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Former College Athletes' Perceptions of Adapting to Transition

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Scholars long have been perplexed with how groups of people navigate change. Due to time demands and high levels of athlete identity, college athletes often struggle adapting to a new environment beyond sport. Informed by Schlossberg's (1981) Model of Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition, this study explored former college athletes' perceived experiences as they transitioned out of college sport. Former college athletes were asked about their transition out of sport via a Twitter thread. The question resulted in 178 responses to the initial question. In total, 57.3% of respondents reported a negative perception of transition while 42.7% reported a positive perception of transition. Results of this study can assist athletic departments in forming institutional support systems as well as effective programming to ensure all college athletes are prepared to adapt to a life beyond sport.

Keywords: College Athlete, Social Media, Transitions

College athletes often have a difficult time transitioning out of sport (Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Hart & Swenty, 2015; Lally, 2007; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Warehime, Dinkel, Bjornsen-Ramig, & Blount, 2017; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). Simply put, college athletes “feel an identity loss when their athletic career is complete and can experience difficulty transitioning into a new social environment and into the work place” (Smith & Hardin, 2018, p. 62). Numerous studies (e.g., Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Grove et al., 1997; Kidd et al., 2018; Lotysz & Short, 2004; Lavallee, 2005; Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Stoltenburg, Kamphoff, & Lindstrom Bremer, 2011; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stryker, 1980; Wippert & Wippert, 2008) have shown that athlete identity, or the degree to which an individual identifies with their athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993), can significantly attribute to how an athlete navigates the transitional process.

There are several negative physical and psychological consequences that those with high levels of athlete identity endure during the course of transition (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Lally, 2007; Lotysz & Short, 2004; Schwenk, Gorenflo, Dopp, & Hipple, 2007; Wylleman et al., 2004; Wylleman, Rosier, & De Knop, 2015). For example, those with elevated levels of athletic identity often experience depression following discontinuing sport participation (Horton & Mack, 2000; Lally, 2007; Wylleman et al., 2004). During the transitional phase, athletes often experience high levels of stress and anxiety as well as a decreased sense of self worth, social support, changes in mood, loneliness, and isolation (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Etzel, 2006; Falls & Wilson, 2013; Grove et al., 1997; Fuller, 2014; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016; McKnight et al., 2009; Hill, Hall, & Appleton, 2010; Lally, 2007; Montgomery & Côté, 2003; Petitipas, Brewer, & Van Raalte, 2009; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Wyleman et al., 2004). Furthermore, from a physical perspective, athletes may experience disordered eating (Montgomery & Côté, 2003; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010; Papathomas, Petrie, & Plateau, 2018), body image concerns (Papathomas et al., 2018), and weight fluctuation (Griffiths, Barton-Weston, & Walsh, 2016). Additionally, past studies have shown that college athletes lack nutritional education and struggle to develop independent eating habits (Burns, Schiller, & Merrick, 2004; Froiland, Koszewski, Hingst, & Kopecky, 2004; Jacobson, Sobonya, & Ransome, 2001; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Shifflett, Timm, & Kahanov, 2002).

During college, athletes' schedules are highly structured and their time is managed (Schwenk et al., 2007). According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), college athletes spend a significant amount of their time (34 hours per week) on athletics-related activities (NCAA, 2016). However, recent studies (e.g., New, 2017; Smith & Hardin, 2018) have demonstrated that Division I level college athletes spend closer to 40 hours per week participating in sport-related activities. Due to time constraints, seldom do college athletes have the opportunity to complete practical learning opportunities (e.g., internships, practicums, job shadowing); therefore, this population often exhibits lower levels of career maturity (Hook, 2012; Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010). Not only does sport participation limit a college athlete's ability to gain experience outside of their sport, but the sheer amount of time college athletes spend on sport-related activities heightens athlete identity (Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007; Lally, 2007; Smith & Hardin, 2018). College athletes with high levels of athlete identity often show lower levels of career maturity (Moiseichik, Stokowski, Hinsey, & Turk, 2019), which is a disadvantage when it comes to athletes leaving their sport and evolving into young professionals.

According to the NCAA (2018), less than 2% of college athletes will play professionally. As such, transition is inevitable for the nearly 98% of college athletes forced to retire from their sport upon the expiration of athletic ability (NCAA, 2018; Stambulova, 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Informed by Schlossberg's (1981) Model of Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition, this study explored college athletes' perceived experiences as they transitioned out of college sport. Specifically, this study strived to address the research question, what were former college athletes' perceptions of adapting to transition out of intercollegiate sport participation? Results of this study can assist athlete development professionals to better understand what college athletes experience following transition. Furthermore, this study can assist in programming that will better prepare college athletes for an environment outside of intercollegiate athletics.

Review of the Literature

Theory

Curiosity surrounds how each individual deals with change (often referred to as transitions), which is an inevitable part of life (Schlossberg, 1981). The concept of transition stems from crisis theory (Lindemann, 1965), as when a crisis ends, the transition begins (Parkes, 1971; Weiss, 1976). According to Schlossberg (1981), "a transition can be said to occur if an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world that requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). It often is difficult for individuals to adapt to transitions, and Schlossberg's (1981) model provides "variables which seem to affect the outcome of the transition of an individual" (p. 5). The model consists of "three major sets of factors that influence adaptation to transition: (1) the characteristics of the particular transition, (2) the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments, and (3) the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition" (Schlossberg, 1981, p.5). Figure 1 below is a visual representation of Schlossberg's (1981) model. Essentially, the model begins with the transition (specific event), followed by the three factors that influence the transition, and ends with how an individual adapts to transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Specifically, "adaptation to transition is a process during which an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with the transition to integrating the transition into his or her own life" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 7).

