon, n=3, soccer, n=1, speed skating, n=1, ice hockey, n=1. There were 13 male athletes and three females included. Six sports (track and field-middle distance run, long distance running-road races, surfing, car racing, triathlon and speed skating) were defined as, “individual sports,” where the actual competitive performance is displayed by the solitary athlete, and four of the sports (football, baseball, soccer and hockey) were “team sports,” requiring other athletes to partake. One sport (cycling), retains elements of both.

Procedures

Data collection would be through the use of a semi-structured interview. To help insure validity, the questions asked were reviewed by at least five experts (two retired professional athletes, one counselor, one psychiatrist, one qualitative researcher) who commented on the questions. After the questions were re-written with the advice of the experts, they were shown to three non-participating retired athletes to determine if they were an accurate vehicle from which to elicit athlete responses. The study was then piloted by asking the final 16 questions of a group of five retired professional athletes (having explained the study and received informed consent from them). A focus group was conducted with the five athletes, the researcher and one other published researcher experienced in qualitative study who served as a tenured professor of sport psychology at a major university different than the one the researcher attended. The researcher asked the questions and the experienced researcher/ professor offered guidance and suggestions when necessary. The responses were audio taped and reviewed for potential content categories and generalized themes. None of these participants were used in the actual study. The pilot study was reviewed by the primary researcher, the qualified academic in the field with extensive experience in sport psychology and three additional graduate students in sport psychology who had played in sports at the college level but who were not actively involved in serious competition any longer. The results of the pilot study were discussed by all parties present, including the athletes, in a subsequent discussion of the questions and the responses given by the athletes. This discussion took place immediately following the pilot study and suggestions for fine tuning the interview process were considered and applied to the final group of questions. It was generally felt that the athletes would like to discuss their early years in the sport and their expectations and feelings at the time before moving on to the subject of retirement and transition. The group wanted to know about outside forces as a factor in the process of retirement as well as coping mechanisms and general conclusions about their thoughts on the transition; the easier questions first, the more thought provoking questions toward the end of the interview. Interestingly, there were several comments from the athletes suggesting that the list *not* include simple informational items such length of playing time and /or retired. The comments surrounded the idea that they had been asked these questions many times and if they were to be interviewed; they wanted to speak about the more intimate details of their experience. This was noted and applied by the researcher.

Interviews

Each participant was each asked the same 16 questions. The interview started with simple non-threatening subjects such as “did they think they would make it to the pros” and “what support did they have coming up?” The study questions (listed in the appendix) gradually tended more toward their specific transitional experience out of sport. At no time were potentially offensive or intrusive questions of a sensitive nature (i.e., did they get divorced, did they use drugs, were they suicidal?) asked of the participant. If the participants offered personal information unprompted and were agreeable to its usage in the study, the data were included and analyzed in the same manner as all other responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interviews took place over the phone or in person, 10 by phone, six in person, following established criteria for mixed format data collection in qualitative research (Patton, 1990) and used in other studies using similar methodology (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). The interviews were recorded on audio tape and no written responses were allowed due to the fact that data to be analyzed qualitatively is often better gleaned in the interview as opposed to written response (Patton, 1990). Video taping was not allowed to encourage open response and retain confidentiality. Some minor and generic interviewer prompting took place to keep the discussion on track and moving forward (statements such as, “tell me more about this,” or “what do you mean by that?”). Each interview was scheduled so that the entire process could be completed in one sitting so as to keep the participant from fragmented responses and a resultant decrease in the reliability. The average interview lasted between 30 and 35 minutes (range 18 to 75 min.). All interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 157 pages (single spaced, #12 font) of transcribed data.

Data Analysis

The athlete interview data were inductively analyzed using hierarchical content data analysis procedures as explained in Glaser & Strauss (1967), Patton, (1990) and detailed in Scanlon, Stein, & Ravizza (1989) and Udry, Gould, Bridges & Beck (1997). This inductive data analysis procedure has been used by other researchers using qualitative methodology (e.g., Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993; Weiss, Barber, Sisley, & Ebbeck, 1991). Udry, Gould, Bridges & Beck (1997) used a six step procedure for their data analysis which included the following. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Second, each researcher became familiar with the interview, listened to the audiotape and reread the transcript. Next, each researcher developed an idiographic profile of the athlete. Then, each researcher developed raw data themes that characterized the participant's responses within each of the subsections of the interview. After extracting raw data themes, the researchers met and reached a consensus on all raw data themes. Next, raw data themes within each section were grouped into like categories establishing a hierarchy moving from specific to general. The process was considered complete when no additional meaningful groupings coalesced. And finally frequency analysis was used to determine the percentage of participants who cited a theme within each second-order and general dimension. This study used the first five steps of that list, beginning with clustering the quotes around underlying uniformities and common threads. These are termed the emergent themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 1990) and facilitated the inductive process that built upon itself.

To help insure "truth value" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the analysis, the primary researcher utilized another secondary researcher for development of raw data themes, collating the data, collapsing the respondent's replies into higher order themes and supporting the final general dimension constructs. The researchers looked for any inconsistencies between their interpretations, and either disallowed that response, contacted the participant once more for clarification or identified how often and where the differences of data interpretation occurred. To reach consensus validation, a third researcher was available to adjudicate any differences in opinion between the primary and secondary researcher. But due to the resultant high inter-rater reliability, this option was not employed.

Ultimately, 356 raw data themes were drawn from the data. Both researchers reviewed each other's responses and in nine cases of the 356 emergent themes, the responses were different enough to be identified. In all cases the researchers were able to discuss their specific

responses and agree on a mutual interpretation. The nine raw data themes that required extra discussion are noted in the appendix with an asterisk. The nine total differentiated interpretations equated to an inter-rater reliability of .975, well within the guidelines established within qualitative research design (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

The 356 raw data themes (listed in the appendix) were collapsed into 17 second order themes or categories. The 17 second order themes were further collapsed into six third order themes. Two general dimension themes were pulled from the six third order themes. A final construct was developed primarily to guide further research as explained in the discussion section of this study and should not be interpreted as a newly developed theory or model.

The emerging data in their highest order themes (third order and general dimension) dictated the discussion portion of this study. In particular, a comparison and contrast will be presented of this study with a similar qualitative studies that used athletes from a single sport, noting any differences in the data that emerged with the use of retired athletes from numerous elite sports.

Results

This section includes a review of the results from this study, focusing on the higher order themes that were induced from collapsing the raw data themes interpreted from the interviews. The findings are explained in terms of content analysis, theme by theme, with some inclusion of athlete quotes to help support the inductive analysis. We begin with *mastery* (figure 1). Mastery as a higher order theme of athlete retirement was collapsed from the second order themes of *confidence in ability* and *focus on improvement.* What many of the participants reported they had lost in retirement from sport was a mastery over their lives because they no longer felt as confident in their ability as a retired athlete to achieve the kinds of success in non-sport areas or even to live a satisfactory life after sport. One athlete was quoted as saying, "I had to start all over again. Now I was behind all my friends in the business world." Yet, athletes who carried a high self-esteem were often able to carry over their confidence in athletic skills to their new career or personal interest. This was exemplified by one athlete who said, "I figured out what it was about sport that I liked and applied that to my search for a new career." These athletes had an easier time in retirement from their sport. It was intuitively deduced from this study that there was a strong desire to re-achieve the level of life-fulfillment and correlating life-validation that the athletes possessed during their playing days. For some athletes, they had no idea how to go about achieving this. But others who did, whether it was due to role modeling, personality traits, etc., did have an advantage. Many however, reported that they felt it would be nearly impossible to duplicate their heightened sense of existence. One major league baseball player reflected on his many years as a player:

> "Baseball is what I was born to do. When I quit baseball, I had played the game every spring and summer for almost thirty years. And I loved it; the highs of winning an MVP award or a league championship were incredible. How do you top that? I was one of the very best in the world."

In much of their sport careers, the participants reported a "forward-thinking" approach, but only insofar as it pertained to athletics. They spoke of "preparing for the next game, the next season," always focusing on how they could improve their skill in the sport, what was needed to win a championship, and "what skills are holding me back from reaching my potential?" The athletes felt that without that confidence and that constant quest to improve one's skill, they had

lost a control or mastery over their lives. The ones, who reported that they were able to keep their confidence and were not so singularly focused on only their athletic skill, were able to move out of sport with less emotional trauma than others those who invested heavily on only improving their athletic skill. Others are forced to retire early and suffer difficult transitions. Larry, a former world champion cyclist reported, “This is not the retirement I had envisioned. I thought I could win the world title again and retire after the Olympics.” While this athlete felt that he had prepared himself for the future, it was several years before he felt whole again. “I was surprised by how depressed I was and the somewhat reckless behavior I engaged in. But after I came to accept my fate and things fell into place, my life was satisfying again.” Larry spoke of engaging himself in another sport in an attempt to duplicate the satisfaction that he had found, and then lost in cycling. Eventually, his interest in the new sport waned and he began a successful business career, attempting to master the challenging intricacies of the world of commerce. What athletes fail to see in the world of sport are the lateral moves prevalent in business or other professions. The athletic culture fosters constant forward thinking and future planning, but *only* so far as it pertains to mastery of their sport, not their life after sport. Those athletes who did not invest themselves in the response of others to their status and performance, or if they did, kept it in balance with their knowledge that they would have a life and another career after sport, did not report the self-identity problems of those whose self-esteem was directly related to their performance and made little effort to consider their life after sport.

The second third order theme that was created was *ego fulfillment and socialization* (figure 1). Looking at *ego fulfillment and socialization* as an upper-hierarchy emergent theme, it was built on the *issues of self-esteem, fulfillment of ego* and *approval and support issues*. It was interpreted that there was a connection between the athletes that presented with lower levels of self-esteem and those who reported “feelings of loss and disconnection.” The majority (11 of 16) of the participants addressed the importance of the camaraderie and friendships that had been a part of their athletic careers. A triathlete confessed, “Opening the door to other athletes and training with other people highly motivates me today. Even if I am slower, I enjoy the camaraderie and the challenge. I should have done this in my early years of racing.” This socialization that he and others often referred to was inductively analyzed to mean that the athletes were speaking in terms as if they would never have the relationships they had as an athlete. Of the 16 athletes interviewed, five had been through a divorce. The participants who

reported that they had ongoing elements of approval and support from family and friends also reported decreased levels of anxiety in retirement. Will, a former NFL player who was divorced shortly after retiring from 13 years in the league and nearly ten years of marriage, addressed the issue this way:

"I came back here and I was married to the wife that I had when I was playing ball, and she started having other interests. And I was like this pathetic little character, and she'd come home and I'd been going through all these thought processes of how I could hang onto her, and she's really great and I'm just a little pile of nothing. And I can literally remember saying stuff like, 'Well, I thought about it today, and while you're off doing this other thing, I'm just going to make it nice for you around here.' How pathetic…is that, to be this hero and then almost immediately you're just this blubbering pile of jelly?"

One could assume that Will was not getting the same level of approval that he had been when he was playing in front of 75,000 fans every Sunday afternoon; that his wife was unable to replace the cheering crowds. Additionally, something to consider in future research is how the athlete's spouse's perception of the athlete changes upon their exit from sport.

The analysis of these data suggested that players, maybe more than non-athletes, gain a sense of life-validation through the acceptance by others. They equate this exchange with and approval from exterior social forces as existential purpose and life-validation. The athletes interviewed who spoke highly of parental and coaching support, often were the same ones with higher self-esteem and use of role modeling as a form of positive coping. Conversely, a bad role model or lack of support can have a negative effect on the athlete.

From a very young age, Sara had been a tom-boy, regularly engaging in sports with males her age. After playing on a number of women's teams from various sports, almost always acting as a leader and high performer, she settled on soccer as her primary sport. Sara continued to play soccer through high school, college (on a scholarship) and several elite level club teams, achieving All-Conference First Team selection at one point. Throughout her career, her father was very unsupportive of her involvement in sport, even to the point of discouragement. After college the options for elite women's soccer were quite limited and she wrestled with what she would do next. "Initially when I stopped playing I would have never guessed it would have been this hard," Sara reported. "At first I felt sort of liberated. After about a year it really began to settle for me. I was totally lost and confused. I was no longer an elite athlete, I was a has-been."

Sara's self-identity had been thwarted by her exit from sport, her statements attested to this transition period where adaptation to a new sense of self requires a period when the athlete feels disoriented and void of direction. Kerr and Dacyshyn refer to this in their study of retiring female gymnasts as *Nowhere land* (2000).

"I still feel alienated from my former identity and I wish that I could go back to those good old days when everything was already scripted for me," Sara confesses. "I am still trying to 'find myself,' whatever that means. What I do know is that I do not feel as comfortable telling people about myself as I used to. I feel as though there is nothing special about me anymore. Without the definition of myself as an elite athlete I am everyone else. What else sets me apart? I am simply one of the masses and I cannot reveal how much that really bothers me." Sara's self-identity problems were likely tied to her low self-esteem catalyzed by a low approval level from her father. Sara also lost the socialization inherent in the team sport environment.

