ELITE ATHLETES’ EXPERIENCES OF IDENTITY CHANGES DURING A CAREER-ENDING INJURY: AN INTERPRETIVE DESCRIPTION

by

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate patterns of identity change in elite athletes after a career ending injury. A qualitative study examined 9 retired athletes two to five years after their international competitive experience. An interpretive description analysis involved four levels of data analysis. The first level of data analysis identified a pattern of over identification with the elite athlete role and a clear pattern of more balanced identity contrasted with a less balanced identity prior to injury. The second level of analysis described smooth versus ineffective transitions after injury. At a third level of analysis, four factors (internal resources, cognitive coping style, relational connections and continuity with sport) emerged and were associated with smooth versus ineffective/turbulent retirement experiences. Finally, at the fourth level of analysis the study found four identity styles. These four styles (termed balanced identity, lost identity, intensification of identity and living for sport identity) are congruent with descriptions of adolescent identity and suggest that, for some athletes, tasks associated with identity development are delayed until retirement from sport. A pattern of positive adaptation was also identified, indicating that over commitment to an athletic identity does not preclude normative identity development or a positive retirement transition. Athlete autonomy and confidence, as well as relationships with coach, teammates and parents, were associated with the experience of a smooth versus turbulent retirement. Implications for practice are discussed in relation to factors that could promote adaptation in the event of sport injury or sport career termination.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sport at the international level requires elite athletes’ intense commitment in order to accomplish major life purposes and athletic goals that focus on winning (Kreiner-Phillips & Orlick, 1993). Researchers have identified athletic identity as an important individual indicator of adjustment during retirement (Taylor, Ogilvie, & Lavallee, 2005). Indeed, athletic identity has been correlated with the degree of emotional and social adjustment in retirement and the amount of time and distress involved in these adjustments (Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997).

Recent increased funding and centralized training centers require greater commitment from international athletes to produce gold-medal performances; this can be associated with an overidentification with the athlete role or a more dominant athletic identity (AI) (Miller & Kerr, 2002). In the past, a strong exclusive athletic identity was thought to offer advantages for athletic performance (Werthner & Orlick, 1986), yet more recent research suggests that it may be a liability when the athlete disengages from sport (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Cecic Erpic, Wylieman, & Zupancic, 2004; Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Stambulova, Stephan, & Japhag, 2007). An event such as a career-ending injury has typically been associated with difficult adjustment during retirement (Lavallee, Grove, Gordon, & Ford, 1998; Sparkes, 1998; Stambulova, 1994), yet some athletes make positive adjustments. The purpose of this study is to explore changes in the identity of elite athletes after a career-ending injury, with a particular interest in adaptive transformations.

In this paper, identity is defined as an evolving, internalized life story that assists self-understanding and provides unity and coherence. These internalized life stories are products of a complex set of interactions between individuals and their environments (McAdams, 1996). In
constructing and telling the stories of their career-ending injuries, the former elite athletes in this study provided the basis for understanding their identity changes.

Viewed from a developmental perspective, a sense of continuity is an essential aspect of identity (Berzonsky, 1990; Chandler, 2003; Marcia, 2003; McAdams, 1985) yet viewed from a sport perspective, athletic identity has been defined as "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role" (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993, p. 237). Retirement transitions often threaten the continuity of the athlete’s identity. The transition due to a career-ending injury identity involves people asking, “Who was I before, who am I now, and who will I be as I enter this new period in my life?” (McAdams, 1985). Identity, then, is the new or emerging role during a transition such as retirement that fits with greater self-understanding. The effect of a career-ending injury is interpreted in terms of its implications for the individual athlete’s ability to continue to accomplish goals and life purpose. It is possible that the loss of the athlete role upon retirement affects not only one’s athletic identity (Brewer, Selby, Linder, & Petitpas, 1999; Brewer et al., 1993).

Injury is associated with adjustment problems over any other reason for retirement (Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). Those who experience an uncontrollable event (Alfermann, 2000; Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004) such as a career-ending injury are most vulnerable to adaptation difficulties during retirement (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Stambulova, 1994). A sudden loss of dreams and identity may leave athletes susceptible to severe adjustment problems, such as depression (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Brewer, 1993; Kleiber & Brock, 1992; Petitpas, 1978), reduced life satisfaction (Kleiber, Greendorfer, Blinde, & Samdahl, 1987), as well as fear, anxiety, loss of self-esteem (Rotella & Heyman, 1986), and substance abuse (Ogilvie & Howe, 1982). Nevertheless, some athletes do adapt well. A few
studies (Brewer, 1993; Lavallee et al., 1998; Sparkes, 1998) have investigated how athletes manage sport identity and cope with injury but these studies have not examined elite athletes with career-ending injuries and their identity changes during retirement.

Most empirical research that has examined retirement and identity associates career-endings with negative life experiences but seldom examines the processes and adaptations in identity that occur after retirement from sport. The subject of athletes’ identities following athletic retirement has appeared sporadically in the literature (Brewer, 1993; Brewer et al., 1993; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007; Lavallee et al., 1998; Sparkes, 1998), but an understanding of the topic is in its infancy and the methodologies employed are different. Beatrice Wright (1983), who heavily influenced the rehabilitation literature, suggested that many individuals believe that having a disability helps them to find meaning or take a more adaptive perspective. To elucidate elite athletes’ experiences, research is needed to examine the adaptations that occur in identity after elite athletes leave sport, and particularly after they experience a career-ending injury.

Murphy (1995) has suggested that assisting athletes to make a successful transition to post-athletic careers is one of the most frequently encountered issues for sport-psychology practitioners. An in-depth examination of the changes in athletic identity after a career-ending injury is likely to have utility for applied sport psychology. That is, such an investigation will help identify factors that contribute to identity crisis during retirement and will enable practitioners to adjust their interventions to deal with particular sources of stress. Similarly, athletes who reach a more balanced identity status after retirement due to an uncontrollable event such as an injury may provide some guidance to sport psychology, career, and rehabilitation practitioners and stakeholders as to what contributes to important positive adaptations and
reduction of stressors. Moreover, the results of the present study may apply to other performance disciplines such as arts and business.

This is the first known qualitative study that examines changes in the identity of adult elite athletes following a career-ending injury, in both genders and in different sports. The purpose of this dissertation was to conduct an initial investigation into the patterns of change in identity experiences of elite athletes after a career-ending injury. Most previous studies have examined elite athlete identity during competitive sport quantitatively, using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer et al., 1993; Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). A few studies have examined athlete-identity experiences during retirement transition qualitatively (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007; Sparkes, 1998; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008) but have not examined adult-identity changes after an uncontrollable event such as an injury, or included both genders and various sports. Therefore, this is one of the first investigations to use a qualitative methodology to examine identity changes following a career-ending injury in a group of former adult-elite athletes of both genders and in different sports. This study also breaks ground in examining identity through qualitative design, which entails (a) extensive exploration of the transformation of identity, and (b) an in-depth understanding of how elite athletes perceive changes in their athletic identities. Certain authors have recommended conducting studies that follow the journey of the elite athlete after retirement from sport to “non-normative” (less common) transitions (e.g., injury) (Wylleman et al, 2004). In particular, examining injury using qualitative methods (Brewer, 1994; Udry, 1997), which can garner rich and detailed data, has been called for.

I selected interpretive description (Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997; Thorne, Kirkham, & O’Flynn-Magee, 2004) as a qualitative methodology because of (a) its support of detailed description of counselling issues such as elite athletes’ transition experiences,
and (b) its sustained focus on interpreting clinical and counselling problems in terms of the practical concerns of healthcare practitioners. Interpretive description asks the researcher to identify the literature and/or models that have influenced the development of the question, yet expects the researcher to move beyond that literature in response to what he or she learns from participants. In the interpretation of the data and the presentation of these findings, I have repeatedly returned to the practical question that prompted this inquiry in the first place: How might stakeholders, coaches, parents, and sport, career and rehabilitation counsellors support elite athletes during the transition from a career-ending injury to retirement? This focus on the counselling origins and practical consequences of knowledge is a fundamental principle of interpretive description (Thorne et al., 1997; Thorne et al., 2004). I provide an overview of this method in Chapter 2 and elaborate on it in Chapter 4.

**Research Summary and Rationale**

Researchers and practitioners have called for greater support of elite athletes during retirement from sport (Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Murphy, 1995; Stephan & Brewer, 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). Due to the intensive training and strong commitment to the elite athlete role, international and Olympic athletes may over-commit to their athletic identity. Little is known about the trajectory of former adult athletes’ identity change during retirement. Even less is known about adult elite athletes’ identity experiences following a career-ending injury. Therefore, this study examines the transformation of former elite athletes’ identity during adulthood (25 years and older) (Hall, 1904) following a “non-normative” event such as a career-ending injury. This study was conducted from an adaptive, positive psychology stance rather than the implied pathological perspective often associated with studies of injury, identity and sport-retirement experience.

The following research questions were addressed in the present study:
• How do adult elite athletes describe their identity experience following a career-ending injury?

• What are the patterns of identity change described by adult elite athletes during retirement from sport after injury?

• What are the commonalities and differences in the identity change of adult elite athletes following a career-ending injury?

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter 1 introduces the research topic and research question. Chapter 2 describes the rationale for my research methodology and framework for this paper, beginning with the philosophical and theoretical orientation that influences the approach to the research. I begin with an overview of interpretive description, and an explanation of theoretical scaffolding. The theoretical scaffolding is the foundation of the study. It acts to bridge the initial intellectual and scholarly position of the study (comprised of the literature review but also the theoretical allegiances, and conceptual, disciplinary, and personal perspectives I bring to the study) to the project’s design and emergent results. Interpretive description requires a move beyond the initial literature that influenced the central question to introduce new literature following responses from participants in this project. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical scaffolding for the study, which is a starting point consisting of broad strands of background research literature areas rather than detailed descriptions and critiques of studies. The literature review begins with two broad theoretical perspectives on identity and injury that draw heavily from rehabilitation research suggesting that disability can be a growth experience. A summary of the sport-psychology literature related to meaning-making is subsequently discussed. Athlete identity and retirement challenges are next described, including the relationship between depression and
injury. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion of factors that influence adaptation of elite athlete retirement after a career-ending injury.

Chapter 4 describes in greater detail the research methodology employed in the project and how I applied the general procedures of Interpretive Description. I describe the research design and the procedures used to obtain a sample, collect and analyze the data, and maintain rigour. Chapters 5 and 6 comprise the findings of the study. Chapter 5 identifies patterns that describe elite athletes’ stories of athletic life prior to injury in order to provide a context in which to understand the experience of a career-ending injury. Chapter 6 addresses their identity following a career-ending injury and during retirement, and identifies four patterns of elite athlete identity changes after retirement. Descriptions of the elite athletes’ retirement experiences are woven throughout the text. Chapters 7 and 8 conclude the dissertation with a discussion of the study in the context of existing knowledge. Finally, the implications for counselling, education, and future research are presented.
Chapter 2: Approach To Inquiry

This chapter explains the rationale for my chosen method, interpretive description, and describes how the choice of method is reflected in the organization of this research report. By examining interpretive description’s historical location and philosophical assumptions, the reader will have a framework for understanding how my design and analysis choices are congruent with this particular method. For example, interpretive description requires the researcher to absorb the literature but remain open to new possibilities that were not originally anticipated in the project. The theory must emerge from the data and not be a priori (Thorne, 2008, 2009). No a priori theory can account for the multiple realities that are likely to be encountered; thus, it is expected that a theory will emerge from or be grounded in the data. The method addresses these assumptions through the related concepts of theoretical scaffolding and theoretical forestructure, discussed below, which require the investigator to identify their starting points in contemporary research knowledge. The organization of Chapter 3, traditionally labelled as a review of the literature, uses these ideas to present research that has served as the starting point for the current study. Consistent with interpretive description, a review is of the literature in Chapter 3, and presents research that represents strands of distinct bodies of research that the researcher decided were relevant such as the dominant and non-dominant views rather than reviewing every study (Thorne, 2009).

As noted above, a central aspect of interpretive description is the theoretical scaffolding, which is seen as a way to ground the work for the researcher and establish the scholarly position from which the study emerges (Mitchell & Cody, 1993). The scaffolding is viewed as a foundation that contributes to building the project and acts to “bridge” the theory and the
research project (Thorne, 2009). In the present work, the theoretical scaffolding is represented by the research literature reviewed in Chapter 3.

The next key aspect of this method, the theoretical forestructure, is part of the theoretical scaffolding and represents the researcher’s personal position and prior knowledge of the phenomenon. Interpretive description, which is grounded in constructivist thought, assumes that the researcher will bring her own experience to the task of interpretation and is transparent with her position and knowledge. My theoretical forestructure is presented in the section entitled “Personal Position” later in this chapter. The chapter ends by reminding the reader about the purpose and significance of the study.

**Introduction to Interpretive Description**

The interpretive-description approach is characterized by creating meaning (knowledge) through the interchange between the researcher and the participant. The approach requires that knowledge generated has an actual practice goal (Thorne, 2008), an aim that is suitable and consistent with the counselling psychology research-practitioner model. Research in counselling should be not only theoretical but also improve counselling practice. This study, therefore, needed an approach that provided guidance in developing knowledge that could be applied. A qualitative methodology that offers such a flexible process to study shared realities is *interpretive description*—a non-categorical, qualitative alternative for developing applied knowledge (Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997). This approach takes inspiration from the interpretive hermeneutic tradition that suggests an appreciation of experience from the perspective of others yet recognizes that the clinical mind is not content with “pure” descriptions. Instead, “interpretive” description seeks to explore patterns and relationships that have been described from a clinical mind (Thorne, 2008). In doing so, I search for underlying
meanings of what may be happening in the data and look to put analysis back into the real world, highlighting the value of context and practice.

**Historical location.**

Originally designed for and by nursing practitioners in the 1990s, interpretive description (Thorne et al., 1997, 2004) is a second-generation qualitative method used to develop a tentative explanation on the basis of description. As a methodology, interpretive description has strong links to grounded theory, naturalistic inquiry, and ethnography, based on methods refined from those traditions. Interpretive description is a departure from traditional approaches in that it uses a research question that emerges from a clinical issue, questions decision-making throughout, and advises awareness of the practical implications of the results. Correspondingly, in the past decade, various health researchers have begun tailoring qualitative approaches to research in ways that attend to the health experience of human beings and on the kinds of clinical knowledge practitioners seek (Sandelowski, 2000). Interpretive description is one such approach (Thorne et al., 1997). First described in 1997 by Thorne and colleagues, interpretive description is grounded in a notion that human-health experiences are comprised of complex interactions between individuals as biological, social and emotional beings, and that these interactions unfold within complex and shifting physical, social and political worlds. Counsellors and other healthcare professionals are interested in generating knowledge about these experiences and interactions for one primary purpose: to improve clinical practice.

**Philosophical assumptions.**

The philosophical alignment of *interpretive description* is within the interpretive naturalistic orientation, acknowledging the constructed subjective realities and contextual nature of human experiences that allow for shared realities (Schwandt, 1994). Epistemological foundations of interpretive description are grounded in the view that because reality is multiple
and constructed, it can only be studied holistically (Thorne et al., 2004). A key axiom in
naturalistic inquiry is that the “object” of inquiry and the inquirer interact and are inseparable;
they interact to influence one another and the research. Interpretive description acknowledges
how beliefs, emotions and power influence the phenomenon of study (Thorne et al., 2004).
Therefore, unlike post-positivistic approaches to knowledge construction, interpretive
description aims to capture themes and patterns through engaging the subjectivity of participants.
This reflexive, engaging dialectic approach serves to limit the objectification of participants by
paying attention to power inequalities between researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln,
1994).

Based on a constructivist philosophy of science, the interpretive-description approach
recognizes the contextual and constructed nature of life experiences. Therefore this approach is
appropriate for the study of the disengagement process and injury experiences of individuals
who come into contact with sport-counselling settings. It relates how the sport-counselling
context may influence an individual’s subjective interpretation of his or her experience. The goal
of interpretive description is not to produce new truths but to identify common phenomena that,
within an individual’s life experiences, bring about new understandings and new meanings. This
approach not only identifies patterns within individuals but also commonalities among many
people (Thorne et al., 1997) and seeks to capture patterns and relationships based on the
subjective perception of participants. The point of this research is to not solve “everyday”
problems but to answer health problems related to understanding how people “behave” and what
constitutes the core nature of the human experience (Thorne, 2008). An interpretive account is
generated by informed questioning, using reflective techniques and critical examination.

A special issue of the Journal of Counselling Psychology (JCP) examined qualitative
approaches (Haverkamp, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2005) and quantitative approaches to
counselling psychology. In the JCP, Ponterotto (2005) summarized the four main philosophical paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, constructivism-interpretivism and the critical-ideological paradigm. The method used in this study is in the *constructivism-interpretivism paradigm* in which research studies are based on certain philosophical assumptions related to questions of ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology. Ontological assumptions of interpretive description suggest we must acknowledge participative reality-subjective-objective reality that is co-created and shared, complex, multiple and contextual (Ponterotto, 2005). Thorne et al. (1997) have suggested that interpretive description is a set of ideas that are “constructed” and can change given a different context, new concepts, understandings and meanings.

*Epistemologically,* interpretive description uses the researcher and participant interviewing and observations as sources of inquiry. It is understood that the researcher and participant influence one another and co-construct or socially construct knowledge through a dynamic interplay (Ponterotto, 2005).

*Axiology* is the study of values and is represented in the role of the researcher’s values in the scientific project. In the *constructivist paradigm,* the researcher’s values and lived experiences are intertwined with the study (Ponterotto, 2005). *Interpretive description* puts the researcher in the position of determining the relevant data and the information to be studied and presented in the findings. Moreover, interpretive description suggests that the researcher must be mindful of where the findings of the study are to be disseminated. In other words, there is an underlying “pragmatic obligation” of the researcher to apply the found knowledge in the real world.
Pragmatism.

The chosen method, *interpretive description*, is firmly rooted in this pragmatic viewpoint. Pragmatism is a movement of philosophy that was developed by Charles Pierce, William James and others. It is distinguished by the notion that the meaning of an idea or proposition lies in its observable practical consequences. Counselling psychology requires that knowledge generated in counselling research be not only theoretical but of use to counselling practice. This study, therefore, needed an approach that provided guidance in developing counselling knowledge that could be applied. Sport counselling involves interdisciplinary work where counsellors are required to integrate knowledge on an ongoing basis; however, little sport-psychology knowledge exists to guide the praxis. Sport counselling is one domain of counselling psychology where the counsellor’s role is gaining increasing attention and interest. Therefore, counselling-psychology research that provides a basis for practice in this area is greatly needed and, in particular, knowledge grounded in context and in human subjectivity that brings understanding of lived experiences.

In pragmatism, the intent is to apply knowledge to practical life settings with the purpose of improving the world (Maines, 1997). Similarly, the main goal of interpretive description is to generate findings that have direct applicability to improving practice. In contrast to the previous discussion about paradigms, pragmatism has at its centre a “truth” that works at the time and is not bound to notions of the human mind’s being separate or dependent upon reality (Williams, 2008). The motivation of pragmatism is the idea that belief in the truth on the one hand must have a close connection with success in action on the other (James, 1907).
Analytic framework.

I now turn to two defining features of interpretive description: the analytic framework and theoretical scaffolding. In this method, the term analytic framework refers to the knowledge base that informs the project rather than the manner in which data collected for the project will ultimately be analyzed. Thorne et al. (1997) contended that an analytic framework built from a solid critical analysis of existing knowledge forms a stable base from which to begin qualitative inquiry (see Appendix 1 for a comprehensive description of principles guiding the approach). The first of the principles guiding the approach has to do with the generation of a key aspect of the analytic framework: a synthesis of the state of existing knowledge related to the research topic that “orients the inquiry, provides a rationale for its anticipated boundaries, and makes explicit the theoretical assumptions, biases and preconceptions” (Thorne et al., 1997, p. 173). The analytic framework for this project is made explicit in the theoretical and empirical locations of the project that are described in Chapter 3 and the philosophical assumptions that were mentioned earlier in the present chapter.

Before turning to the theoretical scaffolding I highlight the important elements of the literature review or scaffolding that interpretive description emphasizes beyond the useful contribution of scholarly contributions. With interpretive description, the literature review or scaffolding serves to locate oneself substantively, theoretically, and within a disciplinary orientation. This approach suggests careful consideration of how the researcher undertakes a literature review and makes certain decisions along the way. To achieve this grounding, the researcher needs to locate the right resources, recognize patterns of research within the field, manage Internet searches, consider other relevant disciplines, explore non-traditional sources, examine a diversity of journals and engage in manual library searches. Other important decision points to consider are an examination of research versus non-research documents, limiting a
review to the last five years and a few specific journals. To guide the literature review using the interpretive description approach, the researcher is encouraged to garner strands of research areas (e.g., identity and injury) rather than detailing specific studies, as the goal is to provide the essentials of what is known rather than be comprehensive. It is also important for the researcher to note patterns of methodology. For example, if most studies in the field take a quantitative approach, then many rich details may be uncovered if a qualitative initiative is undertaken. The researcher may identify a qualitative approach as more suitable to the topic after unveiling general patterns and determining what method would further knowledge in the field and answer practical questions. I now turn to discuss the theoretical scaffolding.

**Theoretical scaffolding.**

As mentioned previously, the scaffolding is viewed as a foundation that contributes to building the project and acts to “bridge” the theory and the research project (Thorne, 2009). The scaffolding consists of the theoretical literature review and the theoretical forestructure. Interpretive description then requires the researcher to “let go” of the literature and remain open to new possibilities that were not originally underlying the project. What the researcher discovers may lead her to rethink her initial location decisions. The letting go of the literature helps the researcher sort out the intellectual position of the study including assumptions, values and beliefs, to allow new positions to emerge (Thorne, 2008).

The second element of the theoretical scaffolding, called the theoretical forestructure, requires the researcher to be transparent and locate her theoretical allegiances on entering the study, within the discipline, and in personal relationships to the ideas that are held.

My personal approach involves a constructivist theoretical orientation where knowledge is co-constructed. My counselling psychology discipline and beliefs are consistent with the
scientist-practitioner model that encourages generation of evidenced-based knowledge that can be applied to the real world. My own sport experience is extensive and I have had the personal experience of retirement from two different sports. In one incident I freely chose to switch sports and in the other I experienced a career-ending injury. In addition to my personal sport experiences as an athlete, I have studied this topic at university and counselled many athletes who have been injured and/or have experienced retirement from sport. By describing my sport experience I hope to communicate to readers of the research (Manias & Street, 2001) the ways in which I may influence both research processes and outcomes. Unlike phenomenology, interpretive-description researchers locate their findings in existing knowledge so that new knowledge can be linked and compared to the work of others in the field (Thorne et al., 1997) and to the researcher’s *a priori* understanding of the phenomenon. In the next paragraph I explain my personal position and understanding of elite athlete experiences of career-ending injuries.

**Personal position.**

As a sport counsellor, I spent fifteen years in private practice and consequently provided counselling to many elite athletes who experienced injury and retirement. From that experience, I believe that the therapy provided to athletes during their experience of a career-ending injury influenced their life experience beyond sport and transformed their identity. I noticed that athletes who were injured and in the process of disengaging from sport experienced different transitional pathways and changes in who they were and I was struck by how they readily engaged in adaptation.

My reflection on these elite athlete experiences suggests that transition from an intensive and highly demanding environment (along with coping with an injury) varied, resulting in adaptations that were seldom predictable transitional experiences. From my observations as a
former athlete, sport counsellor in the field, and my discussions with other professionals, I believe that the experience of retirement following an injury requires the individual to be resourceful in planning, coping and finding a context that allows growth. In my own initial retirement from sport due to injury, I found little support and understanding from the medical field or sport community. I chose to continue my relationship with my former coach by acquiring a part-time coaching position at the same training center and this allowed me to stay connected to sport while I continued my high-school education. However, I found little solace or connection with teammates and found that most people did not recognize the nature of the transitional experience. In many ways, my initial retirement left me feeling that I had some “unfinished business” and it was not surprising that four years later I chose to restart sport at the collegiate level to “finish that business.” The fluctuation in many athletes’ experience of who they were following injury and disengagement from sport suggested to me that adaptation was an interaction between the person and the context (e.g., coach, family, support team and sport organization). The combination of theoretical understanding and personal experiences led me to the research questions of the present project and a desire for a more pragmatic approach.

**Strengths and Challenges of Methodology**

As with all methodological approaches there are strengths and limitations. The strengths of the approach are: (a) strong foundation of assumptions, (b) logical coherent decision making, (c) an approach that is based on practitioner-researcher integration, and (d) generation of practical finding. The limitations of interpretive description include: (a) demands of generating knowledge to situate the methodology, (b) impositions of applying a less-known methodology, and (c) a lack of clarity and tension about how much interpretation to seek during data analysis and ensuring consistency with stated assumptions in doing so (Hunt, 2009). One additional challenge in the use of this methodology was a researcher who has lived the career-ending injury
experience. While this type of experiential knowledge may benefit the research process, another layer of awareness and reflexivity is required.

**Summary of Chapter**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of my method, Interpretive Description, explain the theoretical scaffolding and situate myself, the researcher, within my knowledge of the phenomenon. Interpretive description requires the researcher to absorb the literature but remain open to new possibilities that were not originally underlying the project. The theory or patterns, relationships and associations must emerge from the data and not be *a priori* (Thorne, 2008, 2009). The theoretical scaffolding acts as a foundation or starting point of the study and consists of the theoretical literature review and the theoretical forestructure (e.g., researcher’s personal position). Interpretive description then requires the researcher to “let go” of the literature and remain open to new possibilities that were not originally underlying the project. With an method there are strengths and limitations. In Chapter 3 my approach is consistent with Interpretive Description, where the theoretical review draws on strands of theoretical literature such as the dominant and non-dominant views rather than reviewing every study (Thorne, 2009). The present question for this investigation is a synthesis of a review of the literature and of my personal experiences as an athlete, coach, counsellor and researcher.

**Purpose of the study.**

The primary goal of this research project is to understand the psychosocial experience of identity transformation during a career-ending injury by listening to elite athletes’ stories of their experience. By listening to their experience, we elevate the knowledge of this small subset of elite athletes and the implied pathological perspectives on injury and sport-retirement experience. While four factors (deselection, loss of eligibility, age and injury) commonly trigger retirement from sport (Ogilvie, 1984; Weinberg & Gould, 2007) this study examines a rarely
examined factor, the injury-retirement experiences of elite athletes and, in particular, their identity changes.

This research attempts to distinguish patterns of similarity and difference in elite athlete experiences in order to identify patterns that might assist the work of counsellors who support their retirement experiences. The practical goal of this study is to inform sport organizations, coaches, athletes and sport counsellors of the implications and interventions for adaptive strategies to guide transitional experiences after injury. The elite athletes’ description of their identity, relationships and contextual perceptions will be the basis of this study and influence recommendations for the delivery of support for sport-injury transition.

**Significance of the study.**

We know from the existing sport, rehabilitation and workplace literature that retirement after injury can be stressful (Ellis-Hill & Horn, 2000; Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995) and may cause both maladaptive (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000; Stambulova et al., 2007; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wylleman et al., 2004) and adaptive identity changes in athlete experiences. We also know that pronounced athletic identity is associated with difficult adaptation during retirement (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Stambulova et al., 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Scholars have suggested that many high-level athletes compromise their identity development in pursuit of winning and this occurs at the expense of their well-being, thus influencing retirement transitions (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Interventions or strategies can be implemented to support more balanced adaptation and increase the chance of successful transition. The literature on retirement after injury is in its infancy and a particular gap exists in the research on changes in identity that occur after a career-ending injury.
Research that seeks to describe the changes in identity development following a career-ending injury and that identifies areas where support for the athlete could be improved would be extremely useful. Authors have recommended the examination of qualitative studies (Brewer, 1993; Udry, 1997), studies that include context and examine the journey of elite athletes after retirement from a less common or a “non-normative” event (e.g., injury) (Wylleman et al., 2004). An examination of elite athlete identity during disengagement after injury is warranted. Any contributions that this study can make to clarify adaptive responses to a career-ending injury, identity change and retirement from sport as well as provide support services for elite athletes would be useful.
Chapter 3: Review of the Literature

The purpose of this chapter is to present the theoretical scaffolding that arises from the literature review. Consistent with my method (interpretive description), I review several broad areas of knowledge that provide the basis for my research rather than detailing and summarizing individual studies. My goal is to (a) understand the psychological experiences of elite athletes’ identity following a career-ending injury, and (b) contribute to the knowledge and understanding of counsellors working with the retired athletes. My research queries the athletes’ experience of “who they are” following a career-ending injury. It is important to consider research and theory in the broad areas of identity, injury and athlete retirement.

Identity and Transitions

Studies have examined identity changes associated with adjustment in retirement, yet the literature is fragmented and inconclusive. Authors concentrate on a negative pathological view or do not include research on career-ending injuries, making it difficult to assess the nature of identity change during elite athlete retirement. A review of the sport literature suggests that adolescent elite athletes who train intensively in sport at an early age experience identity confusion and turbulent retirement experiences (e.g., Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). Similarly, the research on adolescent and collegiate athletes indicates that a narrow athletic identity negatively affects retirement (Lally & Kerr, 2005). There is little research on adult elite athletes and positive identity adaptation after retirement and even less research on adult elite athletes and identity changes after a career-ending injury.

Moreover, the few recent studies in sport on identity and retirement are qualitative, focus primarily on female gymnasts (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008), and do not draw a distinction between injury (non-normative) and other reasons
(normative) for retiring. A limited number of studies on injuries and identity in sport have used a quantitative methodology (Brewer, 1993, 1994; Brewer et al., 1993). The majority of studies on adjustment to injury in rehabilitation psychology (e.g., amputation) are cross-sectional in design and have used noncomparable measures and have not studied identity (Dunn, 1996; Gallagher & MacLachlan, 2000; Hamill, Carson, & Dorahy, 2010; Horgan & MacLachlan, 2004; Livneh, Antonak, & Gerhardt, 1999; Oaksford, Frude, & Cuddihy, 2005). Most of the empirical research in sport has been descriptive rather than developmental and has been based on general models that point toward negative emotional reactions and distress. Research is needed to examine whether or how people experience positive growth and meaning. The aim of this study is to use a qualitative methodology to examine injury, identity and retirement experiences with an approach that is positive and growth-oriented.

In the following review of the literature, I begin by presenting my definition of retirement, identity and self. I then provide an overview of the contribution of rehabilitation literature to positive adaptation, particularly in the area of injuries. A discussion of meaning-making in sport follows, as it is related to my positive and adaptive approach to this study. Next, I provide an overview of the sport-psychology literature related to identity and strength of elite athlete identity attachments. I end with a discussion about factors influencing positive adaptation in retirement and injury.

**Relevance to retirement.**

Gerontological researchers have argued that retirement is more than an objective life-course transition and involves a subjective developmental and social-psychological transformation (Moen, 2001). Kim and Moen (2002) indicated that leaving a career involves a major life change that transforms the social world and involves change in roles, relationships and daily routines. Retirement from elite sport signals a transition that may be distressful for athletes
(Lavallee, Gordon, & Grove, 1997) because of changes in social, professional and physical domains. At the same time, the retirement experience may cause positive adaptation and opportunities for personal growth because it leads to a search for meaning in new settings (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). This paper defines retirement from sport as a complex interaction of financial, social, psychological and physical stressors that may produce some form of cognitive, emotional, behavioural or social trauma (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993); alternatively, it may stimulate personal growth and expand meaning in life.

What is identity?

Identity is an evolving internalized life story that assists self-understanding, providing a sense of unity and purpose (McAdams, 1988). When personality psychologists began to turn their attention to people's lives, they found notions such as “story” and “narrative” to be helpful in depicting the coherence and the meaning of lives. Unity and purpose in human lives are the products of a complex set of interactions between the individual and society in which behaviour and experience are embedded. This means identity is “knowing” who one is through occupational, ideological and relational resources. “Identity is not the self; identity is not the Me. Identity is rather a quality of the Me. Identity is the extent to which the Me can be rendered (by the I) as unified and purposeful” (McAdams, 1996, p. 201).

Identity is an integrative configuration of self-in-the-world and is integrative in two ways. First, in a synchronic sense, identity integrates the wide range of different, and at times conflicting, roles and relationships (McAdams, 2001) that characterize a given life at the moment. In my experience, when I am writing my dissertation, I feel at times frustrated; but when I go for a run I feel energized and optimistic. Identity needs to integrate those two events in my life so that although they appear very different, they can be viewed as integral parts of the same self-configuration. When I tell others about my story or my different life roles (counsellor,
Second, identity must integrate diachronically, that is, in time (McAdams, 2001). For example: “I used to love to play the piano, but now I want to be a sport psychologist,” “I was a Catholic but now I feel that I am agnostic.” Identity needs to integrate these kinds of contrasts so that they can be brought meaningfully together into a temporally organized whole. Erikson's (1968) concept of identity underscores an integrative tendency in selfhood that becomes especially salient for the first time in that period of life (late teenage years through the mid-20s) that Arnett (2000) has recently labeled emerging adulthood. Identity entails a sense of continuity with past roles and relationships (Chandler et al., 2003; Marcia, 1993; McAdams, 1988), such that people ask, “Who was I before, who am I now, and who will I be as I enter this new period in my life?”

I have chosen McAdams’s understanding of identity because it is consistent with my adaptive and positive psychology approach. For example, McAdams’s (2001) positive stance emphasizes the integrative nature of stories that can bring together disparate features and tendencies in a given life into a more unifying and purposeful whole.

**What is the self?**

Consistent with the definition of identity, I am using McAdams’s definition of the self. In this paper, the self is composed of both the “I” acting as a process and the “Me” being the product (McAdams, 1996). Thus, the I is like a verb; McAdams calls it “selfing” or “I-ing,” and it is the fundamental process of making a self out of experience. To self (a verb) is to apprehend one’s actions, thoughts, feelings, and so on as “mine” (McAdams, 1996). The I and Me are differentiated in that the I is the process of creating a self through the experience of telling the
story, whereas the Me is defined as the product that the I constructs. The I is the source of experience and evolves over time to a more complex level of meaning construction.

Identity is part of what McAdams calls the Me. Me is also the self-concept and its attributes evolve over time. According to McAdams, the Me casts a wide net, incorporating the material, social, and spiritual realms. For example, a person’s traits (e.g., extraversion or neuroticism) are aspects of the self to the extent that one considers them to be Me. Similarly, the Me incorporates personal concerns and life stories to the extent that these characteristics of personality are experienced as one’s own. One way to experience something as one’s own is to sense that one has indeed constructed or authored it. This is the experience that many adults feel through their “own” life stories. “Thus, the process of selfing involves constructing and authoring experience as one’s own, as well as appropriating, synthesizing, reflecting on, and simply observing experience in such a way that it is deemed to be mine” (McAdams, 1996, p. 302). Over time, selfing builds up and attempts to bind together the Me. Personality traits, person concerns (e.g., motivation, striving) and stories are not parts of the I, but rather Me elements that associate how the I works. Telling stories of one’s self is a synthesis of Me elements that provides coherence and unity over time (McAdams, 1996).

In summary, identity is a sense of who one is. It develops over time and requires unity and purpose. Identity is revealed by the telling of one’s story and the person knowing which parts are Me. The self-concept is part of the Me and the self is involved in owning what is mine. The athletic identity incorporates the goals, values, beliefs, commitment and meaning the person holds about their sport role or domain and is often a salient component of who an athlete is.
Injury, Rehabilitation and Adaptations

This section provides a historical view of the research from rehabilitation studies that examines injury and positive growth experiences such as meaning and adaptation. Further, the deficiencies found in the research on stage theories are described. Traditional models of adjustment were based on Freudian psychology in which people were thought to move through given stages in reaction to a severe loss (Grzesiak & Hicok, 1994). It was thought that, over time, the ego would allow recognition of the loss. Before this occurred, the person would experience denial to defend against anxiety related to the loss. Afterward, the person would go through predictable stages of depression, anger, and bargaining, allowing the ego time to accept the injury (Mueller, 1962). This explanation suggests negativity and psychopathology, and that optimal adjustment is the final acceptance of the permanent disability.

In contrast to this approach, research in the rehabilitation literature was heavily influenced by Beatrice A. Wright's (1960) classic book called Physical Disability: A Psychological Approach. The author emphasized how language shapes our thoughts, feelings, and actions toward others (Snyder & Lopez, 2005) and showed biases towards those who are injured, and coping versus maladaptive frameworks (Wright, 1991). She observed that disability “can be accepted as a surmountable challenge (something to be coped with) or a tragic undoing (something to succumb to)” (Synder & Lopez, 2005, p. 301) but argued that disability is a social psychological phenomenon. Scholars have shown how the physical setting and societal attitudes inhibit personal growth and adjustment after injury or onset of disability, pointing out that there is an interaction between the environment and the way people find meaning in their life (Fordyce, 1988).

In the classic disability literature, coping was considered a key vehicle to adjustment and adaptation. According to Dembo, Leviton, and Wright (1956), coping includes the following
goals: (a) what the person can do, (b) assuming an active role in life, (c) focusing on personal accomplishments, (d) managing negative life events, (e) reducing limitations through changes in physical and social environments, and (f) participating in and enjoying valued activities.

According to the classic model of adaptation of persons with disabilities, coping and adaptation comprise evolving, dynamic processes through which the person progressively approaches an optimal state of person-environment congruence, as demonstrated by (a) active participation in social, vocational and hobbies, (b) negotiation of the environment, and (c) awareness of strengths and assets as well as existing functional limitations.