Scholars have been perplexed with how groups of people navigate change, as so often, especially with normative transitions, individuals will experience and have to adapt to similar life events (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1977; Schlossberg, 1981; Vaillant, 1995). The reality is that although individuals go through similar life events, some will flourish while others struggle to adjust to change (Levinson et al., 1977; Schlossberg, 1981; Vaillant, 1995). Each individual responds and transitions differently to each event (Levinson et al., 1977; Schlossberg, 1981; Vaillant, 1995). The characteristics surrounding the event greatly influence how an individual adapts (Schlossberg, 1981). Transitions are not always positive, but they also are not always negative, and such experiences provide opportunity for growth (Moos & Tsu, 1976; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg & Leibowitz, 1980).

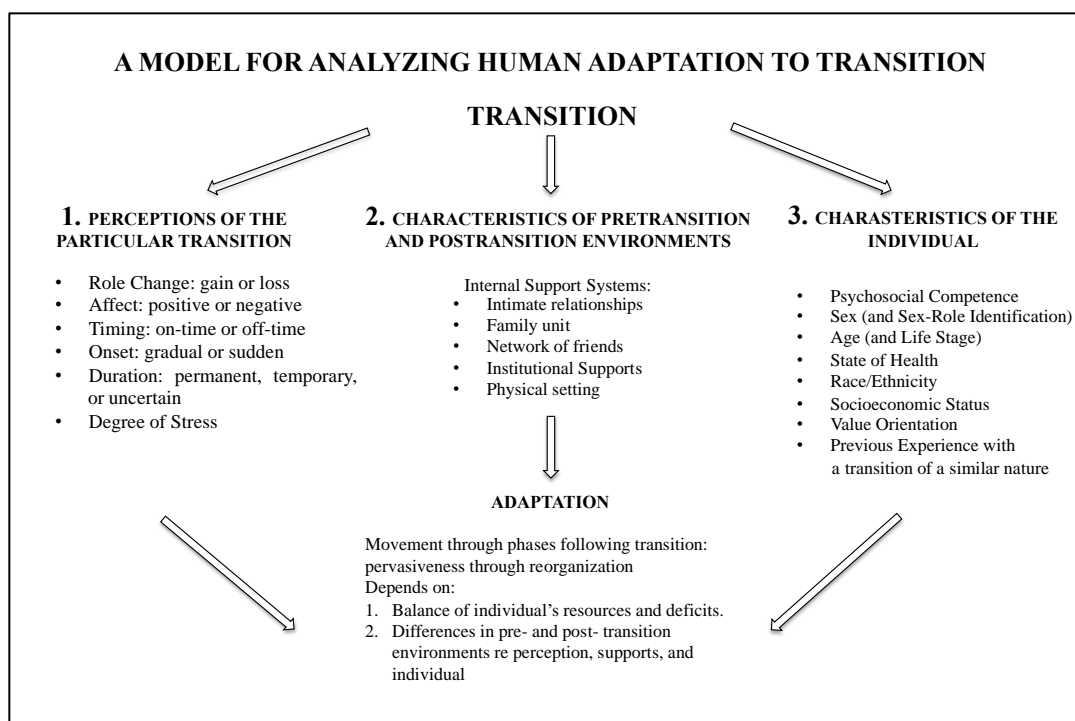


Figure 1. Model of Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition. Modified from “A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition” by Schlossberg, 1981, *The counseling psychologist*, 9(2), p. 5.

Athletic Identity

Athletic identity is a substantial contributing factor to how college athletes adapt to life after sports. If an individual's sense of self-worth is consumed in being an athlete, it further inhibits one's ability to adapt to new experiences beyond sport (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Brewer et al., 1993; Grove et al., 1997; Kidd, Southall, Nagel, Reynolds II, & Anderson, 2018; Lally, 2007; Lavalley, 2005; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Lotysz & Short, 2004; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stoltenburg, Kamphoff, & Lindstrom Bremer, 2011; Stryker, 1980; Wippert & Wippert, 2008). Therefore, the degree to which an athlete identifies with their athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993) impacts adaptation to transition (Schlossberg et al., 1981). Transitioning out of sport will challenge athletes who have a strong athletic identity, as the majority recognize former teammates as their friends and their sport participation has consumed a large portion of their lives (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Stoltenburg et al., 2011). Athletes with high athletic identity also may have a difficult time transitioning out of sport because their social supports were within the team, of which they are no longer a member (Grove et al., 1997). Additionally, those with a high athletic identity likely have neglected other identities, making the transition to life after sport a challenge when the playing career ends (Kidd et al., 2018; Stryker, 1980). Transition out of sport for athletes with a weaker athletic identity can be easier due to the fact that they often maintain a support system outside of their sport (Grove et al., 1997; Stoltenburg et al., 2011).

Career-Ending Injury

The transition is made even more difficult when a career-ending injury occurs and leads to an unanticipated (or non-normative) retirement or end to the athlete's athletic career. A career-ending injury is defined as an injury or illness that impedes an athlete's participation in additional varsity competition in the college sport(s) in which he or she obtained financial aid (NCAA, 2018). A career-ending injury often is unforeseen and its suddenness can increase the athlete's difficulty with transitioning to life after sport. This type of injury can result in the athlete having to make emotional, psychosocial, and physical adjustments in their lives (Baillie, 1993; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; de Groot et al., 2018; Klieber & Brock, 1992; Stoltenburg et al., 2011; Wylleman et al., 2004). Due to the sudden nature of this non-normative transition, social support is essential as the athlete navigates his or her new normal (de Groot et al., 2018; Grove et al., 1997; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003; Stoltenburg et al., 2011).

To help ease the transition out of sport for college athletes who suffered a career-ending injury, Cosh, Crabb, and LeCouteur (2013) found it was important to shift the athlete's focus to other positive aspects in their life. Such reflection was shown to minimize the negative effects of the sudden change. Additionally, career-ending injured college athletes with high athletic identity relied on social support and social circles as a tool to assist them to make the emotional, physical, and psychosocial changes necessary to positively transition out of sport (Grove et al., 1997; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Stoltenburg et al., 2011).