After two years, Sara returned to graduate school and began a course of study in a non-sport related field. Her involvement in sports had taught her of her need for focus in her life and possibly her enjoyment of being around other people in a healthy environment. "I was doing all sorts of fun things that aren't necessarily good for you. I was always a partier but without the constraints of soccer and school it was truly out of control." Eventually, she began distance running and found some degree of the "the old self" she had spoken of in challenging herself at long distance running events. A serious knee injury though, set her running back and her feelings of loss returned. Gradually, Sara began to accept her new position, but at the time of the interview was still not in complete acceptance of her new life.

Sara, along with at least 10 others interviewed, reported that they had not given enough thought to their lives after sport. "It's counter-productive," said Mark, a two time Olympian and American record holder in track and field. "You have to be so focused on the task at hand, on doing your best. Nobody really wants to know what you'll do next. So you just don't think about it."

Positive coping emerged as another third order theme based on the second order themes, *love of the activity* and appreciative for the *benefits of the lifestyle* (figure 2.). While this specific subject has been well researched, these second order themes are new to the subject of athlete retirement. It is plausible that if an athlete feels as if he or she were fortunate to have been given this opportunity, they may not feel as depressed when it has finally ended. One athlete was

quoted as saying, “I was lucky to enjoy the years in the sport that I did. I was able to live my dream of playing in the major leagues. Not many guys can say that.” One individual who showed signs of positive coping but also had retained aspects of the transition process that can contribute to emotional crisis, specifically the self-identity issue we have spoke of was Will. Will played for 13 years as a star linebacker in the NFL and upon retirement, spent time alone in reflection that ultimately allowed that acceptance that was so often reported as the final step in the transition process. Unlike the first two athletes, Jonathon and Kim, Will had been an outstanding athlete for many years, achieving a college scholarship in football to a notable Midwest college where he just missed making the All-American team. His life in professional football was everything to him. And even though he was able to receive good grades, his identity was deeply entrenched in the culture of professional sports and all of the specific nuances of life in the NFL. Will reached a high degree of success in football, making the All-Pro team two years in a row.

When he finally began to realize he was no longer going to be an effective, league leading starter for his team, he retired and began a five year period that was rife with emotional challenges, periods of depression, deep searching and introspection. He entertained a formal study of the athlete retirement process and eventually found a type of understanding and acceptance of his new life outside of sport. “I figured out,” Will reported, “I think it’s some internal process of these guys going, ‘Okay, I guess I’m a retired football player now. I guess I don’t have the things that are going on that I’d like to have going on. I guess my life isn’t as interesting as it was.’ But I was very fortunate to have had all those great years.” Will, even as he went through a divorce and a number of unfulfilling jobs, realized that there could be healing in sharing ideas with other retired players. “I thought that maybe if I got together with a group of guys,” Will said, “it could serve to… help figure myself out; answer the question--am I the only one that’s going through this?” Will returned to school to study psychology, earning a degree that helped him to understand his own feelings as well as those of other athletes. “I learned how to resolve the conflict that was so embedded in my transition,” he reported. “I didn’t have any role models so I got together with the other guys and we became each other’s role models.” Lately, Will has been instrumental with helping other retired players who are experiencing difficulties in retirement and has found a rewarding job counseling and mentoring various youth groups from all backgrounds. While positive coping mechanisms did not insure a seamless transition, in many of the cases, those who were enabled with the skills to cope with the stress of

a major life transition such as retirement from sport, reported less difficulty than those who did not speak of an appreciation for the "opportunity" to play. The love of the activity also had a correlative to those athletes who, when asked what they would use to fill gaps left by loss of sport reported that they would try to stay involved in the sport.

While the theme of *acceptance and emotional maturity* appeared as if it could fall under *positive coping*, it emerged from the lower order themes of *conflict resolution* and *role model issues* due to the many different raw data themes that created it. (figure 2). Several athletes spoke about "feelings of inner conflict" and "feeling separated or fragmented from everything." When probed about the tactics they used to deal with this conflict and anxiety from feeling "whole like I used to feel," several participants reported that they finally accepted that they would never experience some of the highs of playing professional or elite sport again. This acceptance was analyzed and induced to be a form of emotional maturity. In no less than six cases, the athlete willingly and unprompted addressed where this emotional maturity might have come from. The majority of these athletes mentioned a role model, often a parent or coach that provided guidance and support in their ability to resolve the conflict that plagued them.

The emergent third order theme that included the most second order themes and is at the center of the data in this, as well as many other studies on the subject, is the *emotional challenges of life transition.* The theme was collapsed from *issues of self-identity, financial worries, physical vulnerability, emotional crisis* and *dealing with stress. Self-identity* was a theme that ran through many of the athlete's responses to the 16 items on the semi-structured interview. Responses such as, "I defined myself within my sport," and "sport was not what I did but who I was," were easy to analyze and induce as issues of self-identity. But when questioned about whether they felt differential treatment from outside sources some athletes reported relevant comments such as, "They treated me like who I was, a pro athlete," this led to the belief that self-identity in retiring athletes was a central issue. Jonathon for instance, a long distance runner who appeared to have experienced the easiest transition of all the participants began running when he was in high school but never reached a great degree of success. He did not run at a serious competitive level until after he attended college and began a teaching career while he was in his early 20's. Gradually he began to experience some success at the local and regional levels and decided that he might have the ability to compete at a high level of competition. Within two years of serious preparation, he was able to win one of the most prestigious

marathons in the country, gain corporate sponsorship and quit his teaching job to train and race full time. In his rapid success, he may have avoided the rising tension that comes with the anticipation and expectation of which the other athletes spoke of.

After several years of winning the largest marathons in the country, the athlete was able to help launch an ancillary business associated with sport. He was involved part time with the company, helping to run it. When his performances began to wane, he gradually focused more time on his business interests, competing at an age-group level as opposed to a professional and was able to redefine his identity as an athlete. “I was fortunate that I could still do races; that I could just run along, nice and easy, and people would recognize me and clap but I also had other interests too; I guess I never let myself get too invested in being just an athlete,” he said. Many of the proven theories of athlete retirement could be applied to Jonathon’s relative ease out of world class running: he had been trained in another occupation, he retained outside interests and he had the good fortune of a gradual exit from sport. But other elements that were specific to him and less explored in the literature may have contributed to his ease in transition: his rapid rise to excellence at a relatively later age in his career (mid to late 20’s), his ability to remain competitive in age group competition and possibly his retention of certain personality traits that allowed him the coping mechanisms or the foresight in planning for the future.

Or take the case of Kim, a moderately successful female swimmer in high school and college but when she switched to the sport of triathlon after graduation she almost immediately started winning races. By the time she was in her late 20’s, Kim was considered one of the best female endurance athletes in the world. But Kim’s chosen sport was still young and the media attention, endorsement and prize money opportunities and resultant fame were quite small relative to larger, mainstream sports. However, she was a prodigious worker in a very physically demanding sport and often felt she had trained harder than any of her competitors, giving her the notion that she, “deserved to win.” The training needed for her to be the best, disallowed her from working any other jobs and gradually she was able to earn enough money at the sport so that it was her sole source of income. Additionally, Kim was highly intelligent and often pondered what the role of sport meant to her as well as what place it should take in society. “I think athletes are even less qualified to be role models than, say, teachers or any other decent person,” Kim would say. “Athletes live a narrow life with clearly defined parameters for success and behavior, devoid and often removed from the fuzziness of daily life.”

When Kim retired, she returned to graduate school, and invested time in re-developing her self-identity, deciding that what she missed had to do with the validation she received from the social aspect of sport. “It was lonely at first since most all of my friends were associated with the sport,” she reported. “I just left; a bit sad about the lack of meaning, as triathlons brought a certain sense of meaning as well as a means of accomplishment to my life through the friends I’d made.” Kim went on to have a successful business career and returned to team sports years later with the understanding of her life that she had sought. “It took almost 10 years before I felt normal,” Kim remembered. “To me, that was when new things in my life preempted my involvement in triathlons. Now a-days, I can barely remember that I competed…I know it was me because I have the memories but it was another life time ago.” While Kim is happy and satisfied now, her transition could be considered more introspective than traumatic, mostly due to her willingness and need to use the transition period to find out what it was about sport that had been attractive to her. While the literature detailing the differences in sport retirement by gender is sparse (Kim wrote an unpublished paper on the subject), from a contextual basis, Kim’s scenario was different. Her sport was young and had little media focus. She was a bright and cerebral athlete. She had no desire to settle down and have children after sport as some female athletes do, she earned little fame or money, yet her competitive results confirmed that she was among the best in the world at an exciting new sport. If an intervention for Kim’s emotional difficulties in retirement were to be designed, an analysis of the data and intuitive deduction would suggest that the specificity of her situation be considered along with more established theory. These opposing personal anecdotes of Kim and Jonathon imply that the athlete transition is an individual and contextual process, a “personal journey back to where I came,” as one athlete called it, “to a life that could offer some degree of fulfillment again.”

Other themes within the realm of emotional challenges that were culled from the data included *financial worries* and *physical vulnerability*. Indeed, several athletes voiced concern over how they would maintain the material lifestyle they had become accustomed to if they had participated in a sport that compensated them well. And a majority also showed concern over the decline of their physical nature. If their identity was merged with the athlete image, than any decline in their physical abilities would symbolize and further complicate their changing self-image. One female triathlete was especially aware of this. “My sport had shaped my body into a lithe and effective performance tool. I had grown to enjoy being in incredible condition with a

body that many people were envious of. And when I stopped competing, my body gradually returned to a more normal shape. I fought it for awhile but eventually accepted that it would not return to what it was."

A male athlete, a former college swimmer and water polo player who turned to triathlons after graduation and won several world titles during his career, was never completely able to remove himself from the feelings and perceived benefits of training after his retirement. Thomas has come to accept his need to train in recent years through reflection and personal growth, though he still trains several hours every day. "I still have a hidden urge to retain my fitness and possibly race. Denial of aging, the ability to continue to push myself, why? Well, I loved to workout long before I enjoyed racing and letting the aging process take it's course is still difficult for me," Thomas confessed." This "denial of aging," as Thomas refers to it, can also be inferred as a denial of death or the death referred to in prior research that uses the theories of thanatology to explore the emotional trauma of retirement described by so many athletes. And yet Thomas, for example, possesses the advantageous trait of loving his sport and truly enjoying the process of physical training, to continue to push himself for reasons that only he could explain with more in depth interviewing. For Thomas to continue to train at elite athlete levels, admittedly because he desires to slow the aging process and inevitable march towards death, he could only do it with his pure enjoyment of the process as well as an acceptance of his innate need to train. In some ways, this learned acceptance is an advanced form of coping that he has developed in order to resolve the conflict and reduce or eliminate the emotional crisis that otherwise might be sustained if he was not able to train or workout. This personal understanding and chosen lifestyle has worked for him. For other athletes, it might not be logistically possible nor successful either.

Financial worries were reported by several athletes but usually in the context that athletes who had not played a sport that earned him or her substantial compensation. When it was reported by well-paid players, it was often as a reference to whether or not they could maintain the material consumption that their previous salaries had enabled them. One athlete reported, "I made a lot of money but I have a pretty big overhead now too." Larry, star pitcher in Major League Baseball for 11 seasons put it this way, "The analogy, I think, or the actual situation could be if you like computers and you start out working at computers but you're also very artistic, and somehow your first move is working with numbers or whatever and the second

move is, okay, you're going to stay with computers but you're going to somehow be an artist on the computer – that type of thing – so you make these lateral moves. Athletes don't make lateral moves; it's either up or down. You're either making a lot more money every year or a lot less. You're either getting faster or getting slower. Nobody stays the same at anything in sport." In a way, William found a way to make a "lateral move," to keep a part of his athleticism and let the rest go at the same time. And the money too is contextually based on the individual athlete. Several athletes who played sports that did not pay well reported happy to be earning anything from their sport. "Heck," the professional surfer participant said, "can you even imagine getting paid to ride waves? It's unreal." While other athletes who earned well into seven figures each year when they played voiced concern as to how they would maintain a lifestyle that had come to depend upon a large steady income.

Emotional crisis or trauma was reported through a plethora of definitions and abstract descriptions, some of which made it difficult to analyze, label and categorize. Thirteen of the 16 participants reported at least two statements that could be defined as some form of emotional crisis. The participants varied greatly in their willingness to openly discuss this subject; one more than happy to tell this researcher that he or she had been in psychiatric treatment, another needing prompting to address the question at all. The final second order theme that was collapsed into *emotional challenges of life transition* was *dealing with stress* (figure 2). This theme, closely related to *conflict resolution* but different in that the raw data themes here spoke more to the process of trying to deal with stress that resolving the conflict, was identified from the many raw data themes that mentioned and subsequently fell into the general category given this title of "dealing with stress." Fourteen of the 16 athletes interviewed reported that some aspect of their transition out of sport was stressful. The amount and degree were specific to the participant but the words "stress" and "dealing with stress" were often citied. At times the athletes referred to stress when asked such questions as how they dealt with idolization or hero-worship. Other times, when the questions were more pointed (what was your mental state when you retired or how did you deal with problematic emotions?), the athletes were similarly direct in their responses. One athlete said, "Without the structure of sport I had a tendency to go a bit wild. It was stressful knowing that I needed sport to keep me in line." Another reported, "Man, I felt like I was on an emotional roller coaster. I had to learn how to deal with it until the ride ended."