In the model, adjustments refer to the final stage of disability and can be revealed by (a) achieving and maintaining psychological equilibrium, (b) achieving a state of re-integration, (c) positively striving to reach life goals, (d) demonstrating positive self-esteem, self-concept, self-regard, and (e) experiencing positive attitudes towards oneself, others and disability.

The stage models of coping have been criticized because they have not been empirically supported; specifically, predictable progressive stages over time are not supported and do not recognize the positive growth following the physical trauma individuals experience (Elliott, Kurylo, & Rivera, 2002). Researchers Wegener and Shertzer (2006) suggested that future models of coping and adaptation in rehabilitation are a transactional process in which there is interaction with external factors (physical environment and social responses) and internal factors. A transactional model provides a conceptual basis for the explanation of positive growth following trauma. Wright explored the bias that assumes disability is accompanied by mourning, and emphasized the need for a positive shift in attitudes of rehabilitation clients, families and strangers towards people living with a disability (Wright, 1980).
Positive growth and adaptations can emerge in different ways, such as an increased appreciation for life, more meaning in interpersonal relationships, and changes in identity (Dunn, 1996; Dunn & Doughtery, 2005). Wright (1983) suggested that many individuals believe that their disability helps them to find meaning or take a more adaptive perspective (Dunn, 1996; Wright, 1983). These people: (a) appreciate their self worth, (b) value time spent in relational activities, (c) become more thoughtful or understanding (Taylor, 1983; Wright, 1983), and can surpass their previous levels of adaptation. Persons who have developed greater acceptance of disability hold a sense of meaning in their circumstances, value their selfhood, and maintain positive beliefs about themselves (Wright, 1983). Individuals who experience disability may demonstrate resilience, clarity of purpose and greater resolve for personal goals (Synder & Lopez, 2005). What is known from trauma and amputee research is that it is possible to uncover meaning through the experience of something traumatic such as injury, illness, loss or death of a loved one (Dunn, 1996; Hamill et al., 2010; Horgan & MacLachlan, 2004; Livneh et al., 1999; Oaksford et al., 2005). Positive growth in relationships may also be experienced in the wake of disability. Olkin (1999) suggested that injury results in families reporting a greater sense of closeness, more emphasis on family and personal relationships, and positive changes in shared family values. In this way, Wright’s book was a precursor of the contemporary “positive psychology” movement, grounded in the work of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000).

Of particular relevance to rehabilitation and recovery from a career-ending injury is the concept of denial. Denial is a coping strategy for dealing with adversity that has both adaptive and maladaptive functions (Dunn & Dougherty, 2005; Gangstad, Norman, & Barton, 2009; Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Kortte & Wegener, 2004; Taylor & Armor, 1996). For example, immediately after injury, denial assists people to cope with their bodily condition and overwhelming emotions. However, prolonged failure to recognize and/or accept the existence
and effect of their condition (e.g., insisting that function will be restored even though it is medically advised otherwise) (Kortte & Wegener, 2004) may interfere with recovery and adaptation. Prolonged use of denial is likely to exacerbate distress reactions (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989).

Aspects of denial and positive illusions, that is, beliefs that represent mild positive distortions of reality (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) are associated with effective coping and psychological adjustment after traumatic events (Dunn & Dougherty, 2005; Gangstad, et al., 2009; Helgeson, et al., 2006; Kortte & Wegener, 2004; Taylor & Armor, 1996). Evidence for unrealistic optimism in normal samples is voluminous and continues to grow, according to Taylor and Armor. The psychosocial perspective takes a holistic stance and incorporates positive psychology for individuals with disabilities. Life is viewed as worth living because of purpose, meaning and valued activity as well as feeling in control and holding self worth (Bishop, 2005; Dunn, 1996; Elliott et al., 2002). Over time, this capacity to search for new meaning includes changing beliefs and values. Well-being and acceptance are associated with the person–environment interaction (Elliott et al., 2002). Another aspect is the “reality negotiations” or strategies that maintain positive beliefs under conditions that are threatening to the self (Elliott, Witty, Herrick, & Hoffman, 1991). It is believed that the outcome of reality-negotiation processes are enhanced self-esteem, happiness and ability to empathize (Taylor, 1983) and are most pronounced after traumatic events.

The concept of “positive growth” after an acquired disability has been used as an argument against stage models (Elliott et al., 2002). An integrative model of growth involves a dynamic interaction among the following five components: (a) enduring characteristics and individual differences, (b) social and environmental characteristics, (c) physical health, (d)
psychological well-being, and (e) appraisal process playing a central and integrative role (Elliott et al., 2002).

For the purposes of the present project, I define adaptation to an acquired sport injury as a multidimensional construct. My definition is consistent with Livneh and Antonak (1997) who described adaptation as comprising: "(1) active participation in social, vocational, and avocational pursuits; (2) successful negotiation of the physical environment; and (3) awareness of remaining strengths and assets as well as existing functional limitations" (p. 8). I add to these important factors the individual's personal and subjective analysis of his or her total situation as it appears to be the most important factor in guiding his or her response.

In summary, the work of Wright was a precursor to positive psychology and the interest in adaptations rather than maladjustments in recovery from injury or disability. Recent research on adaptation goes beyond the linear and predictable stage models to deal with more multiomensional, positive adaptations and adaptive changes. This study is grounded in rehabilitation psychology literature that highlights positive adaptations of identity related to career-ending injuries of elite athletes. It is clear from the rehabilitation research that there are numerous positive growth opportunities and adaptations after individuals experience injury. My aim is to investigate both negative and positive adaptations to injury among elite athletes and hope to shed a new light on adaptive changes that assist athletes during retirement from a career-ending injury.

Meaning-making and sport.

The process of adjustment and adaptation to a career-ending injury can be described in terms of meaning-making. Meaning-making refers to an active process by which people revise or re-appraise an event or series of events (Baumeister & Vohs, 2005). This reappraisal often
involves finding the positive aspect of a negative event. In an important paper on how people cope with misfortune, Taylor (1983) demonstrated the power of suffering to stimulate the need for meaning. It is thought that giving meaning to a negative event may provide some form of control, even if it has no practical value (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000). From Taylor’s viewpoint, people manage suffering and misfortune in three possible ways: (a) finding purpose in it, (b) rebuilding a sense of mastery or control, and (c) enhancing self worth. These three ways of dealing with adversity correspond to three of the four needs for meaning (i.e., purpose, efficacy, and self worth); the fourth is value. Baumeister and Vohs (2005) suggested that many people believe that suffering serves a positive role and this helps them manage it more easily. The transformation process from adversity to prosperity has been referred to as the “benefit-finding” aspect of meaning-making (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998). For example an athlete initially may feel that a career-ending injury is a negative event but learns the lessons and “benefits” of moving on and developing other life domains. However, there has been very little research on meaning-making and adaptation during retirement in the sport domain.

Authors Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) have suggested that retirement experiences may promote a time of existential questioning of “who am I” and a deconstruction of the past that opens up opportunities for positive adaptations and personal growth because it leads to a search for meaning in new settings. This may be particularly true after a career-ending injury yet there are no studies in the sport realm that have examined meaning-making during retirement after a career-ending injury.

**Identity, injury, and adaptations.**

In the field of sport psychology, the concept of transition was introduced during the late 1960s-early 1980s in the context of psychologists’ and social scientists’ interest in how former
athletes coped with the event of retirement from elite and professional sport (Mihovilovic, 1968). Evolution has occurred in the research on retirement experiences. Initially viewed as a singular event, it is now viewed as a transitional process associated with a holistic, developmental life-span perspective on transitions faced by athletes (Wylleman et al., 2004). Sport psychology borrowed from mainstream psychology the concept of transition, describing it as the occurrence of one or more specific events that bring about “individual” changes in assumptions about oneself (Schlossberg, 1981). Since this initial adoption, the concept of transition has broadened from a focus on these individual changes to acknowledging the influence of social factors (Wapner & Craig-Bay, 1992) in the sport context (e.g., Wylleman et al., 2004).

Researchers have identified retirement challenges in a broad range of areas, including many forms of negative reaction to sudden career-ending injury (Hill & Lowe, 1974; Kleiber, et al., 1987; Mihovilovic, 1968; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Webb et al., 1998). For example, Milhovilovic found that club soccer players in Yugoslavia experienced feelings of abandonment, fears for their future and frustration in retirement after injury. Kleiber et al.’s (1987) research on male football and soccer players found that individuals who experience a career-ending injury have lower life satisfaction.

Other researchers have documented the difficulties that athletes experience in adjusting to post-sport life (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Hill & Lowe, 1974; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; McPherson, 1980; Mihovilovic, 1968; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006). For example, Milhovilovic found that club soccer players experienced diminished social networks, lack of vocational direction, resorted to increased smoking and drinking, and they neglected physical exercise. Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) described adolescent gymnasts’ experiences of feeling lost and confused for up to five years after leaving sport.
Some research indicates that retirement challenges are greater for those who experience an uncontrollable event (Alfermann, 2000; Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000; Stambulova et al., 2009; Webb et al., 1998; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wylleman et al., 2004). This research suggests that athletes who experience a career-ending injury outside their control are most vulnerable to adaptation difficulties during retirement. For example, Webb et al.’s (1998) investigation of high school and college athletes determined that athletes who were forced into retirement from injury experienced greater difficulties (e.g., lower self-esteem, difficulty with identity changes) than athletes who retired for other reasons.

**Depression, mood and injury.**

Relatively little empirical research has examined the relationship between athletic identity and the psychological reactions to injury. For individuals who derive their self worth solely from their identity (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990), depression has been implicated in reaction to injuries based on anecdotal evidence. Oatley and Bolton's (1985) social-cognitive theory of reactive depression suggests that “[D]epression occurs with events that disrupt roles by which people define their worth, if these people lack alternative sources of self worth” (p. 372). Thus individuals who define their self worth primarily on the basis of their performance of a single social role, as many elite athletes do, are vulnerable to depression following the occurrence of life events (e.g., injury) that threaten the individual’s performance of the self-defining role (Brewer, 1993; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

Further, the relationship between pronounced identity and depression needs to be clarified. Brewer (1993) conducted four quantitative studies investigating the relationship of athletic identity and the psychological effect of injury. He examined patterns of self-identification with social roles such as athletic identification and hypothetical career-ending injuries among a college student sample. In summary, findings from each of the four studies
indicated that athletic identity was strongly related to depression following injury, with participants higher in athletic identity reacting more negatively to injury, imagined or real, than participants lower in athletic identity. However, no significant correlation was found between athletic identity and mood disturbance in another study (Green & Weinberg, 2001) and the authors suggested that the inconsistencies in the results compared to Brewer’s (1993) study may be due to diversity of athletic identity. In this paper the term depression is used to describe the participants’ descriptions of their experiences and replicates their voice and use of the term depression. The research to-date has not closely examined the role of depression and identity during elite athlete retirement from a career-ending injury.

**Factors influencing adaptation.**

Initial research suggests that the quality of adaptation to post-sports life is influenced by a number of factors: (a) amount of institutional support (Gorbett, 1985; Schlossberg, 1981); (b) social support from family and friends (Coakley, 1983; Mihovilovic, 1968; Weinberg & Gould, 2007); (c) degree of coping ability (Tunick, Etzel, Leard, & Lerner, 1996); (d) transfer of sport mental skills to retirement (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993); and (e) level of pre-retirement planning (Grove et al., 1997; Perna, Ahlgren & Zaichkowsky, 1999; Taylor et al., 2005). While past research has found that retirement difficulties are more likely to occur when retirement is involuntary, such as when an athlete is unable to continue because of a career-ending injury (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Stambulova, 1994), there is little research on possible positive adaptations that may result from career-ending injuries.

**Strong athlete identity and retirement.**

This section discusses strong athletic identities of international athletes, those individuals whose participation in sport occurs at the highest levels of competition. The material on athlete
identity is discussed in association with difficulties in retirement transition and developmental challenges associated with identity changes. I then identify social roles (e.g., friends, coaches, and family) and individual psychological factors (e.g., personal control and self-efficacy) that may be associated with identity changes during retirement.

Unlike recreational athletes, international athletes’ identity extends beyond a general attachment to sport. For these athletes, being in sport has added significance and is an important part of their identity. This source of identification cannot easily be replaced by other activities or other work. In this paper, I label this “AI” or athletic identity. As in the workplace, those athletes who derive a major source of their identity from sport find retirement from their sport role to be aversive, because retirement carries with it a loss of identity (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). These individuals may view themselves as inseparable from sport. For example, those whose life activities have revolved around sport roles may find themselves at a loss when these activities are not part of their day-to-day existence. In the workplace (Taylor-Carter et al., 1995) and sport environments, individuals who would be most influenced by the loss would be those who do not have other roles (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) that bring satisfaction. For those who have centered their self-identity in this particular domain, leaving sport entails the loss of critical roles. Retirement adjustment would necessitate developing new roles and adjusting to the loss of formerly central sport-related roles.

There are performance benefits associated with a strong athletic identity (AI), (Horton & Mack, 2000; Werthner & Orlick, 1986); however, many studies in sport psychology note that a pronounced athletic identity is associated with major difficulties for retiring athletes (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Stambulova et al., 2007), including emotional and social adjustments (Grove et al., 1997), inhibited decision-making (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990) and low coping resources (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).
Accepting a different post-sport identity may be difficult for those athletes with a strong, exclusively athletic identity (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) as they may never have imagined a life without sport, yet must endure recovery from a career-ending injury. An intense identification with sport may affect athletes’ response to injury (Ogilvie & Taylor 1993; Stambulova, 1994). For example, when athletes with an overcommitted AI are injured, it has been suggested they may be less likely to rest or pace themselves and increase their commitment to the AI (Webb et al., 1998) during their rehabilitation. The athlete may attempt to return to performance too early, eventually resulting in further injury or forced retirement. In other research, a strong AI has been empirically linked to positive psychological factors such as enhanced confidence (Horton & Mack, 2000). Therefore, the research suggests that both negative and positive events can be associated with athletic identity and retirement experiences of elite athletes following a career-ending injury.

**Athlete injury and retirement.**

It is commonly thought that injury causes more adjustment problems than do other reasons for retirement (Webb et al., 1998) and is typically viewed as a negative and uncontrollable experience that is challenging and stressful for athletes (Alfermann, 2000; Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Stambulova, 1994). Research in rehabilitation psychology supports the idea that challenging identity changes occur after injury. Participants who experienced a stroke reported a more negative sense of who they were, post-stroke (Ellis-Hill & Horn, 2000). In sport, a sudden loss of dreams and identity may leave athletes susceptible to severe adjustment problems, possibly depression (Brewer, 1993; Kleiber & Brock, 1992) and lower life satisfaction (Kleiber et al., 1987), fear, anxiety, loss of self-esteem (Rotella & Heyman, 1986) and substance abuse (Ogilvie & Howe, 1982). Several other factors related to retirement adaptation are (a) the gradualness of the process of athletic
retirement (Lally, 2007; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993), (b) psychological readiness of the athlete (Alfermann, 2000; Lavallee et al., 1997), and (c) the nature and severity of the injury (Anderson, 2002). The research to date in the area of injuries and retirement suggests there are identity adaptation challenges in the retirement transitions of elite athletes; however, sport research has not examined positive adaptations and identity changes following a career-ending injury.

**Athlete retirement.**

Every transition may become a crisis, a relief, a growth experience or a combination of these, depending on the individual’s perception of the situation (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Mixed research findings have led to debate about the proportion of individuals who experience psychosocial adjustment difficulties upon athletic career termination (Curtis & Ennis 1988; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985); this runs parallel to the general literature on retirement from the labour force (Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995). In the sport-psychology literature, injuries have been identified as being possibly the most distressing and traumatic reason for elite athletic career transition (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000; Stambulova et al., 2007; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wylleman et al., 2004), yet few studies examine the positive adaptations of this phenomenon (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). A survey of existing approaches to athlete retirement suggests that an in-depth qualitative investigation of elite athlete identity adaptations and career-ending injuries may increase our understanding of career-termination transitions in this unique population.

Sport psychology research has shifted from viewing retirement as an event to seeing it as a transitional process, including a holistic developmental life-span approach, and acknowledgement of identity as an important individual determinant in adaptation to retirement (Taylor et al., 2005). However, research on injury and identity is scant. Recent qualitative research on identity and retirement has focused on female adolescent gymnasts (Kerr et al.). Research that examines identity and retirement does not distinguish between injuries (non-
normative) and other reasons (normative) for retirement. No qualitative studies have examined adult elite athletes’ identity reformation experiences after a career-ending injury. This gap has resulted in sport injury knowledge of retired athlete transitions and identity changes being fragmented and inconclusive. In sport psychology, most of the empirical research has been descriptive rather than developmental and has been based on general models that point toward negative emotional reactions and distress. Little research in sport examines whether or how people experience positive growth and meaning after injury.

Rehabilitation research on amputees suggests that exploration of positive growth and meaning after injury is an area that warrants further research. However, the majority of studies on adjustment to injury in rehabilitation (e.g., amputation) are cross-sectional in design, have used noncomparable measures and have neglected to study identity. The aim of this research is to shift the focus to examine injury, identity and retirement experiences from a more adaptive and growth-oriented perspective.

**Summary of Chapter**

In summary, this chapter has defined retirement and identity in order to provide a basis for discussion of factors that might influence identity adaptation to retirement. Sport psychology and rehabilitation literature demonstrate the need for research on positive identity adaptations (e.g., meaning) in contrast to low mood or depression that has been associated with injury during the retirement experience of elite athletes. International athletes may experience enhanced athletic identities that can make retirement and adjustment from sport injury challenging.

The purpose of this study is to examine changes in elite athletes’ identity after a career-ending injury with a particular focus on positive adaptations that may assist smooth transitions. Little is known about identity transformation phenomena during elite athlete retirement,
particularly following a career-ending injury. Only when we begin to understand the changes in identity during transition after a career-ending injury can we start to develop effective interventions that will facilitate enhanced self-definition for life after sport.

An in-depth examination of these identity changes and athletes’ subsequent disengagement from sport may reveal protective factors related to adjustment and may provide valuable information on the nature of the change process. Thus, the information gathered from this study will provide knowledge for sport, rehabilitation and career counsellors to develop interventions that support healthy identity development.
Chapter 4: Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to describe my method, interpretive description. The paradigmatic assumptions underlying the method were described in Chapter 2; this section addresses the general application of interpretive description, recruitment, and description of participants. Next, I turn to describing data collection strategies, and data analysis including interview, field notes and observations. The data analysis procedure used to arrive at the research findings is explained. The chapter ends with a discussion of the standards and credibility measures that were employed to establish the scientific integrity of the research process and its ethical obligations.

Introduction to Method

Research strategies in interpretive description build upon work in grounded theory, naturalistic inquiry and ethnography, and on phenomenological approaches for data collection (Thorne, Kirkham, O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). Such strategies include purposive and theoretical sampling that reflects an awareness of patterns, relationships and associations that may illuminate diversity in the subject under study. An interpretive account is generated through informed questioning, using reflective techniques and critical examination. Data analysis is an iterative process that begins during data collection as researchers locate emerging patterns in the data and compare them to existing knowledge. The final product of interpretive description is the investigator’s presentation of patterns and processes in the lived experiences of those studied that contribute to understanding in a new way. The patterns portray common features and contrast differences both within a person and between people. Individual experiences are used to depict similarities and differences, thereby portraying individuals visible within acknowledged patterns. This form of counselling knowledge development appeals to those working directly with clients
because it provides insights on how to apply combined knowledge to individual cases (Thorne et al., 1997; Thorne et al., 2004).

**Application of Interpretive Description**

This section describes the methodology and procedures. In this study, the participants were individuals who were former elite athletes who had experienced the disengagement process from sport following a career-ending injury. In accordance with interpretive description, in-depth interviews, field notes and counselling documents were the primary data sources. The transcription of interviews and field notes was continual during the research process to facilitate the emergence of themes in the data.

Interpretive description methodology requires purposeful rather than probability sampling. Sample selection is purposive and carries on until maximal variation and meaningful variation on the patterns and themes that emerge from the inductive analysis is reached (Glaser, 2002; Sandelowski, 1995). In this study, participants were recruited based on a common angle of experience that they helped me to understand throughout the research process (i.e., the experiences of elite athletes with a career-ending injury). At the same time, meaningful variation and maximal variation was sought (Thorne, 2008). As researcher, I began to seek out specific types of cases (e.g., team sports versus individual sports, Olympians versus non-Olympians, endurance versus explosive sports) and generated a data base that would establish credibility. In order to obtain a particular selection of participants that will lead to meaningful and maximal variation, interpretive description uses a framework to guide the research logic by asking: “What knowledge do we need?” “What are our options for obtaining something close to what we want?” and “How can the inquiry maintain an ethical stance and moral obligation?” (Thorne, 2008). The goal of the present research was to understand the experiences of elite athletes relative to their self identity (coherence and purpose) following a career-ending injury.
Therefore, I targeted a purposive selection of male and female elite athletes who had experienced a sport career-ending injury.

Data analysis was conducted by asking major questions: “What is happening here?” and “What am I learning about this?” (Thorne, 2009) and “What am I missing?” A central element of data collection is that it is an inductive process and I carefully noted self-reflections of my own framework or theories that were brought to the study so that they were not influencing the data in unintended ways. For example, my master’s thesis investigated the eating behaviours of female athletes; in this research, when participants described behaviours such as eating, I noted that my readiness to interpret this within a stress framework was part of my lens and might not match participants’ descriptions of their experiences. Constructions of my reflections of the data (both participant experiences and my own processes) were tracked concurrently with engagement of discussions with colleagues and this analysis formed the foundation of ongoing data construction.

Participants

The people who matched the narrow population under study, elite international level athletes with career-ending injuries, were recruited for this study with the assistance of Pacific Sport and Provincial Sport Organizations in British Columbia, and Canada’s National Sport Training Centers. Based on initial purposive selection criteria presented below, I made contact with the sport agencies and potential participants with a letter (Appendix A) that introduced the study and its possible benefits. In this initial contact letter, I explained my study and sought participation. If they were interested in hearing more about the study, they were provided with information to contact me directly. Once telephone contact was made, I described the further goals of the study and what their involvement would entail, and sought participation. If they voiced interest, I encouraged them to take time to consider participating. In the meantime, they
received an information letter and an informed consent form that described the aims of the study in more detail. I contacted them after receipt of the letter to determine their interest in taking part in the study and explained that they could refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. If they agreed to participate, verbal consent was obtained, with written consent on the day of the interview.

**Participant criteria.**

Participants who met the following criteria would be included in the study: (a) an elite athlete who had competed on a national team or had international experience, (b) male or female, (c) able-bodied (i.e., not parathletes), (d) career-ending injury, (e) two to eight years post-primary sport participation, (f) team or individual sports, (g) not presently competing at an elite level in their primary sport or subsequently after retirement compete at an elite level in a secondary sport, (h) not younger than 22 years of age, and (f) injury as the result of sport participation.

Participants who met the following criteria were excluded from the study: (a) those that did not meet the above criteria, (b) those that intended to return to their primary sport or a secondary sport in which they were engaged at the time of the accident, (c) injury that causes memory or mental-capacity deficits, and (d) a disabled body that is congenital.

**Selection.**

The selection of the time frame (2-8 years) between the participants' retirement from sport and the interview was based on several factors. First, Yannick, Bilard, Ninot and Delignières's (2003) research on Olympic athletes indicates that an initial crisis occurs up to five months after retirement. Then, after five months, perceived physical condition, sports competence, physical strength and physical self worth increase to about one year after career
termination. Yannick et al’s findings were on healthy able-bodied athletes who retired from Olympic level sport and this is consistent with research conducted by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) and Werthner and Orlick (1986), who suggested that transitional athletes take several years to re-adjust to life. Therefore, two years after retirement was chosen as the minimal amount of time between retirement and interview in this study. Secondly, McAdams (2008) indicates that, with increasing age, autobiographical memories of participant experiences and stories produce more integrated stories of identity. This suggests that athletes who have been out of sport for a longer period of time benefit from distance from their experience and are subsequently better able to describe their experiences. Therefore, the present study chose the upper limit of eight years as the maximal amount of time between retirement and interviews. The majority of interviews took place between three to five years after retirement from sport. One participant interview was eight years after retirement from sport. In Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) research some participants took up to five years to adjust after retirement from sport. Given that the participants in the present study retired from injury, a more challenging life event than normal retirement, a longer time duration between interview and retirement was chosen so the distance from the interview would provide benefit and likely occur at a more stable time in the athlete’s life. Thirdly, although authors Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) suggest memory decay and recall bias have the potential to affect research findings, this was not considered to be a major concern in the present study because the aims of the this study were to capture the meaning-making of participants integrated identity stories at the time they were interviewed.

**Participant descriptions.**

The sample for this study consisted of nine participants whose ages ranged from 25 to 42 years. The sample size was small enough to allow for a deep analysis and yet large enough to contribute to a new and rich understanding of experience (Sandelowski, 1995) and to provide
variation. Three female participants and six male participants from various team (e.g., soccer and basketball) and individual sports (e.g., freestyle skiing, rowing) agreed to participate. Four participants competed in summer and five in winter sports, three competed in endurance and six competed in explosive/power sports. Finally two participants played team sports and seven played individual sports. None of the participants compete in elite sport after their retirement from their primary sport.

All participants had competed at an international level, were fluent in English and resided in Canada (from the provinces of British Columbia n=8 and Quebec n=1). The participants were all Caucasian, with middle- or upper-class incomes. However, the nation where the athletes competed in sport varied. For example, one participant played in Asia (and prior to that played in the United States), two in the United States (one played in Europe initially) and the other six were based in Canada. None of the participants had children or were married. All were single, and two participants were in long-term heterosexual relationships. One participant had a homosexual orientation while the other eight participants were of heterosexual orientation.

**Types of participant injuries.**

The types of injuries and rehabilitation experiences of the athletes in this study took many forms and, overall, when compared to the rehabilitation psychology literature may be considered to be mild to moderate in nature. With regard to severity one needs to consider that the culture of sport tends to normalize injuries; the majority of participants had experienced between two to eight surgeries throughout their athletic careers. The injuries experienced by the nine participants varied. One athlete injured her neck, another injured his hip, 3 athletes injured their backs, and 4 athletes injured their knees. For example, one participant experienced a herniated disc in the lower back that required two years of physiotherapy, while two participants had upper back-shoulder or lower back-hip injuries that never received formal diagnosis from
the medical system and received minimal medical treatment (e.g., one month) before they retired. The participant with the neck injury to her cervical vertebrae C6-7 was not permitted to medically participate until she received surgery that would require fusion of her neck. The athlete chose to retire rather than go ahead with the surgery. Another participant experienced a hip injury and received surgery to treat this injury. He received a surgical procedure which he described as including bone graft because he was too young to get a hip replacement.

The four knee injuries were an anterior cruciate tear, a dislocation with torn tendons, a torn meniscus and posterior cruciate ligament tear. All of the athletes with knee, hip and neck injuries required surgery to continue participation in sport at a recreational level. One athlete with a torn posterior cruciate ligament tear was also diagnosed with Epstein-Barr virus and these combined diagnoses contributed to her athletic retirement. Another participant managed his injury through modification of training (reduction in volume) and increase of mental training. Athletes commonly took ibuprofen (e.g., brand name Advil) or anti-inflammatory drugs as well as received physiotherapy and massage treatments. One participant was prescribed anti-inflammatory medication, a contraindication to his heart condition (e.g., a pace maker). After surgical treatment and retirement all athletes resumed sports at a recreational level. None of the participants competed at an elite level in any sport after retirement.

**Data Collection**

**Interviews.**

Three semi-structured in depth interviews were conducted with each participant by the researcher and tape recorded with permission. Seidman (1991) suggested that a sequence of three interviews with each participant would likely produce depth and breadth in the experience under study. Each interview was held at a time and place that was convenient for the nine participants to optimize their comfort. Data for one participant were omitted because it emerged that this
participant’s head injury had created considerable cognitive deficits during the time of interest of the present study. This was partially an ethical dilemma because I felt that I needed to allow this participant’s story to be heard. However, when I reviewed the criterion and purpose of my study, I felt that this participant’s injury characteristics (severe head injury), was outside the realm of the study. Moreover, upon interviewing the participant it was clear that memory deficits had occurred in critical disengagement experiences.

At the initial interview I reviewed limits to confidentiality with the participants and obtained consent to participate in the study (see Appendix C & E). In order to build a relationship and encourage participant collaboration, I shared in the initial interview my experience of a retiring from sport due to injury. Then I asked participants to complete the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) and this gave us a starting point for the interview. Often, before the biographical data was completed, most participants were engaged in telling their stories of training, injury and retiring from sport due to injury. McAdams (2008) indicates that storytelling by individuals who have lived a meaningful experience helps create integration of their experiences.

If the biographical information was completed and if the participant was not already telling their story, I followed the semi-structured interview guide (Appendix F) beginning with the question “Could you please describe for me, as fully as you can, the experience of your transition from sport?” I loosely followed this interview guide depending on what direction the participant’s experiences indicated. Interviews were largely unstructured in order to allow participants to reveal the most important meanings to them. Care was taken to build rapport, given that the better the rapport, the better the data were likely to be (Hall & Stevens, 1991). However, the semi-structured interview guide was used as a prompt when needed (see Appendix F).
The interview guide was developed from a review of relevant literature in the field. Questions such as “What is the experience of disengagement from sport after having a career-ending injury?” and “How did your experience of a career-ending injury affect your transition from sport?” assisted the athletes in telling their stories. I used elaboration and clarification probes generated from the monologues to ask about issues related to raising awareness of identity and retirement. For example, “What did you mean when you said you were ready to move on?” In addition, the use of the interview guide serves helped me to maintain a similar focus with all participants. Each interview was approximately 1.5 to 2.5 hours in length. Participants were invited to contact me directly should they wish to add to or correct their data, or share additional comments.

Since data collection and data analysis were done iteratively, data collection took place over six months. The time between each interview varied from two weeks to two months depending on the participant's availability and schedule. After each interview I reviewed the transcripts and generated a new set of questions which were loosely followed in the second interview and third interviews with each participant. At the same time I was engaged in the iterative process of comparing and contrasting patterns with other participants and re-visited the data (Thorne et al., 1997). Comparison of data from different participants generated new questions for the second and third participant interviews. Participants often commented that they had thought about what we talked about in the previous interview and added additional thoughts or comments which provided direction of their own to the second and third interviews.
**Researcher’s journal.**

Field notes were made immediately after each interview. I recorded my perceptions, noteworthy elements of the environment, continuing conversations apart from those captured on tape, and any other details that I considered to be important to subsequent data analysis and comparison. I asked myself questions such as: "What led this participant to respond in this way? What am I hearing and what am I not hearing? What is different and similar in the interviews conducted thus far?" I expected this reflection to lead to further clarification or support the development of emerging themes. Memos were attached to the transcripts as part of the text that was analyzed and then these memos were a reminder to follow up in the next interview. For example, after one interview, several questions emerged about the participant’s rehabilitation and exclusion from teammates during recovery: “Did you feel that input into being separated would have made a difference to recovery? Did you feel being separated was healthy for your recovery?” and “What was family support during this time of separation from teammates?” In another instance I reflected on my own need to hear certain parts of the participant’s story. I wrote a memo to myself, “I really want to hear his emotional piece but there does not seem to be much. He is a very rational, in your head kind of person.” In addition, a memo file was kept, documenting the thought and decision-making of my reflections and meetings with committee members. This strategy was employed to contribute to the validity of the findings.

**Data Analysis**

Consistent with qualitative research in general and interpretive description more specifically, an inductive analysis of the data was undertaken. Prior to beginning the formal coding process, immersion in the data occurred (Thorne et al., 1997). During immersion, I analyzed and interpreted individual cases so that common concepts could be recognized through reframing. Techniques of content analysis, and constant comparative analysis (Sandeloswki,
Consistent with Thorne’s (2008) description of common pitfalls in interpretive description, at times I found myself identifying specific labels too early and was reminded to revert to a more holistic approach. The data analysis was dynamic and iterative, involving going back and forth between data and examining patterns or relationships in ways that would confirm or challenge the basis upon which my linkages between the pieces and parts of the data were made (Sandelowski, 1995; Thorne, 2008; Thorne et al., 1997). This iterative process behind many qualitative approaches guided the process. The inquiry was constantly refined through iteration, testing and challenging the emerging conceptualization of the study’s phenomena (Thorne et al., 1997). I explored the range of ways in which the various clusters, patterns and their interrelationships were configured in order to conceptualize ways in which the data may have been formulated, and evaluated the implications of each possible formulation. The intent was to find the one formulation that most fully and meaningfully represented the phenomenon I studied. In re-immersing myself in the data and often re-visited the literature to draw upon the new direction the participants’ meaningful stories directed. There were a number of levels of abstraction that I undertook in my analysis where I worked with the data to move from simple patterns to more conceptually full and fleshed out understandings (S. Thorne, personal communication, January 28, 2010).

Consistent with an interpretive description analytic path, I went through a process of moving from pieces of data upward toward fully conceptualized findings. The building blocks involved identifying what constituted bits of data, then beginning to identify patterns within them. Various configurations of data were explored (e.g., initial groupings, collections, frequencies, intensities) in order to avoid drawing premature conclusions. As I worked with the various patterns (level 1 and level 2 of abstraction in this paper), I started to explore other, more abstract relationships into which they could form, and which were helpful in organizing the
patterns into a broader conceptualization (called “factors” or larger groupings at level 3 of abstraction, and “styles” at level 4 of abstraction).

In the process of each level of abstraction, I returned to the data in several stages throughout my analysis and generated different categories of findings at each stage (see Appendix J). During my initial review of the data (level 1), it became clear that it was necessary to analyze the athletes’ pre-injury identity and experience. This suggested the existence of more balanced and less balanced identities prior to a career-ending injury. Once that was completed, I moved to the next level of abstraction (level 2), which involved the basic analysis of identity transition during injury and retirement. This revealed that there were smooth versus turbulent transitions. Next, I became aware that there was greater abstraction suggested in the data, and I reverted to the transcripts and located patterns and relationships where four main factors emerged that were associated with whether athletes experienced a smooth versus turbulent transition (level 3). My immersion in the data provided me with a sense that there were more patterns to be analyzed and this revealed a final level of abstraction where I went again back to the data and identified four styles of identity transition (level 4) (see Appendices L-N).

After each level, I sat back and thought about the original pieces and the commonalities or patterns within and between the different participants. The data collection and data analysis continued until redundancy occurred within and between participants. Evidence of redundancy in interviews occurred with participants’ acknowledgement of repetition from previous interviews. For example, during the third interview, they acknowledged that they had discussed some of the information already in previous interviews.

Coding of the data was completed by the author to capture the nuances and nonverbal cues of key words and phrases by the participants. At times, I went back to the raw data (the
recordings) and reviewed these for clarity. In order to counteract the effects of my personal imprint (influences of my past and perspectives) and to enhance critical data analysis, I used reflexivity to capture my personal reactions and reflections. Because interpretive description acknowledges the interview as a collaborative, socially constructed process, reflexivity helped me to recognize boundaries. This included those influenced by language, discipline, roles, socialization, histories, and our respective agendas as researcher and participant (Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). I discussed my actions and reactions with several other colleagues in counselling psychology and sport psychology to check my reflections. Despite the possibility of the researcher being unaware of her influence, the researcher’s counselling expertise facilitates intuition and creativity in data analysis (Cutcliffe, 2003; May, 1994).

Thick descriptions were used to write up the interpretations derived from the athletes’ lived experience. Thick description, as opposed to thin description that simply states facts, provides the context of the phenomenon explored, uncovers meanings that organize experiences, and traces the phenomenon’s development. Thick description presents meanings and feelings as a text that can be interpreted (Polkinghorne, 2005). Interpretation aims to reveal the meanings and concepts that organize an athlete’s disengagement from sport and the recovery process. This intention requires that the researcher be an informed reader of the experience studied (Thorne, 2008).

Rigour

As with other qualitative research, rigour is a critical component of interpretive description. Sandelowski (1986) has identified the following criteria for attaining rigour in qualitative inquiry: truth-value or credibility, applicability of fittingness, consistency or auditability, and neutrality or confirmability.
Credibility.

Credibility refers to the extent to which the interpretation of the research is descriptive of the participants’ meanings, rather than the researcher-defined meanings. Although believing we can completely set aside our biases is naïve (Thorne et al., 1997), I shared with colleagues my personal biases that I struggled with during the research investigation. I tried not to influence participant interpretations with my own approval or disapproval. According to Thorne et al. (2004), credibility of the findings is derived largely from the way the specific analytic decisions are presented and contextualized within the larger picture. I presented my analytic decisions and showed how these were contextualized in the study. I reflected their statements back to participants during interviews in order to ensure the accuracy of my interpretation. I relayed interpretations of early interviews to the participants to establish the perception of interpretations. For example, I summarized what participants had said after each interview and asked questions to extend understanding of that part of their story in the next interview. Thorne et al. (1997) recommended taking key statements of my interpreted data back to participants as such an approach may produce new insights when individuals reflect on why such key statements do or do not represent their view. In addition, I replayed key statements of each participant’s earlier interviews to the same participant in order to capture participants’ perception of their experiences. This assisted me in clarifying the progress of my data analysis and facilitated the depth of my interpretation.

Fittingness.