Positive Transition Out of Sport

Not all transitions are negative (Schossberg et al., 2011). When college athletes have the ability to transfer skills (e.g., time management, leadership, performing under pressure, organization) learned from sport into other aspects of life, the transitional experience often is positive (Bardick et al., 2009; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stankovich, Meeker, & Henderson, 2001). Furthermore, athletes that have support from family, friends, significant others, coaches, and trainers are more likely to experience a positive transition out of the athletic light (Fernandez, Stephan, & Fouqereau, 2006; Wippert & Wippert, 2008; Young, Pearce, Kane, & Pain, 2006). If college athletes have positive role models to demonstrate the transitional process, there also is a higher likelihood the transition will be positive (Harrison & Lawrence, 2002; 2003; 2004). Positive transitions also relate to athlete preparedness, which comes in the form of support from the institutions where they are housed in those four years (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Schmid & Seiler, 2003).

Career Maturity

College athletes spend a substantial amount of time on sport-related activities (New, 2017; NCAA, 2016; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Such time demands inhibit college athletes from taking part in practical learning experiences (Hook, 2012; Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010). Therefore, college athletes often report low levels of career maturity (Brown & Hartley, 1998; Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Moiseichik et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 1996; Ryan, Penwell, Baker, & Irwin, 2015). Career maturity refers to the readiness and ability to make career decisions, complete the necessary tasks associated with the job, and make realistic career choices (Betz,

Klein, & Taylor, 1996; Finch, 2009; Levinson, Ohler, Caswell, & Kiewra, 1998; Savickas, 1984). Although athletic departments have made an effort to prepare college athletes for life after sport (NCAA, 2009; Stokowski, Blunt, Hardin, Goss, & Turk, 2017), the reality is that college athletes remain unprepared for such a transition (Finch, 2009; Hook, 2012; Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Moiseichik et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2015).

Career Transition

At the end of every college athletic season, athletes walk off the field for the last time and transition into a new phase of their lives (Brown, 2003; Moiseichik et al., 2019). Within the NCAA, 98% of college athletes will not make a career out of their sport participation (NCAA, 2018). Transition is an event or non-event that results in altered relationships, roles, identity, or routines (Schlossberg, 1981). Each athlete will experience the transition differently based upon a variety of factors, including whether their retirement is normative or non-normative. Normative retirement can be attributed to retirement due to end of eligibility or choosing to leave the sport (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). In a normative transition, the athlete leaves one stage of his or her life (being a college athlete) and moves into the next stage of life (as a former athlete), often with little trouble (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Non-normative retirement occurs in the form of a career-ending injury or being cut from the team (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Klieber, Greendorfer, Blinde, & Sandall, 1987; Lally, 2007; Paule-Koba & Rohrs-Cordes, 2019; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Stoltenburg et al., 2011). In non-normative transitions, athletes struggle to move from one stage of life to the next (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Whether an athlete's retirement from sport is normative or non-normative, the transition to life after competitive sport is different for each athlete and can range from easy to incredibly difficult.

Research has shown that preparing athletes and increasing resources can be beneficial in the transition (Chow, 2001; Fuller, 2014; Lally, 2007; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Due to the likelihood of higher psychological reactions, athletes often experience confusion, grief, loss of social support, depression, isolation (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Etzel, 2006; Falls & Wilson, 2013; Fuller, 2014; Grove et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2010; Lally, 2007; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016; McKnight et al., 2009; Montgomery & Côté, 2003; Petitpas et al., 2009; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Wylleman et al., 2004), and lower levels of career maturity (Brown & Hartley, 1998; Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Moiseichik et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 1996; Ryan, Penwell, Baker, & Irwin, 2015) following the end of their athletic career.

Method

To the researchers' knowledge, previous studies concerning athlete transition have not utilized social networking sites (SNS) in their methodology. Data were collected utilizing the SNS Twitter. Twitter itself has become "well-suited" to research into particular knowledge bases, as the nature of this space is both communal and relational (Stewart, 2017). Twitter has become a site where academics and researchers can engage in varying degrees of scholarly investigation (Stewart, 2017). In terms of validity and rigor, previous scholarship argues that SNS have become a "techno-cultural" space, where participant accounts are privileged and have become accountable, credible, and we can confirm their willingness to participate through replies (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Stewart, 2017). This study utilized the "public" sector of Twitter. As

this is a space that is available for all to access, it is considered to be in the public domain.

Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the researchers explored intersections between the “personal and the professional” (Patton, 2015, p. 33). It became pivotal, through qualitative description, to allow the words of the athletes (Tweets) to tell their story. Twitter therefore turned into a legitimate vehicle to provide a tool for this methodology. It was an organic way for athletes to have a voice. Twitter, as a method of data collection, enabled this study to engage with the context of athlete transitions from a new perspective. It further deepened our understanding of the experiences of athletes through a new lens. It also deepened the role of the researcher. Twitter is a space of engagement, where it was evident that messaging continued beyond the original scope, as many engaged with each other via the original thread.

Participants and Data Collection

Data were collected completely from Twitter. As Twitter is a fully online source; ultimately, Twitter data is “public” and freely available to all users. Twitter data is classified as non-human subjects per Office of Human Research Protections and their Considerations and Recommendations concerning Internet Research and Human Subject Research Regulations, with Revisions (HHS.gov, 2018). Individuals provided intentional responses with intent established that posted information was public, as the Tweet itself and all harvested Tweets were posted as “public.” The Office of Human Subject research states in their own recommendations that when “individuals intentionally post or otherwise provide information on the Internet, such information should be considered public” (HHS.gov, 2018). Therefore, the former athletes who responded to this thread did so willingly in a public forum.