The last of the six third order themes that emerged was *advantageous personality types*. It was collapsed from the themes *maturity and development* and *selfless or generous actions* (figure 2). *Advantageous personality types* differed from *acceptance and emotional maturity* in that personality types were thought to be innate while *acceptance and emotional maturity* lent itself to a developed skill. During the process of interviewing these participants, it became more apparent by this researcher and his additional coder that some athletes may have personality traits that had been with them for a very long time. After much discussion and close analysis of the transcribed responses, it was decided to include this theme based on the second order themes listed. Athlete comments such as, "I had always realized that my addiction to exercise was harmful," showed a type of maturity that was inductively analyzed to be ingrained in the personality trait of the athlete. Selfless or generous actions reported by the athlete as helpful in reducing their inner conflict and reducing their feelings of lack of self-identity were also thought to be mostly ingrained in the athlete's personality rather than an experiment that they might have stumbled on and received positive feelings from. One baseball player reported that he knew his time to "give back to the game" would come and he was looking forward to offering the support that others had shown him.

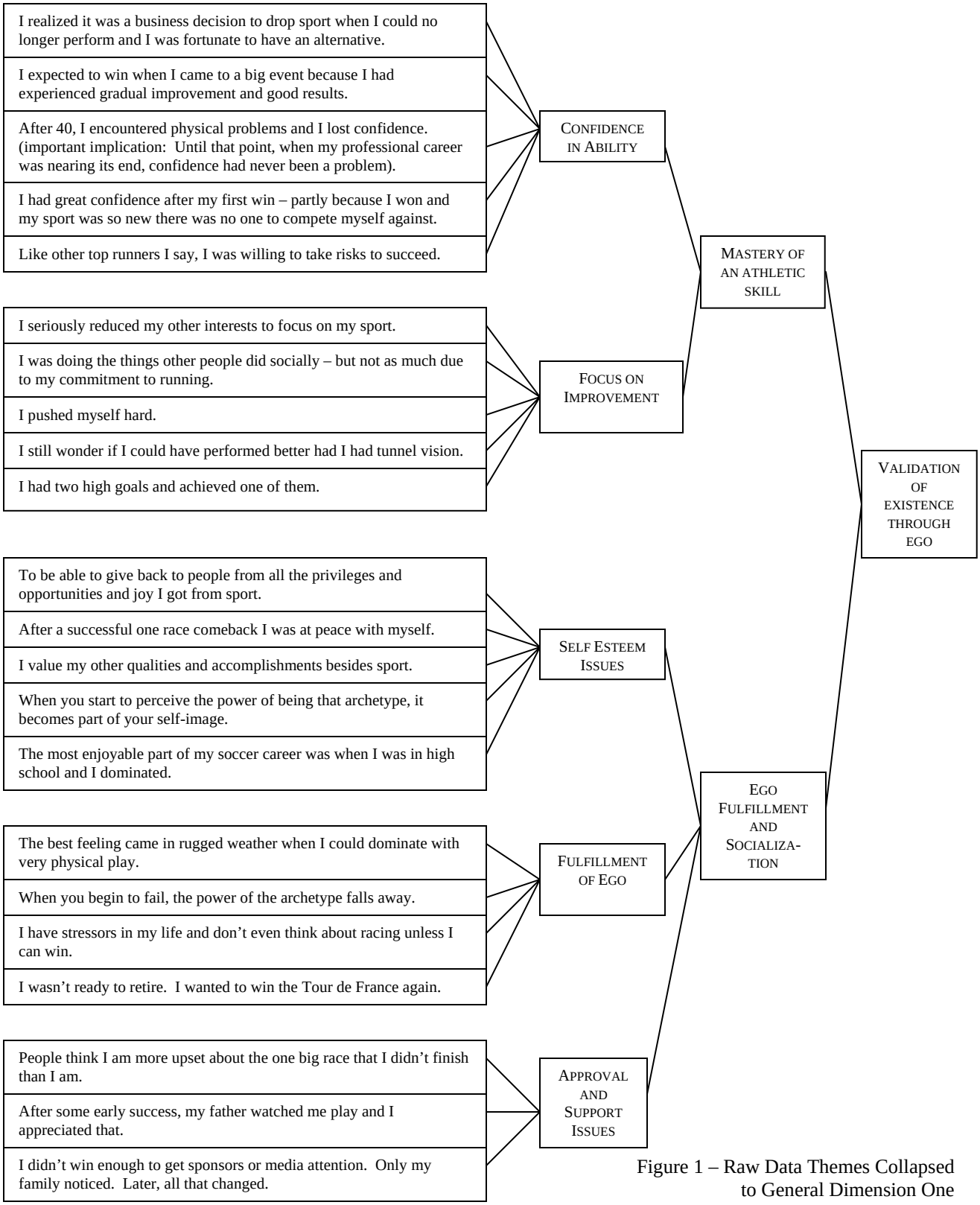

Figure 1 – Raw Data Themes Collapsed to General Dimension One

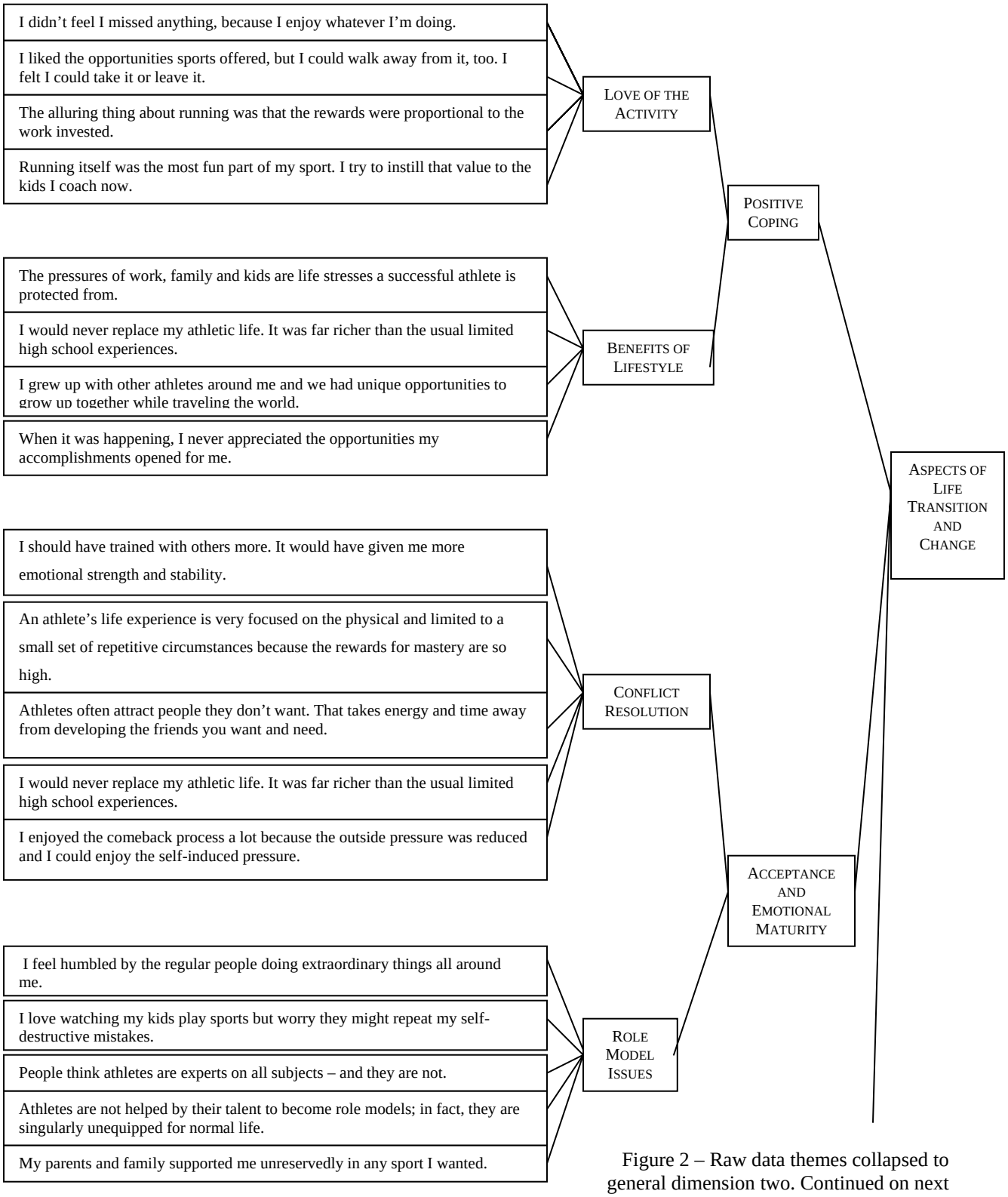

Figure 2 – Raw data themes collapsed to general dimension two. Continued on next page.

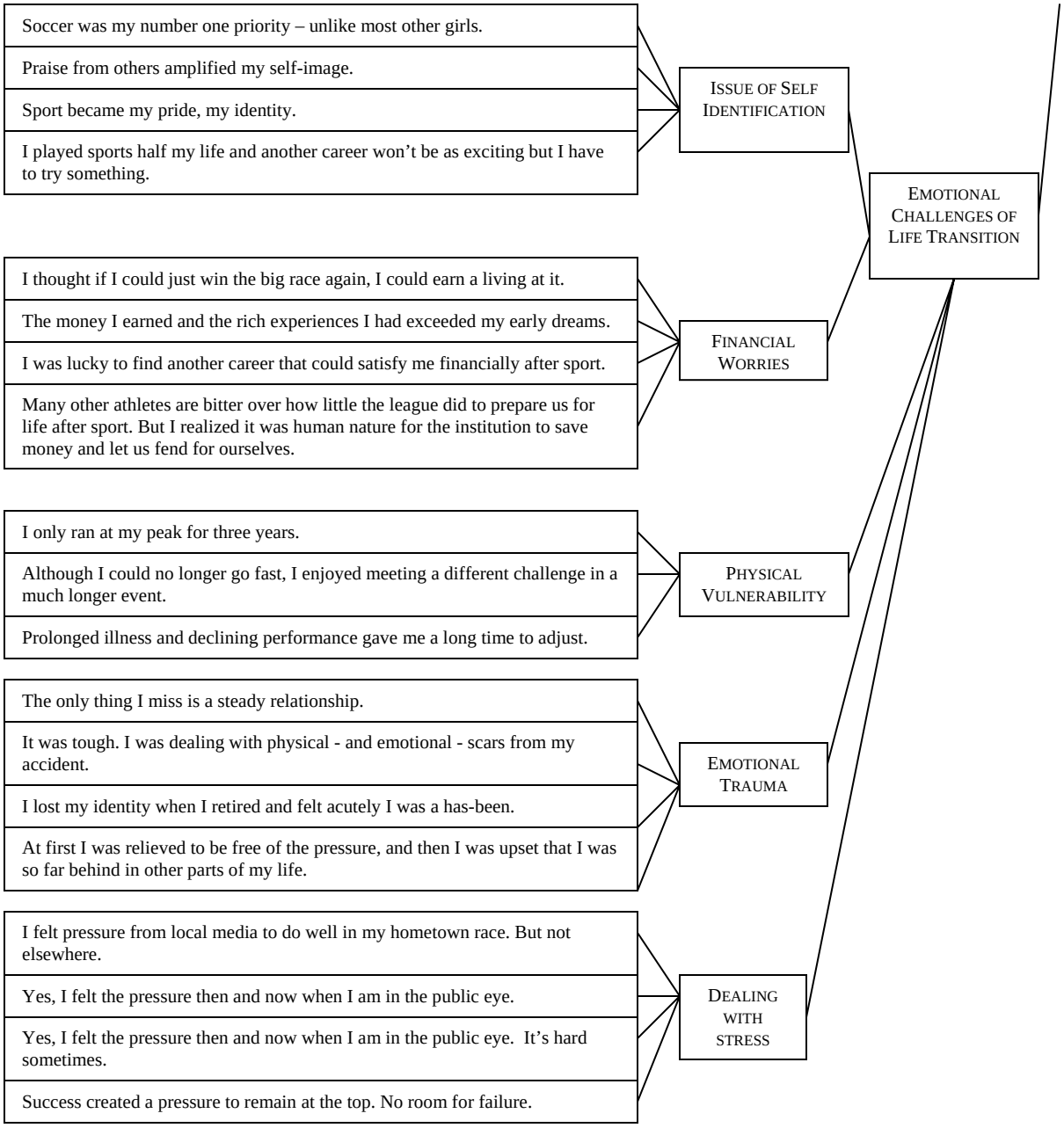

FIGURE 2--- RAW DATA THEMES COLLAPSED TO GENERAL DIMENSION TWO. CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.

