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Transition Experiences out of Intercollegiate Athletics: A Meta-Synthesis

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Abstract

Given the renewed focus as to the degree in which institutions of higher education are preparing their student-athletes for life after sports, this study used a qualitative meta-synthesis research method design to examine the transition experiences of college athletes out of intercollegiate sport. The researcher synthesized data from nine qualitative studies, leading to the identification of six themes characteristic of the transition experience: athletic identity, anticipation and preparation, branching out, satisfaction with athletic performance, loss of camaraderie and support systems. Finally, the manuscript discusses the results of the meta-synthesis in light of their theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords

Retirement, Intercollegiate Athletics, Athletic Identity, College Athlete, Meta-Synthesis

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Transition Experiences out of Intercollegiate Athletics: A Meta-Synthesis

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Given the renewed focus as to the degree in which institutions of higher education are preparing their student-athletes for life after sports, this study used a qualitative meta-synthesis research method design to examine the transition experiences of college athletes out of intercollegiate sport. The researcher synthesized data from nine qualitative studies, leading to the identification of six themes characteristic of the transition experience: athletic identity, anticipation and preparation, branching out, satisfaction with athletic performance, loss of camaraderie and support systems. Finally, the manuscript discusses the results of the meta-synthesis in light of their theoretical and practical implications. Keywords: Retirement, Intercollegiate Athletics, Athletic Identity, College Athlete, Meta-Synthesis

Upon termination of participation in intercollegiate sport, most student-athletes will make a transition to a life outside of sport (Brown, 2003). When retiring from sports in general, some athletes might experience emotional and psychological difficulty (Bailie, 1993, Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) while others might experience a sense of relief and freedom (Coakley, 1983). Owing to these differences in experiences, various explanatory models have been formulated to explain the phenomenon of athletic retirement. Earlier frameworks of athletic retirement included thanatological models, which likened retirement from sports to a social death (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Rosenberg, 1982), and social gerontological models, which emphasized aging and life satisfaction with respect to retiring (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Rosenberg, 1981).

However, a critique of both the thanatology and social gerontology views of athletic retirement is that retirement is viewed as a single incident (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Yet, most athletes do not merely retire from sports in a single moment (Coakley, 2009). Instead, they gradually disengage from their sports while realigning their priorities and life goals. As a result, researchers are now characterizing retirement as a transition process involving development through life rather than a lone event. In doing so, certain factors have been identified that are believed to be integral to the quality of the transition process (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

Factors believed to influence disengagement from sport and realignment of priorities and life goals include athletic identity (i.e., the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role), social support, pre-retirement planning, mode of exit, and the loss of special/preferential treatment (Adler & Adler, 1991; Bailie, 1993; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Wooten, 1994). However, Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) suggested that the transition process might differ based on the highest level of competition attained by the athlete (e.g., college vs. professional or Olympic). That is to say, while there are common themes between athletes retiring from the professional, amateur, and college ranks, there are also aspects of the retirement process that are unique only to college athletics.

Most professional and Olympic athletes retire from sports within their own timeframe (except those with career-ending injuries, not making a team, etc.). In contrast, college athletes have a finite number of years to compete. When their eligibility expires, the

overwhelming majority of college athletes must navigate the intricacies of life apart from college athletics. This combination – the likelihood of a non-professional sports careers and finite eligibility – makes the transition process unique for college athletes when compared to retirement from professional or amateur levels of a sport.

Although disengagement from college sports might have its own unique intricacies, studies have focused exclusively on the retirement process of college athletes using qualitative research methods. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to conduct a qualitative meta-synthesis of the athletic retirement literature on college athletes. The researcher did this to inform intercollegiate sport practitioners (e.g., sport psychologists, academic counselors) and researchers of the experiences of college athletes' transitions out of intercollegiate athletics, while being cognizant of the potential that certain factors of the process might be unique to college athletics.

Method

Research Design

This study used a qualitative meta-synthesis approach (Noblit & Hare, 1988). The researcher picked this design because a meta-synthesis allows for an analysis of an aggregate group of studies in which the themes of each are discovered and the end product “transforms the original results into a new conceptualization” (Schreiber, Crooks, & Stern, 1997, p. 314). Although all themes do not have to be present in every study sampled, a meta-synthesis allows for the identification of similar themes between studies, thus enhancing the ability to generalize qualitative data (Sandelowski, Docherty, & Emden, 1997). In using a qualitative meta-synthesis approach, the present study delineated factors which are common to intercollegiate athletic transition experiences by translating the studies into a synergized whole (Thorne, Jensen, Kearney, Noblit, & Sandelowski, 2004).

