

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**RETIRED ATHLETES:  
WHEN THE SPOTLIGHT DIMS**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Sport  
and Exercise

Massey University, Albany,  
New Zealand

Andrew Lenton  
Student ID - 01176037

2016

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to; (1) examine the experiences of elite New Zealand athletes during the retirement transition and, (2) determine whether current retirement-related assistance in New Zealand is perceived by elite athletes to enhance adjustment to retirement from elite-level sport. An extensive literature review underlies the study by introducing theories and models related to athletic retirement and examining what is currently known about the experiences of elite athletes during the transition. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather descriptive data from 16 former elite New Zealand athletes who retired within seven years of commencement of the study. Data was analysed using NVivo software and Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) conceptual model of adaptation to retirement was used in a thematic analysis of data. This study provided clearer understanding of the experiences of elite New Zealand athletes regarding the retirement transition, and helped to identify whether current athlete retirement-related interventions are sufficient. As well, participants made suggestions for future retirement interventions and/or changes to interventions currently offered. New findings revealed that career/education interventions were available to and highly used by 12 participants who were carded and had access to these interventions. Availability and usage of psychological/emotional interventions was found to be limited or non-existent. Findings that were aligned with or contested previous literature included multi-causal reasons led to all participants' retirements. Participants experienced high athletic identity, high perceived control over their retirement, and retirements that, to varying degrees, were both voluntary and involuntary. Pre-planning was the most prominent resource used and enhanced participants' career prospects. Furthermore, it was found that most participants had both positive and negative retirement experiences during the transition. Future research could include longitudinal designs, which might provide a more accurate account of athletes' experiences and perceptions of the retirement transition as they occur, in particular the variables (e.g. athletic identity, social support) encountered.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

**The retirement transition** - in the sport context, the retirement transition is defined as the multi-dimensional process of transitioning from competitive sport to post-sport life and activities (Chow, 2001; Coakley, 1983; DiCamilli, 2000; Wheeler, Malone, Van Viack, Nelson, & Steadward, 1996).

**Elite athletes** - widely defined in sport-related literature as individuals who have participated at international and/or national competitive level and are either professional, semi-professional or amateur (Grana, 1988; Swann, Moran, & Piggott, 2015). Elite athletes who receive payment and generate their primary income from playing sport are considered professional or semi-professional athletes, while elite athletes who receive no money for playing sport are regarded as amateur.

**Carded athletes** - athletes selected from targeted sports (i.e. sports identified by High Performance Sport New Zealand (HPSNZ) as highly likely to win or podium at pinnacle events, such as Olympic and Commonwealth Games) and sports that received campaign investment from Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC) prior to 2012 and from HPSNZ post-2012 (High Performance Sport New Zealand, n.d.a). Eligible athletes may receive a number of services, based on the needs of the individual and their sport, including strength and conditioning, sport psychology, and injury prevention and rehabilitation. This is based on the level of carding assigned by the National Sport Organisations (NSO), level one being for world class athletes, level two for national athletes and level three for emerging athletes. Carded athletes may also be entitled to funding via investments, such as Prime Minister's Athlete Scholarships, Performance Enhancement Grants and Athlete Performance Support Services.

## TABLE OF ACRONYMS

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Full name</b>
ACE	Athlete Career Education
ACP	Athlete Career Programme
ALA	Athlete Life Advisor
ALP	Athlete Life Programme
HPSNZ	High Performance Sport New Zealand
NSO	National Sport Organisation
NZAS	New Zealand Academy Of Sport
NZRPA	New Zealand Rugby Players Association
SPARC	Sport And Recreation New Zealand

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Trish Bradbury and Dr Janet Sayers, for their expertise, hard work, guidance and commitment toward helping me complete this study. Thank you for taking my project on, guiding me through the greatest of challenges and helping to keep my dream alive!

To my boss and friend Rudi Huijsmans, I am so grateful for the hours of proof reading, flexibility with my work hours, and never ending support, encouragement and advice that you offered.

I would like to express a special thank you to both Ngairu Vakaruru and Ephra Pankhurst. Without your constant friendship, support, advice and belief in me, the completion of this project would not have been possible.