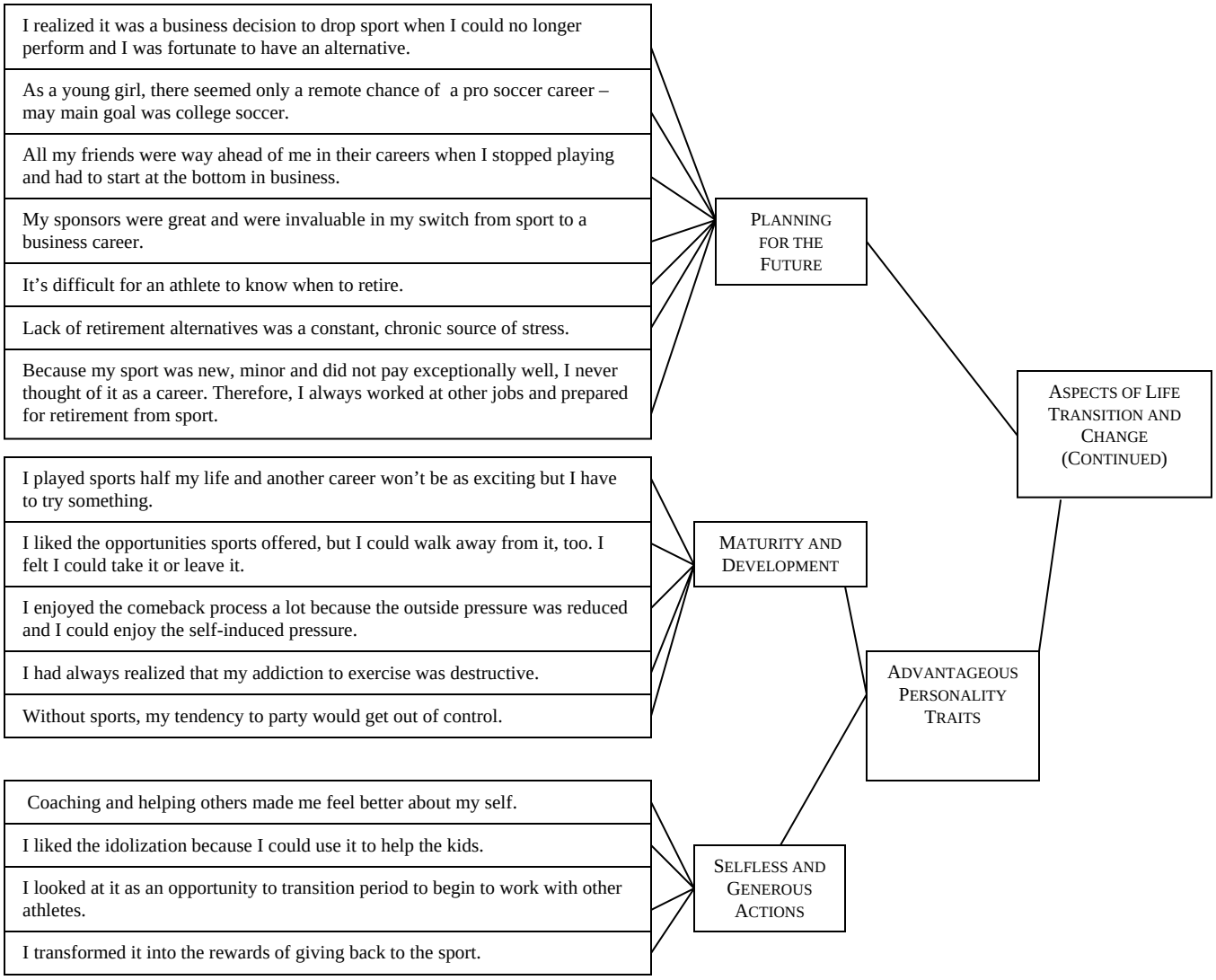

Figure 2 – Raw Data themes collapsed to general dimension two *(continued)*

One second order theme, *planning for the future* (figure 2), did not collapse into any of the third order themes and was placed directly into one of the two general dimensions, *aspects of life transition and change. Planning for the future*, either as something that they did or not, was cited in the interviews by nine of the 16 participants. Most athletes said that they wished they had given more thought and planning to their lives after sport. Those that spoke of easier transitions often cited their long range efforts to assure another career after sport as being instrumental in their post-athletic success. “I knew that my career could end at any time,” reported one athlete, “and I knew that I would have thirty or forty years to fill up with something. I always kept that in my mind.” While athletes spoke in sometimes vague terms about other aspects of their retirement experience, nearly all the athletes, when they addressed the subject of planning for the future were clear—“there wasn’t enough”—became an oft repeated phrase. At least 12 of the 16 athletes reported that they wished there had been more opportunities for them to plan. As one athlete summed it up, “We were always thinking about our jobs in sport and so where the coaches and managers. I’m not trying to blame anyone but it seems that the responsibility to remind a pro athlete it could all go away tomorrow falls on everybody shoulders, not just the athletes.”

Summary of results

Three hundred fifty six raw data themes were developed from the transcribed interviews with the athletes. Interpretive analysis of those themes provided the data that collapsed into the 17 second order themes, 6 third order themes and two general dimensions shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. General dimension one-*validation of existence through ego* and general dimension two, *aspects of life transition and change* are discussed in greater detail in the discussion section of this study. Briefly, it was determined through the inductive process that if an athlete can begin to fulfill their basic needs of the ego by learning and mastering a new skill other than the one they had in their sport, if they can develop confidence through an ability and that skill, and gain resultant increases in self-esteem, especially when supported by other people who they admire and desire to socialize with, they would feel purpose, direction, control and a reason or validation for their existence. General dimension two—*aspects of life transition and change*, encompasses all the elements and challenges that a retiring athlete faces in his or her transition out of sport. The third order themes reflect the issues that determine the retirement experience: how well they

cope, do they retain personality traits that either support of hinder that process, what are their levels of emotional maturity and financial condition, and how do they view not only their experience in sport but their self now that the are no longer a professional athlete? These are the aspects, elements and themes that determine the transitional experience for the athlete. Each of these aspects, applied in context to the individual athlete, may have an influence on the how they proceed through the retirement process. For discussion and future research purposes, the general dimensions were deductively concluded and coalesced into a single conceptual theme: *validation of existence through ego* and *aspects of life transition and change* can be collapsed into *internal and external acceptance equals feelings of life fulfillment.* This interpretation was expanded upon in the discussion section.

Discussion

This study was done to first, to determine if the application of qualitative methods to the study of athlete retirement would support existing literature and possibly reveal new themes on the subject and second to compare and contrast to existing models in the literature. Each participant was willing to speak about his or her career transition, some more openly and frankly than others, but only occasional prompting was required to keep the athletes moving forward in answering the questions during the interview. Due to the high profile of several athletes (hall of fame members, Olympic gold medal winners, former world champions, etc.), it often took several months of planning and communication before the interview was able to occur. But once the athletes "warmed up" to the discussion, the majority appeared to enjoy, if not feel relieved, that someone who could relate and (the researcher who also fit inclusion criteria) was interested in their exit from sport. One athlete in particular who had agreed to be interviewed but was very difficult in gaining final access to, ultimately had his agent assign the researcher "no more than 15 minutes of discussion" at a specific predetermined time. The ensuing discussion lasted for 45 minutes and afterwards, the participant then asked if he could contact the researcher again to speak without the confinements of the study, saying to him, "Nobody seems to want to talk about how hard it was for me to leave sport. They all want to discuss my playing days."

After a lengthy review of the recent literature and mainstream press, it appears that the subject of athlete retirement has not received this much attention since the late 1980's and early 1990's when many of the academic-based studies were undertaken. Quite possibly this is due to the national demographic shift upward in age where many of the baby boomers are themselves reaching the age where they are having to deal with major life transitions.

After the athletes were all interviewed, a common theme emanated from the data, namely that the athletes felt like they had a fulfilling life as high level athletes, and that this sense of fulfillment came from the many elements intrinsic to the life of high level or professional athletes. Areas such as direction, mastery, purpose, camaraderie, ego fulfillment and financial remuneration were all reported as aspects of that fulfillment. In many cases they were quoted with such lofty phrases as, "Football is what God made me to do," or "Baseball is my life, there's not much else I know." When they left sport, they spoke of losing that validation they felt

for their lives (as it was projected) through their involvement in sport. Many of the athletes were faced with emotional crisis of the present and an ambiguous future. They spoke of a loss of control over their lives because they had always known what lie just ahead. Now, lacking any *mastery* of a skill or occupation that had defined them, their lives seemed without direction. Their ego was also subjected to a major blow. The athletes who over-identified themselves in their role as a professional or world class athlete often came to rely on the adulation they received from family, friends and fans.

The literature review and results sections refer to the loss of identity as central to the transition paradigm (Orlick, 1980, Weiss, 2001). While the themes that emerged out of this study confirm this and validate earlier studies, further analysis revealed the relative themes of *mastery* and *ego fulfillment and socialization* as acting in concert with the issue of loss of self identity. According to the data, gaining a *mastery* over one's self through achievement of a very high skill level at an occupation appears to be an element of the general dimension, *validation of existence through one's ego. Mastery* for an athlete can come in the form of technical abilities, confidence in one's athletic skills and resultant feelings of increased self-esteem, a focus on constant improvement of one's skill, and some feeling of control over his or her future because they have a attained mastery in a field that has developed stature in society . This gives athletes a sense of being in control, something several athletes reported not retaining after they left their sport. Still, some athletes knew that the control they felt was tenuous; an injury or serious illness, being deselected from the team or loss of skill level, was reported as areas of concern that the athlete felt he or she could not control. Additionally, prior research (Blinde & Stratta,1992) has shown that athletes who are forced to retire due to injury, declining abilities or graduation, often experience more difficulty in transitioning out of sport.

These interviews often moved (as was designed into the 16 specific questions) from a memory of their experiences in sport toward their memories during the transition out, and then to any thoughts on the retirement process they had come to learn. At the most revealing times of the interviews, athletes spoke emotionally of their feelings of, "lack of identity, confusion and disorientation." Sport appeared to become their identity to such an extent that, in the more traumatic of cases, the removal of sport could take on the same feelings of a loss of existence. While the participants in this study reported that these feelings were tumultuous and frightening, they stopped short of what Baillie and Danish (1992) described, "As great as any disability or

terminal illness" (pp. 91-92). Quite possibly this self-identity crisis as social death that was found and described in retiring athletes, lead early researchers to apply thanatological theories to the study of athlete retirement. Of all the emotional challenges of athlete retirement as a form of life transition, self-identity remains at the forefront. Grove, Lavallee and Gordon (1997) reported in their study of athletic identity on coping with retirement from sport, "retiring athletes used a variety of coping strategies during career transition, and that some strategies were used significantly more often than others" (p.198). Brewer et al. (1993) suggested that athletic identity was related to both the degree of and time needed to make that adjustment. Both support the theory that athlete retirement is a contextual process highly charged with issues of self-identity.

Tied to many of these other issues, is a need for human connection and a theme of approval. It wasn't just enough to have the social ties that came with sport but that the relationships needed to be mostly positive by a show of approval. Upon retirement there is a loss of this human connection and the athletes spoke about looking to replace it in various ways. Many athletes became emotional when reflecting on the loss of socialization, the lack of camaraderie they have now relative to the closeness to others they felt when they were playing. There appeared a mutual respect for other players that helped the athletes to constantly feel connected to their team or their sport. Of the 16 athletes interviewed, five had been through a divorce. And that percentage is much less than the percentage reportedly affecting all retiring professional athletes. While it is beyond the scope this study to discuss the causes behind this, future research on the subject might address the athlete's need for approval.

As the analysis and interpretation of the data were being done, the concept of contextuality begin to emerge; the idea that a more individually-focused approach was considered as a possible outcome of this study. This warranted closer inspection as the data analysis evolved. It was not assigned as a theme since the raw data was not specifically induced to this area but was noted by the researcher for inclusion in the discussion of findings. For instance, the element of positive coping as a factor in the athlete retirement experience has been explored (Grove, Lavallee & Gordon, 1997) in the literature but the two emergent themes of *a love of the activity* and *an appreciation for the benefits of the professional athlete's lifestyle* were produced through the methodology used in this study that allowed and encouraged each athlete to contribute their own experiences within the responses to the questions. It can be inferred that if an athlete feels as if he or she were fortunate to have been given the opportunity to play

professionally and fulfill a dream, they may not feel as depressed when it is finally ended. If they could take the mature approach that the benefits of an athlete's lifestyle were part of a "gift," as one athlete labeled it, then their transition out of sport would be easier than an athlete who did not feel this appreciation.

This acceptance of the change and perception that the athlete was lucky helped to support the themes of emotional maturity. It could be inferred that since the mean age of the athletes was 42, they have had more time to reflect and develop this maturity than an athlete who was retiring at a younger age. Likewise, the data that was reported regarding *financial worries* reflected more mature positions from the older athletes who may have had time to find new careers that eased their financial concerns as opposed to younger retiring athletes who were still struggling to either come to grips that their income would be less or find a career that would compensate them at a level that would provide some stability for them.

Physical vulnerability emerged from comments made by athletes who had grown to know and relate to their bodies as representative of their ability. The triathletes in particular, where demands of the sport often morph bodies into well sculpted examples of the pre-conceived notion of somatic athleticism, reported that they were concerned that retirement would return their bodily shape to a more normal one. "I worked very hard to get that hard body," one female triathlete said. "and then it just sort of went away."

