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A Qualitative Examination of Sport Retirement in Former NCAA Division I Athletes

Kelly Barcza-Renner

Franklin University, kelly.renner@franklin.edu

Amber M. Shipherd

Texas A & M University - Kingsville, amber.shipherd@tamuk.edu

Itay Basevitch

Anglia Ruskin University, itay.basevitch@anglia.ac.uk

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Kelly Barcza-Renner

Franklin University

Amber M. Shipherd

Texas A&M University

Itay Basevitch

Anglia Ruskin University

Barcza-Renner (kelly.renner@franklin.edu) is corresponding author.

Abstract

Statistics indicate that the overwhelming majority of NCAA Division I college athletes will not continue in their sport professionally (NCAA, 2019). Therefore, there is a need to develop a deeper understanding of the variables that influence college athletes' psychological health and well-being as they transition to retirement. The present study gathered detailed information about 15 former NCAA Division I college athletes' retirement experiences four to five months post retirement. The findings suggested that the former college athletes had varied retirement experiences ranging from negative to positive. All college athletes who reported having a successful retirement transition described having at least one identified support group, stated they accomplished their athletic goals, indicated they had started pursuing other interests, and identified some positive aspects about their lives since retirement. Alternatively, the college athletes who reported having an unsuccessful retirement transition revealed they did not accomplish most of their athletic goals and struggled to identify any positive aspects about their lives since retirement. The findings of this study highlight the diversity in college athletes' retirement experiences that can occur. Although there is still much more to ascertain about athlete retirement, this exploration into college athletes' retirement experiences offers practical implications for athletes, coaches, practitioners, and those who want to provide support for a retiring athlete.

Keywords: *college athletes, qualitative methods, transition*

According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), there are more than 480,000 college athletes competing in 24 sports (NCAA, 2019). During the 2017-2018 academic school year, the NCAA estimated 1,147 male college athletes were drafted in hopes of becoming professionals in baseball, basketball, football, or ice hockey, while just 34 female college athletes were drafted with the goal of playing professional basketball (NCAA, 2019). It should be noted that additional professional opportunities in sports like soccer, golf, lacrosse, and tennis, as well as endorsement contracts for Olympic sports, were not reported. Still, the percentage of college athletes who become professionals in their sports following a college career is minuscule, at approximately less than 1% for males, and an even smaller percentage for female college athletes (NCAA, 2019). Statistics indicate that the overwhelming majority of college athletes will not continue in their sport professionally; therefore, there is a need to develop a deeper understanding of the variables that influence college athletes' psychological health and well-being as they

transition into retirement.

While there are studies that qualitatively examine athletes' retirement experiences years after retirement (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Torregrosa, Ramis, Pallarés, Azócar, & Selva, 2015; Tshube & Feltz, 2015; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008), limited research has examined athletes' transitions just four to five months post retirement. Previous research has found a relationship between the time passed after sport retirement and the athletes' perception of the quality of retirement (Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013). More specifically, former athletes' quality of life improved within 18-24 months following their transition out of sport (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Thus, the aim of this study was to investigate how former NCAA Division I collegiate athletes described the transition out of their sports shortly after their lived experiences.

Athletic Identity

When discussing athlete retirement, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of the athletic

identity construct (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Athletic identity is the extent to which an individual's personal identity includes being an athlete. There are both positive and negative factors associated with a strong athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Often, athletic identity is reinforced from the time children start participating in sports and is further enhanced throughout their athletic careers, especially during college.

Recently, researchers have examined the relationship between athletic identity and sport retirement. Beamon (2012) interviewed 20 former Division I athletes and found that most had exclusive athletic identities that negatively affected their transition out of sports. Additionally, Kidd, Southall, Nagel, Reynolds, and Anderson (2018) reported, in part, that NCAA Division I men's football, basketball, and baseball athletes had significant difficulties with retirement related to maintaining their athletic identities. Smith and Hardin (2018) found similar results with former female college athletes, as well. They reported athletes struggled to create an identity outside their sport upon retirement. Aspects of retirement including establishing new social circles, new routines with fitness, and separating from their sport were reported challenging for former college athletes. Alternatively, using qualitative meta-synthesis research, Fuller (2014) reported that college athletes who recognized they had other equally important roles, such as being a student, did not report such difficult retirement transitions. Thus, athletic identity has been identified as a prominent variable in determining athletes' successful or unsuccessful retirement transitions.