Fit is achieved when (a) the findings can be applied to settings outside the one in which the research was completed, and (b) the findings are viewed as significant and appropriate to the real world (Sandelowski, 1986). Like credibility, fittingness is accomplished by participant verification and through feedback from sharing the findings. Formal member checking was not
undertaken but participant verification of later interviews with those of previous interviews, as previously described, was conducted. In doing so, I received feedback from participants that reminded me of the need to keep certain aspects confidential. For example, I did not describe which Olympics they had attended or whether it was a summer or winter Olympics. Interpretive description means the researcher should interpret the findings as described by the participant, rather than the participants’ confirming the findings as either correct or incorrect. The validity of the findings in interpretive description is defined by the capacity of the data to create mental heuristics for the use of expert counsellors in the field. These heuristics should allow for new understanding of their reflective practice observations (Thorne et al., 1997; 2004). I sought informal feedback from expert practitioners in the field of sport psychology and counselling psychology. Field notes and journaling facilitated the progress of reflection during data analysis and led me to question my assumptions about participants’ experience.

Auditability.

Auditability is realized if an external researcher can unambiguously follow the decision trail used by the investigator and arrive at comparable conclusions (Sandelowski, 1986). All interviews were transcribed by a transcriptionist and verified by me through comparison with the tapes. The transcripts were first read without making codes or notes in order to get a general feel for the data. Next, the key elements of the data were underlined along with a single reference word or key phrase in the margin. Then another reading of the transcripts occurred in order to view recurrent themes or main processes. The data collection and analysis were completed simultaneously and iteratively so that the first stage of analysis assisted with the later data collection and analysis. Near the end of the data collection, transcripts were analyzed for common patterns.
Confirmability.

If auditability, credibility and applicability are established, confirmability should be assured (Sandeloswki, 1986). Participants verified their stories in two ways: (a) participants reviewed transcripts after the interviews, and (b) reviewed researcher’s summaries of their stories. The researcher’s summaries provided chronological coherence to participant stories (pre-injury, injury and post-injury events were chronologically organized to ensure clarity). The research study also involved ‘epistemological integrity’ such that the research question, decision making, interpretation strategies and design follow explicit assumptions. The system checks, alignment of assumptions and validity-as-reflexive-accounting together support the confidence that the findings hold interpretive authority and are trustworthy (Thorne, 2008).

Ethical Considerations

This section discusses the responsibilities of the researcher to protect study participants, also known as responsible-research conduct (Steneck, 2002). The protection of participants rests with the researcher and the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject and the narrow field of participants (elite athletes), who are often already identifiable and in the public eye due to their “celebrity status,” the research may not only open up unresolved issues but also create considerable discomfort in the participants. Whenever this occurred I provided emotional support, reiterated to participants their right to terminate their participation at any time, and provided options for ongoing support (e.g., professional counselling services, support groups). This occurred in three of the nine interviews. I recognized that this research endeavour could be therapeutic and was cognizant of balancing participants’ need to talk with the needs of the research.

I was aware of the possibility of coercion to participate by past coaches, national sport organizations or national sport centers and took measures to reduce athlete contact with the
aforementioned bodies (e.g., through direct contact with the researcher). I was also aware of the influence of my role as a sport consultant and made efforts to avoid dual-role relationships. In one such instance, (where I was consulting an athlete who was being coached by a participant in my study) I consulted my supervisor on my feelings of remaining comfortable with a possible dual relationship and a connection to clients whom I had counselled. I was aware of issues of confidentiality and I ensured informed consent throughout the research process, maintained privacy (protecting identity of participants), and protected participants from harm (physical, emotional, or any other kind) (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

I kept all data from the research study in locked filing cabinets accessible only to myself and password-protected on my computer. Participants were kept anonymous through the use of coded identification on all transcripts and tapes. The codes were known only to myself. A signed agreement to maintain ethical standards was obtained from the transcriptionist who transcribed the interview tapes. The participants’ privacy was further protected by presenting only selected data to my dissertation committee members so that the participants’ confidentiality would not be compromised. At the conclusion of the study, all identifying information will be removed from the transcripts and field notes, and tapes will be erased. The unidentifiable data will be retained for a period of five years in order to facilitate dissemination of the findings and publication of the results.

The aforementioned knowledge creates the conceptual basis of my methodological approach to study the way people interpret and describe their retirement experiences after a career-ending injury. This approach guided me to:

1. Design a preliminary schedule based on existing knowledge, leaving space to revise the initial interview schedule.
2. Recognize the importance of thematic outliers as I advanced selection criteria for study participants.

3. View participants’ experiences as influenced by past and present lived experiences, including family, team and coach relations and interactions, and by their personal complex cognitive and emotional interactions.

4. Absorb myself in the subjective interpretation of participants’ stories to elucidate my understanding of their lived experience. In connecting the experiences to lay theory I turned their experience into meaningful stories for future practice.

5. Engage in a reflective iterative process in which I constantly asked myself: “Why is this here? Why not something else? And what does it mean? What is happening here?”

6. Construct knowledge in a collaborative way by sharing themes and patterns.

7. Explore ways in which cumulative processes affect the understanding of individual cases.

8. Consider how counselling knowledge derived from the study can be applied in the development of counselling practice.

9. Interview ten participants three times each. One participant was not included in the final analysis because of the nature of his injury.

**Key Decisions in Interpretation of Findings**

The results of interpretive description are not in themselves “evidence” but represent a portion of knowledge that may shape the context of practice (Thorne, 2008). The results expand and heighten awareness or consciousness of the identity changes that may occur during an elite athlete disengagement from sport as a result of a career-ending injury. In completing my analysis, it became apparent that I needed to analyze the participants’ reports of experience on several levels. Specifically, I needed to analyze the athletes’ pre-injury reports of their experience before I could understand their experiences after a career-ending injury. A description
of the themes that characterize athletes’ pre-injury identity and experience became the focus of Chapter 5. This served as a precursor to Chapter 6, where I present the results of my analysis of the elite athletes’ transitional experience following a career-ending injury and resulting in identity change. The analysis of the athletes’ transitional experience required that I return to the data at several levels of analysis; after identifying general patterns, I returned to the data to investigate patterns that emerged at more fine-grained levels of description. While this approach was not anticipated at the beginning of the study, conducting the analysis in these stages produced several levels of findings, which are described in Chapter 6.
Chapter 5: Experiences of Elite Athlete Identity Before Injury

The topic of this chapter emerged from my analysis, as I found I needed to describe and analyze the athlete pre-injury patterns before I could analyze the retirement experiences of elite athletes after a career-ending injury. This chapter presents the patterns derived from the participants’ description of their experiences prior to a career-ending injury (e.g., level one of data abstraction). These descriptions are a starting point in understanding the nature of the findings on identity change, described in Chapter 6. In order to appreciate the effect of a career-ending injury on changes in athlete identity and provide a context for these changes, it was important for the athletes to tell their story of injury and understand their identity prior to retirement.

All athletes were able to remember and describe in detail the emotional and physical experiences of their career-ending injury as well as their identity change after their athletic retirement. A subset of the participants struggled emotionally in re-telling their stories because these memories elicited tears and distress. When appropriate, I reinforced their right to terminate the interview at any time but, when given this option, all participants chose to proceed with their stories. I was informed by some athletes that it was valuable for them to share their story. In particular, the athletes indicated that it was rare for their stories to be heard and to be able to share the special times and experiences of their lives with someone else.

The present chapter describes (a) the elite athletes’ experience of their identity prior to a career-ending injury, and (b) factors that reinforced the elite athlete identity. A clear pattern emerged as participants described definitions of their identity as an elite athlete. Further, there were two patterns that described those participants with (a) more balanced identity, and (b) less balanced identity. Further common elements concerned how the coach-athlete relationship,
family and culture affected their identity and feelings of self worth. Each influence is described below.

**Defining the Elite Athlete Identity**

Consistent with my counselling observations of elite athletes, all participants in this study described an exclusive, narrow focus on sport related goals and lifestyle prior to the time of their career-ending injury and disengagement from sport. For example, when asked how much of their identity was dedicated to the elite athlete role prior to injury, all athletes said that “who they were” was at least 70-90% an elite athlete and there was little room for other activity. Their daily living revolved around sport, thinking about elite sport, maintaining sleep to perform in sport, and nutritional and conditioning habits that would result in a successful sport outcome. If these athletes had a job or went to school part-time, it was of secondary importance because they needed flexible scheduling to train, travel and compete at irregular times. Their life was not typical of most workers and some recognized and felt guilty about the privileged uni-dimensional lifestyle that allowed them to hold a narrow, elite-sport focus.

To further develop participants definition of an elite athlete, each was asked, “What is an elite athlete?” The following quotes are participants’ descriptions of the sub-elements that compose their own definitions of elite athlete:

…they’re motivated….very hard worker….can concentrate and find the end of the light…. Just a very focused individual ….Knows where they want to be. They know who they want to be. ….They just have to find a way to do it…..It’s a very, very strong personality to…..

Definitely—motivated….I guess you have to be like… …Passionate……

Competitive, I would probably call it train minded, just having one goal, to be as good as possible.

A sense of accomplishment.
Their answers provided rich and detailed descriptions that included several common sub-patterns: selfishness and an ability to live in the moment, being ego oriented, motivated and focused on goals, competitive, and having a sense of accomplishment. These elements of the elite athlete definition provided support and maintenance for the elite athlete in sport goals and athletic identity.

This section discusses in greater detail the characteristics that participants used to define an elite athlete. The participants described their role as needing to be selfish. For example, athletes explained that they particularly enjoyed the single, selfish life offered by their elite-sport experience because it allowed them to decrease other life domains so that they could focus on their goals. Thus, the athletes intentionally narrowed their other life domains so they could concentrate on achieving their athletic goals.

Similarly, these adult athletes (age range 25 to 42 years) described being an elite athlete as similar to characteristics they thought were adolescent. They said that elite sport allowed them to “prolong adolescence.” It was “all about me, me, me, me.” “You are like this big superstar,” it “allows you to be younger” and “you don’t actually look at the future. You can live in the moment.” The athletes said that they could “act immature” and did not need to “grow up.” In describing an elite athlete, some athletes suggested that they were “allowed to be selfish,” but thought they had taken it too far and not thought of the long-term implications of elite sport. For example:

It’s hard, I think, being an athlete and being really serious and motivated . . . to really to see the future or to think about the implications . . . it’s kind of like you’re being a teenager and you don’t know that you’re doing your body [harm] and you’re taking drugs or whatever. Or you know, you jump off . . . roofs. . . . You’re not really thinking about 10 years down the road. You’re thinking about next week.
Athletes said that being an elite athlete involved the need to develop an “ego” in order to be successful in sport. They stated that those athletes who did not “care about anything other than what they were doing” were most successful. These self-centered athletes “knew that they were better than anyone else” and “had this anger.” The anger some athletes described was something that they did not like about themselves and noted that their self-centeredness and ego orientation was a barrier during their retirement experience. They noted that self-centeredness does not “work so well with relationships” and “with major career goals” outside of sport and during retirement. There was a consensus that being selfish, ego-driven and self-centered was a central part of who they were as a competitive elite athlete, particularly if they wanted to be successful.

The participants described the key aspects of an elite athlete as motivation and a single focus on goals. For example, athletes said that they were motivated and passionate about sport and this allowed them to concentrate on their goals and be fully committed to training. The athletes also commented that they were “very hard workers,” knew what they wanted, found a way to commit to their plans and sometimes put up “a cold front” in order to get what they wanted.

Closely linked to the characteristics of motivation, focus, ego and self-centeredness, athletes described competitiveness as a defining characteristic of who they were. For example, athletes commented that being competitive required them to be single-minded and focused on their goals:

Just having one goal, to be as good as possible. . . . think only about themselves. They think only about themselves. I guess selfish. Completely selfish. Goal-oriented of course, competitive, goal-oriented, selfish. . . . Those are the main ones.
Athletes also said that part of their self-definition was a “sense of accomplishment.” The characteristic of accomplishment reinforced the athletes’ training efforts and provided the fuel to be focused, motivated, ego oriented, self-centered and competitive, driving the participants further into the elite athlete identity.

More Balanced and Less Balanced Identity

During my first analysis of the data (level one), despite all the participants’ describing immersion in the elite athlete identity prior to injury, two distinct identity patterns emerged: the more balanced identity and the less balanced identity. One pattern I refer to as the more balanced identity because these individuals were able to remain confident about the other parts of who they were despite immersion in the athletic identity. The second pattern I call the less balanced identity and these participants were also immersed in the elite athlete identity but did not have confidence in who they were. This contrast between identity patterns (more balanced and less balanced) appeared relative to the other influences that emerged and are discussed as part of the following sections.

Coach-athlete relationship and more balanced identity.

This section discusses the effect of the coach-athlete relationship on participants’ feelings of self worth outside their sport roles and how this influenced the more balanced identity patterns that emerged prior to injury. The athletes who were in the more balanced identity group received attention from coaches who showed they cared for and valued the athletes as individuals apart from their immersed athletic identity. One coach encouraged an athlete to retire from sport because he knew both the person and the athlete. The athlete describes:

he was the one that said...I think you should throw in the towel. (mm) Because he knows my family really well and he knows me really well and told me .... The coach knew my family and knew that I had “brains.”
While the coach in this case recognized that the individual was a gifted athlete, he also knew that the individual was smart and should “go to university.” This athlete with the more balanced identity pattern valued and listened to his coach because he felt the coach knew who he was outside of sport.

Another athlete that liked to “joke around” said that his coach preferred him as an individual to the other athletes and gave him more opportunities to reach his goals:

Cared for me as a person . . . because of my personality . . . some coaches liked me a bit more because of my personality and gave me more time to get better . . . fact of life. Coaches really believe in me I think 'cause of my personality

These athletes, in turn, reciprocated and were confident, proactive, used their voice, described greater control and autonomy and “got more out of their coaches.” They described coaches who were extremely positive and how this helped the athletes’ self belief:

I really liked my coach. I thought he was one of the best coaches in the world. And he still is and . . . that was the first thing. Because I always need . . . a good . . . team with me. My coach and myself, I always liked . . . to feel that my coach really believes in [me]. And if he believes in [me], it brings me some hope and brings me confidence.

Athletes responded to this positive attention by approaching the national team coaches and expressing what they needed from the coach to be successful. Positive coach-athlete relationships resulted in some athletes staying at the Provincial level longer before moving up to National team so they could be with coaches who they enjoyed training with. Athletes indicated they valued coaches who could express emotion. For example:

He can live his emotion, he can really tell me how he feels…… And I need some, when he gives me feedback, I need emotion. And he was totally like this, so it really helped me out.

Athletes remarked that it wasn’t what the coaches said, it was the way they said things:
...the way to say things……like that's a good run or that's an amazing run. You know, it's just the intonation. And the way he's going to talk and...I really feel that….he was with me. He was there with me...

The athletes in the more balanced identity pattern’s positive coach-athlete relationship allowed them to learn from their coaches and to take care of their bodies before injury occurred:

Because when you're a kid, like...you don't care about that stuff and you don't believe that you're going to injure yourself. But I always remember my first meeting in the World Cup group. The two coaches were there and they wore shorts and both of them had like a big scar on the knee…..So you know you're going to get injured in that sport.

Athletes with a more balanced identity guided the coach, described what they needed from the coach and collaborated in the preparation of their training. For example, when they were injured, athletes reduced the volume of physical training and increased mental training; the athlete had developed good knowledge of who they were and this complemented the elite athlete role. The confident part of who they were provided congruence and balance to the athlete role and enabled the athletes to have a voice in some of their training. Their confidence helped them demonstrate their agency, voice and autonomy in the coach–athlete relationship.

These relationships between the coaches and athletes are examples of an athlete-centered approach (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) in which the athlete holds more responsibility than is typical of many paternalistic coach–athlete relationships. In these coach–athlete relationships, the power is shifted away from the coach and allows the athlete (the athlete takes the initiative) to develop self-reliance, agency, autonomy and, most importantly, self belief.

Coaches who demonstrated that they liked their athletes as individuals reinforced a more balanced athletic identity. Coach recognition and valuing of the non-athlete identity enhanced the elite athletes’ self confidence and security in who they were as a person. These athletes did not feel they had to prove their self worth and experienced being understood by their coaches. For example, they did not feel they had to prove themselves to other people. “I don't think I was...
. . . ever into . . . proving myself to other people . . . I did it more for myself.” The confidence in who they were supported a more balanced approach, a more realistic goal setting, that was internally driven:

I was always pretty realistic in knowing that . . . the professional level is so high. There's still so many levels within the professional level that . . . for me it was pretty clear that it would probably be impossible for me to do it. . . . I wanted to be as good as I can possibly be with my training.

Prior to injury, the athletes in the more balanced group said they had an internal drive that the coaches supported. For example, these athletes knew that if they were to achieve their Olympic goals they had to keep their focus on the “controllables” (e.g., doing their best) and in turn, this process approach resulted in a more balanced elite athlete identity:

My goal was to win the Olympics when I was a kid . . . but . . . winning . . . it's something that you cannot control. The only thing that you can control is what you do and one thing I know is in the [Olympics], I did my best run in my life. Like I couldn't do better.

All these athletes said that they “wanted to be the best they could be . . . that it was not to be the best overall” and their focus was on their internal standards.

These athletes were more confident and more complex. They were able to develop a more unified and holistic approach towards their training through setting realistic goals based on an internal self-orientation. For example, the participants remained connected to the other parts of their identity (e.g., “I am a really confident guy” and “I am really independent”). They knew their limits, saying, for example, “I was always pretty realistic in . . . I wanted to be the best I could be.” It is difficult to determine if the athletes came into sport with greater self confidence or if their coaches played a role in developing greater confidence which in turn resulted in the athletes developed a more holistic approach to their training.
I now turn to discuss the potential of a strong, more balanced family of origin as one pattern that may have contributed to development of self confidence, perspective and a more balanced approach to sport. The more balanced pattern of athletes valued family over sport. For example, one athlete chose to travel and be with his family over Christmas despite knowing his coach might want him to stay and train with the team. Another athlete who had a strong internal sense of who he was, was autonomous and often played the role of the leader in team activities. He described that 80 percent of him was an elite athlete before he experienced an injury yet also exhibited a strong sense of confidence. He acknowledged that his self belief came from his family values. His family encouraged him to keep sport in perspective and re-affirmed that winning was not everything. As well, they told him he would not be a “better person” if he won the world championships. From a young age he was independent and self reliant and able to set boundaries with others. For example he “did not accept the 200 to 400 hundred dollars of Deutsch money” (equivalent to 200 hundred dollars Canadian per month) when he was on the German National team because he didn’t “really want to have the pressure” associated with money and performance. He valued both his elite athlete identity that dominated who he was and was able to maintain a strong sense of self interest that he described came from his family values.

Another participant that displayed the more balanced pattern described a mother who was very positive and influenced him to be more positive. For example, “in my family my mom was always positive... and my mom was always like, I can do it and being positive. So I really learned from her.” Moreover, the same participant described the benefit of strong family values in supporting his positive world view and self belief as discussed in the following quote: “....family values were strong there because we're like an Italian family .....we always help each other and they're always going to be there for me and I'm always going to be there for them.”
The more balanced pattern displayed strong moral standards such as stopping in the middle of a race to make sure another athlete was not injured rather than continuing to race. What follows is an athlete’s description of offering help instead of winning the race:

Even if . . . I could win the race, I stopped and saw if he was okay. Because I said it’s not worth it for me to see somebody get picked up by the ambulance that would have took 5 minutes for somebody else to help.

Consistent with my observations during the interviews, these athletes described knowing themselves and being able to articulate their needs clearly to their coaches. They were able to draw a line in the sand around their needs and protect their self interests. One athlete’s description of his personal goal was to “grow as a human being” rather than go to the Olympics, and he said this to his coaches:

That wasn't the goal [Olympics] and I never integrated my goal [Olympics]. . . . My goal was just to, like, grow as a human being. . . . In terms of just growing up and learning to fend. . . . for the short term I just wanted to get better myself . . . I wanted to . . . just compete better . . . for myself.

Coaches’ response to these athletes added confidence to “who they were,” which afforded the participants greater opportunity to enjoy their sport without feeling they had to prove themselves by committing all their energy to their elite athlete identity. By believing in these athletes’ abilities and liking their personhood, coaches were reinforcing a more balanced identity. The participants trusted their coaches so it allowed them to “get more out of their coaches.” These athletes had a strong sense of who they were and could negotiate and push back when they experienced pressure from their coaches. They experienced autonomy and control, providing input in their training and contributing to their athletic future. Athletes in the more balanced identity group felt coaches valued and believed in them and were able to protect their health by setting boundaries with the coach.
In summary, participants who experienced more balanced elite athlete identities benefited from both coaches' support and strong family values. Athletes felt coaches believed in their elite athlete abilities and liked who they were as individuals. The more balanced athletes used their voice in their training and had greater control in their development as an athlete. The recognition of the athletes as people apart from sport allowed these participants to be confident and secure; confidence protects against too strong a commitment to the already strong athlete identity. As well as the strong-coach athlete relationship, a supportive, positive family that kept sport in perspective enabled the athlete to maintain a more balanced identity and positive belief in their abilities. For the athlete, this creates greater balance in a sport context that expects, thrives on and supports an overly committed lifestyle and devotion to sport. The more balanced athletes were supported by coaches and family to develop self confidence, which supported a more balanced elite athlete identity and a healthier approach to their sport goals (e.g., realistic, internally oriented, perspective, and enhanced self-knowledge). It is difficult to determine if the self confidence of the athlete existed prior to entrance to sport and how much the coach-athlete relationship and family of origin contributed to the balanced identity group. What we do know of this sample is that athletes who were self coached also benefited from strong family values, self confidence, perspective-taking and support which suggests family also plays an important role in development of a more balanced identity.

**Coach-athlete relationship and less balanced identity.**

This section discusses the less balanced identity pattern that was characterized by extreme immersion in the elite athlete role, a weak coach–athlete relationship and low self confidence. The athletes experienced a sense of powerlessness in their athlete–coach relationship prior to injury and did not feel valued as a person (e.g., low self confidence) outside their sport role. This section reflects the athletes’ “buying into the coaches’ sport culture,” and coaches
creating a controlling environment that left athletes feeling (a) uncertain and anxious, (b) outcome-oriented, (c) humiliated, (d) commodified, (e) they had to work hard and endure pain, and (f) be intensely competitive. Coaches motivated and shaped athletes by creating a highly specific sport culture that led some athletes to feel undervalued, insecure and lacking confidence in their sport ability while guiding the athletes’ energies toward a narrow elite athlete identity.

Participants’ discussed experiences of feeling frustrated by how coaches shaped an environment that left athletes feeling uncertain and anxious. For example, coaches often held back their responses to their performance and athletes were unclear, confused, anxious and uncertain about how to improve and what position they held on the team. The threat of uncertainty motivated the athletes to commit more to the elite athlete role, to “prove” themselves to their coaches and achieve their goals. Athletes sacrificed many opportunities in other life domains because they wanted to prove their worth to the coaches. They thought it was expected that they train all the time. For example, one athlete missed his girlfriend’s graduation from university because he believed he was “expected” to train. In hindsight, this athlete reflected that his commitment to the elite athlete role was “ridiculous” because he missed a lot of important life events that he will never be able to attend again in his life.

Other athletes, uncertain of their place on the team and “trying to push someone else out,” did not seek medical attention or engage in other life domains because it would take time away from training. These participants said that they went too far with their commitment and that they “bought into it” (e.g., the sport work ethic espoused by coaches) at the expense of feeling good about who they were.

Coaches created an environment of uncertainty and control by trivial demands, e.g., constantly telling athletes they had to wear a different uniform. In response, athletes felt
devalued and bullied. For instance, one athlete said that she was almost sent home from national camp because she did not adhere to the right dress code. The coach allowed her to remain on the team but only if she would do extra chores “like fill water bottles and carry them for one week.”

The athletes felt powerless and vulnerable in their interaction with their coach. These athletes remained at national camps or on national teams because of the status associated with “the national team,” their goal to make the Olympic team and their “love” and passion for sport. An example of one athlete's commitment to the sport is described below:

I was super, super fit. I loved the game as an artist, you know. And I was in love with the flow and the beauty of it and the touch, the grace, the ideals of the game . . . there's a grace to it and a sportsmanship . . . I really devoured all those principles with it. And so, in a lot of senses, I was just that complete person, as a player.

Soon these athletes learned that they were not the ones with power in the relationship and if they wanted to fulfill their sport dreams they needed to adhere to the coaches’ demands. The athletes love for sport and uncertainty of their training environment played a role in motivating them to conform to the team identity while reducing their self confidence.

Coaches shaped athletes to have an outcome or ego-oriented focus (e.g., winning), which resulted in motivating the athletes to increase their commitment to training and the athlete role while reducing positive self worth. For example, when the athletes and their team did not win, they began to doubt their self confidence and internalized the team’s failure:

I felt really sort of guilty or . . . shameful or . . . obligated or responsible that . . . our team had to do well and that our team had lost. You know, the first two games. It was definitely my fault . . . because everybody had expectations in me.

Naturally gifted athletes were shaped by their coaches in how to “win” but lacked many other important tools (e.g., managing pressure) to succeed as elite athletes, including a solid foundation of “confidence.” They said that their coaches were very outcome or win oriented. They felt unprepared when they made the national team because they lacked confidence and did
not feel that they were in control. For example, one athlete said that the coach’s instructions were to go “kick their ass,” yet he received very little useful technical feedback so he did not know how to improve. The way athletes were “trained previous to making national team was all outcome-based. Win, win, win . . . there’s no process stuff.” Athletes experienced little sense of efficacy and, in their words, they lacked “preparation” and “confidence.” Coaches had pushed them to win and coaches received personal accolades for a successful program. However, the elite athlete identity lacked the solid foundation of confidence and control required to succeed at the next level. The sentiment of this group was that coaches “destroyed a lot of athletes.”

Moreover, one athlete was raised in a home in which her dad valued the children if they were successful in sport. This may have amplified the coach’s influence. Both her coach and her family life shaped who she was and contributed to a lack of security. She felt low self worth and became absorbed in the status of a national team athlete as a way of being valued by her family and coaches.

Participants reported that coaches used humiliation to control and shape athletes, which increased their immersion in the elite athlete role. One athlete described how the coaches shaped her through humiliation in front of her teammates and making her feel ashamed and like a scapegoat. Years later, she experienced being “haunted” by her coach’s words and said he was in her “head every second.” She described a strong desire to prove herself and seek validation from him. What follows is her experience of his leadership as being like a “cult” and how his power and control affected who she was:

He really is a cult leader. So he has that presence and he affects everybody and he definitely affected me. You know and everyday I lived with . . . trying to . . . prove to him . . . he totally hurt me in front of everybody. He picked on me all the time. And I’d become his scapegoat . . . I totally liked him . . . (he) . . . has a very sublime way of being abusive to people. Because he’s so good with language that he humiliates people all the time.
This athlete was raised in a home characterized by alcohol abuse. The lack of validation from her family likely contributed to the athlete seeking to prove herself in a sport environment despite the experiences of ‘scapegoating’ and abusive coaching behaviours. Both her coach and her family contributed to her feelings of inadequacy; being successful at elite sport was her way of finding validation. She said that she went from “nothing” as a member in her family where she described not being seen, understood or valued to a top American university where she could be seen and valued. Her feelings of low self-worth prior to arriving at the university were related to pressures she felt to prove herself to a coach who had the status of being “US national team coach” and had “won the world championships.” If she could prove to the coach she was capable then she would feel valued. However, instead of feeling valued by her coach she felt hurt and bullied.

Athletes who were trained in this sport culture became dependent on others for their self-worth, did not use their voice and lacked a sense of agency in their interactions, particularly with their coaches. For example, one athlete described an incident in which her coach “played all these games” and “humiliated” her in front of her teammates at the year-end university team banquet, although she was leading scorer that year. Her coach publicly announced “that he didn’t teach her a single thing in four years,” which squashed her belief that she was a great athlete. She said that she did not “have the voice to say something back at the time” but now it would be different; she would tell him where to go “(f… off).” Her reaction to the humiliating experience with her coach was to distance herself from sport, reporting that she tried to lose her elite athlete identity: “learn what it's like to get fat” . . . and have “no identity.” In response to the invalidation, she relocated to Paris and had “absolutely no money and no identity and no athletic scholarship, no free lunches and dinners and books and place to stay.”
Other athletes experienced feeling devalued through coach commodification. A gifted athlete, who was a national team member after only two years of competing in sport, described a decrease in her sense of control when she was used as a pawn in a battle between three coaches. What follows is a description of her coaches’ using her for their own means:

That was a pretty crazy summer too . . . there was so much political b.s. going on with me. That's when the coaches kept shoving me around because the coaches were fighting. One coach didn't want me on this . . . it was unbelievable.

Another athlete said that his coach was:

Looking to make fast [athletes], not fast [athletes] that would keep doing [sport for a long time]. I think he was just happy that his [athletes] were doing well. And that his program was doing well.

Other athletes described coaches that valued them as a means to win games and not as a person. For example, one athlete said that the coaches would:

Treat me well now, but just wait until something happens or I have a few bad games . . . I think everyone gets it. This is a business. It's not a caring environment . . . it's just a lot about performance and . . . final outcomes and not much about, like, process or emotional or personal side of it.

In summary, the coaches’ commodification of the athletes was an experience that reinforced the dominance of the elite athlete role while diminishing the value of other parts of the participants’ identity (e.g., self confidence).

The athletes in the less balanced group had internalized the sport ethic (Coakley, 1983) espoused by coaches that emphasized sacrifice for sport, seeking distinction, and challenging limits. Athletes described the experience of gaining coaches’ recognition and accomplishment through hard work, following the rules, and enduring pain. The coaches rewarded the work ethic, conformity to rules, and tolerance and thus reinforced a strong elite athlete identity (e.g., “he works harder than him so he's going [to the international meet]”).
As an illustration of how the elite athlete’s strong work ethic was reinforced by a coach every week, one participant described how the team would sit back and evaluate how hard they had worked and find ways that they could work harder. This team won a gold medal at the Olympics and was very successful in their performances. It would be difficult for many elite athletes whose childhood dreams are to go to the Olympics not to buy into a coaching philosophy of hard work if they believed it would lead to success at the Olympics. What follows is an athlete’s description of the internalized hard work ethic and how his immersion led to rationalizations and not paying attention to his growing back pain:

[Coach’s] whole philosophy reference was that you train so hard for a week and then at the end of the week you analyze and see if there’s any way you could have fit more work in there. He was convinced that in order to beat people you had to work harder than them. He was disgusted with people who said they were over-training unless they had some clear medical evidence of that. So he just wanted to make sure that we could do the absolute most. I thought I could do all the training so . . . I was able to keep up. I made it through all the workouts.

Another common pattern was an environment that coaches created that encouraged pain tolerance and normalized injuries. Coaches routinely made sarcastic and “sideways” comments when athletes experienced injury and could only partially participate in practices. Athletes described coaches that encouraged them to hide the pain and keep their faces relaxed in order to gain a competitive edge:

You don’t want to show the pain because in a race where someone looks over at you from another (lane) and they see you hurting . . . that gives them strength. They look over and see you just as relaxed as anything—that’s just another nail in their coffin . . . you don’t show the pain.

The environment fostered an attitude suggesting that coaches did not care about athletes or the amount of pain they were in. For instance, one athlete describes how the coaches' jobs were on the line so they pressured him to play in spite of injury. For example:
We were having a tough year. The coach was under pressure to be fired and they wanted me back...I played through pain and I shouldn't have ......And they didn't care. They just wanted me back.

The athletes described how the pain caught up with them and began to impact performances at the World Championships:

At the World Championships I was in pain . . . and my partner was also in pain at that time. His shoulder and neck were seizing up and my neck was going . . . we kind of limped along to the Bronze.

Pain and injury was part of the culture and was something the athletes learnt to deal with despite being constantly questioned by coaches about the credibility of their injury. For instance:

.....coaches thought it was just some muscle thing and......they said I was being kind of weak or a wussy or whatever. And so, that was tough because I was honestly genuinely in pain and struggling . And they just thought that I was, whatever (faking it) faking it or something. That was hard because it was not...some people do kind of fake injuries sometimes, but I just wasn't that type of guy, so... that was tough....

In other situations the coaches would go to the medical staff or trainers and question if the athletes were really injured. Other times, doctors were encouraged by coaches to medically clear athletes. The coaches had created an environment about unspoken rules related to tolerance of injuries and living with pain. The sport culture was not in the best interests of the athletes’ well-being and many athletes did not have an accurate understanding of the pain messages or the long term consequences of their injuries. One player describes how he did not understand the damage he was doing to his knees:

there was pressure, ......I didn't understand what I could do, what I was doing to my knee..... I just thought, you know, being young...you play through pain. That's what you do because...I didn't really know what that pain actually meant

Athletes who wanted to achieve their goals made huge sacrifices to meet the standards set by coaches. Several participants found themselves wanting their coach to validate their
achievements (e.g., “that sense of accomplishment and . . . sense of being valued”). One athlete described receiving validation for meeting the goals embodied by the elite athlete identity:

It's a great sense of accomplishment when you can power your way through something. You knew that everyone there was working towards a goal, essentially trying to kill all the other people on the Earth. If they were going to keep up with me, they were going to hurt more . . . so someone appreciated it when you work hard, like . . . I guess everyone there [on the team] was looking for [coach]'s approval.

Coaches’ actions and reinforcement encouraged a culture of competitive behaviour and, by extension, encouraged athletes to give first priority to their elite athlete role. They encouraged athletes to fight for their goals. One coach created a "culture of war" within the Canadian team: “He was really good at creating anger within the team. You had to go and fight for everything that was ours.” The participant found it really “exciting” to be part of a team where you fought for what you wanted. Coaches had the ability to reinforce the motivation by reminding athletes that their opponents had accomplished great things:

We knew, like it was constantly brought up, we're racing against the Germans. And the English and the Italians and they're training just as hard and . . . their coach has Olympic medals and some of their athletes have Olympic medals and we're going to go up against them.

Athletes who did not have a strong sense of self worth were more likely to buy into the sport culture espoused by coaches and experience a deep commitment to the elite athlete role. For example, one female athlete spoke of having to be tough and how over time in sport it became a habit:

...I think there's something in the athletics too about being strong and tough and not exposing your weaknesses or ...and it's a habit too.

In summary, I found that the less balanced athlete identity pattern identified in level one analysis, was associated with coaches who had the power to motivate and shape athletes by creating uncertainty, anxiety, humility and competitiveness, which further enhanced their elite
athlete role. The environment was abusive, controlling and encouraged pain tolerance and normalization of injuries. Athletes needed coach approval, recognition and validation and conformed to the controlling environment. The coach-led environment motivated athletes to push harder to perform, compete and, consequently, they became more immersed in the athletic role. Coaches capitalized on the internalized work ethic and athletes accepted the culture the coaches provided because they believed this was how they could achieve their athletic goals. Those athletes who did not have a strong sense of self worth (sometimes stemming from difficult family relationships and other times reinforced by coaches) were more likely to accept the sport culture espoused by coaches. The controlling environment that engulfed the athletes did not provide opportunity for exploration or choice. The sport training environment was rigid and encouraged a focus on performance, conformity and overlooked athlete psychosocial and physical health and development.

This section discusses a minority subset of the less balanced identity pattern that sought validation outside the sport system because the national coaches did not support their approach. For example, veteran athletes looked outside their sport environment to find reinforcement of their elite athlete identity because they did not value the feedback from their national coaches. These athletes were resourceful and active in maintaining an immersed elite athlete identity. They had been in elite sport for over fifteen years and became accustomed to being immersed in the elite athlete role. At the same time, some athletes knew what they needed (e.g., self confidence) and sought feedback from people they trusted. One athlete had his life partner coach him, a partner who valued him as a person as well as an athlete. He was resourceful in attempting to get his self interests and needs met, staying separate and autonomous from the national coaches and carving out his own training:
I just keep to myself. Pretty much do my own thing. I’m sure it would drive my coaches nuts. There’d be days where I wouldn’t stop (to train) with them all day . . . if I knew what I was doing then I would just continue to do what I was doing (training).

The veteran status of this participant and his familiarity with the sport system may have helped him to stand up to the coaching staff. This participant did not agree with the training program designed by the new coaches and felt that it was “unrealistic.” The support and belief that this athlete received from his life partner enhanced his self worth (something he did not receive from the national coach) and enhanced his immersion in sport. For example, the athlete said that:

I really didn’t have anything to do with the team coaches anymore. We kind of had a bit of a falling out . . . [my partner–coach] she always supported me and I valued her opinion.

In summary, participants reflected two distinct patterns that reinforced immersion in the elite athlete identity and described differential support for their self worth from their coaches. Participants with the more balanced identity pattern experienced reinforcement from coaches about their elite athlete status and enhancement of who they were as individuals. Their family support was strong reinforcing perspective taking and balance. When athletes experienced national team coaches who reinforced both the person and the athlete, and had supportive balanced families it appeared to help develop a healthier, balanced elite athlete identity and self confidence. An exception in this subset of balanced identities was athletes who were self-coached, confident in their own ability, and had a strong family support system. This suggests that coaches and strong family values that encourage perspective taking may promote a more balanced athletic identity. However, it is difficult to determine if the coaching relationship or family values, or both factors contributed to athlete self confidence and more balanced identity.
In contrast, the less balanced identity pattern received reinforcement from coaches to increase their narrow elite athlete identity but they did not have their personal self worth enhanced. Coaches convinced athletes to internalize the sport work ethic (e.g., dependent, passive, tolerating pain, seeking approval, stoic, unemotional, etc.) if they wanted to achieve their goals. This lowered the athletes’ self confidence. This group did not feel valued for who they were as individuals and described an immersed athletic identity. The families of individuals in this group were either over-invested or under-invested in the elite athlete identity prior to injury. Exceptions in this subset of less balanced identity were athletes who did not accept the coaches’ programs. They sought feedback from other valued sources and maintained an immersed elite athlete identity but enhanced their self worth. These athletes with less balanced identities did not develop broad life domains (e.g., no education or partner in sports) and the length of time participating in sport contributed to their less balanced identity.