Data

The researcher conducted a review of available qualitative literature on transition experiences out of intercollegiate athletics using online databases such as SPORTDiscus, ERIC, PyscINFO and PyscARTICLES. Studies included in the current meta-synthesis met the following criteria: (a) the study used using qualitative research methods, (b) study participants were former college athletes, and (c) participants' athletic careers concluded at the college level. Thus, the present meta-synthesis excluded research examining the retirement process of amateur or professional athletes or studies conducted using quantitative methods.

Because qualitative research contains large amounts of information, overly large sample sizes will limit the level of analysis and subsequent interpretive validity of findings (Noblit & Hare, 1998; Sandelowski et al., 1997). As such, this meta-synthesis included nine studies, which is recognized as an appropriate amount of studies for a complete qualitative meta-synthesis (Sandelowski et al., 1997). The researcher selected studies based on their ability to meet the inclusion criteria, as well as their potential to add unique contribution to the meta-synthesis. For example, Hinitz's (1988) study provided a unique contribution because his participants were exclusively male gymnasts. Likewise, Wilson's (2007) study provided unique contribution as her participants were African American females. The researcher pursued a variety of studies because by identifying similar themes between diverse studies the ability to generalize the qualitative data to the entire student-athlete population would be enhanced (Sandelowski et al., 1997).

In terms of descriptive characteristics, the earliest study was conducted in 1988 and the latest in 2011. The meta-synthesis sample size was 96 former college athletes (62 females and 34 males) who participated in a total of 11 sports (baseball, basketball, cross country, field hockey, football, gymnastics, ice hockey, swimming, tennis, track and field and volleyball). With the exception of Lally's (2007) study of Canada's intercollegiate system, the level of intercollegiate competition included U.S. Divisions I, II and III. Most participants retired from their sport due to eligibility exhaustion or injury. However, some participants retired when their schools cut their sport or they were cut from their team. At the time of the interviews, the amount of time that had elapsed since the athletes' initial retirement from their sport spanned from four months to 13 years.

Results

Using the Noblit and Hare's (1998) seven phase model for conducting a meta-synthesis, the researcher identified six shared themes: athletic identity, anticipation and preparation, branching out, satisfaction with athletic performance, loss of camaraderie and support systems. Since it is difficult to present the entirety of the data, I selected quotes that typify the experience of the participants with respect to the group, but also with regard to the variation in their individual experiences. Appendix provides descriptions of the qualitative studies used in this meta-synthesis.

Athletic Identity

Athletic identity was a significant factor that influenced the transition out of intercollegiate athletics. As previously stated, athletic identity is "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role" (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). College athletes highly committed to their role as an athlete often reported experiencing difficulties in adjusting to their athletic retirement. These athletes were "physically, psychologically and emotionally" committed to their role as an athlete, often to the exclusion of other academic and social roles (Lally, 2007, p. 91). Many athletes expressed difficulty in seeing themselves as anything other than athletes because people referred to as "student-athletes" and they saw themselves as "athlete-students" (Ingebritsen, 1996, p. 96; Stoltenburg, Kamphoff, & Bremer, 2011).

Participants highly invested in their athletic selves reported experiencing a keen sense of loss in their overall identities when transitioning out of intercollegiate athletics. They reported feeling lost, confused and void of life. Blinde and Stratta (1992) reported that these athletes indicated feeling unproductive or simply "just existing" (Blinde & Stratta, 1992, p. 4). Likewise, athletes in others studies began questioning who they were and what life would be like without their identity as an athlete (Barnes, 2002; Lally, 2007).

There were many reasons why college athletes highly identified themselves with their sport role. Athletes' athletic identity was reinforced and strengthened by external factors such as parents and peers. Many of the athletes participated in athletics as children and were accustomed to being seen as athletes. For many these athletes, nothing outside of sports was able to replace the recognition they received from being an athlete. In turn, they did not desire to relinquish their identification as an athlete.