Successful Athlete Retirement Transitions

Athletic retirement experiences are diverse, in part because there are so many potential variables that can play a role in one's decision, or requirement, to retire. Researchers have reported both successful (Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stokowski, Paule-Koba, & Kaunert, 2019; Warehime, Dinkel, Bjornsen-Ramig, & Blount, 2017) and unsuccessful (Jewett, Kerr, & Tamminen, 2018) athlete retirement transitions. For example, Martin and colleagues' (2014) study uncovered that athletes who retired on their own accord reported an increase

in life satisfaction, suggesting that these individuals experienced a positive sport retirement. Additionally, Sinclair and Orlick (1993) reported athletes who accomplished their sport-related goals adjusted with ease into retirement. More recently, Cummins and O'Boyle (2015) identified four central psychosocial factors associated with a successful transition from college to a post-college career in Division I basketball players, which included a balanced college experience, pre-transition planning, positive social support, and an openness to explore alternatives to their current sport.

Further, Warehime and colleagues (2017) explored factors that led to wellness in former college athletes including current employment, sense of control, emotions, self-worth, self-care, spirituality, friendships, relationships, exercise, and nutrition. Using an interview guide based on the Indivisible Self Model (IS-WEL; Myers & Sweeney 2004), they identified that participants reported high levels of wellness, specifically in the areas of work and exercise. Participants perceived their current wellness was equal, if not better, compared to when they were college athletes. These findings highlighted the positive coping abilities of some college athletes as they transitioned to retirement.

Challenges with Athlete Retirement Transitions

While numerous athletes have reported positive retirement experiences, many athletes experience challenges in the transition out of their sport, as well (e.g., Alfermann, 2000; Giannone, Haney, Kealy, & Ogrodnicsuk, 2017; Jewett et al., 2018; Saxe, Hardin, Taylor, & Pate, 2017; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stokowski, Paule-Koba, & Kaunert, 2019). Sinclair and Orlick (1993) discovered that athletes who retired believing their athletic performance had been declining over a recent period of time experienced decreased self-confidence and further challenges with retirement transition. Giannone and colleagues (2017) examined former college athletes three months post sport retirement. Findings indicated that athletic identity was positively correlated with self-reported anxiety symptoms when controlling for mental health symptoms prior to retirement. A strong athletic identity could be considered a risk factor for mental illness following

sport retirement.

For instance, Jewett et al. (2018) studied an elite female college athlete who developed an adjustment disorder with mixed moods of depression and anxiety after retiring from her sport and graduating. It was identified that this college athlete's self-confidence and strong athletic identity were a result of her athletic success. However, with retirement, access to resources and support that perpetuated her strong athletic identity were no longer available. Therefore, this college athlete struggled to cope and reportedly experienced mental health challenges.

It should be noted that Alfermann (2000) estimated that about 15-20% of elite retired athletes experience transition distress and required mental health services to cope with this significant life change. The NCAA (2015) reported college campuses have seen an increase in the number of students reporting mental health symptoms, including anxiety and depression. The 2015 GOALS data concluded about 30% of college athletes self-reported feelings of being overwhelmed during the past month, which was an increase from when the same data was collected in 2010.

While some athletes report significant challenges associated with retirement that impact their mental health and well-being, many more athletes report negative, but much less severe, retirement experiences. Yao, Laurencelle, and Trudeau (2018) reported that former athletes' nutritional habits declined below the average level of non-athletes. Additionally, former athletes reported engaging in physical activity less than non-athletes did. It is possible that retired athletes' decline in self-care could be related to the "transition blues." Saxe, Hardin, Taylor, and Pate (2017) identified a theme of "transition blues" in athletes as, "...the emotions that accompanied the transitions in and out of the student-athlete experience. This primarily occurred upon entering the institution and again when transitioning out of sport and preparing to retire from elite level competition" (Saxe et al., 2017, p. 34). Further, Saxe and colleagues (2017) reported that during their senior year of college, participants identified feeling anxiety and confusion related to their identities.