Via a Tweet, the following question was posted: “Former college athletes, in a Tweet (240 characters) what was your experience like transitioning out of college sport.” This Tweet was public and shareable. This created a snowball effect in terms of sampling. Twitter connects people with their connected networks, meaning when one Twitter user responds to a Tweet, its views increase exponentially. Within a five-day period, the Tweet received a total of 109 re-Tweets and 191 likes. Twitter users who responded to the thread also were encouraged, via a reply, to share the Tweet with others. This sampling style was utilized due to the nature of Twitter. The question resulted in 178 responses to the initial question and 54 replies to the comments posted to the initial question. Tweets were harvested and organized into a spreadsheet where personal identifiers were removed. Only the 178 responses to the initial question were analyzed.

Respondents indicated they had participated in various sports (e.g., basketball, cross country, football, swimming, track, volleyball). Furthermore, several respondents replied with their NCAA membership classification (e.g., NCAA Division I, II, III). Previous recent work regarding athlete transitions has been qualitative in nature with a small sample size and participation limited by gender, sport, and membership classification (e.g., Kidd et al., 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2018). The present study captured responses from 178 participants (men and women), from varying sports and NCAA membership classification.

Coding Procedures

Data were analyzed using Patton’s (2015) strategies for data analysis. Per the recommendations set by the Office of Human Research Protections (HHS.gov, 2018), all

identifiable personal information was removed from the Tweets as well as the replacement of handles and names with pseudonyms. Congruent with Patton's (2015) strategies for coding data when more than one person is working on the analysis, the harvested Tweets were coded by three researchers who coded each Tweet individually. Referred to as "analytical triangulation," the researchers recognized that we each analyze data differently and ultimately the analysis becomes stronger from the recognition of individual processes (Patton, 2015, p. 553). The nature of this process, in conjunction with qualitative description, was inductive. Once the coding processes of each researcher were complete and discussed, regularities in the codes were discussed and organized based on patterns in the codes themselves. The Tweets were then organized into two overarching themes and the subsequent themes that fit under each overarching theme.

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine athletes' perceptions of their transition out of sport. Upon conclusion of the data analysis, two main themes emerged: What do I do now? and I'm free. The themes and data analysis were guided by Schlossberg's (1981) model in which individuals perceive the effect of the transition as positive or negative. Furthermore, to ensure the authenticity of the data and due to the method of data collection via SNS, the responses (including spelling and grammatical errors) are shown in their original context.

What do I do now?

The first theme, What do I do now?, is a collection of responses from participants who expressed responses that were deemed as negative or pessimistic. The main sub-themes were sense of loss, not ready for the next phase, something missing, and physical problems. In accordance with Schlossberg's (1981) model, the theme of "What do I do now?" was categorized as negative. As such, 57.3% of the respondents indicated their experience to adaptation was negative.

Sense of loss. Fifty-six participants mentioned a sense of loss in their responses. The language varied but it all centered around a loss of identity or feeling lost once competition ended. Kristi described her retirement from sport as "Immense sadness but immense relief because I thought I was ready to be done. Two weeks later calling my parents sobbing about not knowing who I was/what I was supposed to be doing with myself."

Destiny felt her transition was "ROUGH. It was like who am I without sports. That was my whole identity all my life." Similar to Destiny, Ally questioned who she was without her sport. She said she was "Completely lost and no confidence. I didn't feel I was good at anything, but softball." Kathryn seemed to have a harder time. Her transition was "Horrible. I had NO self identity for about a year. The transition into a world without athletics to me was uninviting. I developed my self-worth & my lifestyle around my athletics & when I was no longer a jock I didn't know who I was or what I wanted to be."

It was not just female athletes who felt this way. Charlie stated, "It took a solid year to find my identity. Who am I without basketball and my teammates? The other aspect was time...what do I do with all of this new time I have on my hands?" Without the sport to keep him

and the other former athletes busy, there was a newfound element of free time on their hands. This free time gave them the ability to think about their new status as former athlete.

The sense of loss was profound in some participants. Brandon and Sarah were two participants who spoke about difficulty moving on after their eligibility was exhausted. Brandon stated:

It was a reality I couldn't except. The finality of eligibility was something comparable to death. It was over. Can't go back to that again. Like membership card being pulled. Desperately wanting it back but no one would consider it... so I had to coach to cope.

Sarah also discussed her struggle with the transition. She wrote her transition was:

Difficult. I had given a sport (tennis) 16 years of my life, 110%. I was super upset when's someone asked me what hobbies I had & I didn't have an answer for them. I basically had to build a new identity and find out things that I liked.

The word "lost" came up in many of the responses. In his words, Nelson believed "the life I worked for and got accustomed to was over. While everyone else was trying to figure out their first job I felt like I had already had a career I was retiring from. I was pretty lost." Amanda said she was "Lost. Sad and unaware who I really was outside of my athletic identity. It took me a while to get out of not being a student athlete anymore." Additionally, Kendall felt:

LOST/CONFUSED. It was the one thing that I felt defined me & the next thing you know you barely have time to do it because of life. I miss it every day but I don't think 240 characters could describe the pain of losing something so special. It's like mourning the loss of a sport/family.

Some participants stated they were lost but stayed connected to their sport or athletics in ways other than being an athlete. Jenny said she was:

Lost, sad, didn't really know who I was without swimming. Went right into MS program then working as an athletic academic advisor helped because I was still immersed in sport in a different capacity. I still feel great loss 3 years later especially seeing team meet results, social media, etc.

Similarly, Tony said after his retirement he was:

LOST. It had nothing to do with intellect...it was just that basketball had consumed me. I didn't have the chance to do normal student things to help potentially ease the transition. I naturally went into coaching because it was the closest thing that to playing.

For some athletes the transition from college athlete to former athlete was not a quick process. James summed it up when he said it was still "a struggle 20 years later. You lose your identity and the ability to compete in the area where you are the most talented. I can't replicate the feeling of accomplishment today in business that I felt on the field."

Not ready for the next phase. There were 22 unique responses that mentioned the athlete not being ready for the next phase of his or her life. Reasons for uneasiness or feelings of unpreparedness varied. Some participants discussed the need to learn to function outside of the sport they had played for so many years. Jordan stated, “Nobody teaches you how to live a life that doesn't revolve around competition and few will care about how successful you were. Learn to find self-worth outside of your athletic accomplishments. I wish I would've learned that earlier.”