**Cultural influences and identity.**

The larger sport context, or indirect sport environment, served to reinforce elite athlete identity. Some cultures value sport and, in turn, reinforce elite athlete identity by providing a sense of worth to the participant through attention and even worship. Each sport culture varies widely in terms of support. Canadian hockey, for example, has a large, well-developed fraternity or network, whereas other sports in Canada are just beginning to develop networks and alumni. The nation where the athletes played sport varied in the degree to which the elite athlete identity was validated. For example, one participant played in Asia, two in the United States (one played in Europe initially) and the other six were based in Canada. Participants who played in Asia and the United States described these countries as having “sport-crazed” cultures that highly valued the athlete, which serves to strengthen the elite athlete identity. A male athlete who attended
university in the United States found the amount of coverage and attention he received as an elite athlete to be strange and sometimes unsettling:

Sports crazed ah . . . atmosphere. And it's hard to step back sometimes. Like, like the school was all about sports . . . an American school. Smaller town, university town. We had like . . . 7 or 8 thousand people come to our games; 40 to 50 thousand come to the football games. Everyone knew you in the town, well not everyone but most people . . . sports are such a big deal. Like in the papers . . . you'd be in the paper the next day . . . the top scorer or whatever. It’s strange.

Canadian athletes in my study did not comment on the media or newspaper interviews unless they were living outside Canada. When they spoke of the media it was directed more towards local exposure and encouragement to pursue their dreams from school friends and family. A few athletes experienced learning about themselves and growing as a person from their media exposure. They described becoming local celebrities and receiving attention that reinforced their success and their identity as an elite- and world-class athlete. For example, one athlete described becoming “more worldly” after the media coverage of his junior world championship success. This athlete described learning more about the “street smarts” he would need in the real world rather than in his elite athlete role. For example, the athlete learned through his media exposure how to speak with media, develop communication skills and most importantly how to “network” with others. Media exposure assisted this athlete in developing the relational domain and broadening his identity.

A male athlete who lived in Canada where his sport was very popular indicated that he was tired of doing interviews but interpreted the attention and media coverage as part of his job as an elite athlete and Olympian. The value and reinforcement of media attention waned in this athlete’s career and he did not appear to need it to reinforce his elite status. However, he learnt life skills and how to speak publicly by addressing the media. The media training strengthened
his confidence in other domains apart from his elite athlete identity. The following is an excerpt from that athlete’s experiences of media attention:

Because I had really quick success when I moved onto the national team. My first year I had a podium . . . I had like a lot of . . . newspaper and the media attention and then. . . . So I kind of had my kind of . . . role on that team to play. So you have a lot of . . . journalists that want to talk to you . . . you have a well-known hero and that was a lot attention and at some point I was. . . . I was used to it, but it got to you . . . it just drained you so much, your energy. That I didn't really like it at the end. I was getting tired of it.

Another participant reported that an Asian country’s cultural and media influence sent mixed messages to female athletes: we love you and we will pay you to play on our team while we do not pay our own nation’s athletes; yet, you are a female so you cannot quite be accepted as a whole person in our society. Living in Asia was difficult for this athlete because her identity as an elite athlete was not appreciated as much as it had been at university and she wanted the new Asian team to recognize her gifts. To meet the expectations of this country’s sport culture, the Canadian athlete immersed herself in being the “fittest athlete in the world” yet she experienced difficulty being accepted by athletes on her team who did not get paid and spoke a different language. The difficulties she experienced heightened her stress and lowered her confidence so that she pushed herself even harder to “prove” to the team that she was one of the best in the world. The “proving and striving” served to strengthen her elite athlete identity.

The athletes who attended American universities described immersion in an unreal atmosphere that engulfed and idolized them. They found it difficult coping with their celebrity status. This “crazed” atmosphere engulfed the medical professionals as well. Thus, when an athlete walked in for an appointment, the medical professional knew who the team was playing the next day and knew if it was important for the athlete to be healthy for the next game.
Everyone “knew who you were” and “strangers would come up to you on the street” and ask about your elite athlete status or compliment you on the game played last night.

Summarizing cultural influences, many opportunities arose for recognition from friends, fans and community. Recognition was culturally sanctioned, and the strengthening of the elite athlete identity depended upon the culture and the athlete’s perception of media support. For some athletes, dealing with the media was part of doing the job or was a learning experience and did not affect their elite identity but strengthened relational life domains. Other athletes interpreted the media as pressure and another way they might prove themselves. In the first case, athletes experienced a broadening of their identity and in the latter case they experienced the reinforcement of a strong elite athlete identity.

Summary of Chapter

The goal of this chapter was to describe the elite athlete identity experience prior to a career-ending injury. The first-level abstraction of data was participants' descriptions of common characteristics in their definition of an elite athlete identity. This definition included the need to be selfish, motivated, ego orientated, focused, and feeling accomplished. All athletes said that prior to injury 70-90% of “who they were” constituted being an elite athlete. During my initial abstraction of the data at the first level, two elite athlete identity patterns emerged: one that described a more balanced elite athlete identity pattern related to coaches who believed in athletes as people and a stronger self confidence. As well this pattern of identity had strong family support that encouraged perspective-taking and likely contributed to self confidence. It is difficult to determine if the athletes had self confidence prior to their entry into the elite sport experience.
The second pattern was a less balanced elite athlete identity pattern. Participants in this second pattern did not experience coaches’ believing in them as individuals and experienced weaker self confidence. For participants with a less balanced identity, family of origin was also less balanced in their support to the athletes which may have contributed to lower self confidence prior to their entry into sport. These athletes experienced less balanced identities and had internalized the coaches’ work ethic, which included such behaviours as working hard, following rules, tolerating pain, and withstanding injury. The sport environment was described by the less balanced identity participants as uncaring and they experienced abusive treatment. These athletes followed the rules passively and sought coach approval, experienced dependency, lacked agency, and conformed in the belief that they would achieve their Olympic goals.

Cultural forces were described as salient factors in the provision of recognition and support for athletes. For example, American and Asian cultures provided heightened reinforcement of the elite athlete identity in comparison to Canadian culture. Differences in recognition and reinforcement of the elite athlete identity occurred between eastern and western Canada, and between sports.

In summary, the participants in this study received support for their elite athlete identity from several sources and they integrated this feedback into their sense of who they were. Many experienced being engulfed by their elite athlete identity. Other influences that differentiated more balanced from less balanced elite athlete identities included differences between goals that were realistic versus unrealistic, goals based on internal versus external factors, and coaches who believed in their athletes as people versus coaches who forced and pressured athletes to behave in ways that were consistent with their coaching philosophy or a strong work ethic without valuing the athlete as a person. The result was an overcommitted elite athlete identity as individuals immersed in the elite athlete identity sought to prove who they were and experienced
low self worth. In contrast, those in the more balanced identity subset were able to remain confident about the other parts of who they were despite immersion in the athletic identity. With descriptions of athletes’ pre-injury experience as background and context, the next chapter examines the experiences of career-ending injuries and the effect on the athletes’ sense of identity.
Chapter 6: Identity Change After a Career-Ending Injury

Chapter 5 described participants’ experience of athlete identity (more balanced and less balanced) and common definition of an elite athlete prior to a career-ending injury. This chapter describes smooth and turbulent retirement transitions through a description of four factors (and subfactors) within the transitions and the four identity styles following a career-ending injury. The emergence of these patterns occurred at different levels of abstraction as I returned to the data to explore and understand patterns and relationships. To structure reporting of the findings, I have chosen to appreciate the patterns by describing each level of abstraction. While level one of abstraction refers to pre-injury, level two refers to smooth and turbulent retirement transitions, level three refers to abstraction of four factors (and subfactors) within the smooth and turbulent retirement transitions and the fourth level of abstraction consists of four styles of different athletic identity change during retirement (see Appendices J – N)

It is important for the reader to note that the individuals who, in first level of abstraction pre-injury analysis, described a balanced identity prior to injury were the same individuals who experienced a balanced identity during a smooth retirement. There are a few minor exceptions to these patterns that will be addressed later in this paper. Similarly, those individuals who, in level one analysis, described a less balanced identity prior to injury continued to experience less balanced identities and turbulent retirement transition experiences. My focus in this paper is the patterns and relationships of the participants’ descriptions rather than the individuals in the groups.

The smooth versus turbulent transitions are viewed as a continuum. For the purpose of analysis and consistent with participant descriptions, dichotomous categories were developed. A smooth transition refers to participants who experienced few difficulties with social, vocational
and avocational pursuits (e.g., a sense of purpose), stable emotional and mental health, successful negotiation of physical environment, awareness of strengths and assets as well as a positive personal and subjective assessment of situation. A turbulent transition is one where participants experienced difficulties with social, vocational and avocational pursuits (lack of purpose), unstable emotional and mental health, difficulties in negotiation of physical environment, limited awareness of strengths and assets as well as negative personal and subjective assessment of situation during initial transition (less than one year from injury).

I now turn to preview the four major factors (level three) that emerged from my identification of smooth and turbulent transitions: (a) internal resources, (b) cognitive coping styles, (c) relational connections and disconnections, and (d) continuity with sport that influenced the athletes’ identity transformation (See Appendix M). The four factors break down into several subfactors that will be described to assist the reader in understanding the difference between smooth and turbulent transitions (level two). The chapter ends with a description of my identification of four identity styles (fourth level of abstraction) that emerged through participant descriptions and interpretations of their experience. The level four abstraction resulted from an iterative process where after the first three levels of analysis I went back to the data and noticed four patterns emerging into four distinct styles. I discuss the patterns of the four identity styles. The interpretation and description will show the practical implications of the findings.

**Smooth and Turbulent Transitions**

A third level of analysis, where I re-immersed myself in the contrasting descriptions of smooth versus turbulent, revealed four factors relevant to an athletes’ smooth versus turbulent transition experience. Experience of these four factors seemed important to the type of transition that occurred (e.g., smooth versus turbulent described in level two analysis) and thus the factors and the two patterns of transition will be discussed together in this section. The four factors
were: (a) internal resources, (b) cognitive coping style, (c) relational connections, and (d) continuity with sport that influenced the athletes’ identity transformation. Within each of the four factors were subfactors that related to a smooth versus turbulent transition. They will be discussed in the following section.

**Internal Resources**

The first major factor that was related to smooth versus turbulent transitions was the internal resources of the athletes. Internal resources are subfactors related to the athletes’ ability to self-motivate and stand up for their self interests. Internal resources are reflected in the subthemes of (a) autonomy versus dependency, and (b) proactive versus passive reactivity. Experience of these two subfactors seemed important to the type of transition, smooth versus turbulent, that occurred. For example, athletes with strong internal resources experienced greater autonomy and proactive behaviours that were associated with a smooth transition during retirement from sport. I now turn to discuss these two subfactors of the main factor, internal resources, in detail.

**Autonomy versus dependency.**

The first subfactor of internal resources is the autonomy versus dependency of the elite athletes. Those individuals who experienced a smooth disengagement from sport were more autonomous and proactive in their behaviour patterns compared with athletes who described a stressful and turbulent disengagement and were dependent and passive or reactive in their management of their career-ending injuries and transition from sport.

The athletes who experienced a pattern of smooth, relatively effortless transition described autonomous and independent behaviours, resisted pressures to conform to coaches’ agendas, were independent in interactions with medical professionals, and held internally driven
goals. These participants said that they received more “attention” from coaches and knew that coaches valued them as people as well as athletes, yet they also knew when to set limits with coaches during rehabilitation and retirement. Sport is traditionally a paternalistic system whereby many coaches feel they know “best” and they have governance or power over the athletes. For example, one athlete’s coaches travelled six hours to support the athlete and ensure injury rehabilitation yet the athlete was able to break away from sport tradition, codes and norms and decide that it was not in their best interests to continue with sport. Despite experiencing long-term positive relationships with coaches, favouritism, financial incentives, and direct pressure from coaches to continue training, these athletes made the decision to retire from sport independently of their coaches’ influence. Coaches “were kind of pissed off” that the athletes were “not coming back.” However these athletes followed their self interest, made their decisions independently, and followed what gave them meaning and purpose in life, thus demonstrating their self confidence, autonomy, and control.

The athletes who experienced a smooth transition developed independent decisions in their interaction with medical professionals. The athletes gathered what they believed was the most relevant knowledge to help them make an educated and autonomous decision about their sport injuries and used this information to develop retirement plans. For example, they consulted multiple medical professionals before coming to a decision that was based on their self interest.

The athletes also described a pattern of being self-determined and held internal motivation such as “doing their best” in sport rather than focusing on external or outcome-oriented goals. They focused on the process and what was under their control such as their best performances or process goals (e.g., technique). They were not consumed by winning or achieving Olympic success at the expense of their other self interests.
In contrast, the athletes who experienced a turbulent transition from sport described a dependency on sport, succumbed to pressure from coaches, lacked leadership in decision-making with medical professionals, and had external or ego-driven goals. They were dependent on sport “for everything they did,” lacked autonomy or separation from the sport domain and yielded to coaches’ pressure. Their narrow sense of identity and purpose as well as pressure from coaches to return to training despite injury likely contributed to their inability to take “time off” when they were injured. For example:

I think I let myself get so wrapped up in what was happening that moment that I didn't even see the possibilities that were out there. You can take these injuries as a learning experience, like you can come back stronger, rather than saying “Right now I'm injured and if I don't train today, that's the end of the world.” So that's sort of what I've learned is that... your life is long. If you don't train for two months, it's not the end of the world, might as well get better completely instead of keep trying to come back and just push through it. So, that's what I thought I had to do was push through it because coach, I knew coaches wanted me back. So I was like, “I can't, I can't take this time off.” I didn't know how.

The athletes did not indicate to medical professionals that they were in pain and were unable to set limits. For example, despite being in extreme pain, physiotherapists told the athletes to go out and work harder, and the athletes did not question the medical advice they were given. Some incurred further injury because they were unable to stand up for their self interest with medical staff.

The athletes described their dependency and feelings of being lost after disengagement from sport because the coaches and training staff had done everything for them while they were training. One athlete described feeling lost after retirement:

I couldn't see myself in the future. I couldn't figure out what I would be doing or... how to take those steps to get out of my rut I was in. I was, I knew I had to get a job. I knew I had to, that's just what you do, right? And I had no idea what direction to go in. Like I had nothing, I had no idea. And then for me to find a job was virtually impossible because I had no experience in anything except for [sport].
These participants described a pattern of being consumed by their externally driven sport goals such as making the Olympic team or “winning, winning, winning.” The athletes described being absorbed and living in the moment without care for the damage they might be doing to their body:

> It’s kind of like you’re being a teenager and you don’t know what you’re doing to your body and you’re taking drugs or whatever. Or you know, you jump off ... roofs. ... I think there’s a sort of feeling, at least for me, I had this feeling that ... it didn’t really matter what my body was like when I was 40 because this is the really important time in my life.

In summary, athletes who experienced turbulent transition described being dependent on sport for who they were. They also lacked self determination to follow their self interest and went along with the agendas of coaches and medical professionals.

**Proactive versus passive and reactive.**

The second subfactor of the internal resources is proactivity versus passivity and reactivity. For athletes who experienced a smooth transition, this pattern was their ability to be proactive and take charge of their injury treatment, and collaborate with coaches about their recovery plans from sport. They proactively gathered information about their injuries from several different sources and did not unilaterally accept the opinion of medical staff. During rehabilitation, these participants had a sense of agency that allowed them to engage in decision-making for their self interest and took charge of their medical care. For example, a lot of medical professionals told one athlete he was “done ... your injury is really bad, you should stop.” Yet the athlete made the decision in collaboration with his support team that he was going to do everything to “deal with the pain for one more year and after that” he would receive surgery and see if retirement was the next step. These athletes proactively chose the medical route that was best for their personal goals, controlled their pain and training and developed a plan that would allow them to reach personal goals. They took charge of their medical care by gathering
information from a variety of sources (e.g., medical journals, Internet, teammates, medical professionals and family) and gained an internal sense of what they needed. They analyzed the situation to determine what would meet their needs and protect their body so they could achieve their goals in life. They were self-directed. For example:

From the research that I did [on the Internet], they said that for your ACL, your bone to like graft around your ACL takes, they say 6 months it's healed but it's actually up to 12 months. It can be up to 12 months. So I thought, okay at 6 months it’s good. You can go back, but I'm going to wait 8 or 10 because some of the research I'm looking into is saying up to 12 months. So I want to wait 8 or 10 or even 12 [the doctor had advised a 6-month wait].

These athletes used their own “muscle stimulation” or “ultrasound” machines and some paid out of their own pocket for an “MRI assessment.” These athletes were in control of their self interest and were actively seeking solutions that would support a healthy recovery and meet their goals. The ability to take control of their rehabilitation environment led to greater mastery and resulted in enhanced self worth and efficacy. These patterns described by these elite athletes indicated strong feelings of self-efficacy, self confidence and mastery of their environment.

These athletes collaborated with their coaches and put plans in place that would maximize mental preparation to compensate for inability to train due to injury. This plan allowed them to train effectively for “qualifiers for the Olympics.” They reduced their physical training and increased their mental training so they could manage the pain. Athletes in this pattern peaked at the Olympic Games and attributed their peak performance to the extra mental training that allowed them to manage both the pressure of high-performance sport and pain from their injury.

In contrast, athletes who described turbulent transitions used passive coping strategies with the medical professionals and coaches. These athletes believed they were expert athletes and “not experts in the medical field” so they did not take action to self-protect their injured body. For example, one participant entrusted a surgeon to perform knee surgery even though it
was well known that the surgeon had a bad reputation. Only when surgery failed did the participant switch doctors:

So it was misdiagnosed I guess. And so I was playing on it. That was probably why it kept tearing . . . it was the doctor. . . . And my first doctor was Dr. W and he did a lot of the athlete surgeries, like football players, and he was known as W the blade, because he just loves to cut people. And he's known for being a bad surgeon. I have no idea if he did a good job or not because I don't know enough about it, but . . . I switched surgeons after.

Participants described passively tolerating a great deal of pain, internalizing the sport work ethic and ignoring medical advice that protected their body because they wanted to keep their sport dreams alive. For example, athletes ignored the warnings from doctors that their injuries could be long term and they continued to push through the pain in order to fulfill their passion and goals:

I felt . . . you just play through pain. That's what you do. Of course the pain will go away. . . . So I just really didn't understand that that pain would be with me through the long haul. Even though people said it, you hear the doctor say, “Well there's a chance this could be affecting you long term” . . . It just doesn't really resonate.

For two years, participants experienced pain that was all-consuming and “it affected every aspect of life.” Athletes were in constant pain, were “depressed,” and eventually passively gave up because sport became the pain.

These participants passively complied with coaches who pressured them to return to play too early. In the end, several participants said that their passive approach resulted in long-term injury to their body. One athlete talked about his experience of feeling pressured by the coaches:

They were very impatient with me getting back . . . which was really stupid on my part and the doctors’ and the coaches.’ I was playing in a game . . . three weeks after my surgery, which is not good. Like if you're a professional player, for that same surgery, they'll kick you out for a minimum of four months, and so it kind of shows you how they [the coaches] treat athletes sometimes. We were having a tough year. The coach was under pressure to be fired and they wanted me back. . . . And I wanted to play because I wanted to prove myself. And I hadn't really got that chance so . . . it was a combination of . . . things. I played through pain and I shouldn't have. I didn't know the damage I was doing. And they didn't care. They just wanted me back.
When injuries occurred, these athletes became more introverted, lost their “voice” and, with little resistance, “blindly” followed what the coaches demanded. For example, participants believed that their coaches devalued them and did not care about them when an injury occurred. They felt harassed by coaches and commodified, and described coaches who would heckle, use sarcasm and deliver sideways comments when athletes who were injured missed a practice or were not fully participating in training because of injury. Athletes passively tolerated coaches’ psychological subversion and “mind games” and did not take any action to stand up for their self interest. For example, one athlete received several messages from her three coaches about how to recover yet did not tell the coaches that she was confused. From her description, it appears that the coaches did not get along and the athlete was being used as a pawn:

I was not training with the national team because I was injured and so I had the national coach telling me what to do, I had my coach here telling me what to do and then I had my old university coach telling me, all giving me their two cents on what I should be doing ... I just didn't know what to do ... who do I listen to? ... there was no guidance.

Participants experienced a pattern of passive acceptance of segregation because of their injuries and did not voice their displeasure. The athletes felt as though they were “broken horse[s],” that they had some “contagious disease” and were quarantined and isolated from other athletes.

Both male and female athletes passively experienced “sport stereotypes” and “power over them” by their coaches at varying levels that reinforced gender stereotypes requiring men to be stoic and women to be submissive. For example, male athletes learned to fit into a culture which discouraged emotion, being weak and complaining about their injuries. On the other hand, the female athletes were encouraged to conform to the male coach’s wishes: to do what they were told to do, to conform or be punished, to work hard and to seek coach approval. These athletes lacked confidence and agency to stand up to the coaches. For example, they described the national team coaches as dictators, regimenting them by controlling and bullying behaviours.
They were pushed around like pawns and forced to engage in behaviours that they did not agree with or understand. What follows is an example of abusive and demeaning behaviours the coaches forced elite athletes to engage in on an international trip:

We were not allowed to . . . eat or close our eyes the entire trip. I'm not joking. We were not allowed to close our eyes on the airplane and the assistant would walk around and make sure . . . because we knew we weren't allowed to eat, we hoarded the day before . . . which was the worst thing to do because it made us super hungry. . . . He [the coach] was swearing at me and threatening to send me home . . . Swearing. ‘Cause I had a muffin . . . then I think I barely saw the field. . . . We weren't allowed to eat.

These participants passively accepted being moulded by the coach to behave in certain ways and when the best player on the team said that she would not conform to the coach’s wishes she had to sit and not play because she was disobedient. The message the athletes received was: if they wanted to play on Canada’s national team they needed to conform to the system. It was not a collaborative relationship and the athletes passively accepted their fate because they wanted to accomplish their sport goals.

Athletes did not tell their coaches about their injuries because they thought the coaches would care less about them if they were injured and they wanted the coaches’ approval. For example, “He [coach] was disgusted with people who said they were overtraining unless they had some clear medical evidence of that.” Coaches were in powerful positions and athletes said that they inferred from witnessing interactions with other athletes what the coach’s wishes were (e.g., mindreading). These participants were not proactive and submitted to the coach’s power, rules and commands likely because they believed it was necessary in order to fulfill their Olympic dreams. Weaknesses were not to be revealed to anyone, either teammates or coaches, and so athletes internalized these sport values dictated by their coaches.
Cognitive-based Coping Style

The second main factor that is associated with smooth versus turbulent transitions was the cognitive-based coping style of athletes, which involved participants’ descriptions of their thought-based coping processes. There were several subfactors of the cognitive-based coping style such as (a) reality based cognitions versus denial of reality, (b) vision and planning for the future versus living for the moment (c) fleeting depression versus longer-lasting depression, (d) confidence and knowing versus lack of confidence and knowing, (e) purposeful use of mental skills versus lack of use of mental skills for rehabilitation, (f) multiple-life versus singular-life domain development, and (g) planned versus reactive sport pace. Each of the subfactors is discussed below and reflects either a smooth or a turbulent transition. For example, those individuals who experienced smooth transition were grounded in reality, faced facts, were confident, expanded their lives to multiple roles after sport, planned their sport pace and used their mental skill during rehabilitation. In contrast, the athletes who experienced turbulent transition described prolonged and ineffective use of denial, were angry, withdrew from sport or attempted to remain unaffected by their career-ending injury. They were uni-dimensional in their role development in retirement and experienced ineffective use of mental skills during rehabilitation.

Reality based versus denial based cognitions.

The first subfactor, reality based cognitions, is characteristic of athletes who experienced smooth transition and goals that were realistic and attainable. For example, these athletes knew that if they continued in sport they would be more than thirty years old when they retired and did not want to begin their university education and family so late in life. It was clear to these athletes that retiring from sport was in their best interest and based on realistic aspirations of their life beyond sport.
In contrast, participants who experienced the subfactor of prolonged denial of reality had a turbulent sport retirement. For example, for over two years these athletes hung onto the hope that their injury would heal. Their denial was a response to feeling that their uni-dimensional athlete identity was threatened so they did not “accept” their injury. By the time they sought medical treatment it was too late to rehabilitate and try out for the Olympic team. Five years after retiring from sport, some athletes continued to dream about their past sport goals and believed that there is no such thing as overtraining. This is an example of how the internalized sport work ethic lives on.

Sport performance became the singular focus of the day and if ignoring or denying pain helped performance, that is what these athletes did. For example, a male participant described being immersed in his life goal (to compete “professionally”) and focused on performance while overlooking the seriousness of his pain and injury. What follows is his description of deciding to retire. Note that part of his decision to retire is related to a lack of performance achievement:

They took out my cartilage, so . . . it tore once and then they tried to fix it, and then I played on it and it tore again, so they took that part out. And then I played on it and it tore again, so they basically took it all out the third time . . . every time I played it would get swollen. They had to give me cortisone shots in my knee and . . . I was sort of limping around. I wasn’t really performing very well . . . I made a decision with the doctors that it’s probably good to stop it.

The goal of performing described by this athlete is a critical part of his decision to retire from sport and one more important than the injury to his body. This athlete can now barely walk, cannot run and has been told he will need a knee replacement at age 30.

**Planning for the future versus living for the moment.**

The second subfactor is the amount of planning participants engaged in during their transition from sport. The participants who experienced a smooth transition engaged in forward-thinking and recognized that sport had a “shelf life.” They allowed for the preparation of other
interests and illustrated their confidence and reduced feelings of loss associated with injury and disengagement from sport. Despite the difficulty of thinking about retirement when they were training, they said that they “always knew” their “career would have an end at one point.” Many coaches believe that athletes should not think beyond sport because it may limit their performance; none of the coaches in this study initiated discussion about retirement. Participants had used their own initiative to prepare mentally for the inevitable end of sport life. The athletes who experienced a smooth transition pattern had enhanced awareness, faced facts and accepted the finite nature of sport.

These participants were grounded in reality and had created a mental map of life beyond sport, what they wanted for their new future, and how they might go about achieving it. For example, their mental maps included creating meaning in several life domains—occupational, relational, future families, giving back to society and injury management. During rehabilitation, these mental maps provided participants with an opportunity to start building their new life areas even before they had disengaged from sport. Also during rehabilitation, applications for university were completed, courses chosen and registered for, contacts for jobs identified then secured and surgery dates put in place.

Athletes who lacked planning for the future described a turbulent transition, lived only for sport, and had not developed mental maps of their future. For example, athletes said that they were consumed by sport and thought only of going into professional sport or the Olympics. Even when their injury occurred, these athletes were unrealistic and did not think of the future until it was clear they could not fulfil their professional or Olympic dreams. Some of these athletes were typically going to retire after the Olympics (which was six months away) but when they got injured six months before the Olympics there were no plans or goals in place for life after sport. When these athletes were forced to retire from sport they said that they had great difficulty
picturing themselves in the future because they had never thought about what they wanted to do after sport ended.

**Fleeting versus persistent depression.**

The third subfactor, fleeting versus persistent depression, entailed participants’ descriptions of loss and sadness after a career-ending injury. In my observation of athletes’ descriptions, the timing and intensity of their depression corresponded to the effectiveness of their disengagement from sport. Athletes with milder mood disturbances that were more fleeting and transient described a smooth retirement experience from sport. Athletes with a relatively smooth and less turbulent retirement experienced sadness and depression in rehabilitation for briefer periods than other athletes, as described in the following quote:

In the early stages when I was pretty injured, I was kind of depressed. It would be easy to get depressed. Then . . . I would say as my rehab got better, if I had a negative experience, I was able to handle it a lot better. Deal with it, whether it's pushing it aside or just, you know, coping with it. But in terms of like, how did I cope with the negative experience. . . . I sort of push things aside and try not to think about it. That's sort of one way . . . or the other way is . . . whatever the problem or like the negative problem is figuring out how to fix it.

In contrast, athletes who experienced more turbulent retirement patterns described greater mood disturbances that lasted longer than for those who had experienced smooth disengagement. The elite athletes who experienced a turbulent transition described a pattern of greater sadness and depression over a longer time than the other athletes. What follows is an athlete’s description of her experience of depression and situational variables that contributed to her depression over a two-year span:

I would say it really started when the full injury happened with the disc slip in XXXX [a place], when I was completely involved in [program]. That's when it started. And it was up and down. And I had a phase and then I was in school and then my parents split up . . . and then that whole summer in Europe, which was a disaster. . . . It's a long time. There's
been ups and downs in between, but definitely almost a year and a half to two years of just . . . there's a lot of situational things that added to it.

Shortly after retirement from sport, several participants described considerable depression and suicidal thoughts. One participant described a deep depression during disengagement from sport that was triggered by the ending of an intimate relationship. The athlete’s description of her experience of depression and suicidal thoughts follows:

It was just something that I'd never experienced in my life. It was so electronic almost, just sort of metaphysical something, something. I was just like crying everyday for 6 months and . . . my dream was that a bus would just hit me sort of, you know. Honestly, ‘cause it’s not something I wanted to do myself, but I was just like hoping, you know, it would end or something.

Another participant experienced a traumatic loss of “who she was” after disengagement from elite sport and described an experience of deep depression for six months immediately after she received the news that the injury terminated her pursuit of the Olympic dream. Her isolation, depression and loneliness likely contributed to feelings of being unfulfilled without sport.

In summary, low mood was experienced by all athletes after a career-ending injury. Those participants who experienced a smoother transition experienced fleeting mood disturbances contrasted with participants who described a turbulent retirement with persistent depressive episodes.

Confidence versus lack of confidence.

The fourth subfactor was the degree of confidence athletes held during their transition from sport. Athletes with a smooth transition were confident individuals who knew that they could continue in sport and deal with pain if they chose to participate longer. They described themselves as “always confident” and “everything is kind of possible.” For these athletes, “it didn't take” long “to realize . . . it was my life, you know.” They said that they had made the “right call” to retire and were happy with their decision. They “knew” that they had made the
right decision for themselves. For example, in the end they realized that they wanted the opportunity to “live something else” or another “dream” and found purpose and meaning in other life domains. These athletes were confident and knew their life purpose.

In contrast, the athletes who experienced a stressful injury and retirement described a lack of self confidence and did not protect their self interest. These athletes said that they lacked confidence to stand up to their coaches and take initiative in their new environment. For example, many of them said that they did not know what to do and if they had a chance to do it all again they would speak their mind to their coaches.

**Mental skills versus lack of mental skills in rehabilitation.**

The fifth subfactor is the use of mental skills during rehabilitation. In contrast to individuals who were unrealistic about their injury recovery, athletes who experienced a smooth transition used mental skills during rehabilitation that they had learnt from sport. For example, common mental skills used among participants who experienced a smooth injury management experience were: being positive, refocusing, being patient, keeping things in perspective and expecting the unexpected. One athlete described experiencing little support from the Canadian medical system during injury recovery. His response to what he viewed as poor medical treatment by doctors was “Okay, let it go. . . . It's nothing for me to get frustrated about.” He could hear ”people complaining about it, complaining . . . [about] the poor medical care” but “once” he said something to himself quickly, it was okay. For example he said, “You know, it's not the doctors; they are trying their best and doing it as fast as possible.”

Athletes who experienced a career-ending injury applied the skills of being patient and keeping things in perspective. When they were training and competing, they wanted results immediately and pushed hard through their workouts so it was not natural or easy for them to
change their workout pace during rehabilitation. Yet, these athletes were able to keep things in perspective, “see the big picture,” and remain patient, which helped them to maintain a healthy pace during rehabilitation, as shown in the following quote:

You're an athlete and you're out for a month, it seems like a year or two years, but it goes . . . so fast, so just take your time, do your recovery properly and don’t . . . jump some steps. Do every step every time. It’s patience, pretty much. Be patient and be positive. You got to come back you know.

Another mental skill that these athletes used to help them recover from injury and manage the pain was “normalization” of the injury. Athletes said that “everybody’s always injured” and “everybody had something, maybe at a different level of injury. Some [injuries] are more serious than others, but still you have pain. Everybody has to deal with pain.” “And so it helps” to think that “it's the same for everybody.” The use of normalization strategies to cope with pain helped these athletes to feel calmer and in control of their injury and pain management.

Similarly, athletes who experienced the smooth transition pattern were able to use their competitiveness to help them recover from their injuries and shift their attitude to a more proactive, purposeful and in-control stance. When comparing themselves to others, some realized that whoever “is going to deal better with it is going to get through it more easy.” One athlete described himself as naturally competitive and highly motivated to get out of the hospital quickly. So he “made a bet” with the doctor that he was not going to stay a long time in the hospital and “stayed only two days” instead of the prescribed week. To-date, “nobody has beaten your record yet.” The continuity and familiarity provided by mental skills that these athletes transferred from their elite athlete career also helped them to feel greater mastery over their injuries.

Finally, these athletes treated rehabilitation as though it was an extension of their sport training. They believed that rehabilitation was something they “love[d].” The athletes developed
attitudes that they held while training in sport. They were optimistic, they “enjoyed” the challenge of “going to physio” and to the gym. To help keep rehabilitation in perspective and less “daunting,” athletes developed plans with the “physio, doctor, and strength trainer.” This planning was similar to goals and plans they had in training that helped reduce uncertainty or worry. Instead of feeling helpless and not having a strategy to manage their injuries, these athletes were realistic, resourceful and had mental skills that would assist their recovery.

In summary, athletes who chose to use the mental skills they had learned in sport experienced a smooth transitional experience from injury and retirement from sport. These athletes employed the skills of self-talk, confidence, perspective-taking, commitment, focusing, and linear thinking. They were resourceful and self-directed in their use of mental skills and their application to other life domains.

Athletes who experienced a turbulent disengagement from sport did not describe a pattern of using mental skills appropriately for recovery. For example, they used their competitive skills to assist them to recover from sport but this resulted in pushing themselves too hard during recovery activities and they became more injured. These athletes were unrealistic about what their body could handle and could not adapt their use of mental skills appropriately to their new context.

**Multiple versus singular life domains.**

The sixth subfactor of cognitive coping style involved the participants’ ability to engage in multiple versus singular life roles during transition from sport. Participants who experienced a smooth transition kept “involved” with other life domains during rehabilitation and retirement or initiated development of new life domains (e.g., university education, travelling, coaching, intimate relationship development) when their injuries occurred. This helped them to be
independent, self-reliant and to reap multiple sources of fulfillment. For example, these athletes squeezed in their surgeries between other activities such as building houses and attending university, seamlessly continuing with life, choosing their new interests and pathways independent of coaches or the sport system. These participants took the power that belonged to them and released themselves from the paternalistic sport system shortly after their injuries and retirement. These participants freed themselves from dependency on sport or coaches and took action to develop other life domains that were in their self interest.

In comparison, athletes who had a turbulent disengagement had limited development of other life domains. Athletes with this pattern did not develop other life domains once they were injured but reactively increased their commitment to sport, often pushing through injuries and ignoring other aspects of their life. For example, when asked why they continued to push, they indicated that sport was the most important thing to them and defined most of who they were. They missed important events such as a girlfriend’s graduation, family vacations and other important social activities such as weddings. These athletes described continuing to push even harder in order to reach their goal and achieve their dreams because they thought that was what they were “supposed” to do. What follows is one participant’s description of his uni-dimensional focus on sport and how school was dwarfed by sport ambitions:

I don't know. I think part of it was my identity as an [elite athlete]. I hadn't even thought of other things. I didn't take school that seriously, especially that first year. And then as I realized that there's probably other things in life, I started doing better in school and . . . I think a big part of it was . . . like “What do you mean I'm not going to play again?” Like “What are you talking about?” Um, ‘cause I was planning on playing professional (sport) afterwards.

For the athletes with this pattern, absorption with their athletic role was the embodiment of a strong sport work ethic, a focus on external unrealistic goals of winning, and a highly structured and scheduled environment. These injured athletes overtrained because they believed
that “real” athletes never give up (even with an injury). Upon injury, participants were ill-equipped to stop pushing themselves. All they “knew was to win” and they had difficulty slowing down. These athletes were focused only on sport and did not develop other life domains during rehabilitation or for some time afterward during disengagement.

**Planned versus reactive lifestyle pace.**

The seventh subfactor was the ability to plan their lifestyle pace versus react and spontaneously replicate their busy elite athlete lifestyle. Athletes who experienced a smooth transition planned to be busy after they retired in order to assist them to adjust to their new lifestyle (e.g., building a house, surgery, coaching, attending university). In contrast, participants who experienced a turbulent disengagement from sport recreated the fast pace of elite sport through unplanned, reactive, “busy” coping strategies that provided them with a feeling similar to the adrenaline-filled, elite athlete life pace. Athletes described experiences of slowly letting go of the elite athlete identity life pace but this took several years and they still described an unexpected need or dependency on getting their adrenaline fix every so often. They missed the feelings of accomplishment, efficacy and purpose that came from their former sport lifestyle and had “unfinished business.” Athletes who encountered this pattern often stopped all contact with sport once they had disengaged, and then needed to relive the sport pace:

I got really stir crazy. Like because with that sport we were always moving around, like we were never in one place for more than six months . . . I always felt like I had to go somewhere and I never felt settled. It took a year, maybe even two to actually feel settled. And I still, like from time to time . . . I've got to get out of here. What am I doing? Like I feel like I have unfinished business somewhere . . . A part of me that didn't get completed along my little journey through life I guess.