Recommendations for Athlete Retirement

Given the numerous potential negative consequences of poor sport retirement, ranging from mild to severe, it is essential to identify the factors that put an athlete at risk for an unsuccessful retirement, as well as those that may be indicative of successful sport retirement. Researchers have focused on four variables that determine the quality of athletes' retirement transitions, which include the cause of retirement, planning for retirement transition, athletic identity, and the personal and social resources available to the athletes (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007).

Additionally, it is recommended that athletic identity foreclosure, grief processing, adaptive coping skills, and active and enhanced support systems be addressed in order to set up college athletes for a successful retirement transition (Miller & Buttell, 2018). Further, Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) offered a five-step conceptual model for athletes transitioning to retirement that included identifying the unique factors influencing the athlete's retirement and the resources available. Aspects of this model are still frequently used by practitioners today who recognize each athlete's retirement experience as unique and his/her knowledge about retirement resources varies. "Research shows that retirement planning, voluntary termination, multiple personal identity, availability of social support, and active coping strategies facilitate athletes' adaptation to the post-career" (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009, p. 408). The recommendations for athletes to facilitate a positive sport retirement are broad and diverse – likely because each athlete's experience is unique and includes both athletic and non-athletic factors (Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004).

Interventions for Retiring Athletes

While athletes' retirement experiences are diverse, many still can benefit from retirement interventions. Athlete retirement interventions have shifted from the use of traditional therapeutic approaches to cope with the possible traumatic experience of termination of one's athletic career, to that of career transition and athlete life skill programs aimed at providing support and education to retiring athletes (Hansen,

Perry, Ross, & Montgomery, 2018; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). Programs, such as the U.S. Olympic Committee's Athlete Career and Education (ACE) program (2019) and the NCAA's After the Game (2018), as well as a host of online forums, offer athletes education and support. The ACE Program includes a monthly newsletter about upcoming programs and events, including scholarships, tuition grants, and business workshops that are exclusive to current and former U.S. Olympic athletes. The After the Game Career Center is an online platform developed to link employers with former NCAA athletes seeking employment. Although these resources are available, it is unclear how many athletes utilize these support and educational programs.

It is evident that additional support and education for retiring college athletes during these transitional phases are needed. Given that transitions out of sport have been found to be complex and multifaceted, and research has established athletes' retirement experiences are diverse and unique (e.g., Erpič et al., 2004), further research qualitatively examining college athletes' retirement experiences are warranted to provide more in-depth, idiosyncratic, and phenomenological information. Thus, the aim of the current study was to explore former NCAA Division I collegiate athletes' retirement experiences four to five months following their college graduation. To achieve this aim, the following research question guided this study: How do former collegiate athletes describe their transition out of sport?

Method

Qualitative research traditionally embodies a constructionist epistemological view that acknowledges participants' unique perceptions and findings, grounded in participants' lived experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2017). Phenomenological strategies of inquiry are utilized to understand concepts and phenomena experienced by a group of individuals (Creswell, 2009). The goal of phenomenological research is to understand the lived experience of a certain phenomenon using open-ended questions with a small sample of individuals. A phenomenological qualitative approach was selected as most appropriate for this study given the researchers' primary interest in

exploring participants' recent retirement experiences from NCAA Division I athletics. A similar approach was utilized by Lavallee and Robinson (2007) while investigating athlete retirement. Participant data for this study was collected through semi-structured, open-ended questions and coded with phenomenological analysis to understand the essence of the college athlete retirement experience.

Procedures

Following Institutional Review Board approval, 1,202 NCAA Division I head coaches were sent an email toward the end of the competitive season for their sport. Coaches' email addresses were obtained through athletic directories on university websites. The email contained the request that they forward research information along to their college athletes. During the initial investigation, participants were prompted to indicate their anticipated sport retirement date and provide a valid email address for follow-up correspondence.