Just as athletic identity was reinforced and strengthened by external factors, it was also fortified by factors internal to the participants. One way this was done was through many athletes' belief that they would have a future in professional sports (Ingebritsen, 1996). Another way athletic identity was internally reinforced was through the college athlete's perception of their physical selves (Hinitz, 1988). Athletes enjoyed the fact that their bodies

reflected their role as an athlete, and they enjoyed the confidence physically fitness afforded them. After their playing days concluded, some athletes noticed slight changes in their bodies, such as a decrease of muscle mass or weight gain. In turn, the confidence these athletes once had in their physical bodies became an area of concern during their transition out of sport (Barnes, 2002). This loss of confidence inevitably proved to add difficulty to the transition process.

While many were highly invested in their athletic identities, it should be noted that not all participants invested their identities solely in the sport role. From the onset of their college career, some athletes recognized that other roles (e.g., academics) were equally valuable to the sport role. They understood that their athletic identity was only a part of their overall identity and “knew (themselves) outside of (their) athletic role” (Ensing, 1994, p. 33). Though they were in the minority, these athletes engaged in “role-diversification” (Ingebritsen, 1996, p. 130). As a result, participants who balanced their athletic identities with a focus on other pursuits (e.g., education and future careers) did not experience as difficult a transition as participants who had a greater investment in their athletic identities.

Anticipation and Preparation

As previously stated, an athlete’s career in intercollegiate sport is bounded by time, usually four to five years. Although participants in the current study were cognizant of the fact that their college careers would end one day, they varied in their level of preparation for their sport retirement. Some athletes constantly reminded themselves of the time-limited nature of college sport and proactively prepared for their retirement. In contrast, others put retirement out of their mind and did not deal with it until the time came. It was this level of preparation that appeared to play an integral role in the quality of the transition process out of intercollegiate athletics.

Preparation occurred when athletes were cognitively aware of their impending retirement. Some individuals acquired a desire to have a successful final season and started contemplating life after sports, while others were just ready for their careers to be over. The grind of being a college athlete was mentally, physically and emotionally taxing on many participants and over the course of four to five years, the burden of being an athlete eventually took its toll on the athletes’ psyche, resulting in a “jaded and tired group” of athletes (Parker, 1994, p. 301). Moreover, some were ready for their careers to end because of the “physical ‘wear and tear’” and “emotional fatigue” accompanied with participation in intercollegiate athletics (Wilson, 2007, p. 160). These athletes were not “pushed kicking and screaming” out of their sport, rather most “expressed a relief that it was over” (Parker, 1994, p. 301).

However, some participants had involuntary and unanticipated exits from college sport as their careers were prematurely terminated as a result of injury, being cut from their team or having their sport eliminated from the school (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Ensing, 1991; Hinitz, 1984; Stoltenburg et al., 2011). Athletes whose careers ended unexpectedly experienced difficult transitions as they felt “cheated out of four years” (Blinde & Stratta, 1992, p. 6). Likewise, because athletes who underwent an involuntary exit were unable to anticipate the ends of their careers, they were not able to prepare mentally and emotionally for the transition. As such, lack of preparation resulted in extremely difficult transitions for these athletes.

Thus, preparation (or the lack of it) strongly influenced the quality of transition for athletes in the majority of the studies. Athletes who were able to anticipate the end of their careers and prepare mentally and emotionally experienced smoother transitions. In contrast,

athletes who were unable to anticipate the end of their careers, often due to involuntary exits, had much more difficult experiences.

Branching Out

As athletic retirement approached, some athletes were overcome with a sense of “uncertainty about a future without sport” (Wilson, 2007, p. 163). As a result of this uncertainty, they used retirement as a way to focus on areas of their lives that were once neglected due to their sport commitments. They began to pursue other areas of personal interest by exploring “neglected, abandoned or entirely novel identity dimensions” (Lally, 2007, p. 95). For some athletes, this process began during their senior season while others waited until after their college career was over. Regardless of timing, most athletes eventually reached a point in their lives where they shifted their focus and energy into “new directions” other than being an athlete (i.e., “branching out”).