In an examination of data collected in this study, it was conceived that some athletes possessed *personality traits advantageous* to the life transition process and therefore experienced less difficulty in retirement from sport. In particular, the raw data themes collapsed into second order themes of *maturity and development,* and *selfless or generous actions*. This is consistent with Schlossberg's mid-level hierarchy factors in her model of the adaptation process (1981) where she sites characteristics of the individual (psychosocial competence, sex, age, state of health, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, value orientation and previous experience with a transition of a similar nature) as factors in the process. It was also theorized that selfless or generous activities were most likely an innate as opposed to a learned trait. In turn, several of the athletes reported (Figure 1, selfless generous actions) that they found healing by helping others or by returning to their old teams to help coach. These actions implied that there may have been other motivations, primarily social in nature. Nevertheless, those who spoke about "giving back

to their sport," seemed to possess the personality traits that contributed (possibly as a positive coping) to an easier transition.

A key element of advantageous personality traits is the retention of *maturity* and *selfless actions*. Concurrently, *acceptance and emotional maturity* also were desirable traits that emerged out of the second order themes *of conflict resolution* and having *role models*. Nearly every athlete reported some degree of conflict and stress. Those who said they had people to look up to or who had given them coping, transitional or stress relieving skills experienced less emotional crisis. The most valuable tool appeared to be a form of acceptance whereby the athlete realized that what they were experiencing a difficult process but a process nonetheless that would end at some point. Several athletes seemed to possess this skill prior to retirement while others spoke of gaining it during their transition period. Many of the athletes reported spending time alone in reflection and introspection, quite possibly gaining this acceptance of their new identity and place in life.

In summary, each of these athletes spoke about a transitional period of adjustment after their exit from sport, a period that ranged from extremely difficult and lengthy to only mildly challenging and short in duration. Over 80% of the athletes mentioned some aspect of socialization as an important part of their career in sports as well as their transition out of sport. Many of them spoke of spending time by themselves in introspection and their need to keep busy and focused while they endured the psychological challenges. Three athletes cited a return to education as a vehicle that served their need to refocus, to surround themselves with new friends and stimulate the intellectual/cerebral task of personal consideration toward their new identity. A closer analysis of the raw data themes also showed that some of the athletes were forced to deal with personal issues upon retirement that they had put off while focused on sport.

As noted earlier, most of the participants were from a very high caliber playing level, likely higher than any previous study on retired athletes. This researcher was particularly interested to see if the athlete responses differed thematically from prior research that included college players, Olympic team members or national team selectees. Of the 16 participants chosen for inclusion in this study, 15 reported that they had relied on their sport as their primary or sole source of income for all or part of their playing career. Three were selected to Olympic teams and one was awarded a gold medal (actually, he won several gold medals at the Olympic Games). While not a specific purpose of the study, the researcher's bias lead him to specifically

analyze the data with an eye that potentially, an athlete who had played in the professional leagues for many years might find the retirement process more difficult than younger players due to his or her long term personal investment in the sport. However, the only emergent themes that had not been discussed or referred to in some form in the prior literature that utilized fewer professional athletes, were those of *love of the activity* and *appreciation for the benefits of the activity*. These emergent themes, while not seen in previous literature, could not be inductively connected to the level of athlete achievement in the analysis of data. If the comparison had been done to high school or college level athletes who had no thoughts of playing beyond their collegiate years, the results might have been different. Coakley (1983) reports that "retirement" from sport for those who play at the interscholastic amateur level is seen as a normal part of growing up and moving into the work force or beginning a family. Sands (1978) studied 153 former male high school football and basketball players and found that although sport was a crucial activity in their lives while they were in school, it declined in importance after graduation. Sands (1978) reported that the athletes had defined their sport as passing phases in their lives and their exit from sport did not trigger any of the emotional trauma or self-identity problems inherent in the athlete who had played longer and achieved a higher degree of success. Although findings are insufficient in this particular study to draw an empirical conclusion regarding length of time and success achieved in sport as an indicator of retirement experience, it appears from this study that when comparing professional athletes to Olympic or national team members or others at the apex of their sport, there are no observable differences.

Retirement experience by sport comparison

A secondary purpose of this study was to investigate if the specific sport an athlete plays has any bearing on their retirement experience. Any findings would emerge from data in this study and not be compared to other studies that might have compared the athlete retirement experience by sport (the researcher is unaware of any study analyzing retirement differences by sport at the time of this publication-spring, 2003). A total of 11 separate sports were represented (as listed under participants in the methodology section). However only three sports had more than one participant: football with two, baseball with two and triathlon with three. Thus it would be impossible to come to any conclusions due to the small sample size and lack of specifically designed inquiry. However, due to the nature of the qualitative process, the lengthy interviews

and the high inter-rater reliability, several conceptual ideas can be introduced to stimulate further research on the subject. The data provided enough information to present the following conceptual ideas intended to direct further study.

After all the data had been analyzed thoroughly by the researcher and the co-coder, the following concepts were identified and presented as possible investigative areas for further research in the area. First, team sport athletes have a more difficult time in retirement for three reasons. They have often been "cared for" by the team handlers and managers from a young age, never having to deal with many of the responsibilities associated with the adolescent and young adult years. Retirement introduces them to many duties others had performed for them. Individual athletes, in particular, endurance athletes who are not rewarded financially at the same levels as those in the mainstream, media-focused sports, often deal with the everyday responsibilities while they train and compete at a very high level and are not shaken with the new burdens upon retirement. Examples from this study include the fact that the analysis of data showed that athletes from football, baseball, soccer and hockey reported more difficulty in transition than those in surfing, running, skiing and motor-sports. It was induced that these players of team sports are surrounded by support for much of their career where the individual athlete is often left to the details of living on their own.

Second, athletes who play very physical sports where they are subjected to serious physical abuse and often retire with chronic injuries that might prevent them from everyday physical training and even low level participation can have more emotional trauma than those who are engaged in less physically traumatic sports. This is in contrast to where they may retire with the ability to stay involved in their sport on the amateur level, gradually reducing their competitive need and drive. Examples from this study include only those from soccer and cycling where the athletes experienced career ending injuries or subsequent illness, reported more difficulty than those who were still able to remain physically active.

Next, athletes who are involved with individual sports that are readily available to them after they retire from professional or world class competition may have an easier time in transition. This may be due to the fact that they can still go out and play their sport without logistical challenges. A golfer or tennis player can much easier find one partner to play with as opposed to a football player seeking a full contingent of 11 players per side. The surfer, the runner, and the skier all spoke of less trauma than the football player, the soccer player and the

hockey player. Athletes whose somatic bodily shape is at the forefront of their success but looses that self-image of having an athlete's body shape when his or her bodily condition deteriorates after their exit from sport, must deal with this re-adjustment more so than the athlete who is involved in a sport where skill over-shadows power, strength or aesthetics of the body. In this study the motor sport athlete and the runner did not put as much emphasis on their change in bodily image as football and triathlon athletes.

Athletes whose sports offer many competitive opportunities beyond the elite and professional level, sports such as running, cycling, swimming, triathlons, soccer and basketball, will fare better than those whose opportunities to compete at an amateur or age-group level are less prevalent. These sports would include football, motor-racing, speed skating and baseball (excluding softball). The triathlete who was able to continue competing at a lower level felt that it helped him make the adjustment while the football player did not report that simply, "throwing the ball with the kids" was enough to satisfy his competitive urge.

Lastly, financial remuneration relative to sports retirement is not easily understood, with anecdotes supporting various theories. Some athletes reported that they were glad they had earned enough money so that they did not have to be concerned about the stress of supporting themselves. Others were glad that they "had to get a job," since it forced them to go out and learn a new skill, effectively placing them in a new social environment with a forced need to adapt quickly and the possibility of finding value, purpose and direction in a new career. Still others felt that if they had saved just enough money to give them a few years to "re-tool myself and decompress from that old life," yet still would have to eventually find a way to support themselves and their family, they were in the best of both situations.

It appears from this narrow analysis of sport specificity as a factor in the retirement process, that the following concepts are suggested as variables applied by the individual sport and the surrounding culture or nuances of that sport. First, the more an athlete is prepared for life after sport by always having to maintain a connection to the everyday duties of living, the easier their transition. Second, if the athlete could remain involved with their sport on some playing level, retain their body shape and condition if possible or at least come to the acceptance that they must loosen the grip on that somatic ideal, transition was easier; and finally, if they had earned and saved a moderate but not excessive financial cushion, their chances of a less emotionally traumatic transition were higher. All of these concepts are facets of the athlete's

transition and would take further study to support their connection to the paradigm by a specific sport. However, they represent an excellent opportunity for investigation.

A Comparison of Models

As noted in the introduction, the term "models" is used in a variety of contexts in prior research. As Crook and Robertson (1991) pointed out, "Although athlete retirement has been referred to as a transition, the transition concept has yet to be applied to this change process in a systematic manner" (p. 122). Much has changed in the 12 years since their study, with increased focus on the development of systematic approaches to the study of athlete retirement increasing all the time. In an effort to compare the findings of this study to those of others who have used the term "model" to explain their research, this discussion focused on the content of those findings in prior literature rather than on the form in which they are presented. The use of the term "theory," while applied with greater historical consistency than "model" in prior research, was also a focus of the discussion and comparison. Whether the terms used were model or theory, the importance in comparison was placed on the findings.

Internal and external acceptance as major contributors to life fulfillment, with regard to the data in this study, can be explained in the following way. In order for a retiring athlete to regain that lost sense of purpose, direction and fulfillment in their lives; that state of harmony and control that so many speak of having lost with their exit from sport, they must come to an *acceptance* of their new lives, their new "place in the world," as one athlete called it. This acceptance is a final aspect of the transition process, especially one that deals with loss and grieving. It is well documented in much of the prior literature on athlete retirement and life transition (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Many factors are essential to an athlete's ability to reach this level of acceptance. This study found that the development of *positive coping mechanisms, emotional growth and maturity,* and *advantageous personality traits* were key factors in this acceptance. In short, internal acceptance is simply the final theme of letting go of the old self-identity of an athlete by using one's available tools and accepting the new identity. Acceptance can also be tied to the quest for life-fulfillment as it was developed out of the themes of *conflict resolution* or the elimination of the feelings of being "between worlds," as one athlete said. The athlete is accepting his or her new place in, and relationship to the world. Sometimes this is facilitated by the athlete's use of a *role model* to assure them that it is possible to make the

transition out of sport and into a new *self identity*. As noted, an athlete's *self-esteem* and *ego fulfillment* are often tied to the recognition they receive. Many athletes in this study reported that they missed their friends and the fans above all. For a professional or elite athlete who has become accustomed to the adulation of supporters, they must either find a way to replace that *acceptance* they receive from the world around them or reduce their dependency on it to find the *fulfillment* they seek. Thus, if we took the two general dimensions of *validation of existence through ego* and *aspects of life transition and change* and conceptualized that the fulfillment that athletes seek can potentially be achieved with internal and external acceptance, one general construct from which to identify potential methods of intervention would surface.

The specific models discussed here were chosen for comparison due to either the similar type of methodology used or their frequency of citation as models in research on the subject. Referring to the results of Milhovilovic's (1968) study of 44 former first league Yugoslavian soccer players, he concluded the following. There is a harmful striving by active players to stay on the team as long as possible. This was confirmed in our study when eight of the 16 athletes, or 50%, either attempted a comeback or tried another sport hoping to regain some of what they had lost, most of which reported a less than rewarding experience. Next, a retiring player who lacks non-sport vocational training feels conflict and frustration that often manifested itself in detrimental behaviors. Several athletes in our study reported "reckless" or "crazy" behavior. The question of lacking vocational training as a contributory factor was reported and validated in several instances. Third, a loss of social contacts causes feelings of abandonment and neglect. This claim was well validated and central to many of the interviews with the athletes. And lastly, athletes feel that the inclusion of numerous tactics such as re-involvement with team duties and pre-retirement training would help to alleviate some of the painful effects of retirement. This theme was also backed with the emergent themes of helping to create a new self-identity and ego fulfillment through the socialization process that would come with new opportunities.

In summary, all four of Mihovilovic's findings were validated in this study nearly 35 years later, suggesting that even with the socio-cultural changes in professional sports, the process of loss and transition within the frame of athlete retirement has not changed significantly.

Taylor and Oglivie's (1994) five step model of adaptation to retirement, was developed from the findings of previous research on this subject. It is written in a schematic form and begins with the causes of retirement (age, deselection, injury, free choice) on the top level and descends to

include factors related to adaptation to retirement (developmental experiences, self-identity, perceptions of control, social identity, tertiary contributors) and available resources (coping skills, social support, pre-retirement planning) on the lower levels. The above factors resulted in what they called quality of adaptation to retirement with either a healthy career transition or a retirement crisis (psychopathology, substance abuse, occupational abuse, family/social problems). In this study, the causes of retirement were not as substantial or as important as the other items listed lower in the hierarchy on Taylor's and Ogilvie's model. Developmental experiences corresponded to themes of maturity and development in this study and Taylor's and Ogilvie's listing of coping skills and social support reflected this study's themes of positive coping and the need for socialization. The factors related to the quality of adaptation in their model reflect this study's findings in this area as well as their listing of social identity, which concurs with themes of self-identity and fulfillment of ego. Areas not listed in their model that emerged from this study were *acceptance and emotional maturity* and *advantageous personality traits* (though it may be argued that these could fall under developmental experiences). This study also found that *love of the activity* and an *appreciation for the benefits* of playing at the professional level could be collapsed into positive coping. These factors were not listed in their discussion of coping skills.