The 53 participants, who indicated they were graduating and/or retiring from their sport by the end of the spring term, were contacted via email approximately four to five months after their retirement date to participate in the current study. Four to five months post retirement was selected as the timeframe for data collection to limit the inaccuracies of recalling long-past experiences and goals. Additionally, it should be noted the timeframe immediately following retirement was avoided for data collection to give the college athletes time to begin the transition to their next phase of life (e.g. find employment, begin graduate school). The email received by the former college athletes contained a link to 12 open-ended questions about their sport retirement experiences.

An online platform was selected to collect the data to access a larger, more diverse pool of participants, and to eliminate any participant response bias due to the researcher's presence. These open-ended items focused on the former college athletes' perceived transition out of sport, support from others throughout the transition process, level of stress since retiring from sport, and current focus and interests. Participants had the option of explaining as much or as little about their retirement experiences as they felt comfortable.

Participants

Sixteen participants responded to the email request for participation in the current study. However, one former college athlete reported she had returned home to her country of origin to continue competing in her sport after graduation, and therefore was excluded from the present study, given that she was not actually retiring from her sport at the time the data was collected. The 15 remaining participants were between the ages of 19 and 23 years old ($M = 21.67$, $SD = 1.05$) and competed in cross country and track & field ($n = 4$), golf, softball ($n = 8$), swimming, and volleyball. All respondents had competed in their sport for a considerable period of time ($M = 12.83$ years, $SD = 2.06$). The majority of the college athletes in this phase of the investigation identified as female ($n = 12$), which is higher than typical annual participation rates for female college athletes (i.e., approximately 58%; Irick, 2014).

Data Analysis

All investigators carefully read through participant responses to become familiar with the data and individually began recording general thoughts about the data. Data were then organized by one of the investigators into meaningful units (MU's), or "coherent but arbitrary parts...in order to discover what psychologically relevant meanings are actually present" (Giorgi, 2008, pp. 43-44). Next, the MU's were reviewed for similarities and differences before similar MU's were organized into themes (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The themes were reviewed by a second investigator and any discrepancies were resolved by a third investigator. Interrater agreement was 92.2%, revealing a high degree of consistency with respect to the development of themes. This process continued with all themes and subthemes until all text segments were grouped with maximum between-theme and minimum within-theme variation. The themes were determined by the essence of participants' responses. The subthemes were identified when the themes could further be grouped into additional MU's. Frequency counts also were calculated for each theme to assist in better understanding the retirement process for the entire sample (Joffe & Yardley, 2004; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007).

Findings

Four themes and seven subthemes from the data were identified (see Figure 1). The themes revolved around the ideas of sport goals, preparedness for the transition to retirement, satisfaction with social support, and cause of retirement. To better understand each college athlete's unique retirement experience, they were prompted to explain their sports-related goals and why they retired from their sport. All participants' goals were further described as performance goals, enjoyment goals, and learning goals. Further, because researchers identified social support as a protective factor against a negative transition out of sport (Werthner & Orlick, 1986), participants were encouraged to discuss their social support during their retirement transition. This led to most participants discussing their overall transition and the theme of preparedness emerged. Participants identified they planned for their transition, they had an unexpected transition, their lives during their transition lacked structure, and/or they had been struggling with their identity or purpose throughout their transition.