Lally (2007) noted that athletes who branched out prior to the conclusion of their athletic careers experienced a smooth transition process. This identity redefinition was not by chance though as some athletes proactively invested their identities into other aspects of life. They decreased the emphasis placed on their athletic identity and began to balance their identities with other roles of interest. Some turned their attention to their social lives and expanded their social networks by establishing friendships with people other than their teammates. Many participants turned their attention to their academic careers. Once seen as a neglected area of interest, athletes began to shift their priorities to the classroom and thoughts of graduate school.

Two other prevalent areas that college athletes branched out to were career planning and new competitive outlets. In regards to careers, their “efforts began to refocus from trying to play professional ball...to landing a great job with benefits...” (Ensing, 1994, p. 34). In addition to career planning, athletes transitioned into other areas of physical pursuits. Part of this process required athletes learn how to “exercise for fitness” rather than exercise with the mentality that they were “preparing for competition” (Barnes, 2002, p. 125). They became involved in recreational leagues, allowing them a way to continue to stay physically fit.

Satisfaction with Athletic Performance

Most athletes entered college with a variety of athletic aspirations and set a multitude of sports-related goals they wished to reach. The quality of transition out of intercollegiate athletics was affected by the perceived quality of athletic performance by the athlete. The degree to which these sports goals and aspirations were reached influenced the transition such that a smooth transition was marked by a “full and successful career” while a difficult transition was marked by disappointment in one’s career (Hinitz, 1988, p. 86).

Some athletes had a tendency to focus on the goals they did not achieve and their worst performances rather than the positive aspects of their athletic career. They reported not being satisfied with their athletic performances which led to a difficult transition experience. Athletes who were not satisfied with the conclusion of their college career felt a sense of “unfinished or unresolved business,” regretted “not putting everything out,” and at times were haunted by “thoughts of what might have been” (Blinde & Stratta, 1992, p. 6; Parker, 1994, p. 299). Eventually, athletes who did not meet their sports goals progressed from dwelling on their athletic performance to accepting it. They realized that regardless of how much they thought about what they could have done differently, there was no way to change their athletic performance.

As could be expected, not all of the college athletes were disappointed in their athletic performance. Barnes (2002) reported that the majority of the athletes in her study met their athletic goals: "I feel like I accomplished everything I needed to accomplish as a person" (p. 131). Likewise, Hinitz (1988) reported that for some of the gymnasts in his study, just coming close to obtaining their established goals helped for a smooth transition.

Loss of Camaraderie

Involvement in sport played a vital role in developing friendships and athletes spoke about "camaraderie" and just being "one of the guys" (Ingebritsen, 1996, p. 101; Lally, 2007, p. 92). Camaraderie is the "communal sense of a common striving toward team goal" with bonds formed that resemble a "sisterhood" or "brotherhood" (Hinitz, 1988, p. 143; Wilson, 2007, p. 152). The participants felt a sense of belonging while training and competing with their teammates. They looked upon each other as belonging to a "special group" who shared the same passion for training, competition, and sport in general (Hinitz, 1988, p. 143).

However, some athletes saw their retirement from college athletics as posing a threat to the positive feelings they experienced from being part of a team. They feared that the camaraderie felt with their teammates would not be repeated in other aspects of their lives. Moreover, many feared they would be "alienated" from their teammates once their career concluded. As a means to dealing with these potential threats, some athletes began to distinguish between teammates who would quickly lose touch with them and those teammates who would maintain a lasting relationship. Over time, participants maintained contact with a few close teammates but otherwise had limited interactions with others.

Support Systems

College athletes transitioning out of college athletics spoke about the importance of support, or lack thereof, in the process. Some athletes sought out the guidance of former teammates who had already retired. Likewise, other participants received words of encouragement from family members, friends, coaches, sports psychologists and others. Overall, support was an "important coping strategy" and was "often utilized by athletes who are adjusting to retirement" (Barnes, 2002, p. 163), with most athletes explicitly stating that they were in need of "emotional support...to help in the transition" (Ensing, 1991, p. 39).

Although most athletes expressed the need for support, some did not believe they received it. For some, pride got in the way of seeking assistance from others. The persona of "invincibility" that college athletes possessed hindered them from "publicly manifesting the distress of retirement" (Blinde & Stratta, 1992, p. 4). Other athletes avoided seeking because they believed that others would not understand what they were going through. Though they wanted to communicate their complex emotions and issues to a supportive individual, these athletes puzzled through retirement alone.