Steven discussed feeling as though he needed to continue to do something with sport or athletics because that is what he had spent a majority of his life doing. He wrote:

I assumed that I HAD to do something related to my sport because I believed I didn't have any other skills. The years after my career where about learning just how many options and abilities I had. I'm still learning that.

In addition to Jordan and Steven, other athletes mentioned wishing they had done more outside of their sport to prepare for and transition to life after college. Many did not initially believe they had the skills or connections to thrive in life or on the job market. Courtney said, “I didn't feel like I possessed the skills to transition into the real world.” Tony wrote, “I wish I would have explored more as a college student and that might have sped up/provided a clearer path for me after graduation. I literally remember walking across the stage and thinking... ‘what is next?’”

These feelings of regret were not contained to the athletes wishing they had gained experience outside of their sport. There also was regret about not forming relationships with others outside sport that may have proved helpful in their life. Brody discussed his feeling as though the only people he had developed relationships with were coaches and athletic personnel. He indicated that he felt:

As if the 4 years I spent in college was an overall loss. I did no relationship building with professors in my program and could only use my coaches & athletic advisor as references. Despite knowing I was more than a SA [student-athlete], I didn't have proper teaching to know how to move on.

Josie echoed Brody's sentiments about the lack of networking with people outside athletics. She had a:

Huge identity crisis. I wasn't good enough to go to the next level in my sport, so I had to quickly figure out what to do next with my degree. I didn't start networking until after graduation, which was a huge mistake, so it took 2-3 years to finally figure out a career path.

Negative feelings about transition were not contained to the athletes wishing they themselves had done more. Many athletes wished their individual university had done more to prepare them for life after their college eligibility was exhausted. Brett remarked, “I felt that the career counseling department at my school did a poor job in preparing me for job interviews. I felt the job opportunities that was coming my way was not even close to my major.” Brett continued on to discuss his perception of being at a disadvantage when searching for a job after

graduation. He based on that fact that he had “never previously had a chance to job search during college because I was swimming all day every day; right up to graduation.” Poppy echoed Brett’s comments when she stated:

There wasn't enough emphasis on life after sport so many of us aren't ready for work immediately upon graduation. not because we aren't intellectually sound, but because we literally spent 98% of college practicing and competing while our colleagues were interning and networking.

Finally, Kelsey discussed that due to sport participation she was unable to pursue the academic major she wanted. She believed she:

Wasn't allowed to choose the major of my choice due to basketball work load. Went back to school to receive my masters degree and PhD in Epidemiology but wish I was allowed to just chose Physical Therapy. Got into debt just to have a better career.

In her view, had she not been an athlete, she would have been able to earn a bachelor's degree in a major that aligned with her career aspiration.

Something missing. Many participants mentioned feeling as though something was missing from their lives once they were done playing college sport. For Abby, the something that was missing was the structure that came with being a college athlete. She confessed, “I had difficulty adjusting to the loss of a daily structured routine, competition, etc.” Erin also had trouble adjusting to being in charge of her own schedule and finding time to exercise. She said:

It was a little challenging. I was so used to having someone tell me what to do and when to do it. It was all about me motivating myself. The one thing that helped me the most was already being involved with CrossFit and that's what I wanted to do. Life makes it a little harder.

Lack of a schedule and routine was not the only thing athletes spoke about missing. Many mentioned missing being part of a high-level team or the sense of competition. Jayden missed being part of a “family almost every hour of the day” and the transition to “basically being alone” was difficult for him. George said he “Kinda felt out of place. I was always on a schedule of being in meetings, weights, practice, rehab, getting cussed out in film room. All the free time and I didn't know what to do. Still miss it to this day.”

Derek summed up his transition as being:

Dazed and confused. It's been almost 6 years now but every day I find myself still searching for that competition, the camaraderie. What makes it difficult is that for anyone who played in college also played as a kid, in middle and high school too. A whole part of your life ends.

Physical problems. Several participants discussed various nutritional or health challenges when writing about their transition out of college sport. Mary said, “The nutrition-side of the transition was also hard in terms of portion sizes, junk food, metabolism, etc.”

Melanie agreed and stated, “You will not understand what a normal portion size is for years.” Due to their high activity level, athletes are accustomed to consuming and burning thousands of calories. Therefore, when their lifestyle becomes less active, many former athletes have trouble adjusting to a new relationship with food.

While some athletes spoke about challenges with food and nutrition, others mentioned the physical toll athletic participation had on their bodies. Katie said her transition was “definitely hard. In my last season, I suffered from several hamstring injuries & knew it was time to give it up.” Karter also had to stop competing due to injuries. He stated:

I sacrificed two years of eligibility because I had many injuries and assumed I was never going to get healthy again, but I still regret stopping when I did. It's been challenging to come to terms with the fact I'm not able to compete at a high level anymore.

Karter knew his body needed him to stop competing at a high level so he chose to end his sport participation. However, it still was a difficult decision and thoughts of “what if” seemed to linger with him.

Leslie also had a career-ending injury before her eligibility expired. She reflected that her “entire identity was being taken away--still something I feel at times, several years later! Lucky to still be involved in college athletics to help others through that transition.” Scott’s career also ended because of an ACL tear injury. In his transition he felt “very lost for a while and think you can always go back to how you were before the injury. It takes a while to find something your passionate about again.”

Allison did not suffer a career-ending injury, but she did speak to the physical problems that linger even after the competition days are over. She described her transition to former athlete as filled with “Lots of ice, physical therapy, and forever chiropractor appointments!” This illustrates that physical problems fail to be isolated to solely those whose college sport participation ended due to injury.