Another athlete described an experience of hiking 60 km in one day to seek a “challenge” and mastery of his old sport pace. He had cut off all contact with his former sport
life and was missing the connection of self worth and efficacy that his sport identity had provided:

[I] hiked the Chilcotin from 6 in the morning to 6 in the evening. So 60 km . . . . I nearly didn't make that I think. Some people on the road saw me kind of collapsed and gave me a piece of pizza. So I really miss a challenge. That felt really good that I could still do that. Kind of silly. Hiking 60 k up a mountain . . . . I still miss that kind of challenge but that's the thing I miss about [sport].

Athletes in the turbulent-transition pattern said that they coped reactively with the stress of injury and retirement by being “ridiculously busy.” The athletes who experienced a turbulent transition felt a loss of purpose during retirement and in response described being busy or “partying” to deal with the pain and loss.

**Relational Connections**

This section discusses the third main factor, relational connections associated with smooth and turbulent transitions. Relational influences were the extent of connection to others that helped shaped the athletes’ retirement from sport and associated with smooth versus turbulent retirement transitions. The relational factor is composed of the following three subfactors: (a) family balance versus over- and under-investment, (b) teammate connections versus disconnections, and (c) social expansion versus social retraction from athletes’ roles and associations to smooth or turbulent transition from sport. In-depth descriptions of the three relational subfactors follow.

**Family balance versus imbalance.**

The first subfactor is the amount of family balance versus imbalance (or over- and under-investment). Athletes who experienced a smooth transition from sport described families who were supportive, promoted balance, perspective, and development of broad interests over a singular, uni-dimensional sport life. This subset of participants described families who instilled
values helpful for assisting the athlete to experience freedom from the all-consuming elite athlete role. Their family reinforced exploration of other life domains (e.g., education) by encouraging the athletes to keep their elite athlete role in perspective and to recognize that there was life after sport. For example, one athlete who competed at an international level had learned from his family at a young age that sport was “not everything” and that his vocational career was always more important. Athletes with this pattern said that “life is not sport.” Family encouragement of multiple domains served to enhance a smooth adjustment from sport by limiting over-identification with one role while encouraging the athlete to think about life beyond sport. The family support served to protect the elite athletes from being uni-dimensional and encouraged a more balanced identity. One athlete was an exception. His family did not encourage academics or perspective-taking yet this participant smoothly transferred to a new career within the sport system after his injury. This athlete lifestyle did not change much during his transition from a career-ending injury so on the outside his transition looked like it was without difficulties however their was little exploration of different occupation, ideological or gender ideologies.

In contrast, athletes who experienced a turbulent career-ending injury described families who lacked balance (e.g., extremely over-involved or extremely under-involved) in their approach to supporting their athletic career. Over-involved families sent the message that they valued athletes only when they accomplished great things in sport. Love, attention, support and encouragement were dependent upon how they performed in sport. One participant described a father who would talk to his children only if they were excelling. When the athlete experienced an injury, her dad had nothing to say to her:

He focuses on any child that's currently successful in sports. That's how he works. That's the only thing he can talk to you about, is if you're successful in sports. If you're not successful in sports, there's not much to talk about.
Family removal of support at a critical time in these athletes’ lives contributed to greater uncertainty, anxiety and low efficacy. One athlete described feeling like a failure when she was injured because her father gave his attention to her brother who was on the national team. “[T]hat was painful for me…. To him [my father], I like, I felt like a failure because I wasn't worth talking about anymore.” As a result, the athlete described how she experienced her “anxiety levels go up” and a “fear or a complete anxiety over failure” related to her sport performance and her father.

These parents may have indirectly reinforced immersion in an elite athlete identity because sport was all that these athletes had and sport was what they clung to as a means of validation because they had no support from their family. For instance, participants commented that their parents never showed interest in their elite sport career or other life domains. Instead parents immersed themselves in work activities such as computers.

...my dad...he's like a computer geek and he just like...lived in the basement when he came home. He...would come home on Saturday at noon and leave by Sunday night. And...leave for the rest of the week. .....he probably saw three or four games my entire life. Athletes described sport as being “their life” and drew a parallel between their life experience and that of someone in the ghetto who uses sport as their ticket to success:

And maybe it's because I felt like as a (sport) player . . . you know, my life depended on my game. You know, like that game. . . . So maybe that kind of internal pressure . . . pushed me to sort of be successful, you know, and I suppose if you live in Brazil and you're a guy it's the same thing, right? Your way out of the ghetto or something.

Their turbulent retirement was experienced without any family support, which probably contributed to these athletes’ feeling lonely, angry and discouraged during their transition from sport. The distant parent–athlete dynamic contributed to a more fragile sense of who these athletes were. An athlete describes how she missed out on support from her parents and wanting to talk to someone about her abusive coach:
there's so many parents who….do anything to get their kid to go to that school. …and I go there for four years and my mom did visit me once in the off season but like nobody ever saw me play a game. Nobody...anything. Everybody else's families were there.... it might have been different if .....my parents came along, watching my games or on tv. You know, there was actually someone I could talk to …about the coach being a jerk…

When sport was removed from the athletes’ life there was little gratification, attention and satisfaction. The athlete experienced feelings of failure and low self worth. One athlete described her two and a half year recovery from injury without parental support because her parents were in the midst of getting divorced and such parental “situational things….kept going and going and going…shattering” her “confidence further and further.”

Collectively the athletes with more balanced family of origin experienced a smoother transition and benefited from family support during injury transitions. In contrast the athletes with an imbalanced family of origin experienced a turbulent transition and unsupportive injury transition.

**Teammate connections versus disconnections.**

The second subfactor is called teammate connections versus disconnections. Athletes who experienced a smooth retirement from sport did not describe a pattern of loss of connection with their teammates during a career-ending injury. Instead, the athletes described a continuation and valuing of the teammate relationships despite retirement. The reassurance that they were still valued and understood by friends with whom they also shared their retirement experiences probably increased their self worth and optimism about moving forward with their life. Participants with this pattern said that they were still well connected and “tight” with ex-teammates although they saw them less often as life had gone in different directions. Moving forward in life yet maintaining friendships from past sport experiences often normalizes retirement from sport, eases the loss of sport, maintains support and increases acceptance of new life roles.
These participants benefited from hearing the stories of other teammates who went through similar retirement experiences before them. This helped because they saw “things the same way” and made them feel “secure . . . understood . . . to have friends” who really knew what they were “talking about.” Athletes noted that the support and mentorship of these elite-sport friends enhanced their feelings of self worth, helped prepare them for the future and normalized the retirement experience. They described new opportunities for developing non-sport relationships during retirement. One exception in this subset was a participant who described only a few good long-term friends and low self confidence in social situations.

In contrast, participants with the pattern of turbulent retirement commonly experienced a feeling of being disconnected or on the outside of their sport teammates. They described the loss of teammate connection during injury and retirement as a threat to their elite athlete role and sport goals. The sense of belonging to a unique group of athletes had inflated their commitment to sport. “You feel like an elite athlete because you are in a sport group and there is increased pressure to contribute to the team goal.” One athlete described that “it was black and white” to him because he was rigidly “committed to the team” he did whatever was asked of him in training with little attention to his own self interests. Participants described an exclusive experience with teammates that garnered a special connection to a common goal, yet they also experienced inhibited development of friendships outside sport as exemplified in the following interview excerpts:

...and your teammates are your best friends because you spend so much time with them and you sort of lose touch with everybody else outside the (sport) world a lot of times

As a consequence of a lack of support outside of sport, several athletes remained involved in sport despite having injuries as sport was where their peer support system was. For example:
I didn't really have a lot of support [outside of sport focus], which is probably why I held on...I was stuck in it. [identity of an athlete].

During injury these athletes would feel like they were standing on the sidelines excluded from the progress and camaraderie of their teammates. They became jealous of their teammates and experienced low self worth. They lacked the confidence to know that they belonged and were part of the team. For example, one participant described missing her teammates and feeling disconnected. She felt her elite identity status was devalued because she was injured and not training at the same level as her teammates due to rehabilitation.

They just sort of kept practising, kept going without me being there and I just kind of lost my confidence that I had a place in the sport.

Other participants felt isolated when they were injured and wanted to know if their teammates valued them. Without connection with the team, the athletes said they had no way of measuring their elite athlete status and had no validation that they were still part of the team while injured. For example, “It would have been nice to have contact with some of the guys there for support to know that . . . to know some of them would appreciate it when I got back.” But none of the other teammates reached out to the injured athletes. They described feeling lonely, segregated and lost without the support of teammates to help motivate them during rehabilitation. It is difficult to say which came first for these athletes, whether these athletes were distant socially before their injuries or as a result of their retirement experience.

**Social expansion versus social retraction.**

The third subfactor is social expansion and social retraction. The athletes who described a smooth transition after a career-ending injury continued to develop strong social skills and broader social networks. They said that “sports helped” in “socializing with friends...because it's helped me meet other people” and opened up new social opportunities. Sport “helped” because
“the interaction between athletes is way more relaxed” than, for example, “community classes” as the commonality athletes have is their passion for sport. They said that being in sport helped them to become more “worldly” because they went “from high school to travelling all around North America . . . meeting all kinds of different people and making all kinds of connections and networking” and this really helped them to learn how to network or “read” other people during retirement. Athletes with this pattern noted that their social confidence and proactive nature expanded further when they experienced retirement.

In contrast, despite a smooth retirement from sport, one athlete did not have well developed social skills. He described a need to develop his interpersonal skills during his transition to full-time national coach. He spoke of being an introvert and of having an interpersonal style that was sometimes difficult in personal relationships. For example, he described that “it’s hard to make friends - it’s not normal for me to go a month without calling…” He described knowing what to do in his role as a coach in “an uncomfortable situation” with the head coach or with an athlete but it is:

a lot easier for [him] to just kind of hold things in hopes the situation takes care of itself...You know a lot of times I’ll kind of – you know I’ll - I’ll kind of know what I should do. But I’ll just be – I’ll - I’ll be uncomfortable and I won’t be able to do it.

The athlete recognized that a major challenge in his new role as a coach of a national sport team was his inability to communicate effectively with the other athletes, coaches and the sport association. This participant noted that he was “naturally” an introverted personality and in his new role was actively working on taking charge in conversations. It is difficult to determine whether this individual came by his introverted style naturally or was shaped by the sport environment. However, it is clear that he now models weak relational skills to the next generation of elite athletes.
The athletes who experienced a turbulent transition described a relational pattern of early social “retraction” in response to injury (e.g., denial) and then later social expansion. Once injured, these athletes described initial social retraction and “shutting down” of their resources and energies. Athletes with this pattern said that they were initially “pretty angry” and “pretty selfish” when the injury happened and that they had “nothing to give.” For example, at the time of injury they became so immersed in denying the injury and feeling threatened about the loss of their goals that they had “no extra energy for anybody else.” In addition to anger they described social withdrawal:

I just got dropped. Even though in a way it maybe made it better because it’s like, you know what, if you don't care about me, I don't care about you. So it made me angry and it made me determined to be like, you know what, screw you guys. I'm going to go make a life of my own and I don't need you.

During retirement these athletes described a process of “letting go” of their selfish side that had been prominent prior to and during injury. Later, during their retirement transition the athletes’ social domains and skills expanded. They found they could “help people out” and “try to be there for them.” These participants were more caring, giving of their time, and interested in relationships with people. A female athlete described her change from being self-focused to social expansion:

And I have more care and concern for . . . people besides myself . . . when you're an athlete you're very focused on yourself. And now I worry about a lot of other people now . . . I've grown as a person definitely . . . I'm much more accepting towards things, definitely.

Another participant who described a turbulent retirement remarked that he eventually developed his social domain by gaining empathy skills, sharing his feelings and being more present for others. The former athlete described a shift in who he was during retirement and
described exploring the meaning of other life domains during a two-year period of soul-searching.

I was so focused on myself all the time, like I needed to get better and I needed to do this and that. I was very inward focused. So I feel like the total opposite now, just in everything. But it didn't happen fast. It took a while and I think I struggled with . . . my first two years . . . before I went away, I think I struggled a lot.

In summary, initially, after injury athletes described different relational patterns; eventually, all athlete expanded socially. Athletes with a smooth retirement described immediate social expansion and increases in social networks. One participant that experienced a smooth transition was an exception, and described initial experiences of difficulties relating to others due to his communication style. Athletes who experienced a turbulent transition described an initial retraction of their social abilities during injury and during this time of injury they increased their athletic identity as they attempted to hang on to their sport dreams. However, once these athletes accepted that it was no longer realistic to continue sport, they began a process of social expansion and development of relational skills.

**Continuity with Sport**

The final and fourth factor associated with the type of transition (smooth versus turbulent) experienced by former elite athletes was the extent of continuity they maintained with sport during retirement. Athletes who remained connected to sport through work (e.g., coaching full- or part-time or by using mental skills they had learnt in sport) experienced a smooth transition. Athletes with a smooth transition remained partially connected to sport throughout their retirement experience, usually through a part-time coaching job. One exception was an athlete that remained immersed in sport and fully connected to his old sport role through full-time work within sport. In contrast, athletes who experienced a turbulent transition cut off contact with sport, or remained completely immersed in sport through work, or had intermittent
connections (tried to connect to teammates or tried coaching part-time) with sport during retirement.

A second aspect of continuity was the transfer of mental skills to other life domains during retirement. Athletes experienced a smooth transition and benefited from the use of mental skills they had learnt in sport and then applied to their new roles. Many spoke of “who they are today” as resulting from mental skills “learned as elite competitive athletes” and they transferred these skills to academics. For example, one athlete described his application of sport mental skills to his universities studies: “That's when the attitude was shifted. To 110% focus on doing . . . well on all my assignments, studying hard, getting, you know trying to do well on mid-terms.” The athlete believed what he “learned from sports,” “to work hard and not giv[e] up,” “digging deep . . . when there's no gas left in the tank and you just keep going” transferred to his new life roles. Participants reported that they were able to “handle the pressure better than classmates” because of what they had learned as an athlete and other students in their classes at university would notice their confidence. Before exams, just like before a competition, they would say to themselves, “I am confident” and “I know I can do this. It's going to be easy” and were “thinking” they were “going to do well.”

Athletes said their “commitment” to school was similar to their commitment to sport. When they “jumped into school” they “jumped into it” with the same “sort of frame of mind” as sport. Other athletes said that during retirement they transferred skills from sport such as positive self-talk and breathing techniques to help them manage the stress of making public speeches or staying focused on the task at hand. The transfer of mental skills to other life domains empowered these athletes and helped them to feel more confident in their capacity to take charge and remain autonomous in many areas of their life. In addition, these athletes found multiple sources of satisfaction and efficacy in the application of mental skills as they enhanced their
chances of success in new life roles. Former athletes who experienced a smooth transition transferred mental skills from sport to other life roles. The transfer of mental skills enhanced their self-efficacy, increased their satisfaction in new life roles and maintained their continuity with sport. In contrast, athletes who experienced a turbulent transition did not describe using mental skills learnt in sport to other life domains.

In sum, athletes who experienced a smooth or turbulent retirement from sport described four main factors related to internal resources, cognition coping style, relational connections and continuity with sport. Athletes who experienced a smooth transition developed enhanced self-efficacy, were proactive, and action-oriented. They faced facts, were supported by balanced families, remained connected to teammates, and connected to sport by holding part-time jobs associated with sport and applied mental skills to their new life roles. In comparison, athletes who had a turbulent disengagement from sport described a pattern of dependency on others, were passive, remained in prolonged denial, felt on the outside of their team during injury and either cut themselves off from sport completely or remained immersed in a vocation that had them fully connected and identifying with sport

Four Identity Styles

Following my identification of smooth versus turbulent transitions and factors associated with each transition, my re-immersion into the participants' stories helped me identify four distinct identity styles (see Appendix N). These four identity styles are holistic and provide a way to capture a full range of factors. The four identity styles were (a) a more balanced identity, (b) lost identity, (c) intensification identity, and (d) living for sport identity. These identity styles are described together with how they intersect with the four factors associated with smooth and turbulent transition as noted previously, i.e., internal resources, cognitive coping style, relational
connections, and sport continuity, and their sub-patterns that describe smooth and turbulent athlete transitions in the current study.

**More balanced identity.**

The first identity style I identified I called a “more balanced identity” because these participants generally described greater self confidence, greater self-knowledge, more realistic thinking, supportive and balanced connections, and consistent part-time continuity (e.g., part-time coaching during retirement) with sport during retirement. These athletes managed their losses with their self-directed, independent style and had positive interaction with their coaches and medical staff. They held internally driven, self-determined goals that were grounded in reality and included a vision for life after sport.

The participants with a balanced identity style described feelings of transient, short-lived loss, sadness or depression after their career-ending injury, yet they quickly and independently moved forward in their lives. In contrast to the other identity styles, I noted the athletes with the more balanced identity style shifted into acceptance and engaged in positive use of their injury and rehabilitation time. Early acceptance gave this subset of athletes a sense of “control,” more “planning” and preparation time. The athletes with this pattern had considerable agency, independence and self confidence and were proactive in moving forward and broadening their life commitments.

Shortly after hearing the news of injury these participants began to plan retirement life from mental maps of their life-plans beyond sport that were developed during their athletic careers. Their mental maps, use of mental skills, and greater confidence, permitted a more differentiated identity and supported the development of multiple domains during rehabilitation.
and retirement. For example, one athlete described knowing that other life domains were part of his mental map:

I was able to follow a road. . . . And I knew that . . . I wanted to go back to school at one point so . . . And I know myself that when I will be 30 years old I want to be done my school because I’m not going to have, like, the energy to go back to school.

An essential factor in successful adjustment in their retirement as described by athletes was learning and succeeding at new domains of life activities, thus broadening their identity and greater satisfaction in multiple life domains. The balanced identity pattern described exploring other life domains during injury rehabilitation at the time that some of these athletes made their decision to retire from sport. One athlete describes an example of exploration:

I tested the waters a little bit with school and I was still doing all my rehab like with my physiotherapist and . . . . mentally I was still in the (sport) mode.

Once these athletes decided to retire, taking action to explore other domains and realization of success in other life roles such as cooking or other recreational activities, helped these athletes let go of their strong sport identity. For example, one athlete commented that in some ways he regretted participating in his sport for so long because he had had so little time for other activities. In retirement, these athletes enjoyed the feeling of accomplishment from exploring other activities. As these participants disengaged from sport, their elite athlete identity faded and a mature, more balanced identity flourished that was composed of their vocational, social and relational interests.

These athletes described being confident and effectively managed stress during retirement as they applied their mental skills:

I'm just confident going in to mid-terms [whereas] a lot of people would be kind of freaking out or whatever. I think I just have a little more confidence. I just wouldn't stress out over it . . . just being able to just handle the pressure of an exam.
They had self belief, used positive self-talk, and overcame adversity that commonly comes with injury:

Okay, my confidence was pretty much all the time pretty high. . . . I was always able to . . . tell me (myself) that I can do it . . . when the doctor had told me the first time in 2005 my career was done, 24 hours after, I finished second [in the world].

Another factor common to this style I noted was the ability to transfer mental skills (e.g., focusing, managing pressure and high workloads) from sport to new domains in retirement (e.g., academia). These athletes remained connected to their history and did not completely give up their elite athlete identity. One athlete described how the mental skills learned through sport transferred to school, supporting him to complete his university education:

That's when the attitude was shifted. To 110% focus on doing well, doing well on all my assignments, studying hard, getting, you know trying to do well on mid-terms . . . the thought process was . . . more along the lines of what I learned from sports. Just learning, knowing how to work hard and not giving up and, you know, digging deep.

These athletes described how in retirement they learnt to be positive and to shift from negative to positive thoughts through mental skills they had been taught when they were competing in sport.

Athletes who experienced a balanced identity style described deliberately planning activities that allowed them to manage retirement and stay connected to their sport identity. They described planning a busy year of activities that helped them to cope with transition:

Really busy . . . I was always . . . really busy so one thing I did that I knew . . . I was getting my surgery and I knew I had one year off and I didn't know if I was coming back to sport so one thing I did was I bought land . . . and I built a house at one end with my dad . . . I went back to school at the same time. And that was . . . the only way for me to be happy. And it was okay at the beginning because I was so busy I didn't have time to see what was going on.
These participants had strong family connections that encouraged balance, perspective-taking and development of multiple life domains. For example, one athlete reflected on the importance of perspective during rehabilitation:

Try to see the big picture because sometimes . . . you want to recover faster, you want to do things faster than you should and . . . and it seems like when you're an athlete and you're out for a month, it seems like a year or two years, but it's going to go so fast, so just take your time, do your recovery properly and don't like, ah . . . jump some steps.

They were able to continue to grow and expand socially after retirement from sport yet remained connected to their teammates. For example, many athletes retired at the same time as their teammates or would intermittently call up an old teammate. Some of these athletes described the social benefits of sport that helped them to develop skills and broaden their social network during retirement.

Another characteristic particular to the more balanced identity style was the opportunity for emotional closure. In this pattern, emotional closure was made possible through sharing with teammates who were also experiencing retirement, public announcements of retirement or recognition by sport associations (e.g., retirement plaque) of retirement and/or consultation with sport counsellors about retirement.

Finally, when they became injured the athletes with the more balanced identity style paused to re-evaluate their lives and chose to leave sport at a time that worked best for their self interests. They continued to remain connected to sport either through part-time work, use of mental skills, or connection to teammates and sport community. Thus, they held onto their sport identity but let go of most of their elite athlete identity.
Lost identity.

In contrast to the balanced identity style, the next style I called the “lost identity” because these athletes experienced overwhelming feelings of confusion, stress, turbulence and disruption in their elite athlete identity after a career-ending injury. These athletes described having little control over their decision to retire and they lacked self-efficacy and autonomy. Instead, they described being dependent on their externally driven goals (e.g., to make the Olympics or to win), their coaches and the medical staff to determine their fate.

Of particular relevance to the lost-identity style was a weak coach-athlete relationship and athletes described their role as passive and lacking confidence. For example, coaches received financial incentives for putting athletes on the podium. This strained the coach–athlete relationship and the athletes felt used. The athletes with this identity style never produced podium performances. Instead, participants experienced being commodified and used by the sport system. In addition, they had recurring injuries and felt that the coach’s treatment was unfair and heavily focused on their problematic injuries. These athletes questioned the coach’s confidence in their ability and became upset when coaches suggested they seek the support of a sport counsellor.

Moreover, during injury, the athletes who experienced the lost-identity style described passive acceptance of being devalued, quarantined and uncared for by the coaches and sport associations. Through the experience of multiple injuries, these athletes had passively struggled with stigma, disconnection and being devalued by others (e.g., teammates, coaches and sport associations). These experiences corroded their feelings of self worth and that athletes clung onto their elite status for self worth and value as to who they were. In the following quote, one athlete described the challenge of the abrupt change from a world-class athlete to a gas attendant and losing "a feeling of knowing who you are":
If it’s just immediate like that it’s . . . it’s so hard because . . . you’re a world-class athlete and then you’re not, within one minute . . . And it’s hard to take. For me it was . . . for yourself and to figure out who you are . . . And what direction you want to go to. Like, my first job after I finished skiing, I pumped gas.

The athletes with a lost-identity style had not planned or thought about what they would do after sport. In retirement they did not experiment with multiple life domains, lacking the ability to explore or plan their career. Throughout injury and several years after their retirement, they continued to lack the confidence to explore new domains and remained uni-dimensional.

In addition, these athletes did not experience a sense of agency or a positive interaction with the physicians who delivered the news of their career-ending injury. For example, upon hearing the news, one athlete was stoic and unemotional in front of the doctor. The athlete did not want a “stranger” (e.g., a medical doctor) to witness her vulnerability. What follows is an athlete’s reaction to her physician’s medical opinion. He did not provide clearance to continue with sport unless the athlete had another high-risk operation:

When he told me, I didn't know what to say, I just kind of stared at him. And then a tear came into my eye and I was like, okay. I'm not doing this in front of this guy . . . I got out, I told him that I kind of expected that. He's like, “You do, hey?” He knew I did. He knew I knew, I think. He just had to go through the formality of it . . . after I left his office though I got into the elevator went downstairs and phoned my mom and just bawled in the hallway. It was pretty hard. All of a sudden . . . where do I go now? I'm in the middle of [city name], I don't know a soul, my life is over.

Note that this athlete briefly considered getting the high-risk operation and returning to training for another four years in an effort to achieve her Olympic goal.

During the last interview of my study, two years after their retirement, these athletes described being passive and continued to experience difficulty making decisions in any life domain. For example, it took an athlete thirty minutes to order something from a restaurant menu and she felt she could not work out at the gym any longer, because there was no one to tell her
“what to do.” These athletes were dependent on others for life decisions and social activities. For example, without exploration of alternative interests one athlete followed the suggestion of her partner for a life career. Participants who experienced the lost-identity pattern reflected that they are more dependent in retirement than they ever were in the elite athlete role and found it difficult to be alone:

Athlete: And I don’t think I’m as independent as I used to be. . . . If anything I’m more dependent than I was before.

Interviewer: Okay. Interesting. Can you tell me about that?

Athlete: I don’t like to do things by myself anymore. That’s why when I talked to you at the beginning I was saying how I stay home by myself now. . . . That’s a big step for me because I don’t like to be alone at all.

The athletes who experienced the lost-identity style described a prolonged bout of denial, anger and withdrawal that came with their injury and loss of sport role. For example, despite multiple previous injuries and being “mentally” and “physically” tired and finding it “harder and harder to cope with” each injury, they had not thought about retirement or developed mental maps for life beyond sport. One athlete described the multiple injuries:

I first separated my shoulder and I broke my clavicle all at the same time. But they didn't see the clavicle break and then . . . a couple years later . . . I crashed again and I separated my shoulder through the old fracture so I had to have my clavicle grafted and that didn't hold so ... my shoulder is still messed up ... I separated my shoulder a second time in ... December of one year and I broke my femur the end of February, like 2 1/2 months later. And then that put me out. . . . Before my femur I lacerated my liver . . . that was a really scary one. It was that main artery that runs into your liver and it was a 1 cm and a half or 1 cm or something from tearing into that main artery. It was pretty scary.

I completely winded myself they just said from the impact. So I did that one and then I did my shoulder the second time and then I did my femur and then . . . I think it was my ACL in my knee. I think a third-degree tear and it was just hanging on kind of. I think it regenerates, like it’s fine now. And then ... my neck started after that and then just really bad back pain and stuff, like horrible back pain. And actually after I . . . went in for my second MRI right before I retired, they X-rayed my lower back and I have two fractured vertebrae in my lower back. I don't know when it happened ... it was some time over the
last two years of my [sport] career, is what they kind of guessed. But I have no idea when it happened. And I think that's about it . . . and my neck is kind of, just all the way through. There were probably two main crashes that really did it. I think they kind of discovered it was really long-term damage.

These athletes did not plan for life after sport and described abruptly quitting sport due to injury, although one briefly considered continuing despite a serious neck injury. They were mostly forced to quit, were angry and reacted to their loss of dreams by cutting off all contact from sport (e.g., coaches, teammates and sport associations), feeling that their “world had ended.” They immediately returned home, refused contact with anyone or anything related to sport and became directionless:

It wasn't real pretty . . . it's just all those thoughts go through your head, well I've worked this hard for this and I didn't really achieve my goal, like I instantly got down on myself basically. Like, I've worked and I've tried so hard and I didn't make it to where I want to go and what do I do now?

Note that a big part of the athlete’s disappointment was focused on failing to achieve the goal rather than her serious injury. These athletes experienced their career-ending injuries through a pattern of rejection, loss, and an inability to find a new life purpose. At the same time these athletes described a pattern of denial about the serious nature of their injuries.

Typically, the athletes’ experience of the lost-identity style involved forced retirement and a feeling that “life” was “over.” They promptly reacted by withdrawing and blocking out anyone or anything related to sport. One athlete described this as “[I] closed the chapter on that part of life . . . [and was] instantly cut off.” They then got on a plane and flew home to their family, choosing not to say good-bye to teammates, coaches or medical support who had been part of their sport family for years. With their dream to go to the Olympics erased, their identity as an elite athlete was lost too.
Retirement was experienced by athletes who fit the lost-identity style with a long period of loss of purpose, direction and feeling hopeless. It was “just horrible” and there was constant questioning “Oh, what do I do? Where am I going to go?” An athlete’s description of initially being lost and experiencing “depression” follows:

You couldn't even talk to me without . . . me bawling. There was nothing you could say to me . . . I had good days and then I had bad days, like it was really weird. I felt really weird. I don't even think about that time really anymore because it creeps me out that I was so not there. My parents were very concerned and I was . . . white as a ghost and just . . . frail. I didn't move. I wouldn't even . . . I didn't get up or anything. Except to pee of course. Maybe the odd glass of water . . . I had no desire to do anything. At all. Nothing, I guess nothing made me happy. I was so down and so upset that nothing made me happy.

Athletes who experienced the lost identity style had been in elite sport for most of their lives (e.g., participated in one sport intensely during preadolescence and adolescence and retired in adulthood) yet in retirement they cut off connection between their former athletic life and current retired life. They had difficulty accepting and adapting to their new foreign “normal” life and had little experience of exploring different roles. It is likely that a lot of their self worth had come from the recognition and rewards of their former elite athlete role and the valued they placed on their “elite” status.

I couldn't accept that I had to just be an average person. It sounds bad, but I was used to living a World Cup athlete life. Moving to a different country every week and living out of a bag and seeing the world and meeting all sorts of new people and competing and having that adrenaline rush every day. And it was just . . . living a normal life was really hard. And I couldn’t accept that part of it. And I was so depressed and so down.

These participants described being more introverted in retirement and not as “outgoing” as they “used to be.” They were less socially connected during retirement than as an athlete because as an athlete they had something in common with “everyone else” and now they did not “belong” or had not made any friends in several years. For example, their relational skills and
connection to others retracted during their transition from an elite athlete to retirement. As one athlete said, “I think about it a lot more and I feel like I don’t belong anywhere again [laughing].” Eventually (two years later) in retirement they started to reach out and make some relational connections.

The participants described recovery from depression and reorientation from their lost identity when structure and connection to their old sport was added to their lives. Structure was something that they were accustomed to as an elite athlete and helped them feel connected to parts of their old sport life. It gave them a schedule that would guide and organize their day, just as they had had as an international athlete. They started recreationally enjoying their sport again and this provided reconnection with their life as an athlete and the physical sensations of a sport that was their passion.

At the time of the last interview, two to three years after retiring, these athletes described a desire to seek counselling to address some issues related to their sport retirement. When their Olympic dreams and goals were shattered due to injury, their identity appeared to be shattered as well. As a result, these participants lacked self-knowledge, self-reflection and life purpose in during retirement. They felt lost, did not know who they were and were socially disconnected. In many ways, volunteering to be a participant in my study helped them to reconnect with their old athletic identity through story telling. The athletes commented that they experienced personal growth between the interviews as a result of telling their stories. These forms of reconnection, albeit fleeting, may have helped to develop continuity with old and new life roles.

**Intensification identity.**

The third identity style I noted and called the “intensification identity” as participants with this pattern experienced intensification or increased commitment to the athlete role when
they became injured. These athletes felt their identity was threatened when they became injured and responded, in spite of the injury, by increasing their efforts to make their dreams come true. Eventually the participants came to accept that retirement was inevitable. They gained perspective and began exploration of other life domains during retirement; however, the pathway to acceptance was not linear or smooth.

Initially, the athletes reactively continued to commit to their athletic goals despite injury, pushing harder to achieve their goals, denying their body rest needed for injury recovery. The elite athletes who described this pattern were encapsulated in their drive for sport and, despite injury, pushed themselves to the limit. They believed in their coaches’ work ethic and were dependent on the coaches’ creed “that there was no such thing as overtraining.” The participants focused on externally driven goals espoused by their coaches that involved “winning” and working as hard as possible. Their ego-driven outward orientation was unrealistic and replaced their autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and ability to be proactive with coaches.

I noted that athletes with this identity style lost perspective and did not take the time to allow for recovery because they were dependent on coaches and wanted to please them. Their external focus on coach-directed information and achieving unrealistic goals took priority over their self interest and self-awareness. The participants held a narrow focus on sport goals and their dependency on the coaches’ approval provided the necessary blinders for them to deny the serious nature of their injuries.

Denial and focus on the unrealistic outcome goals were common characteristics of athletes with the intensification identity style. Their pattern of denial kept them from realizing the severity of their pain and the serious nature of their injuries. They described how they slowly
began to realize that the pain was taking over their ability to “perform” sport but when asked by reporters, they denied the injury existed:

The next year was probably my fastest but the pain was getting worse and it was some time in early 2003 that I started going down. . . . My back at that time was starting to hurt more and more. I was sort of losing flexibility . . . my hips. They were starting to seize up . . . in 2003 I was doing a phone interview for someone . . . he's like “Oh so last year you mentioned you were in a bit of pain. How's that bothering you?” And at the time I was kind of sensitive about it because I didn't want to admit that I was having this . . . so I said “No, no I'm feeling fine.”

The athletes with the intensification style were self-focused and so “obsessed” about unrealistic outcome goals that they “didn't realize how absorbed” they were. For example, the athletes said that they were like “adolescents” in their focus on goals and denial of their injuries. One athlete described her emotional turmoil and a self-centered focus that kept her from being aware of the bigger picture:

It was more emotional turmoil. Rather than realizing, holy crap, this has just happened to me. I mean I was in pain, but . . . I don't think I could see the big picture. I was just so obsessed with my own feelings and how crappy my situation was . . . I think I was obsessing about my goals and losing my goals.

They said that “accepting failure” was a “really big” learning experience. “Being able to accept the fact that you're not going to win every time” was difficult for these athletes but they eventually came to accept the limitations of their injuries. They described that learning about their boundaries, the reality of their goals and what they could control in their lives helped them move towards acceptance and adjust to retirement.

In addition to being immersed in unrealistic-outcome goals and denying their pain, the athletes with the intensification style were passive with their medical treatment. For example, they either followed what medical professionals told them was best for their body despite feeling that they were often pushing too hard or did not seek treatment at all. Common questions these
athletes ask during retirement were “Why did I wait so long before realizing how bad my injury was, before leaving sport?” and “Why did I not take better care of my injury?” “Why did I listen to the medical team and not my body when the pain was so bad?” During injury, athletes described moving further and further away from their sport goals because their pain limited performance and some had not sought or ignored medical treatment for two years of intense pain related to their injury:

I knew that that was the goal (e.g., the Olympics) but it started to feel further and further away as that year went on. Just I got slower and slower. I . . . probably should have realized that I was injured four months earlier (or somebody should have) . . . I mean some of the best races I’ve gone out there and just decided as a goal that . . . I would see how much pain I could put myself in.

Athletes with the intensification identity style described experiences of receiving mixed messages from the medical professionals and were confused over the intensity of their pain yet continued to follow the rehabilitation treatment plan:

I just lost the joy out of [sport] totally. It was just so frustrating because I tried coming back for a year and a half after the initial problem . . . nobody quite understood why I was in so much pain. And that felt devaluated for me. It's like, "Oh, you should be back in a month or two" and they’d sell that for a year and a half. And it never happened.

Athletes with the intensification identity style described experiencing phases of self-doubt, lacking self-confidence in their abilities after a career-ending injury. For example, over time the athletes’ injuries did not heal, they turned inward and described self-doubts (e.g., "What is wrong with me? Why is my injury not getting better? Is this all in my head? They told me I would get better."). Self-doubt, uncertainty and anxiety increased as the duration of the injuries continued and their goals were threatened. They “started questioning everything that” they “believed in,” their “own toughness,” and became highly self-critical.
Participants that held the intensification identity style did not have the “experience” or know-how to manage an injury. For example, one inexperienced elite athlete described how unprepared she was for injury and the threat to her elite athlete identity came as a shock: “All of a sudden being injured, I just felt like the carpet had been ripped out from under my feet” and “not having a huge athletic background” in “high-performance sport . . . I didn't know how to cope with injuries.” The skills needed to manage an injury (e.g., patience and pacing) were different from the internalized work ethic athletes acquired through elite sport. These athletes lacked the confidence, knowledge and initiative to adopt new skills required for recovery from an injury. What follows is an athlete’s description of rehabilitation accompanied by feeling a lack of direction, support and confidence:

I just didn't know what to do with my free time. I didn't know how not to train. I didn't know what rehab treatment was all about, so I kind of felt lost. And I felt like, I needed somebody to sit me down and tell me, “You're going to be fine.” Like, nobody ever did that. They just said, “Oh it sucks that you're busted.” There was just a lack of support . . . I felt extremely lost. And I didn't know how to come back.

In addition to feeling lost, athletes with this pattern described using mental skills inappropriately during rehabilitation and retirement. For example, the “competitiveness” and “pushing” skills that had helped them to work hard as an elite athlete became a barrier to their recovery. Their “competitive attitude came through quite a bit” and they “tried to push . . . making their bodies hurt more.” Instead of changing their competitive approach during rehabilitation exercises and adjusting their pace, some of these athletes stopped doing the rehabilitation exercises completely.

Athletes who held the intensification identity style experienced initial social retraction in response to injury and then later social expansion during retirement. Initially during rehabilitation they distanced themselves from teammates and friends and put all their energies toward sport. Two to three years later, they accepted their injury was career-ending and then
described the start of social expansion. Part of the process was the realization that they had to learn to start “letting go” of being “selfish” as being selfish did not work “so well with relationships.” These athletes began to broaden and differentiate their social roles. With their athletic role reduced, they put more energy into the social domain, especially caring about other people. Over a two year period in retirement they began to be more flexible with their time, concentrate on relationships and improve their communication skills. For example, “It didn't happen fast. It took a while and I think I struggled with it... my first two years... I think I struggled a lot,” or “I didn't die with the (loss of sport).”