Another way in which college athletes lacked the support needed was due to the negative relationships with coaches and administrators. While most athletes built positive relationships with their peers, coaches, and athletic institution, some developed negative relationships. When this happened, the individuals transitioned with "negative impressions and disillusionment" (Parker, 1994, p. 298). They reported being "discouraged by coaches' words and actions" and felt a "lack of support from college coaches" during their college career (Ingebritsen, 1996, p. 112). When a healthy relationship with coaches and/or administration was absent, the result was often a difficult transition.

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative meta-synthesis was to understand the transition process out of intercollegiate athletics and in turn, inform the practice and policy of intercollegiate athletic practitioners. Thus, the following sections will discuss the results of the meta-synthesis in light of their theoretical and practical implications.

Athletic Identity

Taylor et al. (2005) identified the importance of athletic identity as an individual determinant of the retirement process. The results of the current study substantiate the claim that athletic identity is a decisive factor to quality of transition for athletes. Athletes who had a high saliency of athletic identity were more likely to experience difficult transitions than those whom did not. These findings are not shocking or otherwise surprising as numerous researchers have singled out athletic identity as being a fundamental influence on the quality of athletic retirement (e.g., Brewer et al., 1993; Lavalley et al., 1997; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). Consistent with this study's findings, Grove et al. (1997) reported a positive correlation between the degree of emotional and social adjustment in retirement and distress involved and athletic identity. Likewise, Webb et al. (1998) found that the difficulty of athletic retirement was positively related to athletic identity.

The athlete role is associated with social status and self-esteem due to its visibility relative to other identities (Webb et al., 1998). Individuals make judgments concerning personal worth and competence in the context of particular domains. The athletic domain is one area in which these judgments take place (Brewer et al., 1993). Thus, the more prominent the athletic domain is to an athlete, the more perceived ability and competence in sports will affect the athlete's self-esteem. This postulation appears to have merit based on the findings of this meta-synthesis. The current study found that athletes who were satisfied with their athletic performance were more likely to report smooth transitions. In contrast, athletes who expressed disappointment in their careers experienced difficult transitions.

Anticipation and Preparation

Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) conceptual model of athletic retirement identifies factors contributing to the transition process and presents trajectories towards smooth or difficult transitions. Within the conceptual model proposed by Taylor and Ogilvie (1994), the quality of transition is affected by the mode of exit (e.g., deselection, injury, age, free choice). Likewise, Schlossberg's (1981) model of retirement suggests that the timing and source of the transition will affect the individual's adaptation to it. The athletes in the current study either experienced anticipated (e.g., eligibility exhaustion) or unanticipated ends to their athletic careers (e.g., cut from the team), with athletes experiencing unanticipated exits more likely to go through a difficult transition. As was true with participants in the current study, a lack of control over the exit form can leave athletes with feelings of powerlessness and frustration (Adler & Adler, 1991). Therefore, when attempting to further theory on the transition process out of athletics, and specifically intercollegiate athletics, it is essential to differentiate whether the retirement was voluntary or involuntary because the irreversibility and permanence of unanticipated exits from sport can create psychological and emotional challenges (Webb et al., 1998).

Branching Out

Social identity (e.g., athlete identity, student identity, etc.) has been included as an influential factor in the theoretical conceptualization of athletic retirement (Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994). According to Coakley (2009), a main challenge facing athletes transitioning out of intercollegiate athletics is the task of reconstructing their identities in terms of something other than sports. Concerning the process of “branching out” or “redefinition of self” (Lally, 2007), the results of the current meta-synthesis explicate the importance of social identity in relation to athletic retirement. College athletes who were able to redefine their identities beyond athletics successfully transitioned out of sport. The athletes who sought to explore once neglected roles did so through career planning, focusing on education and pursuing other competitive outlets. Thus, the current study illuminates the significance of “role-diversification” to conceptualizations of athletic retirement (Ingebritsen, 1996, p. 130).