I'm free

The theme “I’m free” included responses from participants that were deemed positive by the researchers. This theme contained three sub-themes: staying connected to sports, prepared for the future, and ready for the next phase. Of the respondents, 42.7% indicated they had a positive experience moving to adaptation.

Staying connected to sports. Several athletes said staying connected to their sport helped their transition. Liliana said that staying involved with athletics:

Helped ease my transition because I am still able to be around it just as a different role now. Getting to see the side of athletics that student-athletes don't realize what it all takes to run our programs and be the best we can so our student-athletes can be the best.

Steph felt similarly to Liliana. She commented:

For myself, transitioning was smooth as I made myself busy right away with grad school and work. Working in athletics has made it easier for me as I haven't had to completely shed my athletic identity. I truly didn't miss it until season started. Now I miss it all.

Mason also had a positive transition due to remaining involved in athletics. However, in addition to speaking about his involvement, he also mentioned another reason his transition had been positive. He stated, “thankfully I've found my way now in athletic admin/student-athlete development — trying to keep paying it forward so current student-athletes are better prepared than I was!”

Other participants were able to make the move from college athlete to former college athlete with ease. Richard expressed that “For distance running, not much changed. Less structure, but a good racing schedule if you wanted it. The transition to coaching was even better.” Likewise, Emma said her transition was “Fine. Kept playing in competitive summer soccer leagues and then started coaching. Never really left the sport just switched roles. Still play, rec now.”

Prepared for the future. Several participants had positive transitions because they felt prepared for life after their college athletic careers ended. Naomi concisely said she was “Prepared, inspired, and ready to conquer ‘adulthood.’” Johnny was equally brief and stated his transition was an “Easy process, because I had a plan after college! Living life to the fullest.”

Other participants felt their transition was eased because of the academic opportunities they were able to partake in while in college. Tina felt she was able to be successful because she:

Had an internship for two years during college that helped connect me to my first job out of college. It was local, with AmeriCorps, and I got hired before I graduated. Without my internship I would not have known or been prepared for the position.

Bennet knew what he wanted to do for a career at a young age. He aspired to work in the sport industry so he “pursued an internship my senior year of college in Minor League Baseball that turned into a full-time gig! Yes a few bumps but I never looked back 21 years later.”

While Bennet had been out of college for more than two decades, Jason was a recent college graduate. He wrote:

I worked just as hard to get my first job! And even after I accepted, I still didn't have a clear idea of what I'd actually be doing. Basketball taught me to push through the fear of failure and to deal with that ambiguity.

His transition to the real world was eased because he relied on the skills he learned while playing basketball.

Ready for the future. Many of the former college athletes who participated in this study spoke about being ready to be done with their sport – for a variety of reasons. Ellie said that when she was finished playing her sport it was “liberating. Finally, I could do what I wanted when I wanted. I could speak my mind, be an individual.” Theo also was excited to do things he

was unable to do as a college athlete, however, unlike Ellie, he was looking forward to something other than speaking his mind. What Theo looked forward to most was “Being able to drink beer in December. And not feeling so tired that I couldn't give full attention to classes. That's become more important over time but the drink beer in December thing really was great back then.” Alicia also had a positive transition. She said that transitioning from college athlete to former athlete was “incredible. I was urgent about making connections and finding out who I was. I found many interests and did all I could to prepare. I ended up in the perfect position.”

Ivan also spoke about being “Ready. Spent my last season mentally and emotionally checking out of athletics. Had a plan that life was only going to pick up from there. Fortunate enough to say it, in fact, did.” Similar to Ivan, Tyler and Yolanda both discussed being burned out from their sport. Tyler said, “initially I was very glad to be done. In less than a year though I hunted out a running club in order to get back into running competitively and to be able to run with others again.” Yolanda echoed that sentiment and said she was, “Burned out. (Volleyball) Needed some time after college to just enjoy the sport again but found my way into coaching HS. So glad I did.” Mason summed up the positive responses when he said, “Maximize Effort + Self-Belief = No Regrets! That's all you can ask for in your athletic career.”

Discussion and Conclusion

What do I do now?

Nearly all college athletes will experience a normative transition out of athletics. However, despite the fact that nearly 98% of college athletes will not play professionally (NCAA, 2018; Stambulova, 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), 34% of the respondents in the present study felt “lost” or “not ready” to adapt to their new environment. Furthermore, 57.3% of the total respondents indicated a negative response toward adaptation (Schlossberg, 1981). As such, this study is in line with previous studies (e.g., Grove et al., 1997; Hart & Swenty, 2015; Lally, 2007; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Warehime, Dinkel, Bjornsen-Ramig, & Blount, 2017; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004) regarding the difficulties athletes face transitioning out of sport.

The majority of participants reported a profound sense of loss upon leaving their sport. The present study can add to the growing body of knowledge regarding athlete identity. As previous studies have found, athletes that demonstrate a high level of athlete identity often find it difficult to transition to a new environment (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Grove et al., 1997; Kidd et al., 2018; Lally, 2007; Lavallee, 2005; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Lotysz & Short, 2004; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stoltenburg et al., 2011; Stryker, 1980; Wippert & Wippert, 2008).

An individual's degree of stress can influence the transitional process (Schlossberg, 1981). Research has demonstrated that athletes are at risk for mental health disorders and often experience high levels of stress, anxiety, a decreased sense of self-worth, lack of social support, changes in mood, loneliness, and isolation (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Etzel, 2006; Falls & Wilson, 2013; Fuller, 2014; Grove et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2010; Lally, 2007; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016; McKnight et al., 2009; Montgomery & Côté, 2003; Petitipas et al., 2009; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Wyleman et al., 2004).

In the present study, 22 former college athletes reported not being ready for adaptation. As evident by the participants' responses, college athletes demonstrate low levels of career maturity (Moiseichik et al., 2019; Ryan, Penwell, Baker, & Irwin, 2015). Moiseichik et al.

(2019) in particular found that college athletes with high levels of athlete identity demonstrated lower levels of career maturity. As such, a lack of career preparation places college athletes at a disadvantage when adapting to their new environment (Moiseichik et al., 2019).