Looking specifically at the Grove, Lavallee and Gordon (1997) study of 51 retired members of Australian national and/or state teams (detailed in Chapter 1), the similarities to this study's findings include a large sample size and participants from multiple sports. The differences primarily dealt with methodology. They mailed the athletes a questionnaire asking them descriptive information about their careers as well as requests to complete the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993) and the COPE inventory list of coping strategies (Carver et al., 1989). This study used a semi-structured interview. Their study was focused on one aspect of athlete retirement whereas this study sought to identify emergent themes of the entire experience through a qualitative study. The aim of their study was to relate athlete identity with coping abilities in post retirement. Of 15 separate items listed as coping mechanisms in the COPE inventory, the study found (listed highest to lowest) acceptance, positive reinterpretation, planning, active coping, mental disengagement, seek emotional support, focus on and vent emotions, suppress competing activities, seek instrumental support, restraint coping, behavioral disengagement, humor, denial, alcohol/drug abuse, and turning to religion as important factors. The results of this study paralleled their themes of acceptance

(*acceptance and emotional maturity*), positive reinterpretation (*role model issues*), planning (*planning for future*) and emotional support (*approval and support*). Turning to religion was also reported as a coping mechanism by two athletes in this study. Themes that emerged from this study that were not noted in Grove, Lavallee and Gordon (1997) and were specific to positive coping were a *love of the activity* and an *appreciation for the benefits of the athletic lifestyle*.

While the athlete-based qualitative study by Jackson, Dover and Mayocchi (1998) focused on the changes that 18 Olympic gold medal winners faced in several aspects of their lives after having won the gold medal rather than looking at the retirement paradigm from an overall perspective, the similarities in methodology justify a brief comparison. Emergent raw data themes such as "time demands for gold medal winners" and "other things started to take precedent over training" compared favorably to the statements reported by this study's participants, such as, "I knew I was normal…when other interests preempted my life in (sport)," and "I was into a new career and used my skill from sport to help me." However, since Jackson, Dover and Mayocchi (1998) focused on gold medal winners who had not necessarily retired from sport nor passed through the transitional experience, further comparison to their model of adjustment was not undertaken. It is interesting to note that since winning an Olympic gold medal often forces a change in one's life and/or signals their retirement from sport, the subject of how an athlete handles "major victorious milestones" as an indicator of how they might handle final retirement from sport might demand further investigation.

Kerr's and Dacyshyn's study (2000) of seven former elite female gymnasts used a methodology (Patton, 1990) similar to this study, and their descriptive categories were compared to the emergent higher order themes that were collapsed from the raw data themes in this study. Similarities between their model comparison and this study's are important as each study examined the data reported by each participant on a content analysis and social structural basis, identifying the differences based on individual circumstance. An analysis of the data from this study suggested that the retirement experience was often mediated by an individual's *personality traits, level of mastery, positive coping abilities and emotional maturity,* effectively concluding that while models and theories can be applied in mass to all retiring athletes, future study should examine individual traits and circumstances to a greater degree than has been done previously. This application of context reflects the findings of Schlossberg's (1981) often cited model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. While Kerr and Dacyshyn did not endeavor to create a

model based on their findings, they did list their findings in several descriptive categories; 1) Nowhere Land: disorientation, feelings of void and reorientation and, 2) New Beginnings: a period of exit from Nowhere Land and emergence in their new existence. In their category of Nowhere Land, built on the descriptive emergent themes of disorientation, feelings of void and re-orientation, the analysis of this study yielded paralleled themes such as *issues of self-identity, self-esteem* and *planning for the future*. For New Beginnings, themes of conflict *resolution, maturity and development and confidence in ability* were matched in this study. In Kerr's and Dacyshyn's (2000) discussion section, they focused on two key factors in the transition process: "voluntary verses involuntary retirement" and "the pursuit of identity". In the first area, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) produced themes such as "reluctant dropout," which paralleled this study's themes of, "I wish I had a longer career, though I was successful for a short time." These ultimately collapsed into the general dimension theme of *elements of life transition and change* which closely followed Schlossberg's (1981) model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. Kerr's and Dacyshyn's (2000) voluntary verses involuntary retirement falls into the "timing" label as used in Schlossberg's model (1981).

In Kerr's and Dacyshyn's section label of, "pursuit of identity," there is ample evidence to justify self-identity as a central and key element in the study of athlete retirement (Grove, R.L., Lavallee, D., & Gordon, S., 1997; Ibrahim, H., 1976; Lenk, H., 1979; Webb, W., & Nasco, S.A., 1998; Weiss, O., 2001). Kerr and Dacysyn (2000) stated, "The loss of identity expressed by the respondents is consistent with the sport retirement literature, which has emphasized that athletes who identify exclusively with the social role of the athlete are vulnerable to retirement difficulties." In our analysis of the data from this study, self-identity also emerged as a central issue and collapsed into the upper hierarchy themes of *ego fulfillment* and *emotional challenges of life transition.*

Additional comparisons to other existing research in this area included two studies that examined the existing literature to determine categorical descriptions of the key elements in the transition process. Crook & Robertson (1991) identified anticipatory socialization, identity and self esteem personal management skills, social support systems and voluntary verses involuntary retirement as central elements in the transition process. The data in this study identified these issues as key elements and were folded into the corresponding themes of *future planning, ego fulfillment and socialization, issues of self esteem and self-identity, approval and support* and

maturity and development. Reasons for retirement did not emerge as a primary theme in this study. This probably occurred due to the participants only including two athletes who had to retire involuntarily and both of them did have a chance to return to their sport for a brief comeback attempt.

Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) identified the following as factors contributing to career termination crises: self-identity, perceptions of control, social identity, social support, pre-retirement planning, socio-economic status and financial dependency on the sport. The data in this study corresponded favorably and were categorized as *self-identity, self-esteem issues, future planning, approval and support and financial worries.* Perceptions of control was not mentioned enough to list in this study's findings. If it was referred to as a raw data theme, it was collapsed into *mastery*, *emotional crisis* or *maturity and development* Socio-economic status was never mentioned in the participant interviews in this study although discussions of financial status may have included this concept.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study contributes to the existing literature on athlete retirement in several ways. First, it included 11 different sports, using the semi-structured interview process of qualitative methodology. To date, this is the only study to use this logistically difficult method with as many high level athletes from a large number of different sports.

Second, as reported in the discussion section, much of the data supported the findings of existing literature. The 356 raw data themes that were ultimately collapsed into the general dimension themes (and the central construct that *internal and external acceptance equals* {a return to} *life fulfillment*) and supported and paralleled many of the issues and themes discussed in the literature. Themes such as pre-retirement planning, social support, self-esteem and control, positive coping skills and self identity and final acceptance of one's new role were all supported as important issues and substantiated theme/issues in prior models as well as the general conclusion of this study.

Significantly, two new themes and issues that emerged from this study that have not been previously identified in other studies were *a love of and appreciation for the sport* and what it had contributed to the athlete's life experience as *benefits of having been in an athletic lifestyle.* This reveals a side of the athlete in their retirement process not previously explored and reflects a more mature, deeper thinking individual than has been exposed to any extent in prior literature. This finding parallels the goals of qualitative study (Patton, 1990). The analysis in this study supported the idea (Coakley, 1983) that theories can be applied to athlete retirement but suggested that better results could be found if, as Crook and Robertson (1991) stated, "the nature of each athlete's adjustment process is dependant on the interaction of a number of factors." This study supported Werthner's and Orlick's (1986) assumption that no single factor will determine the amount of emotional crisis, or the ultimate success or failure of the athlete's retirement from sport and transition into a post-sport life. The study also indicated that of all the non-sport specific models of adaptation applied to athlete retirement, Schlossberg's (1981) context-based model, when used in conjunction with the rich and revealing data emergent through qualitative study, has a very high potential of uncovering new issues, themes and potential intervention processes.

Secondary purposes of this study were to determine if professional and world class athletes of the highest possible rankings would differ in their retirement experiences from collegiate, elite or national class players; and to analyze and comment on any data that might suggest a difference in athlete retirement experience by sport. In the case of professional verses elite, there was no indication of any differences. With regards to potentially unique cross-sport transitional experience, no conclusions were made due to the small sample size representing various sports. However, several concepts emerged and seem appropriate for further research. They include the potential study of how different sports prepare an athlete for retirement through the socialization process i.e., the emphasis on body type as it pertains to specific sports, the after-sport activities and opportunities within a particular sport, the financial remuneration level of the athletes for their chosen sport, and the daily responsibility level of the athletes as it pertains to that particular sport.

While no specific theme of prior emotional challenges or crisis was emergent (the question was not listed among the 16 items used in the interview process), after all the data were analyzed, and it became apparent that if contextuality and individual experience were of paramount importance in the athlete retirement experience, that question should have been included in this study. This is a dimension that would have added significantly to further study of this concept and is recommended. Further limitations of this study would include the ability of a single primary researcher to access any more than 16 athletes, any more than three athletes in a single sport and the time and logistics required to analyze the amount of data produced in a study of this type.

In summary, each athlete in this study had a story, a tale to tell of his or her experience as they moved out of a life deeply involved with and committed to sport. Each athlete came forth with a unique perspective because it was a personal narrative of a huge investment of self, a self that began in their formative years but ended with more than half their lives left to live. Yet what they shared were common themes discussed in the literature time and again. As great as the body of knowledge on athlete retirement is, relative to the amount of emotional crisis experienced, the levels of pre-retirement planning and psychological intervention available are disappointingly small. It is this researcher’s opinion that the greatest opportunity for future study in the area should not come in the form of new theories or models of athlete retirement, but rather in how to

implement and apply what knowledge is available about the transitional process of athlete retirement to the athletes themselves.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR ATHLETE RETIREMENT STUDY

Interview questions for athlete retirement study

1. How did you deal with your initial success?
2. Did you have any idea you would make it? Did you think you would make it to the pros?
3. What support did you have coming up? How much of a difference did it make?
4. Do you feel you were maturing at the same rate as non-athletes? If not did it bother you?
5. Did you miss any part of growing up that you wish now you would have taken part in?
6. What was the best part of your career?
7. Did your career lead up to your expectations as a kid or young adult?
8. Did you ever feel the pressure of being idolized or perceived as a hero?
9. How do you feel the public, the sponsors, your family, etc., treated you during and after your career?
10. Did you fulfill all that you had hoped for? If not, what did you miss and why?
11. Did you receive or undertake any pre-retirement planning while competing or after you retired?
12. What was your mental state when you retired?
13. Did you ever consider a comeback?
14. If you were experiencing problematic emotions, how did you deal with them?
15. What, if any, did you use to fill the gap left by the loss of sport? How long did it take to feel “normal” again?
16. What, if anything, would you do differently?

APPENDIX B

HUMAN SUBJECTS CONSENT

Human Subjects Review

Human Subjects Committee has indicated that due to the non-invasive nature and the anonymity of consenting adult subjects, an exempt or limited review status would be indicated and has been approved as such.

APPENDIX C

RAW DATA THEMES

Raw Data Themes

Question # 1 - How did you deal with your initial success?

1. I expected to win when I came to a big event because I had experienced gradual improvement and good results
2. I wasn't surprised to win.
3. Sometimes I expected to go even faster than my early good performances.
4. I expected to win because of good prior performances against good opponents.
5. I had great confidence after my first win – partly because I won and my sport was so new there was no one to compare myself against.
6. I had won easily and more important, beaten my early idol.
7. I felt invincible.
8. I lacked mental toughness early in my career
9. With success, my attitude and confidence reached a higher level.
10. Praise from others amplified my self-image.
11. I was eager to see if sponsors responded to my success
12. I was anxious for, then disappointed by, financial return
13. I thought I could make a living at the sport.
14. I seriously reduced my other interests to focus on my sport
15. I was eager, anxious impatient – and fueled by anger
16. I felt I deserved more attention – and so I was mad at my critics.
17. I ignored others' issues and did my job
18. I identified myself more with my other job – it paid more than my sport.
19. I doubted myself, even after success (drive fueled by insecurity)
20. I pushed myself hard.
21. When I allowed my identity to derive from my sport, I became a great player.
22. My ability was tied to my self-esteem.
23. I was more proud of my abilities in sport than my intellect or popularity
24. Sport became my pride, my identity.
25. Although it was a team game, my competitiveness was driven more by high expectations of myself.
26. Personal goals were as important – or more important – than team goals
27. I was able to let go of the sport's frustrations after retirement when I made the transition to a meaningful job.
28. I wanted to train far more than work at a normal job.
29. My expectations increased with monetary success
30. Outside influences increased my ego and decreased my humility.

Question # 2 Did you have any idea you would make it? Did you think you would make it to the pros?