The athletes described that before retirement they lacked “patience with people who couldn’t get off their butts” and lacked a general empathetic “understanding” of other people. However, during retirement they became more in touch with their feelings and were more open in relationships than they had been while competing in elite sport. For example, a male athlete described a shift from being inwardly focused and unemotional as an elite athlete to being more “caring” and expressed a desire to “help other people” after his career-ending injury. Their self-described inward, selfish, unemotional focus that had helped them cope with the pressures of sport was replaced with more caring and awareness of others:

I'm more in tune with like people’s feelings and I think I just care more about people than I did before. . . . I was so focused on myself all the time, like I need to get better and I need to do this and that. It was very inward-focused. So I feel like the total opposite now, just in everything.

Another female athlete said that she felt her friendships were deeper and she was more “honest” about who she was with friends. She learnt to admit that she sometimes messes up and that she is not “perfect.” Athletes with the intensification identity grew and learnt to take care of their bodies and set boundaries in relationships. For example one athlete described “I'm way more aware of who, of what I want. I'm way more respectful of my boundaries.”
The process of exploration and broadening from a narrow sport identity to include other life roles began through acquiring perspective, self-reflection and meaning-making. Former athletes spoke of having “a more realistic perspective on life and people” and sport. Athletes suggested that they should have:

Put [sport] on hold [during injury]. You don't need to do [sport] right now. Just have some fun. Relax. Realize there’s other things out there aside from that sport and that world. Because it's so consuming when you're in it. And then . . . go eat fried chicken.

What follows is another retired athlete’s search for meaning and passion in other life domains during retirement from sport:

My search is trying to find some kind of path. I was going down a path before but it was a different path. I needed to find something that I was really passionate about. I think it's totally different. . . . I guess I'm still defining what it is . . . it's definitely a passion. I love working with people and it's pretty vague but that kind of leads me.

During retirement and through soul-searching, these athletes went from focusing on singular life domains to multiple life domains and acquired great satisfaction. For example, those that described the intensification pattern said that they enjoyed exploration of “other passions” and they felt more like “a well-rounded person,” which they said they were not “before.” These athletes experienced greater self-fulfillment and satisfaction through exploration of other life domains during retirement. They developed broader, more complex and diverse roles. After acceptance of their injury and during retirement from sport these participants expressed greater efficacy, self worth and purpose from experiencing multiple life domains.

After retiring, the athletes who experienced intensification identity style also described intermittent continuity with sport. Once they had disengaged from sport, they disconnected from their teammates and coaches. However, during retirement they explored connections with teammates and tried coaching, which helped to maintain limited continuity with sport and some of their past sport roles.
**Living for sport identity.**

The final pattern I call “living for sport” identity style comprised participants who I noted remained in the sport system. Half of the elite athletes with this style described a turbulent retirement while the others described a smooth retirement from sport.

All the athletes in retirement described a dependency on sport and put little effort into exploring options or careers outside of sport. During injury recovery they were passive and did not attempt to rehabilitate their body or apply the mental skills they had learnt in sport. They were passive in interactions with coaches and medical professionals, doing what came most easily, eventually making a commitment to a role in sport. After retirement, these athletes realized that they had not used the power in their relationships with their coaches. For example, one athlete talked about her “controlling, strict and . . . autocratic” coach and that she did not have a “voice” in their relationship. In retirement she gained “perspective,” realized her “rights” and felt if she was in a similar position again she would speak up or take action.

These participants described passively believing that they had not experienced true retirement and remained uni-dimensional in their career role. They did not seek out other vocational interests or explore other career domains:

The hardest thing I'm sure everybody goes through is like, what do I do next? I'm 33 and I have no idea what I want to do next, you know, and it's kind of like everything that's happened so far has just fallen into place and it's just been easy.

Athletes with the living for sport identity style described an external, narrow focus on unrealistic sport goals; these attributes continued during their new sport careers after retirement from elite sport. For example, their careers during retirement continued to be related to elite sport. They strove to fulfill their lifelong elite athlete goals that they had not been able to accomplish through athletes who they now coached. These former athletes felt low self worth
and were compensating for unachieved athletic goals thus continued to chase the gold medal dream:

Whatever my short-term successes as an athlete were, I kind of want to make up for that in my new role . . . if I have some big champion or . . . a gold medalist or win an international competition . . . to me, that’s just as fulfilling . . . if we can get somebody that nobody said would ever be top five in the world……

After many years of counselling some athletes said that they came to terms with who they were and discovered that they were lacking self-acceptance. Many of them were overly concerned with what others thought of them and did not want to “worry about what other people” thought about them.

All athletes who experienced the living for sport identity style described changing from being self-focused during their athletic career to an outward social orientation. They realized that they needed to develop social skills. For example, “My communication skills are not the best . . . it’s something I’m working on.” Others described their growth in the social domain during retirement from an inward focus to an outward caring and accepting focus:

When you're an athlete you're very focused on yourself. And now I worry about a lot of other people . . . I've grown as a person definitely . . . I'm much more accepting towards things.

After their career-ending injury these athletes went through an in-depth search for who they were and described adjustment difficulties (e.g., depression). During their sport participation they had a deep all-consuming relationship with sport that was a means to acquire recognition they did receive from family and/or teammates. Sport was their life and passion. During retirement they grieved the loss of playing sport. One athlete said that watching her former teammates play sport was like “attending an ex-lover’s wedding.”
The athletes who experienced the living for sport identity style described great continuity between their past and present sport lives and little diversity or broadening of life domains during retirement. They described participating in their new role in sport as a way to give closure to their “unfinished” sport experience or as a means to compensate for unaccomplished former goals, lack of recognition and low self worth. They said that their life pace had not changed during retirement because their new occupations involved so much of their old sport life. Their identity remained narrow and undifferentiated. They were still firmly holding on to their sport role.

**Gender and Identity Styles**

It is important to understand the gender context of sport. Sport is traditionally a patriarchy where a male dominates the field (e.g., all coaches in the current investigation were male) and there is a lack of female coaches. The female athletes in this study all experienced less balanced identity patterns. The attitude of female athletes was one of dependency on their coach during injury and questioning of their own psychological health when their bodies failed to recover. Female participants experienced the most difficult, turbulent transitions and less adaptive identity style (e.g., lost identity). These female participants had been members of the elite sport system for most of their adolescent and adult lives and governed by male coaches typical of the sport system. One female athlete with the lost identity style experienced a sudden trauma when learning that her sport career was terminated and initially would not show her emotional pain to others (e.g., coaches, medical doctors and sport administrators who were all male). Her action was to respond by cutting off all connection with her coaches and sport family and then moving back to her family of origin.

The other female participants who experienced a turbulent transition described either the intensification identity or the living for sport identity. The pattern of these female athletes was
long term denial of injuries and dependency on their male coaches. One participant described three coaches who each gave her advice. Instead of separating the three and choosing one coach who she trusted she remained in connection with all three coaches. For instance she described:

I was too passive. I think if I were in the situation now knowing what I know...I would have just stuck to what I knew felt best and I would have had the confidence to say, ok you guys are messing with my head, this isn't healthy for me.

Athletes described “just wanting to please” their male coaches and later acknowledged this was “extremely self-destructive” and contributed to their “loss of identity” during transition. Other participants described feeling abused by their coach, a “cult leader,” yet they really liked him and wanted his approval. The female athletes had relational connections but did not use their voices when they were in pain or when they had conflict with their coaches. When they retired, they missed the relational connection to their sport family (i.e., coaches and teammates) and this contributed to retirement difficulties.

In contrast, only male athletes in the present study were represented in the most advanced identity pattern, the balanced identity. These male participants adapted to their transitions without challenge. They had positive coach athlete relationships and this appeared to support their exit from sport. The male participants that experienced turbulent transition described patterns of either the intensification identity or the living for sport identity pattern. The male participants with the intensification identity style remained disconnected to their coaches and described that it was a “business” and “not a caring” environment. The coaches would not provide concrete feedback on how to improve. The male athletes had to find their own power and ways that they could in dominate in sport. An environment of unwritten rules, such as be tough, stoic and do not acknowledge your injuries, pervaded. As one male athlete described, the coach had created an environment where there was no interpersonal intimacy and no “emotional expression.” The male participants with the ‘living for sport’ identity pattern acknowledged his
own interpersonal challenges and difficulties connecting with teammates and coaches. The response of this athlete was to distance from his teammates and coaches and develop his own self coaching program. In retirement the athlete was actively working on his communication skills to improve in his role as a national team coach.

In sum, gender influences were described by participants in this study. All participants experienced male coaches as their primary authority figures and were shaped by the dominant ideology of the patriarchal sport system. The female athletes were relational and had difficulties separating from their sport identities. One facet that may account for the challenges of separation experienced by two female athletes was that they were engaged in individual sports where the coach-athlete relationship is often deeper and separation may be more difficult. Hence, a greater loss may have been perceived by female athletes due to their greater attachments to the male authority figure (e.g., coaches). The male athletes were encouraged by coaches to be distant and trained in an emotionally distant environment. Thus, the participants experienced sport as a gendered institution in which men are elevated to the most powerful positions and women the less powerful ones and the athlete identity during transition mirrored these power differences.

Summary of Post-injury Identity Changes

In summary, my analysis of participants’ stories revealed quite different transitions and identity styles of trajectories after a career-ending injury. I discovered four different factors (internal factors, cognitive coping style, relational connections and sport continuity) and subfactors (level three analysis) that were associated with smooth versus turbulent retirement transitions (level two analysis). I found individuals who experienced a smooth transition described subfactors related to internal resources, cognitive coping styles that were based in reality, greater relational connections to others and greater part-time continuity to sport. These participants described patterns of being more proactive and confident. They were able to plan for
their future to adapt to new multiple life domains easily and quickly during transition. Moreover, participants who experienced a smooth transition experienced a collaborative and positive athlete–coach relationship in which they felt they could negotiate their needs, or they were self-coached. They also described supportive families that encouraged balance and perspective. In retirement they maintained ongoing connections to sport through teammates and part-time employment. It is important to note that participants who experienced a smooth transition also were the same participants who described a more balanced identity in pre-injury and a balanced identity style after a career-ending injury.

In contrast, participants who experienced a turbulent transition described dependency, a lack of personal control, commodification, passivity, and internalized sport work ethic. These individuals described more and longer-lasting patterns of depression than the former group and had lower feelings of confidence. Their athlete-coach connections were negative and not collaborative. Their family support consisted of either over or under involvement and they did not maintain teammate connections or continuity with sport.

Participants that experienced a turbulent transition were unable to attend (e.g., denial) to their bodily pain or slow down during their initial experience of injury, which led to further damage to their body and termination of their sport career. These athletes felt pressured by their coaches and themselves to continue training despite injury. They had internalized outcome- or ego-orientation, focusing on winning at all costs because they felt pressured by coaches and the sport system. However, they did experience a period of soul searching, social expansion and exploration during retirement. It is important to note that participants who described a turbulent transition experienced a less balanced identity pre-injury and were either lost, intensification or living for sport identity style post injury.
Through a fourth level of abstraction, I proposed that elite athletes experienced four different identity styles (e.g., balanced, lost, intensification and living for sport) during life after sport. Factors that shaped the identity changes were described and interpreted for each of the four identity styles. All participant patterns had strong athlete identities prior to injury but varied with respect to continuity, complexity, breadth and diversity of identity after injury. Another commonality among all four identity styles was a growth in relational roles, although this varied substantially. This suggests that the elite athlete social roles were stifled and effort was put into the dominant identity during their elite athlete experience. The structure of the sport context limited all participants except those of the balanced identity style who had clearer self-knowledge, greater confidence, agency and autonomy and were able to negotiate their needs. Individuals who expressed greater agency, such as those with a more balanced identity style, managed to negotiate coach–athlete relations and medical care.

Despite the different transitions, patterns and styles identified in this chapter, several commonalities among participants were described during retirement. First, all athletes expanded their social connections and number of life domains to varying degrees. Some of their social expansion was immediate and others described a more prolonged pattern of social-role development at times achieved minimal new connections; however, they all experienced some expansion. There was one athlete that was an exception and did not develop a relational pattern of growth further than her pre-injury levels. The athlete socially isolated, withdrew from any contact from sport and felt that she was lost. She never attained her pre-sport relational skills because she found it difficult to make new friends with people whom she felt she had nothing in common with despite being in retirement. She described herself as “less social” than she was as an athlete because she did not “feel like” she had:
“anything in common with anyone…..And when I was an athlete you know you have everything in common with everyone.”

The athlete also described that in retirement she was less outgoing than she was as an athlete…..”I don’t think I’m as outgoing as I used to be.”

Second, all athletes experienced a pattern of broadening life domains during retirement at varying rates and breadths. The expansion of their life domains brought great satisfaction to these athletes and many said that this brought great meaning and was a considerable shift in who they were. The one exception to this pattern was the aforementioned athlete who had difficulty expanding beyond her own circle of support people in her life.

Finally, no age differences were found however gender patterns in a patriarchal sport system were identified. Male coaches shaped and dominated the athletes. Male athletes were the only members of the more balanced identity. Female athletes experienced the least adaptive identity and most turbulent transitions. Female athletes described difficulties disconnecting from their coaches, their teammates and sport identity and responded by either completing cutting off connection or dependency or by conforming to coaches’ standards. Male athletes described difficulties with a non-emotional environment that encouraged them to be powerful, stoic and distant. The identity patterns experienced by males (more balanced) and females (less balanced) on the whole reflected the power imbalances in the patriarchal institution of sport.

In the next chapter, further exploration of these findings will ensue as results are compared to past and current scholarly literature. Moreover, further meaning regarding these results will be explored by looking at the literature in this area.
Chapter 7: Discussion

Key Elements of Retirement Transitions

The purpose of this investigation was to generate insights into changes in elite athlete identity after a career-ending injury. The results described both balanced and less balanced changes in elite athletes’ identity after a career-ending injury. Despite an overcommitted elite athlete identity prior to retirement, the results of this study show that athletes may experience more adaptive changes such as a more balanced identity in retirement. Further, this study shows that some athletes with an overcommitted elite athlete identity prior to retirement experience a less balanced identity in retirement.

Several other individual factors such as strong internal resources such as self-efficacy and autonomy, and social factors such as supportive families, connections to teammates and positive coach–athlete relationships, are found in the present investigation to be associated with positive identity changes and a smooth transition.

The present research found that for elite athletes, transitions after a career-ending injury can be described as four distinct identity styles. These four identity styles are consistent with developmental research (e.g., Marcia, 1993) and I suggest that some of the adult elite athletes in this study experienced a stall in identity exploration and continued to be engaged in the lifelong process of identity reformation. Several other individual factors such as strong internal resources and social factors such as supportive families, connections to teammates and positive coach-athlete relationships, and some continuity with sport are found in the present investigation to be associated with balanced identity style and a smooth transition. Moreover, the cognitive coping subfactors in the present study that were associated with a balanced identity style and a smooth transition were: (a) development of multiple life domains, (b) planning, (c) transfer of their
mental skills during rehabilitation and retirement, (d) fleeting depression, and (e) reality based cognitions and (f) confidence.

I begin with a discussion of smooth and turbulent transition experiences, more balanced and less balanced identity, internal resources such as self-efficacy and personal control, and then discuss social roles such as coach–athlete relationship, teammates and family, the role of gender, and mood and meaning-making. To conclude, I discuss the four emerging identity styles and offer a possible developmental explanation for the findings of the present study and present a summary of this chapter.

**Smooth versus Turbulent Retirement**

This study suggests that, despite a career-ending injury, athletes can experience a smooth transition if they have certain factors (highlighted in the previous section). This is consistent with Sinclair and Orlick’s (1993) research that suggests every retirement may be either a crisis or a smooth transition. These findings support research on individuals with amputations that suggest both adaptive (Dunn, 1996; Dunn & Dougherty, 2005) and maladaptive transitions are possible (e.g., Rybarczyk, Edwards, & Behel, 2004). Those participants in the present study who reported a smooth transition described themselves as being more autonomous, proactive (e.g., personal control) and having more efficacy about retirement. They shared several subfactors such as forward thinking and planning. In their social roles they were positive and took a proactive stance in relationships, felt supported by family and connected to teammates. They were goal-directed and had collaborative coach–athlete relations. Finally, they had a more balanced identity (with the exception of one participant who had a living for sport identity) that involved easy adaptation to multiple life domains.

In contrast, several of the participants who experienced a turbulent injury and retirement from sport initially had the following characteristics: a non-collaborative coach–athlete
relationship, a lack of agency, voice, self-efficacy, and planning and were uni-dimensional in their roles. These athletes had an ego or winning orientation, were dependent, and internalized the coaches’ work ethic. Their self worth was diminished when they lost their elite athlete career. Moreover, those athletes who experienced a turbulent retirement transition had a less balanced identity during retirement from sport. The study lends support to the traditional view that there may be negative reactions to sudden career-ending injury (Mihovilovic, 1968; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Webb et al, 1998) and difficulties adjusting to post-sport life (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; McPherson, 1980; Mihovilovic, 1968). However, the current research suggests that elite athletes who experience a career ending injury can have positive and smooth experiences in retirement.

To a certain extent, some of this study’s findings contradict what has previously been reported about elite athletes with overcommitted identities and career-ending injuries in terms of smooth retirement experiences. One set of patterns in the present investigation supported the notion that a heightened elite athlete identity is associated with challenges in identity changes and turbulent experiences during retirement. Another set of patterns in the present study added new information to what has typically been thought of as maladaptive retirement experiences, suggesting adaptive changes in identity are possible for elite athletes with a heightened identity after a career-ending injury. Previous research has suggested that athletes with pronounced elite athlete identity may be a liability when the athlete disengages from sport (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Brewer et al., 1993; Cecic Erpic et al, 2004; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007; Stambulova et al, 2007) and that a career-ending injury has typically been associated with difficult adjustment during retirement (Lavallee et al, 1998; Sparkes, 1998; Stambulova, 1994). Some of these studies have focused on adolescent female gymnasts (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) or collegiate athletes (Lally, 2007) which involved different age groups from the present study. As well, the athletes in some of these studies knew their career was finite. For
example, collegiate eligibility is limited and athletes felt in control and planned for their retirement (Lally, 2007) unlike athletes who are forced to retire (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Sparkes, 1998) such as many of those in the present study that experienced injury. These studies also used different methodologies (e.g., quantitative, longitudinal, or a different type of qualitative) than the present investigation and this may account for some differences found.

The present study suggests that when a career-ending injury interferes with, stops, or actually hinders psychological growth, it is a source of concern for athletes, sport community and sport, career and rehabilitation counsellors. It may even lead to maladjustment similar to that seen in cases of people with disabilities. We can learn from the participants in my study that despite an overcommitted identity, a career-ending injury provides opportunity for learning, meaning-making and, in short, promotes a more balanced identity development. Such experiences can be a source of growth, ultimate maturity and adaptation (Shontz, 1977) and have a wide range of applications from trauma to the performing arts or business.

**Internal and Coping Resources**

Individual differences in adjustment can occur among those athletes who have similar social, sport-related roles and developmental tasks (Stambulova et al., 2009). Individual differences may stem from psychological factors that determine an individual's response to retirement changes. The results of the present study suggested that elite athletes with heightened athletic identity who have a strong sense of self-efficacy and personal control (e.g., autonomy, self interests) are more likely to experience smooth retirement transitions and balanced identity style. While I did not measure self-efficacy in the present project, in view of my findings and the literature in career counselling, I suggest that self-efficacy may be a construct that positively influences identity changes during retirement of elite athletes.
Self-efficacy, or the belief that one can cope with a given situation, has been used to predict whether one will enter a new and unfamiliar situation as well as the affective reactions to the situation (Bandura, 1982). Retirement self-efficacy is the belief that one possesses the knowledge and skill needed to manage retirement (Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995). Personal control in the present study involves a belief that one possesses the power to shape life's outcomes. Individuals with personal control believed that they can control numerous events in life, whereas those with less personal control believed that much of life's outcomes were the result of luck and chance and were not under their control. I will first discuss self-efficacy and then personal control. Self-efficacy is supported in the workplace retirement literature as a significant predictor of the ability to change and adapt (Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995) and have been linked to positive adjustment in rehabilitation psychology (Dunn, 1996; Hamill et al., 2010).

The athletes in the present study who had retirement self-efficacy were more likely to experience balanced identity style, plan quickly and adapt to new roles after a career-ending injury. Self-efficacy predicts confidence in one’s ability to deal with change. Given that elite athlete retirement is a new experience for elite athletes, self-efficacy is likely associated with positive adaptations and identity changes after a career-ending injury. Consistent with research on adult retirees' beliefs before retirement (Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995) those preparing to leave elite sport would be expected to respond more favourably to retirement if they believed that they had the skills and abilities needed to make the retirement transition. The present investigation finds support for collegiate sport research that suggests athletes who committed early to the athlete role and had little meaningful exploration of (or investment in) other roles reported lower self-efficacy for career decision-making (Lally & Kerr, 2005). Collectively, the research suggests that self-efficacy may be an important psychological determinant of identity adaptation.
during former elite athletes’ retirement from a career-ending injury; however, more research is needed to verify these conclusions.

**Self-efficacy and identity.**

Athletes in the current investigation with a more balanced identity and greater self-efficacy had the self-assessed ability to deal with the changes that accompanied retirement. They began preparing and planning for their retirement once they discovered their injuries might be career-ending. These participants took the time to engage in “forward rehearsal,” develop future mental maps, were able to quickly adapt to their new context (e.g., injury) and develop other life domains during injury or before retirement, thus experiencing a balanced identity style. This supports the concept that preretirement planning (Perna et al., 1999) is associated with healthy athlete retirement (Alfermann et al., 2004; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), and that preadjustment to the end of a sport career is associated with identity formation (Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). The present investigation further supports research on amputations that indicates adjustment begins long before surgery (Hamill et al., 2010).

Findings are consistent with other research that indicates the quality of adaptation to post-sports life and injury (e.g., amputation) (Hamill et al., 2010) is influenced by the gradualness of the process of athletic retirement (Lally, 2007; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993) and the ability to adapt to adversity (Gonzales, 2003). Awareness and acceptance of change is the key to moving forward in life (Dunn, 1996; Dunn & Dougherty, 2005; Engel, 1961). The processes of mentally rehearsing and mapping out their vision assisted these athletes to develop future life roles that contributed to a smooth disengagement and balanced identity style. Given that thinking about retirement increases healthy adjustment in sport (McPherson & Guppy, 1979; Stambulova, et al., 2009), workforce (Beehr, 1986; Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995) and rehabilitation psychology (Hamill et al., 2010), it is important to help individuals prepare psychologically for
the retirement transition beforehand (Stambulova et al., 2009) as well as any surgeries related to injury.

Athletes in the present investigation who had a balanced identity style, retirement planning and self-efficacy experienced a smooth transition from a career-ending injury. Beliefs about retirement, and planning before workforce retirement (Beehr, 1986; MacLean, 1982; Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995) and sport retirement, encourage healthy adjustment (Alfermann et al., 2004; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Lally, 2007; Perna et al., 1999; Stambulova et al., 2009; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993) and identity formation in college athletes (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007) to retirement. This is one of the first studies to contribute to knowledge on balanced identity changes of elite athletes, self-efficacy and retirement planning particularly after a career-ending injury when it is often perceived that there is little time to prepare athletes for their future.

The current investigation found that athletes with a balanced identity style, self-efficacy and retirement planning adapted more quickly to multiple roles in their retirement experiences. This is consistent with previous research that diversity in identity, quicker adaptation to multiple life domains and self-complexity is associated with positive adaptations of identity during retirement (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986; Schlossberg, 1984; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Athletes who have more options, or see possible future roles, after retirement, such as employment, interests or relationships, are thought to be better prepared to negotiate a smooth transition than athletes who have few or no options (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Thus, one explanation may be that a decrease in athletic identity during retirement from elite sport facilitates the athletic retirement transition (Lavallee et al., 1997) but difficulty with identity reformation may prolong the transition (Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman et al., 2004). It may be that those individuals with self-efficacy, who plan to experiment with new roles, receive greater satisfaction from these new roles, and are then able to
let go of their attachment to the elite athlete identity. Thus, promotion of self-efficacy in other domains, combined with shoring up pre-retirement efficacy, may be necessary before some athletes are willing to invest in roles outside of sport (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2000) and develop a balanced identity style.

Consistent with the athletes in the present study who managed smooth identity transitions is the research on self-complexity (Brown, Cairns, & Botterill, 2001, 2004; Linville, 1987). Authors suggest that valuing a sense of “personal complexity” over a simplistic, uni-dimensional view of the self buffers against stress-related illness and depression (Brown et al., 2001, 2004; Linville, 1987; Thoits, 1982) and provide protection or adaptive potential against failure or stress in any one life domain. Self-complexity has been defined as greater self-knowledge in terms of a greater number of self-aspects and maintaining greater distinctions between self-aspects. Participants who experienced injury and a smooth transition immediately engaged in multiple activities that were unrelated to sport, maintaining personal complexity into retirement and avoiding the linear uni-dimensional life of being an injured athlete or former athlete. It seems that “adolescents and adults who hold multiple perspectives on themselves and others have a firmer and more flexible sense of who they are” (Marcia, 2003, p. 133). Wylleman et al.’s (2004) developmental model of athlete transitions views an athlete as a person doing sport but also other things. These authors advocate for the importance of multiple personal identity and balancing different activities in life. In summary, athletes who experience a career-ending injury who develop numerous life domains during retirement are more likely to experience a smooth transition and healthy identity adaptation.

In contrast, individuals in the present study who did not engage in mapping out their future or thinking that sport would end had less balanced identities, feelings of low self-efficacy, and a longer adjustment period to new roles in retirement. These individuals lacked the belief
that they had the resources and ability to handle the sudden challenges in retirement. This is consistent with the workplace literature (Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995), suggesting that retirees who have less self-efficacy experience a more difficult retirement transition and less retirement planning. Thus, the present study supports the notion that a balanced identity style, self-efficacy, and planning for retirement are associated with quick adaptation to multiple life roles after a career-ending injury. Identity has been shown as an indicator of adjustment difficulties during retirement (Taylor et al., 2005), yet few studies have undertaken an in-depth investigation of athletes’ experiences of identity reformation, self-efficacy, planning and experimentation with a number of new roles following a career-ending injury. Thus, many questions remain in the explanation of non-normative transitions and identity formation.

**Personal control and identity.**

The results of the present study support the claim that a more balanced identity is associated with personal control. The athletes in the current study who experienced a smooth transition were more proactive in their behaviours and took charge of their injury management and medical care, were able to use resources, and plan for their retirement. This supports evidence from a range of gerontological, rehabilitation psychology and sport studies that suggest personal control has a strong influence on retirement adjustment (Dunn, 1996; Fretze, et al., 1989; Hamill et al., 2010; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Mutran, Retizes, & Fernandes, 1997; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, 2003; Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). It also supports research from rehabilitation psychology that amputees who feel in control have more positive adjustments (Dunn, 1996). Werthner and Orlick (1986) found that 64% of Olympic adult athletes perceived they had a lack of control in sport and subsequently felt lost and directionless in retirement. Personal control is one aspect related to individual differences and identity that may have an important role in adjustment to retirement among athletes.
A review of the workplace-retirement literature suggests that control may have a positive influence on retirement adjustment. For example, retirees who made positive adjustment during retirement were more likely to: (a) take “charge of restructuring their activities and redefining their roles after retirement” (Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995, p. 68), (b) capitalize on resources to help them redefine their life roles, (c) engage in proactive strategies to meet the retirement changes (e.g., proactive retirement planning), and (d) seek out new activity and roles after retirement (Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995). The issue of autonomy and control over one’s life is said to be central to the preparation of post-sport life (Stephan et al., 2003) and, in the present study, was associated with a balanced identity style.

The present research is consistent with self-congruency (Reich, Harber & Siegel, 2008) (or, in Brown et al.’s research, “living authentically”) where the experience of the outer world is in harmony with the inner world of the individual and this reduces psychological tension (Rogers, 1961). Athletes who experienced a more balanced identity in the present study were clear about their needs, did not bow to the pressure of the coaches and were purposeful in their actions. Such individuals are clear about their actions, who they are, and have greater self-knowledge. For example, athletes who experienced a smooth transition were also clear in their decision-making and told the coaching staff what their needs were. Considerable research has shown that congruence between social roles and “who one is” assists in coping and adjustment and is linked to well-being and life satisfaction. A “congruent self provides a blueprint for the clearest and least conflicted plans for action” (Reich et al., 2008, p. 130). Self belief and self-concept clarity are similar to self-congruence in that both are indicators of psychological integration (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002).

Interestingly, one participant in Brown et al.’s (2001) study said there was little need for the sport retirement talks that some sport centers arrange because, if people were more balanced
while competing in elite sport, there would be no need for adjustment during retirement. This is consistent with athletes in the present study that had a more balanced identity and managed to engage in multiple life domains when they were training, during injury and retirement. What follows is an athlete’s reflection on retirement talks and the self:

I keep seeing that there are some lectures and talks at the sport centre on athletes retiring, and how to reintegrate yourself into society and stuff like that. I think that’s wild. I think if an athlete has that balance and that perspective in life, a complete life, not just athletics, they wouldn’t have to be reintegrated back into society. They’d already be part of it. There are too many athletes that have a problem retiring, like it’s a bad thing to retire, it’s a bad thing to leave the sport. (Quoted in Brown et al., 2001, pp. 32)

In the present study, the ability to respect other aspects of life allowed athletes who experienced smooth disengagement to engage in autonomous decision-making, maintain self interest, and manage adversity despite pressures from the sport system to behave in ways that were not in the athlete’s self interest both during injury management and disengagement from sport. For athletes, making this transition to a less-structured environment than elite sport may be eased by a general sense that one has control over life’s outcomes (Dunn, 1996; Hamill et al., 2010) particularly after experiencing a career-ending injury.

Transfer of mental skills.

A final characteristic associated with the ability to adapt to change in retirement and self-efficacy is the use of mental training skills. Mental skills training is a term used commonly in the sport psychology literature to represent athlete’s application of skills such as goal setting, visualization, relaxation and positive self talk to enhance their sport performances (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). The present investigation is similar to previous research on athlete retirement that found athletes who adapted the mental skills they had developed in sport to their sport retirement experienced a smooth retirement process (Sinclair & Orlick, 1986) and a balanced identity style. The current study extends these findings to include the use of appropriate mental skills during
injury management and rehabilitation. Athletes who managed their injuries effectively applied mental skills such self-talk, relaxation and self-pacing.

In contrast, athletes who did not manage their injuries effectively did not use relaxation or pacing but continued to push their body hard as if they were still training with a healthy body and therefore experienced a less balanced identity. Individuals in my study who used their mental skills inappropriately or did not adapt the mental skills they learnt from sport to their injury management or to disengagement from sport experienced a more-turbulent transition and a less-developed identity. This research suggests that athletes who are injured would benefit from the application of mental skills training programs and support (Ahern & Lohr, 1997; Ross & Berger, 1996). Authors have described a comprehensive psycho-educational program for training sport-injury personnel and the application of various mental skills when athletes experience injury (Gordon, Potter, and Ford, 1998; Gordon, Potter & Hamer, 2000; Potter & Grove, 1999) and retire (McKnight et al., 2009). The present investigation is one of the first to link identity adjustment to adaptation of mental skills in both rehabilitation and retirement from sport injury.

**Personal control and less balanced identity.**

The results of the present study indicate that a lack of personal control is associated with a less balanced identity. These results are consistent with the findings that former elite adolescent female athletes retirement experiences lack independence and personal control and that this was associated with a loss as to who they were in retirement (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002). My results are consistent with research on the athlete–coach relations that found many athletes lacked autonomy and independence in their relationships with their coaches (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). They were continually being shaped to act and behave in ways that were requested of them by others (e.g., coaches, media, stakeholders) and
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This, in turn, reinforced their elite athletic identity (Stephan & Brewer, 2007). The present investigation supports research that demonstrates how athletes are encouraged to “suck it up” in order to manage their injuries, be passive, follow orders and to work hard to gain others’ approval (e.g., people pleasing) (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). The findings further support Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) and Werthner and Orlick’s (1986) observations that very few athletes indicated a strong sense of control during their sport career and noted that coaches or sport associations had been in control of their lives. Many decisions of the athletes in these studies were made for them, ranging from how, when and where to train, to arrangements for plane fares and accommodations (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). They led organized and structured lives with restricted autonomy, were nurtured and protected, and thus developed a false sense of control and heightened athletic identity (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). This study extends the research to include athletes who experience career-ending injuries and highlights associations between a lack of personal control and a less balanced identity in retirement.

**Personal control, winning and perfectionism.**

Athletes in the present study described a lack of control, focused on winning, measured their self worth through sport accomplishments and were ‘perfectionist.’ They used more passive strategies for coping, were not able to adapt to changes in sport retirement and lacked self-understanding of their new injury and retirement roles. These athletes were passive in their interaction with coaches, medical professionals and teammates and took longer (e.g., several years) to seek out new life domains. Athletes who described less balanced identity changes and turbulent transitions said that they found it difficult to be themselves during injury and retirement, either emotionally or socially. They felt that they had to display the “tough,” “I am okay,” image and not let their friends, teammates or coaches know that they were feeling vulnerable. This outward focus may assist the athletes in coping with their bodily pain but it
keeps them out of touch with their self interests and enmeshed in a winning and outward athlete role dictated by their coaches. Their sense of self worth became dependent on performance during their career, injury and retirement. As a result, they were prone to feelings of worthlessness and tended to be overly critical of themselves. These behaviours are consistent with maladaptive perfectionism. These participants were not able to respect or value parts of themselves (i.e., low self worth), lacked knowledge in decision-making, agency to navigate the medical system and manage their injuries. They experienced incongruence between inner and outer representations of who they were. Incongruence between who one is and one’s social roles has been related to dysphoria, inauthenticity and psychopathology both in the theoretical literature (Backman, 1988; Carson, 1969; Erikson, 1995) and in empirical research (Alexander & Higgins, 1993; Erikson & Ritter, 2001).

The current results support findings that associate maladaptive perfectionism and a winning or ego orientation. Dunn, Causgrove Dunn, & Syrotuik (2002) found a positive relationship between a strong goal orientation (and winning) and maladaptive perfectionism among athletes. The findings in the present investigation further support research (Flett, Beser, Davis, & Hewitt, 2003) that examined non-athlete perfectionists who evaluated themselves in terms of a contingent sense of self worth. Non-athlete perfectionists were found to be vulnerable to psychological distress when they experience negative events that did not affirm their self worth.

The results of the present research contrast with a recent document, *Beijing 2008 Olympic and Paralympic Athlete and Coach Preparation and Lessons Learned* (Muir & Werthner, 2009). The document surveyed Canada’s Olympic coaches and found that they believe winning needs to be embraced and a “winning mindset” shift needs to occur for Canadian athletes to excel at international levels. In contrast, athletes in the current study who
experienced performance excellence (e.g., one athlete peaked at the Olympics and outperformed all other Canadian athletes in his sport at the Olympics), a smooth transition and a balanced identity style described coaches who (the athletes felt) believed in their ability and cared for them as individuals. Participants in the present study who had a career-ending injury experienced a turbulent disengagement and less balanced identities because they felt they were pressured by coaches to focus only on winning and lacked self-confidence in their ability. Further research is necessary to clarify the relationship between coaches’ beliefs, identity and adjustment after a career-ending injury.

**Summary of Internal and Coping Resources**

In summary, a pattern of athlete descriptions illustrate adaptive responses to a career-ending injury. The psychological resources of elite athletes may influence their reaction to the retirement experience. Coaches and counsellors' sensitivity to individuals' self-efficacy and personal control may lead to a greater awareness of identity adaptation during retirement transition. Therefore, consideration of these individual differences may enhance the effectiveness of retirement planning. I now turn to social roles (teammates, coaches and family), which can influence whether one takes advantage of available resources.

**Social Roles**

The present investigation found that coaches, teammates and parents were important in athlete adjustment and identity changes after a career-ending injury. Social connections, such as mature relationships, in retirement offer support for individuals as well as a source of identity (Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995). Several studies on adult retirees and a few on adolescent elite athletes (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Miller & Kerr, 2002) and rehabilitation psychology have been conducted, suggesting a positive relationship between the quality of social connections and postretirement affect (Baillie, 1993; Dunn, 1996; Hamill et al., 2010; Taylor-Carter & Cook,
A common finding among researchers is that social support may buffer stress and stressful changes (Antonucci, 1990). Developmental processes always take place in the context of ongoing social relations, and this includes developmental shifts that occur with retirement. In addition, workplace and sport researchers have found a relationship between retirement satisfaction and social connections such as friendship networks and family members (Baillie, 1993; Dorfman, Kohout, & Heckert, 1985) that can have important implications for changes in identity. Next, I discuss coach–athlete relationships, teammates, family and the social expansion of elite athletes as they relate to identity changes after a career-ending injury.