College athletes' schedules are tightly regulated (e.g., NCAA, 2016; New, 2017; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Participants in the present study reported feeling that something was missing in their lives upon transitioning out of sport. As such, perhaps the time demands of intercollegiate athletic participation heightened their athletic identity, making the adaptation to an environment outside of sport increasingly difficult (e.g., Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007; Lally, 2007; Smith & Hardin, 2017).

In adapting to life after sport, athletes may experience an array of physical challenges such as body image concerns (Papathomas et al., 2018) and weight fluctuation (Griffiths, Barton-Weston, & Walsh, 2016). College athletes often lack knowledge regarding food literacy and need help learning how to eat properly following athletic competition (Burns et al., 2004; Froiland et al., 2004; Jacobson et al., 2001; Shifflett et al., 2002; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Several participants in the present study described their relationship with food as a challenge. For example, Mary and Melanie had to adjust portion sizes as their metabolisms changed since their bodies were no longer burning thousands of calories a day.

Numerous participants' athletic careers did not undergo a normative transition, but rather a non-normative transition, as their careers ended abruptly due to injury. Those who have undergone a career-ending injury often experience emotional, psychosocial, and physical pain (Baillie, 1993; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; de Groot et al., 2018; Klieber & Brock, 1992; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Stoltenburg et al., 2011; Wylleman et al., 2004). As Karter explained, "It's been challenging to come to terms with the fact that I'm not able to compete at a high level anymore." Due to the fact that non-normative transitions happen unexpectedly, social support is essential for adaptation (Grove et al., 1997; de Groot et al., 2018; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Stephan et al., 2003; Schlossberg, 1981; Stoltenburg et al., 2011).

I'm free

Seventy-six participants (42.7%) indicated they had a positive experience transitioning out of sport. The athletes that appeared to have the smoothest transition to their post-collegiate athlete lives were the ones that remained connected to their sport or athletics. For athletes like Corey who "moved directly into coaching & athletic administration. Being in locker room & sport atmospheres may have eased my transition somewhat." His statement is consistent with Smith and Harden's (2018) findings that athletes who have the opportunity to transfer the skills they learned from sport into careers and many other aspects of life have a more positive transition.

Bardick and colleagues (2009) argued that athletes' transitions were eased if they were able to connect the skills they gained while competing in athletics to their post-athlete life. As Lily articulated, "A few interviews in, I soon realized how much sports equip you to navigate everything career-world." Being an athlete, especially a collegiate athlete, helped teach skills such as time management, teamwork, and leadership (Bardick et al., 2009; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stankovich, Meeker, & Henderson, 2001). When athletes learned how to use these transferable skills, the transition was viewed as more positive for the athletes.

Being prepared for the next phase of their life also was deemed as important when transitioning to post-athlete life. As Naomi said, she was "ready to conquer 'adulthood.'" In

addition to feeling “ready to conquer” adulthood, other participants stated they were “prepared” and the transition was “smooth” because they had a plan. For some, the plan involved going to graduate school or coaching while others were going straight into the workforce. Positive transitions are related to athlete preparedness (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Schmid & Seiler, 2003). The fact that a plan for life after sport has been shown to positively assist in athlete transition gives credence to athletic departments providing career services and guidance to all athletes during their four years at the institution.

Theory

Perception of Transition. Schlossberg’s (1981) model indicates how an individual perceives transition (positive or negative) or role change (gain or loss), and how the source (internal or external) can influence how an individual perceives a particular transition and ultimately influences adaptation. It also is important to note that although the participants went through a similar experience, responses indicated they perceived the transition differently (Schlossberg, 1981). More than half of the respondents (57.3%) indicated a negative perception of the transitional process. As the participants that indicated a negative perception felt a sense of loss, such a role change presented challenges regarding how the individuals adapted to their new environment (Schlossberg, 1981). It also can be inferred that many of the athletes who experienced a negative transition did not discontinue sport participation willingly. Most of the individuals in this sample likely were forced to stop competing due to an external source such as eligibility, injury, or being unable to pursue sport professionally.

Not all transitions are negative (Schlossberg, 1981), and 42.7% of the respondents indicated a positive transition. As participants felt “liberated,” “excited,” and ready for the future, it can be assumed that college athletes with a positive perception of transition embraced the role (gain) that they were presented. Unlike respondents that perceived their transitional experience negatively, those with favorable responses appeared to have an internal source that helped them to adapt. For example, some respondents indicated they were ready to move on and had a plan.

Characteristics of the individual. One of the three main variables within Schlossberg’s (1981) model involves the characteristics of the individual. Although this study did not collect certain demographic data (e.g., sex, age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status), there are aspects of the characteristics of the individual that can be inferred based on the results. As participants indicated they had participated in sport most of their lives, it can be inferred that the participants did not have previous experience with a “transition of a similar nature” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Often past experiences with transition assist individuals in developing constructive feelings toward the event (Schlossberg, 1981).

Psychosocial competence (e.g., self-esteem, self-worth) refers to “personality variables and behavior mannerisms” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 12). The college athletes with a negative perception to transition appeared to exude high levels of athlete identity. Often, if an athlete’s identity is consumed by athletic performance, self-esteem and a sense of self-worth become interwoven with being an athlete, threatening an individual’s ability to adapt (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Brewer et al., 1993; Grove et al., 1997; Kidd et al., 2018; Lally, 2007; Lavalley, 2005; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Lotysz & Short, 2004; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stoltenburg, Kamphoff, & Lindstrom Bremer, 2011; Stryker, 1980; Wippert & Wippert, 2008). Furthermore,

the characteristic of value orientation also appeared in the results, as the respondents indicated they were athletes and without sport, they were simply “lost” (Schlossberg, 1981). The participants that perceived transition positively appeared to find value outside sport. Research (e.g., Grove et al., 1997; Stoltenburg et al., 2011) has demonstrated athletes with a weaker athletic identity often have an easier time adapting to a life beyond sport. Therefore, perhaps the respondents that felt positively about their transition exhibited lower levels of athlete identity.