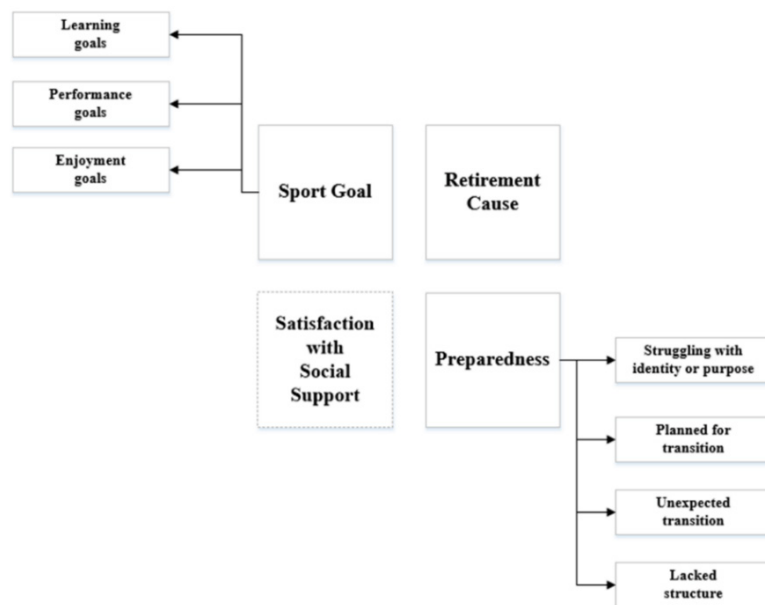


Figure 1. Transition out of collegiate sport themes.

Sport Goal

Three subthemes emerged related to participants' major sport-related goal during their university athletic career: performance goals, enjoyment goals, and learning goals. Former college athletes who described having learning goals reported a positive transition experience, while participants who described having enjoyment goals noted a negative transition experience, and participants who identified performance goals varied in their assessment of their transition. It should be noted that three participants identified multiple goals that were coded into separate subthemes.

Performance goals. Fourteen participants described their major sport goal as being related to obtaining a criteria (e.g. running a certain goal time) or level of performance (e.g. competing at the collegiate level). For example, Participant 15 stated, "I improved my performance and results on the track within my event each year. Every year my time dropped a little more, and I achieved more accomplishments within the [conference]." Participant 15 went on to describe specific achievements: "Senior year we broke the Indoor 4x400 Women's Division I collegiate record and won that event. In addition, I placed Top 8 at Outdoor Nationals and we placed second in the 4x4 there as well." Four participants described having accomplished their performance-related goals. Participant 3 stated, "My ultimate goal was to get recruited to [university] and play in the uniform." Additionally, Participant 13 said, "[We] won a National Championship and [I was] All-American."

Five participants reported they accomplished some of their performance goals. For example, Participant 4 shared, "I was able to be a student-athlete at the collegiate level and earn a starting spot as a freshman. I only got to play two full seasons due to multiple concussions; and I was able to serve on the SAAC organization." Further, Participant 9 explained, "...I always felt that my training was going better than my races. I had more fun in practice working with my teammates versus competing against them." Participant 9 went on to discuss goals and said, "I had high goals for myself that I did not accomplish, like qualifying for the track regional meet, but still definitely exceeded my initial expectations going into collegiate

athletics." Participant 1 summarized, "I fell short of succeeding as well as I wanted to in collegiate golf, but my ultimate goal was to play Division I golf and I did accomplish that."

Alternatively, five participants conveyed they did not accomplish their performance goals. For example, Participant 11 said, "No, I never went All-American nor did I get an invite to the pro league." Participant 7 stated, "No, [I] didn't get to play in a college game." While Participant 6 reported, "...I wanted to improve more than I did my senior year. Overall, I did well, but I know I am better than the way I performed."

Participants who either described accomplishing goals related to their athletic performance, reported accomplishing some of their performance-related goals, or identified they were unable to accomplish their performance-related goals described both successful and unsuccessful transitions. In other words, whether or not former college athletes accomplished their performance-related goals was not an indicator of their retirement experience. However, all college athletes who reported having a successful retirement transition stated they accomplished their athletic goals.

Enjoyment goals. Two participants described having fun or enjoying their sport as an objective; however, both participants noted that they did not accomplish this goal. For example, Participant 8 said, "...did not have as much fun as I thought I would." Both participants also described the quality of their transition as being negative.

Learning goals. Two participants described learning and growing as their goal for their sport participation. Participant 14 explained, "I think I was able to mature greatly and learn the values of work ethic, teamwork, and goal setting." While Participant 5 shared, "...I learned a lot but did not see the results I had hoped for." One participant who identified having a learning goal assessed the quality of their transition out of sport positively, while the other indicated their transition to be neutral.