In support of these findings Lavalley et al. (1997) noted that the quality of adjustment to sport loss improved as athletes decreased their identification with the sport role. The findings of the current study also appear to disconfirm the position of Brewer et al. (1999) and Grove et al. (1997). Brewer et al. (1999) identified that athletes redefining their identities might potentially have negative behavioral consequences because high saliency of athletic identity increases the likelihood of athletes engaging in positive health behaviors. Likewise, Grove et al. (1997) echoed the negative implications of athletes redefining their identities in terms beyond athletics by stating that it ultimately is detrimental to positive adjustment. Given the apparent antithetical results between the current study and prior research (e.g., Brewer et al., 1999; Grove et al., 1997), future researchers would do well to continue exploring the relationships between athletes “branching out” their identities and the quality of the transition process. Doing so will further illuminate the dynamics of retiring from college athletics in particular and sports as a whole.

While it seems practical enough to advise athletes to balance their identities between multiple roles, there is a belief among sport practitioners (e.g., coaches) that as athletes decrease their identification with the athlete role, their athletic performance will suffer (Lally, 2007). This belief was highlighted in Ingebritsen’s (1996) study when an athlete ran into trouble with his coaches for attempting to make academics a priority. Lally’s study (2007) disputes the notion of mutual exclusivity between athletic and academic performance. Even though the athletes in her study decreased their identification with the athlete role, they were still able to compete at a high level. Miller and Kerr (2002) provide an explanation as to why this was possible by noting that devotion to excelling in both personal and athletic pursuits are not mutually exclusive. Future researchers would do well to further explore the relationships of “branching out” on the athletic and academic performances of college athletes.

Loss of Camaraderie

Yet another challenge that athletes transitioning out of intercollegiate athletics face is a renegotiation of relationships with teammates (Coakley, 2009). Athletes transitioning out of college athletics are also in part, transitioning away from their teammates (Lavalley et al., 1997). Without a doubt, the affective ties that athletes had with their teammates impacted the quality of the transition process. One of the dangers of having a homogenous support system (e.g., sport-based) is that there are limited alternatives for support. As noted by Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) theoretical model of athletic retirement, athletes’ acquire their close friends and acquaintances through their involvement in sport. Once the athletes’ careers end and they are removed from the athletic environment, their social support might no longer be available.

This notion was evident in the current study in that teammates who were once used as an emotional strategy *for* coping became one of the reasons *to* cope (as the athletes grew apart from one another). Moreover, the athletes lamented the fact that their “sisterhood” or “brotherhood” (Hinitz, 1988, p. 143; Wilson, 2007, p. 152) would never be replicated in other domains of life. In turn, finding that the athletes had a homogenous support system provides further credence to the importance of “branching out” or “role-diversification.” In doing so, athletes will not restrict their circle of influence solely to the athletic domain, thereby providing them with alternate opportunities to build camaraderie with individuals outside of athletics. Clearly future research is warranted to investigate the effects of camaraderie on the quality of life for former intercollegiate athletes.

Support Systems

Both Schlossberg (1981) and Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) models of transition identify support systems (pre- and post-retirement) as influential in the quality of the transition. Likewise, Grove et al. (1997) identify social support as a potential coping mechanism for athletes transitioning out of athletics. Prior research on college athletes has indicated that athletes feel isolated and unsupported once being removed from sport (Melendez, 2006). The findings of the current study confirm this in part. Athletes were able to describe individuals and groups (e.g., family members, friends) who served as sources of encouragement and discouragement.

The athletes in the current study also emphasized the relationships with their coaches as either supportive or unsupportive. Athletes who were encouraged and supported by their coach experienced relatively easier transitions than athletes whom were not. These results align with prior research stating that coach difficulties leave athletes with a sense of bitterness (Lotysz & Short, 2004; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). In contrast, a close relationship with a coach is linked with a successful transition (Lotysz & Short, 2004; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Thus, future research should focus on the coach-athlete relationship and its function in transition experiences out of intercollegiate athletics.

One additional finding of interest was that many, but not all, athletes in the current study were hesitant to seek help with the myriad of emotions they were experiencing while transitioning away from athletics. One of the reasons cited for the lack of disclosure was that the athletes were under the impression that nobody would be able to relate to their predicament. Providing that other research (e.g., Lotysz & Short, 2004) has documented a similar pattern this finding may not be an isolated incident to the participants in the current study. One would expect to find differently since Grove et al. (1997) indicated that individuals with high athletic identity were more likely to seek social support when faced with transitions, but this was not the case in the current study.