Characteristics of environment. Relating to Schlossberg's (1981) model, the characteristics of the pre- and post-transitional environment play a significant role in an individual's ability to adapt. Participants that perceived a difficult transition noted the lack of institutional support as well as internal support systems (Schlossberg, 1981). However, participants that stayed involved with athletics indicated a positive transition experience. Perhaps these former athletes found support systems by staying connected with their sport.

Adaptation. According to Schlossberg's (1981) model, upon transition, the ultimate goal is for all individuals to adapt to their new environment. Adaptation is influenced by the “balance of an individual's resources” as well as the “differences in pre- and post-transition environments, perception, and supports” (Schlossberg, 1998, p. 5). Based on the results, although all athletes experienced a similar transition, the transitional environments were perceived differently.

Limitations

Schlossberg (1981) believes individual characteristics (e.g., age, race, ethnicity, sex, socioeconomic status) influence an individual's ability to adapt to a transition. Although the participants in this study were former college athletes, due to the method of data collection, the researchers did not collect specific demographic data. Furthermore, some participants indicated the sport they played as well as their gender in their response; however, in order to construct a more effective narrative, the researchers assigned each participant a pseudonym. The pseudonym was based on the participant's profile picture and given name. The researchers realize the participant's given name and profile picture may not reflect the gender identity of the participant. Although this study analyzed 178 responses, participation in this study was limited to those who saw the Tweet and felt compelled to respond. Because the researchers are Sport Management faculty members who use Twitter to connect with students, former students, faculty, and industry professionals, many users who saw the Tweet most likely were connected with sport in some way (many participants reported staying connected to sport upon graduation) and therefore more likely to respond. Lastly, the results of this study cannot be generalized; transition is an individual process (Levinson et al., 1977; Schlossberg, 1981; Vaillant, 1995).

Future Research

Athlete transitions warrant further investigation. Future research should examine all college athletes at every level (e.g., Junior College, NAIA, NCAA Divisions I, II, and III), as this study found this issue does not discriminate on the basis of gender, sport, or institutional classification. Former college athletes should be surveyed post-transition to provide insight into how this population adapts to their new environments. Furthermore, researchers should survey institutions regarding practices currently in place to assist college athletes transitioning out of

sport. Future studies should be guided by Schlossberg's (1981) model. As such, future research should examine the individual characteristics, environmental characteristics (pre- and post-transition), perception of transition, and adaptation of college athletes. Lastly, social media should be utilized to examine the experiences of college athletes regarding transitions. Social media allows participants to reflect upon their experiences, encourages inquiry, and facilitates relationships between users (Kapoor et al., 2018).

Practical Implications

Through the words of the participants as well as Schlossberg's (1981) model, this study provides current college athletes and athlete development specialists with techniques that can assist those navigating through the transition process. First, college athletes and those working with this population must understand the characteristics of the individual (Schlossberg, 1981). College athletes are an at-risk population (Hebard & Lamberson, 2017), and there are demographic factors (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, value orientation) that can impact the ability of college athletes to adapt to transition (Schlossberg, 1981). As such, athlete development specialists, college athletes, and coaches need to be aware that there are individual factors that enhance an individual's ability to adapt.

Stakeholders must examine and address the perceptions that college athletes have regarding transitioning out of sport (Schlossberg, 1981). College athletes must be prepared to transition, to see this transition positively, and realize the transition process should be gradual (Schlossberg, 1981). Furthermore, college athletes and those working with this population must be mindful of the fact that stress can greatly influence perceptions of transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Those in the present study who had a positive transition stayed connected to sport, had a plan, and utilized skills they learned while playing their sport to assist them in adapting to their new environment.

Perhaps the most important factors are that of the pre- and post-transition environment, which can influence individual characteristics as well as college athletes' perceptions of transition (Schlossberg, 1981). It is vital that college athletes have a stable support system (e.g., family, friends, institutional support). To begin with, athletic departments must create (and enhance) programming that begins as soon as college athletes step on to campus. Furthermore, programming must be evaluated. Athletic departments need to provide college athletes with mentorship programs and offer this population practical learning experiences (e.g., service learning, job shadowing, internships, study abroad). Through effective programming, athletes will begin to find an identity and to see their self-worth outside of sport.

As the present study demonstrated, those who "had a plan" and were "prepared" indicated a positive transition. Athletes in the present study noted that working in sport assisted them in adapting to their new environment. As such, perhaps athletic departments should allow college athletes to apply skills learned in the classroom within the realm of sport business. Lastly, athletic departments should invite former college athletes back to campus to keep members of this population involved in the institution, the athletic department, and their respective teams. Maybe having a field day in which all former athletes are invited back to campus to participate in competitive games and activities would allow this population to stay connected, in turn ensuring an environment of continued support.

Participants in this study also noted non-normative, sudden transitions in which their athletic career ended due to injury. Athletic departments need clear holistic policies that will

assist athletes as they recover not only physically but mentally as well. College athletes recovering from injury should have access to both physical care (e.g., team doctors, athletic trainers) and mental health care. Furthermore, athletic teams need to include injured athletes in team-related activities to ensure those who are injured continue to feel included and valued.

Although college athletes often have a difficult time transitioning out of sport (Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997; Hart & Swenty, 2015; Lally, 2007; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Warehime, Dinkel, Bjornsen-Ramig, & Blount, 2017; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavalley, 2004), transitions do not have to be experienced negatively (Schlossberg, 1981). How the athlete perceives the transition, the characteristics of an individual, and the characteristics of the environment all play a crucial role in an individual's ability to adapt (Schlossberg, 1981). The present study demonstrated that college athletes who "had a plan" perceived their transition positively. As such, institutions must have a plan to ensure all athletes are ready to embrace a life after sports.

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