Preparedness for the Transition to Retirement

When discussing the quality of their transition out of sport, participants described either having or

not having a plan in place, or something else to get involved with when they transitioned out of sport. For example, Participant 1 stated, “I went back to school to get my master’s [degree] so [I] have my mind focused on other places than golf.” While Participant 2 explained, “I’ve been traveling so reality hasn’t hit me yet, but I really enjoyed my life as a student-athlete, so I know it’s going to be difficult.”

The former college athletes who described a lack of preparedness also discussed feeling purposeless and/or feeling like their life was currently lacking structure. Participant 8 explained, “After I finished, it was like I was never there. The team moved on quickly; people didn’t miss me.” Participant 9 shared, “I found it difficult to navigate social interactions without a team, and felt that I was purposeless for a while. I continued to train at a relatively high level for no reason really other than personal gratification and stress-reduction.”

Additionally, three participants noted their transition out of sport was caused due to injury or medical reasons. Participant 3 summarized, “I had to leave the sport because I was in a serious amount of pain every day. If I continued, it would have been detrimental to my physical and emotional health.”

Planned for transition. Six former college athletes discussed feeling prepared or emotionally ready to transition out of sport. Participant 15 said, “[I] was ready to transition because I never considered running track professionally. Obviously, leaving athletics is difficult but I was prepared for it.” Participant 5 described, “I have transitioned well without my sport to lean on and it has allowed me to invest in the pursuit of my career, professional and friendly relations, and other interests.” Participant 12 explained that she planned for her retirement transition by going on a mission trip to Israel and was anticipating starting Law School in the fall. Additionally, Participant 3 reported, “I knew I wanted to get a job and start working to try and make some money and get involved with something else to keep my mind off the fact that I can’t play anymore.”

Lacked structure. Two participants described feeling as if their lives post retirement lacked structure. Participant 2 stated, “I had a lot of options but haven’t pursued anything yet...” Participant 5 explained, “I started a few other interests like rock climbing, biking, music, etc., but those quickly faded because there was not the rigidity that I had while

competing with a team.” Interestingly, one participant noted a successful transition out of sport while the other evaluated their transition out of sport negatively.

Struggling with identity or purpose. Four former college athletes depicted feeling a loss of sense of self or feeling aimless or purposeless. For example, Participant 9 commented, “...that routine that my sport provided me gave me a poignant sense of purpose and identity that is hard to find elsewhere.” Similarly, Participant 4 described feeling, “...a little empty.” Two of these four participants assessed the quality of their transition out of sport as negative, while the other two participants evaluated their transitions to be more neutral.

Unexpected transition. Three participants explained their transition out of sport was due to injury or medical reasons and described the transition as unexpected, suggesting a lack of plan. For example, Participant 4 said, “I practiced all fall before I was told I had to medically retire so the transition was very sudden, difficult, and life-changing.” While Participant 7 reported the experience was, “...hard to let it go...”, all three of these participants assessed the quality of their transition out of sport different – one was positive, one neutral, and one negative.

Satisfaction with Social Support

Thirteen participants described receiving social support during their transition out of sport, but unfortunately, two former college athletes reported not receiving any support as they transitioned out of sport. Twelve participants reported feeling satisfied with the amount and/or type of social support they received, while three participants reported feeling dissatisfied with the quality or lack of social support they received.

All participants who reported a positive retirement transition indicated having at least one identified support group. Most of the participants identified having support from family, a significant other, friends/teammates, and/or their coach/school. Participant 1 stated, “My family has supported me through everything.” Participant 9 explained, “I was still best friends with many of my prior teammates and had support from my parents and boyfriend, who also competed in college athletics.” Participant 2 described a coach’s support as, “My coach put me in contact with someone about an internship in Human Resources and I participated in a professional development

program at school the summer after I graduated.” While Participant 3 explained, “I had support from my family, coaches, and trainer. They all ensured that I did not disappoint anyone and that they would take care of my medical needs as I needed.”

Three participants described feeling unhappy with the amount or quality of support they received. Two of the former college athletes reported they did not have any support as they transitioned out of their sport, just stating, “None” (Participant 8 and Participant 11). Further, it should be noted Participant 11 reported an unsuccessful retirement transition, while Participant 8 reported a neutral retirement transition. Participant 7 noted, “...coaches not very supportive” and expressed a negative transition out of sport.