The athletes possessed high levels of athletic identities, but it was their very athletic identities that prevented them expressing their internal turmoil. A commitment to the athletic identity fostered personas of “invincibility” in the athletes which ultimately hindered them from “publicly manifesting the distress of retirement” (Blinde & Stratta, 1992, p. 4). If not for anything else but the psychological and emotional well-being of college athletes, and all athletes in general, future researchers should explore the relationship between athletic identity and athletes’ verbal expression of internal tumult during the transition process.

Policy and Practice

According to Thomas and Ermler (1998), athletic institutions have an ethical obligation to help prepare their athletes for the transition out of intercollegiate athletics and

into a non-athletic career. Athletic institutions (e.g., coaches and administrators) are aware “many athletes become absorbed in their cloistered athletic world” and thus have a duty to help athletes “develop the skills that will permit a successful transition and retirement from sport” (p. 148). However, many institutions no longer focus on the holistic development (i.e., mind, body and soul) of student-athletes, but instead emphasize athletic excellence, to the detriment of the student-athlete (Singer, 2005; Zimbalist, 1999).

In order to meet the obligation of helping the athlete redefine the self, policy and practice recommendations are briefly discussed based on suggestions made by athletes in the current study:

Transition networks, programs & career fairs

In order to aid in the transition process, athletic administration and coaching staffs could set up transition networks (i.e., career fairs with former college athletes). This would not only allow current athletes to explore future career options but also provide the opportunity to discuss the transition process with people (i.e., former college athletes) who have previously navigated it. In speaking with former college athletes, transitioning athletes would then realize that their experience is not isolated, and others can relate to them. In addition, programs and classes geared towards addressing the inevitable retirement such as Positive Transitions at the Ohio State University (Stankovich, Meeker, & Henderson, 2001) will aid in the retirement process and equip athletes with the tools necessary to successfully transition out of sport.

De-Training and recreational outlets

Since college athletes are accustomed to year-round competitive training, athletic trainers and strength and conditioning coaches can get involved in the transition process by helping athletes de-train. Athletic trainers and strength coaches should educate athletes on the way to properly transition from year-round competitive training to exercising for health and fitness. De-training curriculum should educate athletes on the long-term effects of nutrition, vitamin supplements, training protocols, and weight regimens (Thomas & Ermler, 1988). In addition, encouraging retiring athletes to adhere to a routine and continue fitness activities will provide a sense of stability during an otherwise unstable transition period (Collinson & Hockey, 2007). Moreover, the current study’s finding that college athletes lost self-confidence due to physical changes in their bodies substantiates claims that physical changes during the transition may be a cause of distress (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). Therefore, college athletes should be educated of any physiological changes that may result from a decrease in competitive training (e.g., decrease in muscle mass and increase in body fat) (Thomas & Ermler, 1988).

In addition to de-training, retired college athletes should be encouraged to pursue different forms of recreational outlets. Participants in the current study found solace in being able to exert their competitive nature in sports such as basketball, volleyball, squash and rock climbing. Thus, the continuation in sports of a recreational nature can serve as a buffer between athletic retirement and transition difficulties. Additional research in the field of athletic retirement has also found that recreational sports participation by retired athletes is used as a positive coping method (Grove et al., 1997). Athletes who cease participating in intercollegiate athletics will most likely have added “free time” to pursue other activities of interest. As such, these athletes should be encouraged to participate in the recreational leagues that most colleges and universities offer to the student body.

Career planning

Pre-retirement planning is among the factors that aide athletes through a successful transition process out of sport (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Along with the findings of the current study, researchers have found that many college athletes are eager to start planning for their futures outside of sport (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). As a result, academic counselors should frequently discuss career plans with the athletes throughout their career, especially during and after their final season. A straightforward exercise such as having them take the LASS (Life After Sports Scale) (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004) has proved useful in motivating athletes to begin considering their future outside of sports (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). Career planning will assist the athlete in developing a balanced identity which in turn will help the athlete successfully transition out of intercollegiate athletics (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

Expanded social network

Research indicates that college athletes, specifically those in high profile sports (e.g., football and men's basketball), are often isolated from the larger university population (Adler & Adler, 1991). Consequently, the ability for college athletes to expand their social network beyond the athletic environment is severely debilitated. The importance of college athletes acquiring friends and acquaintances beyond the domain of athletics is keenly significant in light of the findings of the current study. As such, athletes should be encouraged to become involved in non-athlete endeavors for the purpose of building friendships beyond athletics. Whether it is participating in student organizations or simply joining a study group with classmates, college athletes should be encouraged to interact with the larger university population. Doing so might ultimately prove useful during the transition process out of intercollegiate athletics by reason of an expanded system of support.