1. After I trained with the best competitor and saw him win I thought I could too.
2. When I was young, I told a friend I could be the best in the world.
3. After 40, I encountered physical problems and I lost confidence.(important implication: Until that point, when my professional career was nearing its end, confidence had never been a problem)
4. I thought if I could just win the big race again, I could earn a living at it.
5. Early, I had no dreams of being a professional – only of winning amateur titles and getting on television.
6. Early in my career, I had seemingly unattainable goals of winning a world championship and an Olympic gold -- but not the belief I could attain them.
7. As a young girl, there seemed only a remote chance of a pro soccer career – my main goal was college soccer.
8. I had confidence that I would be recruited at least for some not-so-high-profile college because that, bottom line, was my lifetime dream.
9. Soccer was my number one priority – unlike most other girls.

Question #3: What support did you have coming up? How much of a difference did it make?

1. Parents and coaches support existed – but the only important support was belief in yourself
2. The alluring thing about running was that the rewards were proportional to the work invested.
3. I believed I could be better by training harder.
4. Like other top runners I saw, I was willing to take risks to succeed.
5. My brother showed me the drive, organization and focus I needed to succeed
6. My father was extremely organized (it rubbed off on me) and he supported my career.
7. My success in other areas gave confidence to father that I could succeed in sports.
8. My father encouraged me in sport even though he did not realize all that would entail
9. The athletes I coached were supportive of my sports career because they knew I was passionate about it.
10. People I thought would be supportive ended up being disloyal -- which I used as motivation to train and succeed.
11. My parents and family supported me unreservedly in any sport I wanted.
12. Having another family member who was an athlete motivated me and gave me a feeling of support.
13. I got great support from coaches who understood all it required to be successful.
14. My mother and father helped me see the big perspective.
15. My parents, especially my father, were not supportive of my passion for sports and wanted me to accept a more traditional female role.
16. My father coached my brothers with enthusiasm but thought my sport was unimportant.
17. After my father realized I was a good athlete, he pushed me toward traditional female sports
18. Parental pressures added to my motivation and drive.

19. My parents were supportive because they had played sports -- but they also instilled a healthy sense of balance and humility.
20. Very little. Most of it came from friends -- not family.

Question # 4. Do you feel you were maturing at the same rate as non-athletes? If not did it bother you?

1. I missed out on some things but I was satisfied because I was dedicated to my sport.
2. I was not overly social, but I wondered if I used running as an excuse to avoid social situations.
3. I was doing the things other people did socially -- but not as much due to my commitment to running.
4. I was a more intelligent trainer than my peers.
5. *I was not arrogant. I was confident.
6. When I retired, I felt like I was behind all my friends who had not played pro sports, from a business standpoint.
7. All my friends were way ahead of me in their careers when I stopped playing and had to start at the bottom in business.
8. Because I traveled the world as a teenager, I matured faster than my friends.
9. I had some unique experiences that I wouldn't have had in high school.
10. I became street smart, but not as mature mentally and physically.
11. While I was in sports, time seemed to slow down and my friends matured faster than I. I didn't appreciate those things until I went back to college and had the same experiences.
12. It felt strange to return to college as an older man after I finished sport.
13. The demands of sport made me feel more mature than non-athletes.
14. Parents and coaches put pressure on me to be mature and act like an adult when I was still a kid. It took the fun out of it.
15. Your identity as an athlete becomes tied to your value as a human being. You cannot separate your performance from your identity, your value.
16. I was maturing faster because I was making money sooner than my peers.
17. Athletes are insulated while they are playing.
18. I matured more slowly than others because I considered anything but my sport a distraction. I stayed focused on sport.
19. When you are retired and you have to pay bills, it's a shock.
20. The pressures of work, family and kids are life stresses a successful athlete is protected from
21. I thought I was more advanced than non-athletes.
    After I retired I felt split. On one hand, I felt like I was standing still while the world passed me by. On the other hand, I felt as if I were normal. And I thought people raising families were inferior to my sports accomplishment.

Question 5: Did you miss any part of growing up that you wish now you would have taken part in?

1. Yes, but I was happy that I made a choice to focus on sport. Still, I tried to achieve some balance.
2. I was a bit older and mature than many young athletes when I won my first big race.
3. I should have trained with others more. It would have given me more emotional strength and stability.
4. I was very hard, even self-destructive, with myself while driving hard for success.
5. I would have not dealt with the press and my coach when I got traded.
6. My athletic peers provided early socialization and satisfying camaraderie.
7. I grew up with other athletes around me and we had unique opportunities to grow up together while traveling the world.
8. I would never replace my athletic life. It was far richer than the usual limited high school experiences.
9. My ability to have relationships and develop a healthy ego did not mature at the same level.
10. Because of privileged lifestyle, athletes they don't mature as quickly as others.
11. Athletes often attract people they don't want. That takes energy and time away from developing the friends you want and need.
12. In business, you often try lateral, exploratory moves -- but not in sport which demands conservative thinking and rewards avoiding mistakes.
13. An athlete's life experience is very focused on the physical and limited to a small set of repetitive circumstances because the rewards for mastery are so high.
14. The financial rewards are so high; you focus on sport-related activities and ignore the rest of your life.
15. I didn't feel I missed anything, because I enjoy whatever I'm doing.
16. I liked the opportunities sports offered, but I could walk away from it, too. I felt I could take it or leave it.
17. I wished I had invested more wisely.
18. I wouldn't change anything. It made me the person I am.

Question # 6: What was the best part of your career?

1. Running itself was the most fun part of my sport. I try to instill that value to the kids I coach now.
2. The best part of my career came when I let go of bitterness toward others when I turned 40 and returned to race.
3. I enjoyed the comeback process a lot because the outside pressure was reduced and I could enjoy the self-induced pressure.
4. I liked the comeback because it reminded me of the early days – when all the pressure was self-applied.
5. I enjoyed the camaraderie.
6. I liked to know my limits and test myself against them.
7. I enjoyed the clarity of training and knowing where I stood.
8. Does not address the question.
9. Collegiate soccer was my highest competitive level – but it was not the most enjoyable.
10. The most enjoyable part of my soccer career was when I was in high school and I dominated.

11. The most enjoyable part of my career was the middle years when I was playing my best.
12. The best part was when I achieved mastery and that recreated the simple joy I felt as a child.
13. The best feeling came in rugged weather when I could dominate with very physical play
14. The best part was getting big cheers for playing like a kid in the park
15. Mastery.
16. The best part was traveling the world and getting paid for it
17. Seeing and experiencing very different lifestyles. To be able to give back to people from all the privileges and opportunities and joy I got from sport.

Question #7: Did your career meet up to your expectations as a kid or young adult?

1. I had two high goals and achieved one of them.
2. I feel lucky to have achieved what I did and I have no regrets.
3. Due to my illness, I couldn't really have done anything different or better. I'm satisfied with and resigned to my fate
4. I have a very healthy and balanced satisfaction with what I accomplished.
5. Yes, I achieved many of my dreams.
6. My career was far greater than I initially expected.
7. I never expected that I would accomplish any of my goals
8. When it was happening, I never appreciated the opportunities my accomplishments opened for me
9. By the time I retired I realized what excited me about sport and vowed to recreate and pass that on to kids through coaching.
10. I made some poor choices but competing hard was a satisfying end in itself
11. Where I played was not as important as how I played
12. The money I earned and the rich experiences I had exceeded my early dreams.
13. I worked hard to make the Olympics, and felt bad when I didn't. But later I felt the Olympic experience is over-rated.
14. My early belief that hard work pays off carried over to my adult life. Now I have no specific expectations and trust hard work will pay off.
15. I was lucky to find another career that could satisfy me after sport.
16. I had no early expectations.
17. My sport was so new; there was no standard to measure myself against.

Question #8: Did you ever feel the pressure of being idolized or perceived as a hero?

1. I don't feel pressure. I do feel a responsibility to do the right thing.
2. Everybody should be role models, not just athletes.
3. I don't feel the pressure of being a role model, in fact I welcome the responsibility to be a good influence on the youth I coach.
4. I felt pressure from local media to do well in my hometown race. But not elsewhere.

5. Yes, I felt the pressure then and now when I am in the public eye.
6. It's hard for me to live up to high expectations of public and sponsors.
7. I've always felt the need to be charismatic and exciting in front of the public.
8. Public adulation motivated me to go the extra mile and live up to expectations.
9. Early in athletic career, I placed most pressure on myself. Later, I felt more external pressure.
10. As a woman, no one but myself put pressure on me.
11. After I became successful, pressure increased dramatically.
12. Success created a pressure to remain at the top. No room for failure
13. The added responsibility of team leadership added greatly to already high pressure of pro sports
14. Nothing.
15. The idolization caused a split personality -- invincible warrior outside, secret sensitive thinker inside.
16. I liked the idolization because I could use it to help the kids.
17. There are people who deal with idolization in different ways. Some love and expect it, others don't believe it is earned.
18. No, I feel humbled by the regular people doing extraordinary things all around me.

Question #9: How do you feel the public, the sponsors, your family, treated you during and after your career?

1. My sponsors were great and were invaluable in my switch from sport to a business career.
2. I realized it was a business decision to drop sport when I could no longer perform and I was fortunate to have an alternative.
3. My family was very supportive even though they would prefer I retired earlier.
4. People think I am more upset about the one big race that I didn't finish than I am. They seem afraid I'll be hurt if they mention it.
5. That failure doesn't bother me as much as they think.
6. I was hurt by sponsors and media who turned on me.
7. My business naiveté and trust in people were betrayed.
8. I didn't let me ego get caught up in the success, so people treated me the same as others.
9. I think my humility enabled others to treat me normally.
10. My parents treat me the same after I was a star as they did before my success.
11. My parents have high expectations for me.
12. Most people still recognize me for my athletic success and not the other things I've accomplished in my life.
13. That bothers me. I value my other qualities and accomplishments.
14. Even if you don't think you are a role model, fans see you as one.
15. After some early success, my father watched me play and I appreciated that.
16. Sporting success validated my persistence and patience.
17. You aren't aware of it as a player, but later you realize you're an archetype.
18. When you start to perceive the power of being that archetype, it becomes part of your self-image.
19. When you begin to fail, the power of the archetype falls away.

20. With success, people will identify with you.
21. I didn't win enough to get sponsors or media attention. Only my family noticed. Later, all that changed.

Question # 10: Did you fulfill all that you had hoped for? If not, what did you miss and why?

1. No. I set some lofty goals and missed them.
2. I wish I had a longer career, though I was successful for a short time.
3. No. I had some physical setbacks from pre-existing conditions I wasn't aware of.
4. I only ran at my peak for three years.
5. I still have the desire to race and train, from fear of aging and the enjoyment of pushing myself.
6. I enjoyed training before I raced.
7. Yes. But I continue because I don't want to get old and out of shape.
8. I enjoy giving back and training with other athletes more now than before.
9. I enjoy the camaraderie and simple challenge now. I am sorry I didn't train with others early in my career.
10. I was happy to retire after all I accomplished in sport.
11. I was chronologically young but mentally I was burned out.
12. In my second sport, I didn't focus as well as I wanted due to other career distractions. But I have no major regret.
13. I realized my life would change after sport - but I was forced to retire and that took adjusting to.
14. I wasn't ready to retire. I wanted to win the Tour de France again.
15. I still wonder if I could have performed better had I had tunnel vision.
16. I wish I could have played for a better team with a better coach.
17. I wish that I had been more mentally involved in the sport.
18. I put too much pressure on myself and it hurt my performance.
19. I had no expectations - no one to measure myself against.
20. No. I didn't win an Olympic medal or set a world record.
21. Later in my career I failed to achieve a master's record.
22. I occasionally reminisce about what I failed to achieve, but I don't sulk about it.
23. I wish I could have raced without pressure.
24. I regret I did not give more back to the sport earlier in my life. The only thing I miss is a steady relationship

Question 11: Did you receive or undertake any pre-retirement planning while competing or after you retired?

1. No but I had bought a house and saved money for my kids college education so I didn't feel pressure when I retired.

2. While some athletes blow it all and some make enough money to retire, it is a common mind set not to think about what they will do before they quit their sport.
3. I gradually became interested in non-sport matters while my sports performance declined.
4. Because my sport was new, minor and did not pay exceptionally well, I never thought of it as a career. Therefore, I always worked at other jobs and prepared for retirement from sport.
5. I never fulfilled the fundamental income required for retirement after my sports career, so I still must work very hard.
6. No. It's sad because many other great players were cheated of fair wages and benefits.
7. It's sad because a lot of great athletes became desperate and destitute because they weren't ready to earn a living and save for retirement
8. We made so little salary in my day; we needed a few endorsements to survive. We scraped by then, and still do.
9. *The most important thing that prepared me for life after sport was the humility and mindset to think ahead my parents instilled in me.
10. My parents helped me think ahead from a young age. Otherwise, what do you know at 19?
11. *My agent helped me realize I must choose other paths and learn to take care of myself after sport.
12. No.
13. Many other athletes are bitter over how little the league did to prepare us for life after sport. But I realized it was human nature for the institution to save money and let us fend for ourselves.
14. The league, even though they have the money to help players with retirement, prefers to focus on active players.
15. It took me 13 years before I started to wonder if I've saved enough to retire and what I would do next.
16. I began to think there were many other things I could do when I retired, but sport is what I do best so I waited until my career was over.
17. Sport is brief and well paying – so I waited until sport was done.
18. No, no one in the sport helped me plan for retirement.
19. Nobody helped me but I knew I needed to save money.
20. I didn't think about what I was going to do after sport other than to plan to maintain a standard of living.
21. I contemplated other careers but knew I'd start at the bottom.
22. I wanted to go into coaching but there were few opportunities in my area. Because my family was settled, I didn't want to move.
23. Lack of retirement alternatives was a constant, chronic source of stress. I went relied on offers from friends.
24. No. Not at all
25. I consciously created a post-competitive role with my sponsors.
26. I planned for five years to take on the business side of sport – and now I enjoy it.