Retirement Cause

The participants reported they retired from their sport because they graduated from college, their college sport participation eligibility expired, they were injured, and/or they identified other reasons, which were mostly related to not being “good enough” to compete at the professional or Olympic level. Participant 8 stated, “[I] finished my senior year of volleyball and didn’t play professionally because I needed to go to grad school.” Participant 7 noted that she had “four shoulder surgeries,” which required her to retire from softball. Participant 13 simply stated that her “eligibility ran out.” While participants identified various reasons for retirement, the reasons they gave could not be organized by their perceived success or failure of retirement transitions. For example, participants who reported they retired due to injury reported both successful and unsuccessful retirement transitions.

Discussion

While the vast majority of college athletes will retire from their sport during, or at the conclusion, of their college career, to date there is limited research qualitatively examining this phenomenon four to five months post retirement. The current study sought to examine former college athlete’s experiences following their retirement at a point in time when they likely would be able to accurately recall information about their emotions, relationships, and specific events. To achieve this aim, the following research question

guided this study: How do former collegiate athletes describe their transition out of sport?

The findings suggested that former college athletes had diverse retirement experiences ranging from positive to negative. Most of the retired college athletes reported having support from family, a significant other, friends/teammates, and/or their coach/school during their time of transition, however, some identified not having any support. This finding highlights the need for additional support for retiring college athletes so they feel adequately prepared for the next phase of their lives.

One commonality among participants who reported they had a successful retirement transition was that they accomplished their athletic goals. Sinclair and Orlick (1993) and Duque-Ingunza and Dosil (2017) reported athletes who accomplished their athletic goals adjusted with ease into retirement, further supporting the findings of the present study. Practitioners and coaches should work with college athletes preparing to retire to ensure their sport-related goals are realistic prior to retirement. While this alone will not guarantee a smooth retirement transition, it is likely to assist in setting athletes up for a successful retirement.

Additionally, all former college athletes who reported a positive retirement transition reported having at least one identified support group. Stambulova et al. (2009) concluded, in part, from their review of athlete retirement literature that an athlete’s coping process largely was dependent on individual and social resources available to the athlete. This can lead to successful adoption of new roles in an occupation/academia, family, or/and the sport system.

In the current study, all former college athletes who reported having a positive retirement experience indicated that they had a plan and began pursuing other areas of interests immediately following their retirement. They reported concentrating their efforts on education, employment, a relationship, and/or an aspect related to their former sport, such as coaching involvement. Although participants in the current study were not asked specifically when they started focusing on other interests outside their sport, Lally (2007) found when college athletes distanced themselves from their athletic identities prior to planned sport retirement they were able to protect their identities during the transition process, and thus experienced relatively smooth retirement transitions. It should be

noted that a college athlete who self-identified as having a difficult retirement transition also reported she had no interests outside her sport four months after retirement.

These findings further support the necessity of providing college athletes with resources that help them plan and prepare for retirement. Kidd et al. (2018) reported that, "...our participants overwhelmingly felt their institution did not, but should have, provided extensive and readily-available pre-transition/transition services" (p. 130). Reifsteck and Brooks (2018) found that a half-day workshop for current college athletes that focused on assisting them with the transition from highly structured athletic activity to continuing physical activity throughout their lives was positively rated. Given that two participants in the current study reported struggling after their retirement due to the lack of structure, preparing college athletes to address this aspect of transitioning should be considered.

Applied Implications

From the data, it is evident that some former college athletes struggle with their transition out of sport. Only one retired college athlete indicated that he had a positive retirement experience, while many retired college athletes indicated their experience was neither positive nor negative, and a few retired college athletes indicated their retirement experience was negative. These participants who reported facing challenges with retirement could benefit from the support of a practitioner who could assist them with applying the skills they developed as college athletes to being successful in the next phase of their lives.