Coach-athlete relationship

The coach-athlete relationship needs to be a positive one in order for a smooth transition. Based on the 3 + 1 C's theoretical model, Jowett (2009) defines the coach-athlete relationship as the mutual and causal interconnections (co-orientation) of coach's and athlete's feelings (closeness), thoughts (commitment), and behaviors (complementarity). While some coaches may not need guidance and instruction in developing positive relationships with their athletes, there is the possibility for training programs and/or interventions to help coaches create positive and effective relationships with their players (see Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007 for detailed recommendations). If this is to be done, the programs and interventions should be and designed upon a valid theoretical framework (e.g., the 3 + 1 C's model; Jowett, 2009) and involve a set of straight forward guidelines that all coaches will be able to implement such as using their influential relationship to foster critical thinking, decision making, social interaction skills, and autonomy in the college athlete (Thomas & Ermler, 1988).

Limitations and Conclusion

One limitation of this meta-synthesis is that the researcher did not accurately maintain the integrity of each study when synthesizing the data. To address this limitation, a peer reviewer who has published qualitative meta-synthesis research was used to ensure integrity during the synthesis process. Taken together, the results of the current meta-synthesis provide

intercollegiate athletic practitioners (coaches, counselors, psychologists, administrators, etc.) and researchers with an idea of athletes' experiences as they transition out of intercollegiate athletics. It is vital intercollegiate athletic practitioners educate athletes about the transition process out of intercollegiate athletics by making athletes aware of the themes that emerged from this meta-synthesis. Transition education should happen throughout the athlete's college career, not solely during the transition. The results of this meta-synthesis will not only help prepare the athlete for the transition process but also provide insight to the coaches, counselors, and athletic administrators on how to assist the transition out of intercollegiate athletics.

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Appendix

Table 1: Set of Qualitative Studies Used to Synthesize the Transition Experiences out of Intercollegiate Athletics						
Author(s)/Year	Methodology	Participants	Sports	Division	Cause of Exit	Time Elapsed
Hinitz, 1988	Qualitative Descriptive ¹	Males (12)	Gymnastics (12)	Division I & II	Exhaustion of Eligibility, Injury	Unspecified
Blinde & Stratta, 1992	Grounded Theory	Females (18), Males (2)	Field Hockey (11), Gymnastics (2), Unspecified (7)	Unspecified	Sport Eliminated, Cut from Team	4 – 5 Months
Ensing, 1994	Grounded Theory	Females (10)	Basketball (10)	Division III	Exhaustion of Eligibility, Injury	Unspecified
Parker, 1994	Phenomenological	Males (7)	Football (7)	Division I-A ²	Exhaustion of Eligibility	8 Months – 3 Years
Ingebritsen, 1996	Naturalistic Inquiry	Females (5), Males (5)	Basketball (7), Football (2), Baseball (1)	Division I	Exhaustion of Eligibility	1 – 7 Years
Barnes, 2002	Constant Comparative	Females (10)	Basketball (7), Volleyball (3)	Division I (7), Division III (3)	Exhaustion of Eligibility	16 Months or Less
Lally, 2007	Phenomenological	Females (3), Males (3)	Swimming (3), Track and Field (1), Volleyball (1), Basketball (1)	Canada ³	Exhaustion of Eligibility	Final season – 1 Year
Wilson, 2007	Grounded Theory	Females (14)	Basketball (11), Cross Country (1), Tennis (1), Track and Field (1)	Division I & II	Exhaustion of Eligibility	2-13 Years
Stoltenburg et al., 2011	Qualitative Descriptive ¹	Females (2), Males (5)	Football (2), Hockey (3), Soccer (1), Basketball (1)	Division I & II	Injury	5 years or fewer

¹ This term was given to a qualitative study that did not specify a specific qualitative methodology

² Currently known as the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS)

³ Comparable to U.S. Division II

Note: Number in parentheses are the number of participants in each category

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