Question # 12: What was your mental state when you retired? How did you feel?

1. It's difficult for athletes to know when to retire.

2. I was too young to realize I had medical problems and could not compete at the highest level any more.
3. I don't know if I was in denial about my medical condition.
4. I might have retired if I had known asthma was incurable. But I thought I could be competitive again with medical treatment.
5. My ability to run is no longer competitive, but good enough for fitness and health.
6. I realized that I had been racing with asthma most of my career.
7. I enjoyed the fact that I had less pressure to perform at my peak.
8. For the first five years of retirement, it was brutal.
9. After a successful one race comeback I was at peace with myself.
10. It was tough. I was dealing with physical - and emotional - scars from my accident.
11. Combined with physical deterioration due to illness, when my comeback didn't go well, I became tired and depressed.
12. It was a mental relief to find medical reasons for my deteriorating performances and there was nothing I could have done about it.
13. I knew what excited me when I began sport and sought to re-create that feeling for the kids I coached.
14. During my sports career, I was aware of what I knew and didn't know and that knowledge became a vehicle for building my life after sport.
15. * I am a participant not a spectator by nature. When I first had to watch due to injury, it was hard. I'm OK now.
16. I never imagined it would be so hard to retire.
17. At first it was liberating but then I felt alone and confused.
18. I lost my identity when I retired and felt acutely I was a has-been.
19. I am still trying to understand the puzzle of who I really am as I recover from a knee injury and face life after sport.
20. All of my identity was derived from my athletic career. Now I am trying to figure out who I was/am.
21. I had a hard and swift transition from big hero to a pathetic servant to my wife.
22. At first I was relieved to be free of the pressure, and then I was upset that I was so far behind in other parts of my life.
23. I was lonely.
24. My life lacked meaning.
25. I wandered, upset about losing the meaning of my sports career.
26. At first, I mourned my failure to win a world title.
27. I had major stress on multiple fronts: relationship troubles, impending divorce, declining performance, a need to seek new income, my kids.
28. I went from being the best at sport with adulation and money to a humbler beginner in business.
29. I didn't want to risk all the money I had earned in sport on a risky new venture not tied to my hard earned identity.
30. I was getting into a new area and had to apply transitional skills I had learned in sport.
31. When I retired I was ready for a new life and happy with the past.
32. When reality bit, emotional trauma hit me hard.
33. After a tough transition, I became secure with planning for the future.

Question # 13: Did you ever consider a comeback?

1. I realized I couldn't be competitive at my old, shorter distances after my asthma. But I heard about another, longer race where I could do well.
2. Although I could no longer go fast, I enjoyed meeting a different challenge in a much longer event.
3. I thought my new longer distance races could ignite a new running career until I became badly injured and that finally ended it.
4. I aimed at some age group records but with heat and pressure, it didn't work out.
5. I made comebacks in '94, '96 and a noble but unsuccessful attempt in 2001.
6. No.
7. My knee injury will not allow a comeback. I can't even coach my children.
8. I would've liked to try playing in a women's competitive recreational soccer league.
9. I have stressors in my life and don't even think about racing.
10. The stresses caused health problems – I chew my tongue at night.

Question # 14: If you were experiencing troubling emotions, how did you deal with them?

1. I looked at it as an opportunity to transition period to begin to work with other athletes.
2. I transformed it into the rewards of giving back to the sport.
3. Prolonged illness and declining performance gave me a long time to adjust.
4. I was puzzled and very upset because the illness hit me when I was young – and shortly after my period of domination.
5. I had a spiritual epiphany that allowed me to accept my retirement and be appreciative and positive about my blessings.
6. I eventually saw my enforced retirement as a positive thing because it forced me to have humility and compassion and a truer faith in God.
7. My belief in God gave me acceptance dispelled bitterness.
8. I had sleeping problems but eventually it went away.
9. It surprised me how much I loved the act of running itself, more than the competition.
10. I realized I was addicted to exercise and became a recluse when prevented.
11. I came to realize my addiction to exercise was destructive.
12. I figured out that if I totally immersed myself in the work, all my problems would disappear.
13. Working helps me accept things I can't control.
14. The first six months of retirement were tough because you were no longer on a pedestal and I had become addicted to endorsement income.
15. I missed the old high, but I had good friends who helped me cope.
16. I was puzzled because I thought I should be performing better so when they found medical problem that forced me to retire I was relieved.
17. I was upset because I wanted to retire after making the Olympics and I didn't
18. I get withdrawal symptoms when I don't exercise.
19. I played sports half my life and another career won't be as exciting but I have to try something.
20. I stayed really busy and went back to school – which helped me stay out of potential trouble.

21. Without sports, my tendency to party would get out of control.
22. I was determined to remain in the game.
23. Before I retired I wanted to coach and knew I'd get some of the same high from coaching as I did playing.
24. I took time for myself and entertained myself.
25. I took what I learned from sport and applied it to the challenges of life after sport.
26. I've learned to alleviate the stress in my life and cope.
27. I consoled myself with the realization that things could be worse.
28. I miss playing and feel pangs when I see active players.
29. I lost my desire to train.
30. I was lost, frustrated.
31. At first, I lived off my savings. Then I became determined to make a living and stop the economic bleeding.
32. Exercise and competition was a way of dealing with emotion growing up. Now I don't known how to get that release.
33. I was uneasy and didn't think about it. I felt nervous and unsettled and traveled to escape.
34. I had this wild unfocused energy until I saw a psychologist.

Question # 15: What, if anything, did you use to fill the gap left by the loss of sport? How long did it take to feel "normal" again?

1. I went to Yugoslavia to a shrine to the Virgin Mary and it triggered a spiritual renewal.
2. I moved to a new city that was better atmosphere for my children, quit the restaurant business and took a job with my old sponsor.
3. I missed the highs of sport but I was consoled by the fact I had prepared well for retirement.
4. I re-channeled my competitive nature to seek age-group records.
5. I am struggling with physical deterioration. But even if I'm not competitive, I still want to be able to run for fun.
6. I concentrate my running now on the remaining healthy, vibrant and the friendships.
7. I love watching my kids play sports but worry they might repeat my self-destructive mistakes.
8. It took time to feel normal after retiring from competitive sports.
9. I started to become comfortable with people who became my friends outside of sport – but continued to suspect their motives for a while.
10. * People think athletes are experts on all subjects – and they are not.
11. * I had to forgo the fame that came with of athletics and assume a new identity, but becoming a student did not fill the void.
12. I no longer feel special and wish my day to day normal activities were still taken care of as when I was a pro athlete.
13. I am reluctant to identify myself now I am no longer a pro athlete. I no longer feel special.
14. After retirement, I no longer feel special and that hurts me a lot.
15. The process of creating a new identity outside sport takes a while – depending on how much your ego was invested and how much help you receive from your family and friends.
16. It can take 6 or 7 years for an athlete to transition to a new identity.

17. I need to network with other retired athletes to get over feeling poor and boring.
18. Returning to school became a great outlet for energy and desire.
19. It took a decade before I could feel completely normal and healed.
20. I have become dissociated from my memories of sport.
21. Athletes are not helped by their talent to become role models; in fact, they are singularly unequipped for normal life.
22. * Athletes live focused lives that are not as complex as normal ones.
23. At first, I was paralyzed with worry and failed to try to cope.
24. I could neither compartmentalize nor make a decision.
25. I just hung on to the illusion of what I had had, even though I knew the ship was sinking.
26. I felt I didn't have the tools to cope but now I'm doing better.
27. I avoided reality by going to celebrity golf tournaments.
28. * I got sick of avoiding things by playing golf and became determined to do something meaningful in retirement.
29. I decided to give something back to my sport by talking a small coaching position. But I found it was far more emotionally rewarding.
30. I tried to race a lot of races in colorful places for fun after deciding my serious pro career was over. But it was unsatisfying. So I decided to come back once more and take competing seriously.
31. It took me a year to feel normal again – life wasn't predictable.
32. Too often I chose instant gratification and that hurt me.
33. I will never have the same highs as when I was competing. So far my new normal seems OK with me.

Question # 16: What, if anything, would you do differently?

1. I don't look back, life is too short.
2. The bad thing stick in your memory –- I wouldn't let them haunt me.
3. I worked hard, but luck plays a big part. I'd be appreciative of good things.
4. Running helped replace the highs of my sport after retirement. But an injury cut that back. I'm just hoping to run and feel like an athlete.
5. I know that after recovery from injury, running will make me feel better.
6. I can think that I should have done some things differently, but given my shy personality, I doubt it.
7. I did the best with my emotional and personality capabilities.
8. I made a lot of money through sports and now I'm retired I don't have the drive to build a new, money-making career. I have enough money.
9. Through belief in God, I lost my anxiety about material wants.
10. Religion gave me the tools to be accountable and faithful in my human relationships. Now I am calm and not consumed by stress.
11. When I became very ill I suffered through the experience and learned commitment and integrity and trust.
12. Nothing.
13. Based on my choices, I think my story will have a good ending – like a Christmas present.
14. I lost myself in my marriage.
15. Because I learned from my mistakes, I am a much better person.

APPENDIX D

SECOND ORDER THEMES

Second order themes

Confidence in ability
Focus on improvement
Self esteem issues
Planning for the future
Issue of self identity
Fulfillment of ego
Financial worries
Approval and support issues
Physical vulnerability
Love of the activity
Benefits of lifestyle
Emotional trauma
Conflict resolution
Maturity and development
Dealing with stress
Selfless generous impulses
Role model issues

APPENDIX E

SECOND ORDER THEMES COLLAPSED TO THIRD

Second order themes collapsed to third

Confidence in ability ……..mastery
Focus on improvement……..mastery
Self esteem issues….ego fulfillment and socialization
Planning for the future……aspects of life transition and change(general dimension)
Issue of self identity….emotional challenges of life transition
Fulfillment of ego….ego fulfillment and socialization
Financial worries…..emotional challenges of life transition
Approval and support issues….ego fulfillment and socialization
Physical vulnerability….emotional challenges of life transition
Love of the activity……positive coping
Benefits of lifestyle……positive coping
Emotional trauma……..emotional challenges of life transition
Conflict resolution……..acceptance and emotional maturity
Maturity and development…..advantageous personality traits
Dealing with stress…..emotional challenges of life transition
Selfless generous impulses…..advantageous personality traits
Role model issues….acceptance and emotional maturity

APPENDIX F

THIRD ORDER THEMES COLLAPSED TO GENERAL DIMENSIONS

Third order themes collapsed to general dimensions

Mastery……validation of existence through ego
Ego fulfillment and socialization……..validation of existence through ego
Positive coping…….aspects of life transition and change
Acceptance and emotional maturity….aspects of life transition and change
Emotional challenges of life transition…aspects of life transition and change
Advantageous personality traits….aspects of life transition and change

APPENDIX G

GENERAL DIMENSIONS COLLAPSED INTO FINAL CONCEPTUAL CONSTRUCT

General Dimensions collapsed into Final Conceptual Construct

Validation of existence through ego+
Aspects of life transition and change=

Internal and external acceptance = Life fulfillment

Abstract

Few areas of sport are as misunderstood by the mainstream public as that of the plight of retired professional and world class athletes. And while the subject has been often studied, modeled and theorized, the case of the retiring professional or world class athlete has yet to be fully explored in a detailed qualitative study that includes some of the most successful athletes in the world from many different sports. This study was an eighteen month long qualitative research study of 16 professional athletes, including world champions, Super Bowl MVPS and Olympic gold medal winners from 11 different sports. The semi-structured interviews resulted in over 356 raw data themes that were ultimately collapsed into two general dimension constructs. The higher order themes that emerged from the raw data were analyzed and compared to several existing models and theories of athlete retirement. Additionally, this study included information on the level of achievement in sport, length of career and the specific sport played as variable factors in the career termination experience.

Results of the study supported much of the findings of previous studies. In particular there was supportive evidence with themes in this study that correlated to such previously identified areas as self-identity, positive coping, ego fulfillment and socialization. The qualitative data permitted the researcher to identify two new themes surrounding the concept of *love of the sport* and *appreciation for its benefits* as elements of the higher order theme of *mastery*. Additionally, the findings supported the conclusions as discussed in Coakley's (1983) study that the athlete retirement paradigm is more contextual and individual-based than has been discussed in more recent literature. The analysis of the athlete's raw data supported Coakley's claim that it is difficult to separate the effects of retirement from the effects of other significant events.

There is insufficient data from this study to empirically conclude that professional athletes have different retirement experiences than Olympic, world class or national team members. The results as analyzed suggested no observable difference in their retirement experiences.

Finally, taking advantage of the numerous sports represented, the analysis of data offered six conceptual ideals for further study that pertained to potential differences by sport in the athlete retirement experience.