Further, practitioners could provide college athletes with additional proactive support (e.g., career planning, providing education of transferable skills) so they are best prepared to retire (Park, et al., 2013). A recent study by Hansen, Perry, Ross, and Montgomery (2018) demonstrated that college athletes in their senior year reported a one-day two-hour workshop was helpful in preparing them for their retirement transition. Former college athletes in this study also believed introducing pre-retirement workshops to college athletes in their junior year or younger would allow more preparation for the transition.

One indicator of a college athlete's ability to transition to retirement successfully was support from family, a significant other, friends/teammates, and/or their coach/school (Stambulova et al., 2009). However, two of the participants in the current study reported they did not have any support from others. When college athletes' support systems are built into their sport participation (e.g. coaches, teammates, trainers, academic advisors, tutors), most college athletes lose almost the entire support system they have relied on, at least through their formative years of high school and college, and they suddenly struggle to identify support not associated with their sport (see Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015; Jewett et al., 2018; Kidd, Southall, Nagel, Reynolds, & Anderson, 2018). This further supports the necessity for college athletes to work with a practitioner prior to retirement, if possible, to identify and utilize a strong support system.

The majority of retired college athletes who participated in this study identified negatives, or positives and negatives, in their lives since retiring from their sport. Few participants only identified positive aspects of their lives since retirement. The data emphasized the instrumental role practitioners could play in supporting retiring college athletes by helping them cope with the emotional aspects of retirement, identify positive aspects of their retirement, develop ways to refocus their athletic abilities into other productive avenues, create new structure and routines, and support their identity reformation (Park et al., 2013). The challenges college athletes might face when they retire often are minimized, or not discussed at all, prior to retirement. Working with a practitioner to prepare for this life transition could assist college athletes with a smoother retirement process.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the present study aimed to gather detailed data about former college athletes' retirement experiences, additional research is needed to better understand athlete's diverse experiences and how they can successfully navigate this life transition. Large-scale quantitative studies can gather data to identify trends in athlete retirement experiences. While the majority of college athletes in the present study knew it was their last season of competition prior to retire-

ment, additional research should be conducted with athletes who retire from their sport unexpectedly, perhaps due to an injury or other life circumstances. Lavalley, Grove, and Gordon (1997) reported that athletes who retired “involuntarily” or unexpectedly from their sports experienced greater social and emotional challenges than their counterparts who voluntarily retired. The retirement transitions between these two groups should be further investigated.

Additionally, athlete retirement studies could be conducted at different points in time leading up to athletes’ retirement, immediately after their retirement, six months after their retirement, and one year after their retirement. Most current longitudinal studies have examined athlete retirement only after the retirement itself (e.g. Douglas & Carless, 2009). As with any study asking participants to report on their lived experiences, memory selection/reinterpretation can be identified as a limitation. Despite the limitations, the data could be useful as a foundation for additional research on retiring college athletes, as well as for practitioners supporting college athletes through their transition to retirement.

Researchers should strive to further investigate the relationships between athlete retirement and variables such as athletic identity (Lally, 2007; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007) and career transition interventions (Lavalley, 2005). Further, there are emotional, psychological, physical, and social variables to be considered that likely play a role in athletes’ retirement experiences. Research examining these variables will provide invaluable contributions to the growing body of research on athlete retirement, as well as potential practical implications for practitioners and current athletes.

Conclusion

The present study gathered detailed information about former NCAA Division I college athletes’ retirement experiences. The findings suggested that 15 former college athletes had varied retirement experiences ranging from negative to positive. While some of the retired college athletes reported not having any support, most identified support from family, a significant other, friends/teammates, and/or their coach/school during their time of transition. All college

athletes who reported a positive retirement transition also reported having at least one identified support group. Additionally, all college athletes who reported they accomplished their athletic goals, started pursuing other interests, and reported some positive aspects about their lives since retirement also reported having a successful retirement transition. The findings of this study highlight the diversity in college athletes’ retirement experiences that can occur. Although there still is much more to ascertain about athlete retirement, this exploration into college athletes’ retirement experiences offers practical implications for athletes, coaches, practitioners, and those who want to provide support for an athlete who is retiring.

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