Most importantly, my parents, Philip and Mary, thank you for your never ending love, support, and advice. You have encouraged, supported and believed in me all the way. I cannot put into words how much you mean to me.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	i
DEFINITION OF TERMS.....	ii
TABLE OF ACRONYMS.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.0 Background to athlete retirement.....	1
1.1 Rationale for the study.....	1
1.2 Purpose of the study.....	4
1.3 Structure of the thesis.....	5
1.4 Delimitations.....	6
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
2.0 Introduction.....	7
2.1 Elite athletes.....	8
2.2 Retirement from elite-level sport.....	9
2.3 Athletic retirement: Theories and models.....	12
2.3.1 Athletic retirement as a singular event.....	12
2.3.1.1 Thanatological frameworks.....	12
2.3.1.2 Social gerontological frameworks.....	13
2.4 Athletic retirement as a transition.....	14
2.4.1 Human transition models.....	14
2.4.2 Athlete-specific career transition models.....	14
2.4.3 Career explanatory transition models.....	15
2.5 Framework for the present study.....	16
2.5.1 Stage one- Reasons for athletic retirement.....	17
2.5.1.1 Age.....	17
2.5.1.2 Deselection.....	18
2.5.1.3 Injury.....	18
2.5.1.4 Free choice.....	18
2.5.2 Stage two- Mediating factors influencing athletes' adjustments to retirement.....	19
2.5.2.1 Social identity.....	19

2.5.2.2 Athletic identity .....	20
2.5.2.3 Voluntary/involuntary retirement.....	21
2.5.3 Stage three- Available resources for adaptation to retirement .....	22
2.5.3.1 Coping skills .....	23
2.5.3.2 Pre-retirement planning.....	23
2.5.3.3 Social support .....	25
2.5.4 Stage four- Quality of the career transition for elite athletes.....	26
2.5.5 Stage five- Interventions .....	27
2.5.5.1 The importance of life skills interventions for athletic retirement.....	29
2.5.5.2 Historical context of athlete retirement transition interventions in New Zealand from 2000 to 2012.....	30
2.5.5.3 Current athlete retirement transition interventions in New Zealand (as of June 2016) .....	32
2.5.5.4 The importance of post-career interventions .....	33
2.6 Summary .....	33
<b>CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>35</b>
3.0 Introduction .....	35
3.1 Research method .....	35
3.2 Participants .....	38
3.2.1 Criteria used for selection of the participants.....	38
3.2.2 Sampling process and assessing participants.....	38
3.2.3 Description of the participants .....	39
3.3 Data collection .....	40
3.3.1 Data transcription.....	46
3.4 Data analysis .....	47
3.5 Research quality .....	50
3.5.1 Credibility.....	50
3.5.2 Transferability .....	50
3.5.3 Dependability .....	51
3.5.4 Confirmability.....	51
3.6 Ethical considerations .....	51
3.6.1 Respect for persons.....	51
3.6.2 Minimisation of risk of harm.....	52
3.6.3 Informed and voluntary consent.....	52



3.6.4 Respect for privacy and confidentiality .....	52
3.6.5 Storage of data .....	52
3.6.6 Avoidance of conflict of interest .....	53
3.7 Summary .....	53
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS/DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>54</b>
4.0 Introduction .....	54
4.1 Participants' retirements were multi-causal.....	56
4.2 Mediating factors that contributed to the participants' adaptation to the retirement transition .....	57
4.2.1 Participants' perceived control over their decision to retire .....	57
4.2.2 Participants' athletic identity .....	59
4.2.3 Each retirement was to varying degrees both voluntary and involuntary.....	61
4.3 Participants used resources to prepare for life after sport.....	63
4.3.1 Pre-planning for retirement .....	63
4.4 Positive and negative retirement experiences .....	65
4.5 Retirement interventions available to participants.....	70
4.5.1 Career/education interventions .....	70
4.5.2 Psychological/emotional interventions.....	73
4.6 Participants' suggestions for retirement interventions for future retiring athletes .....	76
4.7 Summary .....	79
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>80</b>
5.0 Introduction .....	80
5.1 Conclusions .....	81
5.2 Strengths/limitations .....	86
5.2.1 Strengths.....	86
5.2.2 Limitations .....	86
5.3 Future directions .....	86
5.4 Summary .....	88
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>APPENDIX A - INTERVIEW SCHEDULE.....</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>APPENDIX B - INFORMATION SHEET .....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>APPENDIX C - CONSENT FORM .....</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>APPENDIX D - ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER .....</b>	<b>116</b>

**APPENDIX E – PORTION OF A TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEW .....117**

**LIST OF TABLES**

**Table 2.1 Summary of key studies investigating the retirement experiences of elite athlete .....10**

**Table 2.2 Overview of selected athlete career interventions currently available .....28**

**Table 3.1 Participant information .....39**

**Table 3.2 Justification for interview questions included .....42**

**Table 3.3 Themes and example extracts .....48**

**Table 3.4 Overarching themes that emerged from the data analysis.....49**

**LIST OF FIGURES**

**Figure 2.1 The conceptual model of adaptation to retirement.....16**

**Figure 4.1 Link between interview questions and key themes and sub-themes that emerged.....55**