**Coach–athlete collaboration and adaptation.**

Athletes in the current study who experienced a smooth transition and a balanced identity style indicated that either their coach–athlete relationship was more collaborative or they were self-coached. Such athletes were proactive in their relationships with medical personnel and coaches and used their agency and voice to ensure that their self interests were met. These athletes’ experience in the present study supports other studies of coach–athlete relationships that found coaches influence personal growth (Poczwardowski, Barrot, & Henschen, 2002) and collaborative trusting relationship between elite athletes and their coaches empowered the athletes (Antonini Philippe and Seiler, 2006; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Further, the results of the present study are similar to research that identified the importance of the coach–athlete relationship in retirement transitions and adjustment (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Without a coach’s support, athletes cannot feel connected (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003) and are less likely to feel confident. The importance of the coach’s involvement in intrinsic motivation has been documented in previous research (Brown, Fankel, & Fennell, 1989; Omundsen & Vaglum, 1991; Pelletier et al., 1995) and has been shown to affect retirement. Lavallee and Robinson (2007) found that athletes who had a smooth retirement experience
described their coaches as people who really believed in their ability and cared about them as athletes and as people. Kenow and Williams (1999) studied coach-athlete compatibility and found that athletes who felt more compatible with their coach had fewer negative cognitive effects from their coach’s behaviors during performance. In addition, they found that athletes who were more compatible with their coach felt supported and viewed their coaches’ communication style as more positive. Thus, coach-athlete interactions and athlete perceptions are critical components of athlete personal and performance satisfaction. We know very little about the impact of coaches’ behaviours on retirement, yet preliminary investigations suggest this may be an important factor in development of balanced identity styles and smooth athlete retirement transitions.

This is one of the first studies in sport to contribute to the literature on self-coaching, identity and athlete transition after a career-ending injury. Athletes who were self-coached experienced a smooth transition and a balanced identity style. Authors in the business world (Whitmore, 1994) have suggested that self-coaching is useful to practitioners in helping to “clarify their needs and make their best decisions” (p. 2); Skills required of self-coached athletes, such as reflective self-questioning (Greenwood, 1986) or self-direction, may prepare athletes for management of injuries and disengagement from sport because they are able to recognize their needs and be honest with themselves (Hall, 1997). Consistent with the present results, Bradbury (2001) suggested there are pre-requisites to self-coaching “such as self-confidence, motivation, self belief, dedication, and determination” (p.68). More research is required to illuminate the relationship between self-coaching and identity development after a career-ending injury.

**Lack of collaboration in coach–athlete relationship.**

The present study found that elite athletes with negative coach–athlete relationships experience a less balanced identity in retirement and greater difficulty adjusting to life after a
career-ending injury. Coaches pressured athletes to continue sport even when they were injured, suggesting that they view athletes, at least partially, as tools for their own success. Athletes felt dependent, controlled and stigmatized by their coaches. This study confirms the work of others who have found that the coach–athlete relationship has an important effect on the transition process (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). The present study is similar to other research that suggests athletes who felt powerless and pressured in the coach–athlete relationship experienced difficult retirement transitions (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). The influence of an uncaring environment and autocratic coaching style affects the athlete identity formation process (Gergen, 1991). Coaches of these participants failed to acknowledge the athletes’ personal needs, perhaps because they were overly concerned with podium performance and self-recognition (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). Coaches’ expectations can develop into a self-fulfilling prophecy for athletes behaviours (Sternberg Horn, Lox, & Labrador, 2006; Wilson & Stephens, 2007). It has been shown that athletes who feel they lack power and control within the coach–athlete relationship (Klint & Weiss, 1986) experienced problematic transitions and identity loss after retirement from sport. Some of these athletes continue to process the negative feelings and unfinished business related to their relationship with their coach during retirement (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) and this can influences change in identity development.

On the other hand, rehabilitation psychology literature (Hamill et al., 2010; Rybarczyk, et al., 2004) suggests that individuals with amputations often internalise aspects of social stigma relating to feelings of shame and embarrassment about their perceived “abnormality” and that the individual created a process of self-stigmatization that was driven by the projection of pre-amputation self not the other nondisabled people. Thus with respect to career-injuries and impact
of the coach-athlete relationship on identity and transition further research is needed to examine the role of self-stigmatization, coach-athlete relationship and injured athlete retirement experiences.

Coaches described by athletes in my study, as with other researchers, avoided the topic of retirement preparation altogether (Anderson, 2002; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Taylor et al., 2005). Coaches’ avoidance of the topic of retirement contributes to the possibility that athletes will suffer from low self-efficacy during retirement and may have a less congruent self-understanding. The role of the coach in retirement preparation may be particularly important if the athlete experiences self-stigmatization. Avoidance of the topic of retirement likely contributed to a more turbulent transition because athletes are less prepared for their future.

**Teammates and identity adaptations.**

The importance of the role that teammates play in influencing adjustment of elite athletes transition in retirement cannot be underestimated. Athletes in the present study who felt support, and remained connected with teammates during injury and retirement experienced a balanced identity style and a smooth transition. The present study supports other work by Baillie (1993) that found that former athletes rated losing friends as one of the most important losses experienced during retirement. Further, the present study supports Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) findings on adolescent athletes that with retirement comes a loss of important friendships related to identity confusion and a loss of who they were. For example, “All my friends were associated with gymnastics, and everyone I knew, knew me as a gymnast, and I was no longer that. So who was I?” (p. 128). The current investigation results support Taylor-Carter and Cook’s (1995) review of the workplace literature that indicate friendship roles have a strong influence on retirement adjustment. Those individuals who derive many of their meaningful social activities
from colleagues at work or in the sport setting may have a relatively difficult retirement transition when those friendships are lost after a career-ending injury. There is little research in this area and further examination of the role of teammates on athlete identity changes and transition after a career-ending injury is warranted.

**Family and identity.**

Parents helped to shape a more balanced athlete identity for their sons and daughters, thus contributing to smooth transitions. The present study indicates that families may be an important influence on changes associated with identity during retirement. Those parents that were perceived by athletes as supportive, encouraged perspective and development of other life domains were associated with sons or daughters that experienced a balanced identity style and smooth transition in retirement. Research on identity has consistently found that for young, mid and late adolescents, the search for autonomy is best assisted by both parents (e.g., Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). The present research further supports Lavallee and Robinson’s (2007) findings that parents’ ability to help adolescent athletes keep sport in perspective and encourage outside activities resulted in healthy identity formation and positive retirement experiences. However, consistent with athletes in the present study that experienced less balanced identities and turbulent retirement, families imposed demands as well as support (Hagestad, 1990). Research from rehabilitation psychology suggests that family members of individuals with amputations should be given education on topics such as what are helpful support behaviours (Hamill et al, 2010). Given that this is one of the first studies to look at the influence of coaches, teammates and friends and family on identity change during retirement following a career-ending injury, more research is needed.

In sum, continuity of social connections after retirement has been an important determinant of adjustment in the workplace (Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995) and in sport (Baillie,
1993; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007) and rehabilitation literature (Dunn, 1996; Hamill et al., 2010) and requires further exploration in the sport domain. Rehabilitation psychology literature suggests it is the quality of relationships over the quantity of social networks (Williams et al., 2004). Further examination of the different roles associated with friends, teammates, coaches and families and quality of those relationships will allow us to understand their importance related to identity change after a career-ending injury.

**Social expansion.**

At different times during retirement, participants in the present study experienced social expansion after retirement from elite sport. This is consistent with research in rehabilitation psychology that suggests people experience positive growth and adaptation after injury (Dunn, 1996; Dunn & Dougherty, 2005; Wright, 1983) in (a) time spent in relational activities, (b) becoming more thoughtful and understanding of others (Taylor, 1983; Wright, 1983), and (c) having enhanced feelings about their self worth surpassing their previous level of adaptation (Dunn, 1996). Those who experienced smooth transitions and identities described positive and continuous social expansion; that is, they remained connected to some of their former elite teammates and began to broaden and develop new friendships.

Those who experienced turbulent transitions upon injury typically retracted socially and “shut down” their social resources and energies as a way of coping with the initial stress of injury. This response is consistent with research from rehabilitation psychology that suggests individuals use denial as a coping strategy for dealing with adversity and is viewed as an adaptive response (Dunn & Dougherty, 2005; Gangstad et al., 2009; Helgeson et al., 2006; Kortte & Wegener, 2004; Taylor & Armor, 1996). Once it became clear that injuries would not allow many of these athletes to continue in sport or that they needed to find a new career, most of these athletes began a process of social expansion or reconnection. This is consistent with
research from rehabilitation psychology that suggests people experience positive growth and adaptation in social domains and feelings about their own self worth after injury (Dunn & Dougherty, 2005; Wright, 1983) surpassing previous levels of adaptation. The results of the present study confirm criticism of stage theories (Elliott et al., 2002) and suggest that individuals do not go through predictable stages. Participants in the present study experienced different adaptive trajectories and growth during retirement after a career-ending injury.

Consistent with research from rehabilitation psychology and positive adaptations (Dunn & Dougherty, 2005; Wright, 1983), the former athletes in the current study experienced an enhanced view of themselves during retirement. Many of the former athletes who experienced a turbulent transition liked who they were in retirement more than who they had been during their competitive career. Over time, the pressures from coaches to be stoic and unemotional were removed and many of the athletes experienced an increase in their ability to reveal their authentic selves to friends. They became more self-accepting of who they were and revealed less of a focus on the self. They were more caring and empathetic than they had been during their sport career. Their enhanced self-awareness was consistent with greater self-congruence and increased interest in other life domains (Reich et al., 2008). The results of the athletes’ shift to a more likeable self and involvement in numerous life domains is consistent with research on self-complexity (Linville, 1985; 1987; Thoits, 1983) as well as greater self confidence (Taylor-Carter & Cook, 1995) that contributed to a happier and healthier functioning during retirement from sport. To my knowledge, this is one of the first studies to examine the nature of social retraction and expansion as it is associated with smooth and turbulent experiences of elite athletes after a career-ending injury. Retirement may involve a crisis or an opportunity for growth (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993) and injury can be traumatic or adaptive (Dunn, 1996; Dunn & Dougherty, 2005; Rybarczyk et al., 2004). This study is an exemplar of the ability to encounter adaptations beyond
the level of functioning that athletes had previously experienced in their social roles. Further research is needed to examine the effect of social domains on elite athletes who retire from sport.

**Little social growth.**

A small minority of participants described very little social expansion and growth after experiencing a turbulent career-ending injury. The current study indicates that elite athletes who experience intensive training during early developmental periods may be more likely to be shaped by their environment and coach–athlete interaction, and experience a difficult transition and a lost identity style. The study suggests that these participants achieved little growth in self-knowledge, autonomy, self-acceptance, and self-congruence. Several years after injury, athletes still had difficulty “fitting in” and felt they were “starting again” in the real world. Given that these athletes had spent their entire pre-adolescence (9-12 years) and adolescence (13-25 years) consumed by training for elite sport, it is highly unlikely there was opportunity for extensive development of interpersonal skills or exploration of who they are. Researchers found that parents who assist adolescents in their search for autonomy (e.g., Grotevant & Cooper, 1986) produces positive results. However, these athletes had little opportunity to explore or develop outside of thirty hours a week of intensive sport training.

The present investigation supports research on early specialization sports (e.g., intensive training prior to adolescence that occurs in sports such as diving, gymnastics, swimming, and figure skating) suggesting that athletes experience powerlessness, (e.g., no voice, no agency, no collaboration, commodification, feeling lost) in the coach–athlete relationship and lack identity development or explorations (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

One explanation for the turbulent disengagement may be offered by the research related to stigma or shame. Due to the sport environment, there is the potential for stigma or shame to
occur as an injured elite athlete falls further than many into a socially devalued state (Brock & Kleiber, 1994). As mentioned previously, rehabilitation psychology researchers (Hamill et al., 2010; Rybarczyk et al., 2004) argue that, in a process of “self-stigmatization,” individuals with amputation often internalise aspects of social stigma relating to feelings of shame and embarrassment about their perceived “abnormality.” Almost all people with some disability experience a devaluation of their identity by people without disabilities (Cogswell, 1984), yet Hamill et al. and Rybarczyk et al.’s research, suggested the process of stigmatization was initiated by the projection of the person not the other nondisabled people. Further, a negative sense of identity and the difficulty of interacting with other people may lead to lower levels of life satisfaction after spinal cord injury (Lee & McCormick, 2006). Moreover, when an “injury is subtle and its initial symptoms linger outside” the realm of physicians, trainers, and coaches, these observers experience doubt and the injury is not given a creditable social standing. The participants said that there were times when coaches “quarantined” them and they experienced stigma. This is consistent with rehabilitation psychology research on the insider-outsider distinction. Individuals who experience disability or undergo rehabilitation (insiders) have a different understanding of disability than outsiders (people without disabilities) (Dunn & Dougherty, 2005; Wright, 1991). Athletes had experienced multiple injuries that, over time, may have led to the coaches’ questioning the athletes’ credibility and worth. In turn, the athletes lived through a long period of doubt and feeling that there was something wrong with “who they were.” Some believed that an early and correct diagnosis of injury may affect an earlier and more successful rehabilitation, thus continuing to fulfil the goals of the athletic identity (Brock & Kleiber, 1994).

In addition, according to Miller & Kaiser (2001), the major social coping tasks for individuals with disability are adjusting to altered social relationships, dealing with the social
stigma of the illness and maintaining a feeling of control. Athletes with a history of depression, such as those in this subset, and even if not on medication at the time of the career-ending injury, may have had difficulty coping, particularly given the cumulative effect of several injuries. Such athletes may be at greater risk for maladaptive adjustment when they experience a career-ending injury and thus, multiple non-sport factors may contribute to the limited growth described for this subset during retirement from sport.

A final explanation may be that, due to intensive training or commitment to sport there may have been a less parental involvement during adolescence and the athletes did not have the opportunity to develop interpersonal skills, explore and develop other life domains. More research is needed to explore this topic.

**Gender and Identity**

Another explanation offered for the differences observed in balanced and imbalanced identities of elite athletes is gender viewed from a feminist lens. Gender can be considered a central part of an individual’s identity and can form the basis for one's self-concept, self-esteem, and self-perceptions (Crawford & Unger, 2000; Spence, 1993; Spence & Buckner, 1995; 2000). In the present study, male athletes composed the more balanced identity pattern and female athletes the less balanced identity pattern, which is consistent with a male dominated ideology in which men hold power in sport and normalize injury and pain (Curry, 1993; Dunning & Malcolm, 2003). The results of the present study are consistent with the work of sociologists on male athletes (Curry, 1993; Dunning & Malcolm, 2003) and female athletes (Theberge, 1998; 2000) that show that normalization of injury is a form of socialization in sport and can be a threat to athletes’ health. The female athletes in the present study experienced the least advanced identity pattern and the most turbulent transition from sport.
The current study supports work of several other sociological investigations (Eitzen & Sage, 1993; Nixon, 1996) that males are more likely than females to accept pain because males are socialized to be more ‘tough,’ a characteristic associated more with the male identity than the female identity. In order to explain the identity imbalances and gender differences in my study I turned to feminist psychologists. Feminist psychologist Nancy Chowdorow (1974) suggests that men’s social orientation is positional and women’s is personal or relational. For example, male athletes’ sense of success is defined in terms of being separate from others and from whom he competes against. In contrast, females values are different than those authorized by the male dominated sport culture. Female athletes value being in relation to others rather than to be on top of, winning, separate or more powerful. However, indoctrination into the sport culture creates a dilemma for women. Indoctrination into the masculine values of sport results in women athletes questioning their feelings (e.g., what is wrong with me that I do not value the same things?) and I suggest lowers their self concept. In the case of the present study, women may ask: What is wrong with me that my body is injured and I am in pain? Why does my coach want me to ignore and not respect my body (e.g., non-acceptance of pain and injury)? Why am I feeling disconnected from and on the outside of my teammates? From the results of the present study I conclude that female indoctrination into the sport world and injury normalization leads to lower self concept and deferment of opinions to external authority. Further research is needed to validate this finding as the present investigation is exploratory.

The male athlete experience in the present study supports research that suggests, that in the sphere of sports, men tend to develop “positional identities” (e.g., fear of intimacy). Male coaches fostered a male dominated culture of emotional distance, being stoic, and acting tough. In contrast, female athletes who developed “relational identities” (e.g., a fear of separation) were indoctrinated into a male world. One female participant observed “it almost became a habit” that
she portrayed a “tough” image. Feminist psychologists (Chowdorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1993) suggest for females that disconnection, “separation,” and consequently retirement from sport aligns with human pathology and a lack of growth. In contrast, for male athletes, separation and individuation are critical to their development whereas intimacy is a liability to their adolescent development. Thus entering the male domain of sport, male athletes are encouraged by coaches to foster their power through separation and individuation (e.g., being stoic and unemotional in the management of injuries) and female athletes are relegated to a lower position by their very nature or need to access relationships. Female normal development requires being in relationship which is in direct contrast to what the sport system values or celebrates (e.g., winning, gold medals and being on top). The females' need for care and support throughout injury supports other research that suggests gender differences occur with injury (San Jose, 2003). As well, the present findings support San Jose's (2003) research that female athletes’ are more concerned about separation from teammates as injury continues.

A plausible explanation for the male participants' greater presence in the more balanced pattern and the female participants presence in the less balanced and least advanced identity patterns is the context in which these participants were socialized and the disconnection or threat to female human development where retirement or disconnection from sport is also normalized. From a feminist perspective (Gilligan, 1993), female connection and relational tasks are central to women and psychological separations which “have long been justified in the name of autonomy, and selfhood” (p. xiii) are human problems. A sport environment that encourages disconnection after injury inhibits important relational development and connection for female athletes. For example, female athletes with the lost identity were cut off from their sport family and any relational connections that they had nurtured in the athletic world. The female participants in the intensification and living for sport group, in a masculine world, are viewed as
‘dependent’ because they did not want disconnection from their coaches or teammates. Gilligan (1993) further suggests that a relational crisis occurs for women in adolescence and this is consistent developmentally with the timing of participants’ departure from sport in the present study. The findings of the present research are an exploratory examination of career-ending injuries and gender identity. Another factor that may account for the gender differences in identity balance is that women were mostly engaged in individual sports where the connection with the coach is often more exclusive and deeper; thus disconnection may have been more disruptive to who they were. Further research from a feminist lens of inquiry is warranted to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon.

**Mood and Transition**

The present study validated previous findings that indicated elite athletes with pronounced athletic identities, with a hypothetical or real experience of a career-ending injury, felt some sadness or depression during transition (Brewer, 1993). Depression was not measured in the present investigation, however, participants used the term to describe their various feelings after a career-ending injury. The present study found that all individuals indicated they felt a pronounced athlete identity prior to injury, and those who experienced a balanced identity style during retirement had less depression. In contrast, athletes who experienced less balanced identities during retirement also experienced greater depression. The athletes who had a balanced identity style effectively managed their career-ending injury accepted the changes in their lifestyle earlier, redirected their goals, adapted more quickly, readjusted plans, gained a sense of purpose sooner and experienced more temporary depression than other participants. The findings of the present study concur with Brewer’s results that identity is related to some mood disturbances and depression following injury. The present study further supports rehabilitation psychology researchers (Elliott, Godshall, Herrick, Witty, & Spruell, 1992) that found
individuals who were more goal directed and planned were less likely to be depressed. The present study extends Brewer’s quantitative findings and adds detail to the identity patterns and styles that may be associated with greater depression during retirement from sport. This study is consistent with Gonzales’s (2003) work that suggests individuals who can adapt to their immediate situation and change context rather than following the predetermined, scheduled plan laid out cope better with adversity. Consistent with successful Olympic athletes, these athletes paused for reflection and were open to assessing their environments’ characteristics and activities (MacNeil, 2007) (e.g., taking time off for rest and exploration of other life domains).

Consistent with research on depression, individuals in the present study who were less able to accept their career-ending injury experienced deeper and more long-lasting depression (Dougher & Hackbert, 1994), turbulent transition and less balanced identities. These individuals appeared to flounder in their search for a sense of purpose, self worth, and efficacy. Consistent with the present research Elliott et al. (1992) found that individuals who were lacking in social support, planning and goals were more likely to experience higher levels of depression after spinal cord injury.

It is interesting to note that athletes in the present study reported depression during injury and transition yet none were treated for depression; thus, athletes who experience a career-ending injury may benefit from screening for depression. One athlete, in the present investigation, experienced a turbulent transition and less balanced identity had been on prescription medicine with a private doctor but this was kept private from team coaches and sport counsellors, and the athlete never received treatment by a counsellor. Moreover, it suggests that counsellors who work with athletes who experience injury or disengagement from sport need to be trained in the treatment of depression, grief counselling and grief therapy as well as identity development.
**Meaning-making and Transition**

The athletes’ experience of a career-ending injury and transition in the present study provide participants with the opportunity for personal growth that led to a search for meaning and new insights. *Meaning-making* refers to an active process through which people revise or re-appraise an event or series of events often finding some positive aspect in a negative event such as an injury (Baumeister & Vohs, 2005; Dunn, 1996; Dunn & Dougherty, 2005; Taylor, 1983). It is thought that giving meaning to a negative event such as a career-ending injury may provide some form of control (Rothbaum et al., 1982). From Taylor’s (1983) viewpoint, people manage suffering and misfortune in three possible ways: finding purpose in it, rebuilding a sense of mastery or control, and enhancing self-worth. These three ways of dealing with adversity correspond to three of the four needs for meaning (i.e., purpose, efficacy, and self-worth). The fourth is value. Baumeister & Vohs (2005) suggests that many people believe that suffering serves as a positive value and this helps them manage it more easily. The results of the present research are consistent with rehabilitation psychology literature (Dunn, 1996; Dunn & Dougherty, 2005) on amputees who found that efforts to seek out meaning from the amputation experience were highly adaptive (Gallagher & MacLachlan, 2000). Further the present findings are similar to sport researchers Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) results that retired athletes began a period of existential questioning asking themselves “Who am I?” They described a process where they took time to think and analyze their past and looked at it in a different light. The former athletes in the present study often gained new insight and understanding about themselves, their social ways of being in the world, philosophical approaches and even attitudes towards various religions. Also in support of Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) study, participants in the present study examined and began to question the doctrines of elite sport that they had internalized and accepted as truth.
The transformational process from adversity to prosperity has been referred to as the “benefit-finding” aspect of meaning-making (Davis et al., 1998). Many of the athletes discovered parts of themselves that were “underdeveloped” such as the ability to show empathy toward others, have relational skills, awareness of religion, and spiritual beliefs that were not unveiled until after their injury and/or disengagement experience. Self-complexity is self-knowledge in terms of a greater number of self-aspects and maintenance of distinctions between those aspects and acts to buffer further stress and act as a preventative factor (Linville, 1987). Given that, empirically, people’s lives usually draw meaning from multiple sources including family, love, work, religion and personal hobbies (Emmons, 1997); those individuals who explored a number of areas during identity development were protected from meaninglessness. In other words, having multiple sources of meaning in life protects the individual against meaninglessness. This is consistent with the results of the present research that showed individuals who acquired meaning through sport alone were at a greater disadvantage compared to individuals who had broader interests when they lost sport and were required to adjust. A second aspect of meaning-making involves looking for attributions (e.g., “I was always meant to go to the Olympics” or “I knew the Gods were against me”) in an effort to understand their career-ending injuries. In sum, the results of the present study support the findings that different styles of meaning-making events (Baumeister & Vohs, 2005; Emmons, 1997; Gallagher & MacLachlan, 2000) are experienced as part of an elite-athlete’s journey after a career-ending injury.

Four Identity Trajectories

This study uncovered new and detailed information about different identity styles after a career-ending injury, adding detail to existing conceptual models of sports-career transition (Wylleman et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2005). Specifically, my analysis of change after a career-
ending injury resulted in four different identity styles: (a) seeking a balanced identity, (b) lost identity, (c) intensification identity, and (d) living for sport identity. As in other studies, participants with what I called a balanced identity style described themselves as less stressed (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993) after a career-ending injury. Those with a balanced identity style were able to manage their transitions (e.g., injury and retirement) and develop alternative life domains to broaden and differentiate their identity after retirement. They had greater self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and this was reflected in the clarity of their interviews. Prior to injury, the balanced identity style could be described as immersed in sport but with the ability to maintain perspective on their commitments and self confidence. In other words, they were more balanced before their career-ending injury.

I called the second identity style the lost identity, those who experienced little adaptation after injury and retirement. They were socially isolated and did not explore different identities or interests after losing their Olympic aspirations until several years later. One possible explanation for the lack of social adaptation lies in the length of time these athletes were at the elite national level, and the critical age of identity development (e.g., pre-adolescence and adolescence) when there was little opportunity to grow as a person, and lack of parental involvement to support identity development. Moreover, these athletes cut off all contact with sport when they became injured and in doing so created great discontinuity and connection to their athletic identity and lost their sense of social belonging (Bradley, 1996). Another contributing factor may have been a predisposition towards depression and an experience of stigma during injury. This is consistent with research in rehabilitation psychology that stigma and pre-existing depression have been found to be associated with adjustment challenges with an acquired disability (Hamill et al., 2010; Rybarczyk et al., 2004). These athletes in the present study cut off connection to who they had been for the first two decades of life. It was not surprising that this group felt lost if they
could not connect with their past. After all, identity is known to be the continuity of time past, present and future (McAdams, 1996; 2008). This subset did experience small growth, when they re-ignited their sense of purpose and later reconnected with teammates.

A third style I called intensification identity. Intensification identity style endured injury and attempted to increase their efforts toward achieving their sport goals despite being injured. Their initial shock and denial that an injury might threaten their career goals sparked a process in which the athletes began to push their body through cycles of pain and performance. Despite feeling different and at times isolated from teammates and coaches the athletes continued to push through recovery and rehabilitation. As time wore on, mentally exhausted and physically unable to perform, the athletes accepted that the pain was too great. This supports rehabilitation psychology literature that suggests adjustment to loss of amputation entails for some resistance until acceptance of a new disabled-identity (Hamill et al., 2010). Those who experienced identity intensification style eventually accepted their career-ending injury and engaged in exploring interests and other broader domains as their elite athlete identity waned during disengagement. However they experienced confusion and uncertainty during injury and upon retirement, they initially felt lost and confused. Several years after injury participants with an intensification identity style grew socially, which is consistent with the notion that identity development is a lifelong process and athletes narrow some of their social development due to intensive training.

The fourth identity style I termed the living for sport identity style. The athletes who held this style were still engaged in sport during retirement but in a different role within the sport system. Their identity after retirement was similar to the narrow and undifferentiated elite athlete identity they had held prior to injury and disengagement. This is consistent with previous research in sport that suggests identity foreclosure is a common phenomenon (Brewer, 1993) particularly with a pronounced athletic identity. Participants with the living for sport style
experienced a turbulent transition. One participant with this style was an exception and experienced a smooth career-ending injury. Age was not found to be associated with identity style with the exception of participants who were older comprised the identity foreclosure group.

**Developmental Perspective on Identity**

One plausible explanation that may fit the four identity styles of the present study is Marcia’s theory of adolescent identity development (see Appendix O). James Marcia (1966) developed a model of identity formation that has been used as a framework for research on adolescent identity within the athletic population (Brewer et al., 1993; Murphy, Petitpas & Brewer, 1996; Petitpas, 1978). Marcia’s descriptions of the identity statuses matched well with those of the current investigation. This is the first study of adult elite athletes to find that changes in identity trajectories after a career-ending injury are consistent with Marcia’s developmental research and the life-long process of identity development.

James Marcia (1966) developed a model of identity formation that has been used as a framework for adolescent identity development studies conducted with the athletic population (Brewer et al., 1993; Murphy et al., 1996; Petitpas, 1978). Marcia’s model (1966) uses Erikson’s theory of ego identity development as a foundation. Erik Erikson proposed a scheme for life cycle development that consists of eight chronological periods, each marked by a crisis in ego growth that, if resolved positively, would provide the scaffolding for development of the succeeding stage. Basic Trust furnishes the necessary conditions for Autonomy; Identity is the precursor to Intimacy, and so forth. In this model there is a schedule of normal expectable psychosocial development consisting of crises in ego growth whose resolution incorporates both positive and negative aspects; every stage occurs at every other stage – and this means that previous stages are remediable at any subsequent stage. In attempting to see if Erikson’s theory could be empirically supported, Marcia differentiated four identity statuses, ways in which any
late adolescent or emerging adult might be found to be dealing with Erikson’s *identity vs. identity diffusion* issue. These identity statuses are determined by the two process criteria of exploration (questioning, evaluating and decision-making) and commitment in three life domains: occupation, ideology (composed of religion and politics), and relationships (covering sexuality, gender roles, dating, etc.).

The findings of my current study support the existence of four identity statuses. Many of the characteristics of identity status provided an explanation for the results of my study. Yet many components of Marcia’s statuses challenged my thinking. To date, over 600 published articles and doctoral dissertations have empirically explored Marcia’s identity statuses in relation to other variables (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2006) and thus his theory of adolescent development is well established. I now turn to discuss the commonalities and contrasts between Marcia’s identity statuses and the identity styles in this study.

**Identity achievement and more balanced identity.**

Marcia’s *identity achievement* is the most developmentally advanced of the four statuses and occurs when an individual has undergone a period of genuine exploration and is committed to occupational, ideological (religion and politics), and relational positions (sexuality, gender roles and dating). Consistent with the results of other studies, the participants in my study used more adaptive defense mechanisms (e.g., adaptive narcissism, internal locus of control) and had high levels of personal autonomy and self esteem (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999; Cramer, 2001; Marcia, 1967). The patterns described by athletes of the present study were similar to the identity achievement status because they had all undergone a period of exploration that was particularly related to their occupational and relational positions. In contrast, the patterns in my study did not provide much evidence for exploration of religious or political life positions. Consistent with Marcia and participants in my study, individuals in this status could be described as more
capable of intimacy than individuals in the other statuses (Marcia, 1967). The majority of participants in my study in the balanced identity subset appear to be very similar to identity achievement as they were involved in relatively long term intimate relationships with a person outside of their immediate sport team. They appeared solid and directed in their goals for performance excellence, injury recovery and retirement from sport yet flexible to accepting new ideas. These are similar characteristics to Marcia’s identity achievement status. When challenged with information that disconfirmed their committed beliefs, they considered it thoughtfully and may have decided to change their directions if persuaded the other options were viable and better alternatives. Most of this subset of participants in my study who have attained Marcia’s identity achievement status could be described as open in their approach to training and interactions with coaches. They also carefully considered options that were available to them during medical care for their injuries and disengagement from sport.

Akin to the characteristics described in identity achievement, most participants were likeable, had a sense of humour, and could suspend self-concern in order to be concerned for others and these are characteristic of individuals with strong relational skills. Only one athlete in my study was not typical of the identity achievement group in that the athlete could not be described as having a sense of humour, was self-coached, and less open to others ideas. Consistent with Marcia, a balanced identity style is higher on moral reasoning and these participants in my study gave back to other athletes during some portion of their career. This status is associated with functioning at a greater tolerance of ambiguity and greater cognitive capacity under stress. In contrast, athletes in the balanced identity style did not tolerate great amounts of ambiguity and sought to reduce uncertainties in their lives. These athletes sought surety in their sport performance preparation and training because they did not want to leave
their sport results to chance. The more they could control and the more they could reduce uncertainties, the greater the chances they would have in producing peak performances.

Consistent with research, achievement identity and balanced identity both use more planned, rational decision-making strategies than other identity statuses (Blustein & Phillips, 1990). For example, participants in this study planned for life after sport well ahead of their impending career ending injury. They also were careful to ensure their doctors were experts, cared for them and gave them the best advice about their injuries. Participants required a specific plan for recovery and developed a specific plan for activities they would engage in during disengagement from sport. The sport environment is often highly structured and during retirement they sought to replicate the surety and comfort of the structure of sport that they knew well. I would add to this stage a strong family foundation that values a holistic model rather than a narrow sport identity model encourages perspective and development of other life domains. In line with identity achievement the athletes in my study could also be described as individuals who were self determined, autonomous and proactive in their approach. Thus, on the whole, the individuals in my study that were in the more balanced identity group held characteristics that were very similar to the identity achievement group as defined by Marcia.

Identity diffusion and lost identity.

According to Marcia, the least developed of the identity statuses is called identity diffusion and this corresponds to the subset of athletes in my research I referred to as the ‘lost identity’ group. Marcia suggests there is quite a wide range of types of diffusion, yet this status is reflective of the participant patterns in my study who, during disengagement from sport, lacked commitment to a particular direction and meaningful exploration. Research suggests these individuals have low self esteem, lack personal autonomy and use an external locus of control (Cramer, 2001; Hamer & Bruch, 1994; Marcia, 1967). At the extreme low end of
Marcia’s diffusion status, individuals may become “emotionally remote, socially isolated, withdrawn and almost schizoid.” One participant in my study reflected similar characteristics to the type of extreme identity diffusion described by Marcia where they become emotionally remote and socially isolated during disengagement from sport due to what was described as a deep depression. This participant immediately ‘cut off’ any contact with sport when the career ending injury was confirmed. Marcia also describes individuals in the diffusion status as the lowest among the statuses in level of moral thought and cognitive complexity. While I cannot comment on their moral thought, participants in the lost identity subset in my study were akin to Marcia’s description of diffuse identity status by being less cognitively complex and lacking self knowledge while sometimes describing themselves in ways that were contradictory.

Consistent with Marcia’s description of the diffuse status characteristics, participants in my study described themselves as unable to be validated by, or to emulate their coaches, all of whom were male. While Marcia indicates that validation and emulation is with a parental figure, particularly of the same sex, in the sport context most coaches are male. Thus, there is a gender difference inherent in the sport coaching context that limits application of this aspect of Marcia’s theory. However, like Marcia’s identity diffusion status, individuals in the lost identity style had difficulties developing relationships during retirement from sport. The athletes in this subset externalized responsibilities and their main concern was with themselves. They were self focused.

Based on my study, I would add to this status a description of a high need for control and loss of social belonging and fragmentation or internal conflict of who they are after retiring from sport. I would also add, particularly within the sport context, participants who are extremely overly committed to sport and who hold an ego-orientation are outwardly oriented (e.g., winning and going to the Olympics was the primary focus) prior to injury. Specifically, the athletes
focused so much on winning and fulfilling the Olympic dream, and this came at the expense of the self and exploring other options in life. As a result they became very depressed during sport retirement. Similar to Marcia’s Diffuse status, participants with the 'lost identity style' during sport retirement developed a dependent stance that inhibited their ability to search and discover career options that might have been of interest. In essence, they drifted and were not interested in an identity formation processes of exploration or commitments.

**Moratorium and intensification identity.**

According to Marcia, *moratorium status* is the second most developmentally advanced status and occurs when a person is in the exploration or crisis phase with commitments to a particular position. Moratorium status is consistent with what I have called the 'intensification' subgroup in my study and such individuals showed higher levels of use of denial (Cramer, 1995; Marcia, 1967) by not accepting their career-ending injury for several years and continuing to train or by not receiving treatment for their injuries. This status is distinguished from other statuses as there is an appearance of an active struggle to make commitments and explore interests. This is consistent with research that suggests this group and those in identity achievement status are able to undertake tasks in a self-directed manner (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000). For example, the athletes of the intensification style deliberately sought out opportunities to explore religion, politics and careers during disengagement from sport. Marcia also suggests that one of the characteristic of the Moratorium status is that cognitive functioning is high, but it is also the most variable of the statuses. The variability in cognitive capacity of participants in this subset fluctuated, particularly as they described exploring new life interests during disengagement from sport. Also consistent Marcia’s Moratorium status and intensification style is that the capacity for intimacy of individuals in this group does not match that of the more balanced/achievement identity.
Participants in the “intensification style” were similar to Moratorium status with regards to intimacy and relational development. They were actively struggling to make their intimate relationships work or they did not have a stable intimate relationship during injury and retirement from sport. Marcia describes the lower level of intimacy in the Moratorium status as being related to pre-occupation with Oedipal issues. He believes that individuals in the Moratorium status have relationships with their parents that are highly ambivalent. A minority of participants in this subset described a struggle with their parental figures and this may have influenced their ability to engage in stable intimate relationships. Marcia’s Moratorium status suggests a pattern of greater more anxiety than other statuses and greater need for support in their identity search. While the majority of participants of the intensification style required a greater amount of support and were highly anxious compared to the other statuses, not all individuals in the intensification style reflected these particular characteristics in comparison to the other statuses. These participants were also unlike the Moratorium status in two ways: (a) they did not waver back and forth between extreme concern for others and complete self-absorption and (b) they did not question authority. Instead they socially retracted, were initially self-absorbed during their injury, in denial, and complied with coaches’ requests. Over the period of retirement they gained acceptance of their injury and then socially expanded. They became more concerned for others, more empathetic and better able to communicate than when they were training or injured.

One significant difference between the subset of individuals in my study compared to Marcia’s Moratorium status was that the athletes responded to injury by initially increasing their commitment to their identity (e.g., increased self-absorption and sport commitment) without exploration of interests or options. After the participants in this subset initially experienced increased intensification and commitment to their sport identity the participants in this subset
then experienced disengagement from sport and began a phase of social expansion with increased ability to care for others. The majority of participants were satisfied with the growth they had made in their relational skills. One participant was the exception and continued to struggle with letting go of his “selfish” side. In summary, most of the participants in the ‘intensification’ subset of my study corresponded to the characteristics described by Marcia’s Moratorium status. However, there were individual differences among participants’ identity pathways as well as to some of the common characteristics of the Moratorium status.

**Foreclosure and living for sport identity.**

The last of Marcia’s statuses, *identity foreclosure*, is similar to the ‘living for sport’ style in my study and describes a person who has undergone very little or no exploration. They show high levels of authoritarianism, low levels of autonomy, and use of external locus of control (Cramer, 2001; Marcia, 1966, 1967). These individuals are firmly committed to their positions but have not looked at or examined alternative careers, ideologies or interests. Similar to Marcia’s Foreclosure status, the participants in my study adopted beliefs and values that had been indoctrinated through others, in particular their authority figures (e.g., coaches) or the sport system they had grown up in, and these values remained throughout their life span. Marcia described individuals in the Foreclosure status as “not particularly tolerant of ambiguity” (they like structure and explanation of details) which is typical of many elite athletes common to the intensification and other identity styles. In contrast, all participants in the ‘living for sport’ style were similar to Marcia’s Foreclosure status in both holding the highest respect for authoritarian values among the statuses and being cognitively rigid. Most participants in this subset were rigid and adhered to the values that their coaches suggested. Foreclosure and the ‘living for sport’ style suggest these people relate more strongly to people most similar to them, and reject or are disinterested in those dissimilar to themselves.
Similar to Marcia’s description of Identity Foreclosure status the living for sport style participants experienced relationships that were stereotyped - dependable, consistent, and generally “happy”. All the participants in this subset, except one, showed similarity to people of the Foreclosure status in that they described experiences of positive relationships with their parents. The one participant in my subset that did not experience a positive relationship with her parents was similar to what Marcia labelled a negative identity, a subtype of Identity Foreclosure. Negative identity refers to persons who become exactly the opposite of what their parents or authority figures had in mind. The participant described both parents and her origin of family as vacant, boring and lacking. In response to the boring and empty upbringing, the athlete created an exciting adventurous life of an elite athlete to replace it. The athlete received a prestigious university scholarship, was a member of Canada’s national team for a decade, travelled the world, lived in four different continents and aspired to go to the Olympics. The participants’ life path was a reaction to the lack of involvement that was experienced during early family life. This participant was also not typical Marcia’s other Foreclosure characteristics and was not rigid cognitively. Instead the athlete was a creative individual who completed a Liberal Arts degree while on a university scholarship. Another individual in the identity foreclosure group also appeared to engage in exploration process of ideological values but like the others in this group there was no exploration of vocational values. In summary, Marcia’s theory of identity development may be an alternative theoretical explanation for the patterns of experiences described by participants in my study.

The role of internal resources, coping styles, relational connections and continuity with sport are quite powerful given that there were no age influences on identity development style (balanced, lost and intensification styles) except the oldest participants were representative of the living for sport identity style. No differences among sports and genders were found. However, a
potential influence of gender stereotypes were found. For example, females were more likely to report being encouraged to be dependent and seek approval while males were more likely to be less emotional and more stoic in their demeanour.

The current investigation raises the question that elite sport narrows the identity development of some elite athletes. The participants in my study who asked, “What is the meaning of my life? Who am I?” and “Where am I headed?” during injury management and prior to retirement from sport, retired with a balanced identity style and smooth transition. However, the majority of athletes in my study were asking those questions and doing what appeared to be the “work of adolescence” after retirement from sport during their mid-twenties and thirties. One former athlete was in her forties. The present study extends Erickson’s stage model (1959) to suggest that identity formation may be a life-long process.

It is clear from the research on elite athletes that many athletes, including those in the present study, may compromise their identity development in exchange for the pursuit of performance excellence, which affects identity changes during retirement. However, more research examining the relationship between identity changes and developmental trajectories during retirement from elite sport after a career-ending injury is needed.

Further support for athletes’ experience of a developmental delay comes from the athletes in the present study who experienced less balanced identities. These athletes did not feel that they were personally in control until they were away from their coaches and the sport system. Thus, engagement in elite sport may narrow identity development particularly for athletes who do not experience a collaborative coach–athlete relationship in which there is autonomy and control. For example, those athletes who wait (or are not encouraged) until disengagement to ask the critical question, “Who am I?” and “What does life after sport look like?” experience narrow
identity development. Similarly, individuals in the present study who experienced less balanced identities did not describe mature relationships with teammates or friends until they were retired from sport. Several years after injury most athletes described expansion of relationships and their self-empathy skills.

The present research further supports the notion that two important developmental tasks associated with adolescent identity development may be less attainable if one has an over-commitment to the athlete role. The first developmental task is establishment of personal control and independence, and the second task is formation of mature peer relationships (Gilligan, 1993; Rice, 2001). Athletes who do not have the opportunity to develop these two tasks may stall their identity development during elite sport. On the whole, research indicates that an examination of the key task of adolescent identity development (control and mature relationships) warrants further investigation. Developmental theories highlight the role of personal control and autonomy in identity formation (Chickering & Reisser, 1969; Erikson, 1968). The development of mature relationships and the lack of development of these relationships have been found elsewhere in the sport literature that focuses on adolescent athletes (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008) but this is the first study to examine developmental tasks among the adult elite athlete population.

**Summary of Chapter**

The athletes in the present study described pronounced elite athlete identities prior to experiencing a career-ending injury and this information should come as no surprise, given the pressures to perform at the elite athlete level. Yet during retirement from sport, these same participants described two very different experiences as a result of a career-ending injury. Athletes with a more balanced identity experienced a relatively smooth and seamless injury
management and exit from sport, while athletes with a less balanced identity experienced a turbulent career-ending injury.

All participants in the present study described growth in their social relationships after retiring from sport and found positive meaning in their experiences. Athletes with a lost identity style had particular difficulty expanding their social domain.

However, all participants in the current investigation were engaged in an active process through which they revised or reappraised their life event and all found a positive or meaningful aspect of what is usually perceived as the unfortunate experience of a career-ending injury and early retirement from elite sport. This study unveiled the common occurrence of some loss or depression during injury and retirement from sport and suggests that practitioners may need to develop grief counselling skills as well as screen for depression amongst the elite athlete population that experience a career-ending injury. My findings also suggest that goal directed behaviours, quick adaptation to injury and planning future roles may be important factors for both a balanced identity style and lower levels of depression.

The four identity styles that emerged from the present study (balanced, lost, intensification and living for sport) suggest that some elite athletes experience adaptive identity formation while others experience delays and/or difficulty in adapting to their new identity. A possible explanation for the findings of the present study is the notion that elite athletes may experience stalled identity development and that identity formation may be a lifelong process. Previous research on female adolescent athletes indicates that two tasks of adolescent identity development (autonomy and mature relationships) and the present study suggests that elite adult athletes may experience delays in these areas of development. This is the first study to note that identity development may be stalled in an adult population of elite athletes. Research is needed to examine the notion that elite athletics narrows identity among adult elite athletes and to
acknowledge that identity development is a lifelong process. Further research that examines athletes who retire in their thirties and forties may provide more clues to the process of delayed identity development among elite athletes. In addition, it would be fruitful to examine if and when athletes catch up to their peers in the exploration of who they are and in developing self interests.
Chapter 8: Conclusions, Implications and Future Directions

This study of elite athletes’ identity experience after a career-ending injury from sport was undertaken to learn about that experience, find an explanation of the processes involved, and develop recommendations to influence practice. As a sport psychology consultant, my interest in this research was piqued by my observations of the process of elite performers’ transformation of identity after a career-ending injury from sport.

Although both the lay and professional literature on athlete retirement are extensive, much less is known about career-ending injury and even less is known about the identity changes following disengagement after an injury. The available literature on injury and identity comes from two intersecting sources—rehabilitation psychology and sport psychology. Much of the past research has pathological experience whereas the present investigation examined adaptive experiences in response to injury. The literature on identity among athletes and retirement experiences is increasing; however, the identity changes experienced as a result of a career-ending injury appear to represent a significant gap in the literature.

Using an interpretive description methodology, I conducted three interviews each with nine athletes who had a history of injury and who subsequently retired from elite-level sport. With the assistance of a semi-structured interview guide, I asked the athletes to tell me about their psychological experience of injury and retirement from sport. The findings were generated from a constant comparative analysis of the data, in which common patterns and relationships were identified as well as variations in the athletes’ accounts.

The findings of this study illuminated the manner in which elite athletes’ experience of a career-ending injury varies depending on the state of the elite athlete identity. In all, four levels of abstraction produced common patterns at multiple stages of this experience. At the first level
of data abstraction, all athletes experienced a pronounced elite athlete identity prior to injury and retirement, and described terms such as motivated, focused self-centered and driven, to define an elite athlete. As well, at this pre-injury level, two identity patterns emerged, those with a more balanced identity and those with a less balanced identity. The second level of abstraction revealed two types of transitional experiences, a smooth and seamless transition and a turbulent transition, after a career-ending injury. This contrast was associated with balanced identities in the former (e.g., smooth transition) and less balanced identities in the later (e.g., turbulent transition). At the third level of abstraction, four factors (internal resources, cognitive coping style, relational connections, and continuity with sport) emerged within the smooth versus turbulent transitions described by the athletes.

I begin by discussing in greater detail level three data abstraction factors and subfactors associated with smooth and turbulent transitions. Several important subfactors within each of the four main factors described smooth and turbulent transitions. For example subfactors of a smooth transitional experience were: autonomy (independence and personal control), proactive qualities, forward thinking, planned mental maps of their future self confidence, positive coach–athlete relationships, a sense of ongoing connection to teammates and parents, who encouraged perspective and development of other life domains. These athletes developed several life domains quickly after disengaging from sport, and were able to transfer their mental skills that they had developed in sport to rehabilitation and other life domains in retirement. All athletes who experienced a smooth transition also described more balanced identities (that were discussed in the fourth level of abstraction), except one athlete who described a less balanced identity.

In contrast, subfactors associated with a turbulent transition involved patterns of experience such as a lack of personal control, low self confidence, passivity and dependency in
interactions, a negative athlete–coach relationship, commodification, and limited connections with teammates and parents (e.g., either over-involved or under-involved). Other subfactors common to a turbulent retirement were a lack of mental maps for the future, uni-dimensional life domains, little appropriate transfer of mental-skills. A turbulent retirement commonly was associated with less balanced identities that were described in my fourth level of data abstraction.

Both smooth and turbulent transitions described a common factor of social expansion and development of relational connections, depression or mood disturbances, transfer of mental skills and finding meaning during retirement.

At my fourth level of abstraction, four unique styles of identity change emerged during retirement from elite sport due to a career-ending injury. These four identity styles were termed more balanced, lost, intensification and living for sport identity and represent the divergent patterns retirement experiences. It is important to note that participants who at pre-injury (level one of abstraction) held a more balance identity remained more balanced during retirement transition (level four abstraction). Similarly participants who held a less balanced pattern of identity at pre-injury (level one of abstraction) diversified into one of the three less balanced identity styles (e.g., lost, intensification and living for sport identity). These four styles I identify in my project are similar to Marcia’s (1966) developmental patterns and suggest that a subset of elite athletes experienced less-advanced identity patterns. Three less balanced identities emerged along with a turbulent retirement experience after a career-ending injury. In contrast, one style, called the more balanced identity emerged along with a smooth transition.

Two developmental areas that are commonly thought to be mastered during adolescence or early adulthood are mature relationships and autonomy or control. These two developmental areas were not mastered amongst participants with the less balanced identities. Yet the two
developmental tasks were well developed among a more balanced identity style. Thus, autonomy and control are two developmental areas associated with normative development among athletes and warrant further study.

My data set suggests that some athletes experienced narrowing of identity development and that identity development is a lifelong process that goes beyond adolescence. These observations raise awareness of the experience of elite athletes in how they are coached, parented and supported by teammates and suggest more research is needed in this particular area. Strategies are needed to assist more balanced athlete identity development, greater athlete autonomy and development of diversity in life domains. Interpreting these athletes’ accounts enables us to challenge some current beliefs and practices. These include retirement planning led by the coach, coach–athlete relational experiences shaping athlete identity, teammate relationship connections, parental “balanced” involvement, thoughts that identity development goes beyond adolescence, and the emergence of four identity styles.

In addition, strategies are needed to increase the sport community’s awareness of identity growth and change. The athletes’ diverse experiences of interaction with coaches, sport associations, medical professionals, teammates and families reflect patterns of both positive and negative adaptations. The pattern of findings in this study creates a context within which we can examine and improve our practice in terms of identity development in the training environment and support of elite athletes who experience a career-ending injury. It would be interesting to investigate how transferable these findings are to other populations such as business, the performing arts, workplace and high-risk occupations.
Summary and Conclusions

The goal of this research was to begin to understand elite athletes’ experience of identity changes after a career-ending injury from sport. The second step was to develop strategies that assist coaches in supporting these athletes. As a result of this study’s findings, as well as an examination of those findings in the context of the available empirical literature, we can draw the following conclusions:

**Balanced identity and internal resources.**

Elite athletes commonly experience over-commitment to their elite athlete role during competitive sport. Athletes who were able to maintain a strong sense of self confidence, autonomy and internal control in addition to their pronounced elite athlete identity were able to navigate their retirement experiences effectively and experienced a balanced identity style. However more research is needed to further illuminate the relationship between elite athlete internal resources, identity and career-ending injuries.

The results of a more balanced identity and smooth transition were consistent with Livneh and Antonak (1997) who described adaptation as comprising: "(1) active participation in social, vocational, and avocational pursuits; (2) successful negotiation of the physical environment; and (3) awareness of remaining strengths and assets as well as existing functional limitations" (p. 8) and (d) the individual's personal and subjective analysis of his or her total situation as it appears to be the most important factor in guiding his or her response. Therefore research that investigates characteristics associated with adaptation is warranted.

**Transition and achievement of balanced identities.**

Elite athletes experienced either a smooth retirement experience that was associated with more balanced identities or a turbulent retirement experience after a career-ending injury that
was associated with less balanced identities. This finding is important because athletes who experience positive changes in identity after a career-ending injury could assist the sport community, stakeholders, sport, rehabilitation and career counsellors in developing protective factors that will result in more positive experiences for elite athletes. For example, greater scrutiny of the coach–athlete relationship, training environment, athletes’ ability to relate, teammate connections and parental ‘balanced’ support are areas that need to be reinforced. This area if research, in particular social roles and relationships in sport related to identity, is in its infancy and would benefit from further examination.

**Factors associated with transitions.**

Four main factors were described that contrasted the two transitional experiences of elite athletes’ smooth (more balanced identities) versus turbulent experience (less balanced identities). The four factors were: internal resources, cognitive coping style, relational patterns of connection, and continuity with sport. Within each factor, several subfactors were associated with an smooth retirement. For example, individuals who experienced autonomy and had strong internal resources (e.g., autonomy and proactive relations) were associated with a smooth transition. Participants who held more reality based cognitions, fleeting depression, greater confidence, strong vision and planning, purposeful mental skills during injury, development of multiple life domains and a planned-retirement pace were characteristic of a cognitive coping style associated with smooth retirement. In addition, individuals who experienced relational patterns of family balance, teammate connection, positive coach-athlete relations and social expansion in retirement experienced smooth transition. Finally, individuals who maintained continuity with sport on a part-time basis mostly through coaching described patterns of smooth transition. In future, it would be interesting to examine other variables such as the effects of the type of sport and how that might influence identity changes and retirement effectiveness.
Identity Styles and Transitions

Balanced identity and smooth transitions.

Elite athletes who have strong internal resources, self confidence, autonomy and agency in their relations with coaches, medical professionals, teammates and family tend to be more self-congruent and self-complex despite experiencing a pronounced elite athlete identity. These athletes were also able to plan and adapt quickly to their current situation of a career-ending injury. They used mental skills during injury and retirement to assist them in their adaptation. This is of particular importance because it demonstrates that elite athletes can achieve healthy integration. It also shows that athletes with more balanced identities can achieve a relatively smooth transition from injury and elite sport by preparing for their future through increasing their interests in multiple life domains, developing mental maps, transferring mental skills learnt in sport, and enhancing coach–athlete collaboration. This is most significant because it can arm elite athletes with tools for navigating adversity in life after sport.

Finally, the development of a personal control and mature relationships are two developmental tasks that may serve as protective factors and support an adaptive retirement experience, more balanced identities among elite athletes who experience career-ending injuries.

Less balanced identities and turbulent transitions.

Characteristics of elite athletes who experienced less balanced identities were patterns related to negative coach–athlete relationships, turbulent injury and retirement transitions, pressures to conform to the sport work ethic, low self confidence, lack of appropriately balanced parental support and teammate connections. This is important because social skills and identity development, which usually occur during adolescence, have implications for management of injury and life after sport. For example these factors affect how athletes interact with coaches and medical staff during injury, rehabilitation and retirement. It is important that sport
associations become aware of the training context and provide athletes with the meaningful exploration, decision-making, problem-solving, future-viewing, and goal-setting. Empowerment of athletes aids in development of healthier identities. If parents, coaches and practitioners intervene earlier they will likely develop autonomous individuals with psychosocial skills that are associated with the development of more balanced identity development.

**Support for Different Identity Trajectories**

Elite athletes do not follow a common or linear pathway in their identity change following a career-ending injury. The development of different identity styles requires different support and is important for sport, career and rehabilitation counsellors to develop appropriate support for different identity styles. More research is needed to look at the influences of individual differences and social roles on the various pathways identified.

**Continued Immersion in Athletic Identity**

An injured athlete’s smooth retirement from sport is not necessarily an indicator of healthy identity development. Many athletes who remain in the sport system become coaches who appear to have adaptive sport-retirement experiences but maintain a living for sport identity. These coaches then model to the next generation of athletes behaviours that may depict a narrow, undifferentiated, prematurely closed identity and delays in development of their social skills. The social realm of athletes is one area where it would be beneficial to examine the separate influences of each factor – coaches, parents and teammates to see at what stage and age each impacts identity development.

**Screening for Depression**

Elite athletes who experience injury and retirement from sport are likely to experience some form of depression or mood disturbance that, for some, went undiagnosed during their elite
athlete career and for the majority was experienced during injury and retirement from sport. The sport system needs to implement screening tools for depression and practitioners need training in grief counselling. It would be interesting to survey athletes to see how sport consultants currently manage depression and mood disturbances.

**Implications**

Although this study is small and the findings are not generalizable to all elite athletes experiencing a career-ending injury and changes in identity, the findings themselves reflect patterns, factors and styles that may echo clinical observations to the extent that it seems reasonable to suggest implications for practice. The current direction in the elite-sport field is to be reactive in response to injury and retirement from sport. Athletes and coaches are not prepared for injury or for retirement and lack the necessary resources and knowledge to manage conditions related to identity development. Although this study is not in itself a basis upon which to support changes in practice, the findings generated from the voices of its participants may provide insight for a practice that is consistent with current trends.

**Implications for practice.**

The findings of this study will be particularly relevant in sensitizing sport organizations, coaches, parents and sport practitioners to the complexities inherent in the elite athletes’ experience of a career-ending injury and identification of the individual differences that may emerge. The research in this study has practical implications which suggest that one promising approach is the identification of athletes’ primary identity styles early on to provide intervention and adjustment to a more positive identity pathway if necessary. Athletes who experience the
“lost identity” style may receive the most benefits from a targeted intervention while those who experienced “intensification” and “living for sport” identity styles may also find benefit. The “lost identity” style characteristically lacks exploration, commitment and agency. Those participants of this style were dependent and unable to think about the future or set goals. Such targeted interventions may involve meaningful exploration in a number of life domains, decision-making, problem-solving, future mental maps and goal-setting to empower athletes and develop healthier identity trajectories.

It is necessary to recognize that the sport-training environment influences the way coaches behave and that the context shapes the coach–athlete relationship and athletes’ early identity development. Implementation of changes in the sport system that reduce pressure on coaches (e.g., examine implications of providing extrinsic financial rewards on coaching styles) and ultimately enhance athletes’ feelings of self confidence are also needed. Education of coaches and sport counsellors should assist in the development of a warm collaborative environment that enhances athlete development of autonomous behaviours (e.g., decision-making, problem-solving, goal-setting), social skills, intrinsic motivation, self worth, and multiple life domains. Coaching styles may need to shift during injury management to reflect an adjusted pace that is required for athlete rehabilitation. Also important are opportunities for coaches to lead discussions about life after sport. The aforementioned coach discussions and other strategies (e.g., What is life like outside of sport? Are you happy? What do you plan to do in your vocational career?) that show coaches’ interest and value in the athlete as a person would enhance athletes’ sense of well being. Parent education sessions and encouragement of teammate support during retirement (e.g., mentoring or storying) are useful. Plans to have continued contact with athletes after retirement would also be beneficial. Strategies for ensuring emotional closure could include retirement recognition parties, goodbye wishes on websites and
blogs, or the development of alumni networks to bridge the gap for the athletes yet help them feel valued and connected.

Coaches could be role models and develop their own interests in a variety of life domains to model diversity in their own identity. Coaches could encourage self-complexity and self-congruence among their athletes through behaviours that are individual to the athlete’s needs and encourage self-reflection and self-knowledge. Finally, coaches should be mindful of the power they hold in the coach–athlete relationship, their reinforcement of certain values, and influence on self worth, and make honest efforts to minimize bias and favouritism. Regular sport counselling for coaches or coach mentorship opportunities may be viable options to facilitate coaches’ self-awareness, self-reflection and greater self-knowledge in their relationships with others.

Parents may benefit from learning about the importance of their influence on identity development. Provision of opportunity for their sons and daughters to gain meaningful exploration in a number of life domains, decision-making, problem-solving, and developing mental maps of their future lives would be an asset. Helping athletes to gain perspective and develop multiple life roles and future dreams beyond sport are typical roles of parents that may be compromised because elite athletes spend so much of their time training and away from home at centralized training centers. Thus, parents would be wise to be diligent in their effort to “parent” their children even if it is from a distance. At the same time, parents need to be mindful that if they emphasize self worth through sport achievement, children may become dependent on their sport achievement for their self worth.

Educating athletes about how to be proactive, self-determined and autonomous will offer greater intrinsic motivation. Encouraging athletes to remain connected to their sport teammates
may provide emotional closure and support during transition. Educating athletes on how their behaviours influence coaches (and teammates) and increasing their knowledge about the reciprocal nature of the coach–athlete relationship (and teammates) is important. Athletes need to learn strategies to manage the power imbalance in their relationship with coaches. In addition, education for athletes on the risk of focusing on sport at the expense of other life domains is warranted. And the benefits of staying in contact with team mates and the sport community after retirement from sport need to be highlighted.

Mental-skills training for life on and off the field would promote more balanced identity development. The implementation of goal-setting, relaxation strategies, imagery, mental maps, self-reflection, meaning-making, social skills (e.g., decision-making, conflict management, and assertiveness), self-knowledge, numerous life interests and the transferability of these skills to life beyond sport will assist athletes in managing injuries, disengagement and the athlete–coach relationship. Several processes that were found to be beneficial for athletes and the development of such skills as reflection, perspective-taking, meaning-making, acceptance and appropriate use of denial would facilitate coping with adversity.

Given the strong impetus to experience depression or mood fluctuations within the short timeframe of injury and disengagement, these findings suggest that intervention programs and ongoing support should be implemented. Support should include information sources and encourage a preventative approach to elite-sport injury and retirement experiences. Moreover, the screening of injured athletes for depression should be implemented along with the training of practitioners in grief counselling. It would also be interesting to examine the sport team, coach and athletes' awareness of when the athlete experiences depression or mood fluctuations and how these athletes are effectively managed in the sport environment.
Implications for future research.

Although this study added to the understanding of elite athletes’ experience of injury and disengagement from sport, it seems that extending our knowledge to include the athletes’ voice was not enough to understand the phenomenon. In order to understand the phenomenon and to develop evidence-based knowledge upon which interventions can be built, we require different perspectives from which to generate a fuller empirical picture. One direction for future research might include the documentation of patterns and insights from several perspectives. These may include partners, team mates or parents of the athlete who are witness to the injury and retirement processes and professional observations (doctors, physiotherapists, strength trainers, sport trainers, sport psychology enhancement professionals and sport counsellors) and finally coaches who are part of the recovery and retirement from sport.

In terms of participants, this study is unique in the research of the area of elite athlete identity experiences after a career-ending injury. It represents a relatively homogenous group of Caucasian, middle-class, mostly well-educated athletes yet from a diverse set of sports. It may be that the recruiting strategies were limited or it may reflect a greater interest by the participants in describing their stories. However, to get a complete picture of the phenomenon it would be important for future researchers to include in their samples a wider diversity so that our knowledge includes ethnic variation, poverty, more severe maladjustment (e.g., addiction) and pre-adolescent, adolescent and lengthier athlete careers in the experience of a career-ending injury and disengagement from sport.

This investigation’s analysis of the findings of the athletes’ experiences of injury and disengagement from elite sport, when compared to those of other authors who studied a similar population, reflects several commonalities. The commonalities could indicate the occurrence of emerging identities, the deferment of athlete psychosocial identity development in particular, the
development of athlete-support autonomy in the coach–athlete relationship, and the identification of factors related to the adaptation of identity (e.g., transfer of mental skills and mental maps). Research that extends and builds on these findings may be helpful in promoting the development of theoretical scaffolding onto which the exploratory findings of this study could hang and the phenomenon could be further examined. The voices of the participants offer greater direction in providing new forms of assistance to elite athletes’ identity changes during a career-ending injury and disengagement from sport.

**Implications of additional perspectives.**

With any methodological approach and theoretical orientation there are inherent limitations. Consistent with Interpretive Description and my alignment with constructivism I made the choice to stay close to the participants stories. In doing so there are aspects of the participants’ lens that may limit their awareness and may not be noted as important to their retirement transition experiences and are not addressed.

While there are a numerous theoretical orientations with different rationales that could examine factors outside the immediate awareness of elite sport participants one such approach is critical theory. Critical theory asks questions that are valuable to thinking about injury, gender and systemic issues in the sport context that are not asked (or at least emphasized) by those working in a more interpretive domain. The epistemology of critical theory has a purpose to release those that are dominated (and can be emancipated) and to further autonomy and responsibility. The methodology of critical theory involves uncovering hidden power imbalances and enlightening participants about how they can act in their best interests. The method used frequently by critical theorist has been critical reviews and they involve examinations of existing knowledge both historically and politically (Campbell & Bunting, 1999).
In application of a critical theorist approach to sport, the researcher focuses on power differentials and enlightenment of the participants. Such an approach would focus on the identity of female athletes, from the perspective of oppression and marginalization by the male dominated sport culture. Sport for years has been the ‘contested terrain’ (Messner, 1988) and women have been denied equal access for a very long time. While women are carving out a place in sport they are doing it within the constraints of a number of systemic forces. For example, despite playing hockey for almost as many years as men, women’s hockey was only recently added to the Nagano, Japan Olympics in 1998. Women’s hockey has been cited as a challenge to hegemony of masculinity. Canadian hockey is male dominated patriarchy and with women’s hockey sharing the spotlight it dilutes the masculine status of hockey (Coakley & Dunning, 2000). Women experience a constant backlash for sharing the spotlight and potentially diluting the tough image of hockey. There is a lack of funding to women’s sport, less media and women’s sport is relegated to a lower status. For example, at the 2010 Olympics there were questions about the legitimacy of women’s hockey. International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Jacques Rogges questioned if women’s hockey should remain in the Olympics because it is not as ‘competitive’ as men’s hockey (Wyshynski, 2010). This is a systemic problem that starts at the very top of sport and is filtered down. Adrienne Clarkson, Canada’s former Governor General, felt that Rogges’ comments were a ‘slap in the face’ to women (Wyshynski, 2010).

Gender is a social construct and can be oppressive for men as well as women and there is a danger that if we do not acknowledge the influence of this construct for both genders, research will be incomplete. Masculinity is the opposite of being vulnerable, needing help and being dependent. Male athletes that are injured may be more willing to suppress their injuries and pain to save face (Coakley & Dunning, 2000). They may push their injuries so far that they become
permanently injured. The forces of oppression that are the focus of a critical inquiry offer a different perspective to the lens offered in the current study.

Similarly, oppression of persons with disabilities has been recognized at all levels in sport. Only recently have policy members step forward and made a significant impact in laying down policy. For example, the adoption of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* in 2006 affirms the right of persons with disabilities to participate in mainstream and disability specific sporting activities at all levels and to have equal access to training, resources, venues and services (United Nations, 2006). Institutional and systemic barriers to persons with disabilities in sport occur at all levels. The Olympics are contested separate from the Paralympics. The Olympics receives twenty-four hour media coverage while the Paralympics media coverage is limited and bound.

Given these other angles there are many broader contextual questions raised about athletes who experience identity changes after a career-ending injury. For example, how does a patriarchal sport system, with gender role stereotypes, and normalization of injuries collectively produce a pronounced athletic identity and identity changes after retirement from sport-injury? Volumes of research suggest that systemic forces play a role in shaping athlete training environment, injury management and likely influence identity changes during retirement. The fact that the current participants did not identify these systemic forces raises an interesting question of a sport system that keeps such knowledge from the athletes’ awareness. The present investigation makes a powerful argument for a more athlete-centered approach; however, efforts to mobilize and safe-guard athletes’ rights will need to address structural, and organizational constraints that reinforce a narrow athletic identity. Future research that builds on the present findings and expands identity research in this larger context, would contribute efforts to broad efforts to enhance athlete well-being.
References


*Research on Aging, 7*, 577-599.


*Rehabilitation Psychology, 50*, 305-311.


Dubuque, IA: WCB Brown & Benchmark.


Dear Sir/Madame,

My name is Anne Muscat. I am a doctoral student in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia and am currently doing research for my dissertation, which explores retirement from sport.

As you well know there is little research on athlete retirement, transition out of sport and career-ending injuries. The purpose of my study is to give elite athlete’s who have experienced a career-ending injury the opportunity to communicate and discuss their experiences of their transition from sport, whether physically, psychologically, and/or emotionally.

I hope that the study results will provide useful information and education to sport psychology practitioners who work with retired athlete’s in their office. I also hope the study will contribute to development of programs for the elite athlete lifestyle and transition skills. The project will aim to inform both theory and practice in the field of sport psychology.

In addition to these benefits, the findings may be very validating to retired athlete’s and those preparing to retire. Knowing that there are other athlete’s who share similar experiences may be empowering.

As with all research that involves the disclosure of personal information, there is a possibility that such disclosure may create temporary discomfort for participants or impact their coping abilities with other psychological issues. My training as a sport psychology consultant, supervised doctoral intern and a registered clinical counselor (#2127) enables me to recognize and ensure a safe environment. If greater discomfort and feelings of risks are identified, the researcher will provide an appropriate referral for psychological services.
I am enclosing a poster that describes the research and calls for participants. I would appreciate your assistance in posting it and requesting the participation of any retired elite athlete’s you know who may be interested in discussing the experience of their transition from sport with me. Confidentiality is guaranteed; however, in British Columbia, policies on research ethics require are a few standard exceptions to confidentiality:

1. If an athlete expresses an intent to harm themselves or other, I must disclose information as necessary to protect those involved.
2. If the researcher has a reasonable reason to believe that anyone under the age of 19-years-old needs to be protected from abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional) or neglect, I must disclose that information to the Ministry for Children and Families.
3. If I am served with a valid subpoena, court order, or search warrant, we must comply.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your help.

Anne Muscat, MPE, MA, RCC

Tel: 778-838-0271
Email: muscat@interchange.ubc.ca

Supervisor of Research: Dr. Beth Haverkamp; beth.haverkamp@ubc.ca
Appendix B

Cover letter

Dear_________________________,

Thank you for your expressed interest in participation in my research. There is very little research on athlete’s who experience career-ending injuries and retire from sport as a result. Being such an athlete you will be asked to reflect on specific experiences of your experience in the context of leaving sport and choosing other activities. The purpose of this study is to obtain the descriptions of your physical, psychological, and/or emotional experiences as they relate to your a career-ending injury and transition out of sport. I am also interested in the pre-conditions that lead you into retirement, the coping mechanisms you used, how you negotiated your identity away from sport, and after-effects of any of these experiences. The participation in the study may be beneficial for you as it might enhance your self-awareness and increase your and future athletes understanding of the experience. Such changes may promote growth, happiness, and life satisfaction.

Participation will involve three in-depth interviews which may last anywhere from 45-120 minutes. During the interview you will be asked to recall specific experience of your transition from sport. You will be asked to describe in detail such experience, factors that led to it, coping strategies, identity negotiation and its effects on you. Interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed. First-name pseudonyms will be assigned to the audiotapes to ensure confidentiality. Only I will be able to match your actual identity with the information obtained during the in-depth interview. Even the research team (Supervisor, and Dissertation Team) and the person(s) transcribing the interviews will only see your pseudonym. Should you feel the need to emotionally debrief your participation in the study, I will provide you with an appropriate referral to a professional.

Audiotapes will be stored in a secure office and the protocols will be locked securely on my laptop. Audiotapes will be destroyed upon successful completion of my dissertation defence and the protocols will be securely kept on my laptop indefinitely for the purposes of further research or potential publication of the study. You will be asked permission if there is a need for the use of your data in the future. You have a right to withdraw your permission for the indefinite retention of your data. In the case of such withdrawal your data will be completely and permanently erased from the laptop two years after I receive my Doctoral degree. Upon the
completion of the study you will receive a copy of the findings (unless you express your preference not to receive them). As an athlete I competed at international and national levels. I have over fifteen years experience working with elite athletes in the area of sport psychology consulting, am currently completing a PhD and am a registered Clinical Counsellor (#2172). I am also a member of the executive council for the Canadian Sport Psychology Association.

Your involvement is voluntary and you will be able to withdraw from the study at any time without being penalized in any way. Confidentiality is guaranteed; however, in British Columbia, policies on research ethics require are a few standard exceptions to confidentiality:

1. If an athlete expresses an intent to harm themselves or other, I must disclose information as necessary to protect those involved.
2. If the researcher has a reasonable reason to believe that anyone under the age of 19-years-old needs to be protected from abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional) or neglect, I must disclose that information to the Ministry for Children and Families.
3. If I am served with a valid subpoena, court order, or search warrant, we must comply.

I will contact you to arrange an interview time that is convenient for you. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Anne Muscat
Doctoral Student in Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia.
Appendix C

Consent form

Title of Study: What is the lived experience of elite athletes who retire from sport due to a career-ending injury?

Investigator: Anne C. Muscat
778-838-0271
muscat@interchange.ubc.ca

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Beth Haverkamp
604-822-5354
bhaverkamp@interchange.ubc.ca

Purpose and Procedure:

The purpose of this research project is to discover descriptive themes regarding the experience of transition from sport after a career-ending injury. Participants are asked, in three 45-120 minute interviews, to recall and describe specific experiences of their emotional, psychological, and physical aspects of their transition from sport.

Confidentiality:

All information submitted by you will be strictly confidential. Interviews will be audiotaped, transcribed, and given a pseudonym (created by you) to ensure confidentiality. All names and locations will be changed to further ensure confidentiality upon transcription. Only myself and the transcriber will have access to the tapes, which will be stored in a locked cabinet and then destroyed upon successful defence of the dissertation project. A copy of the transcript will be stored in the Counselling Psychology Department at the University of British Columbia and destroyed after five years.

Benefits and Risks:

I hope the results of this study will provide useful information and education to yourself, future athletes and sport psychology practitioners who work with athlete’s in the field. I also hope the study will contribute to development of programs for the elite athlete retirement and recovery from injuries skill development. The project will aim to inform both theory and practice. The process of telling your retirement experience may also have a positive affect on your emotional well being.

As with all research that involves the disclosure of personal information, there is a possibility that such disclosure may create temporary discomfort for participants or impact their coping abilities with other psychological issues. I will provide a referral source to a qualified professional should such situation arise for yourself. Moreover, the inherent risks in the research project are identification of participants due to the unique aspects of their sport experience and high status in the Canadian Sport community. As mentioned above
confidentiality protocols will be strictly adhered to in order to protect your anonymity in this project. Moreover any identifying information may be altered to protect your identity (e.g., sport type, residence, competition participation).

**Right to Withdraw and/or Omit Specific Details**

If, during the course of the interview, you feel uncomfortable about the subject matter, you have the right to omit specific details without prejudice or negative consequence. You may also withdraw yourself and/or your data from the study at any moment without prejudice or negative consequence.

I thank you in advance for your participation in this research study.

**Results of the Study**

You will be sent a letter outlining the common themes found in the study if you indicate that you are interested in receiving such a letter.

If you have any questions about ethical issues involved in this project, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at (604) 822-8598

I have read and understood the description of this study and I willingly consent to participate in this study.

__________________________________________  ________________________________
Date                                           Signature
Appendix D

Demographic form

Name of Participant: ______________________________________________________

Address: ________________________________________________________________

Phone: _________________ Email: _______________________

Age: _________________ Sport:

Highest Level of Competition:______________________________________________

How many years have you had the status of an elite athlete___________________

How long were you on the national team before ending your career_____________

Why did you decide to retire from sport________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Years competing in Sport:________

Was your retirement from sport voluntary?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

What type if injury did you have just before retiring?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Years from date of Injury__________________________________________________

How long have you been retired from sport? ________________________________?

What is your current occupation or main activity that you are doing now? ________

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix E

Interview guide

Orientation Speech

“Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and your willingness to share your experience of retiring from sport after a career-ending injury. I recognize that the nature of this subject is private and, therefore, respect your courage to volunteer and be a part of this study.

The purpose of this study is to obtain the descriptions of how your physical, psychological, and/or emotional experiences changed as they relate to your transition from sport. Throughout the interview, I may ask for clarification or for more details about your experience. I hope that your participation in the study may be beneficial for you, as it might enhance your self-awareness and increase your understanding of your experience.

Please keep in mind that the information you share with me will remain confidential. The first-name pseudonym will be assigned to the tape and only I will have the access to your identity. You have a right to omit details of your experience and/or to withdraw from the study at any moment without being penalized in any way.

Your involvement is voluntary and you will be able to withdraw from the study at any time without being penalized in any way. Confidentiality is guaranteed; however, in British Columbia, policies on research ethics require are a few standard exceptions to confidentiality:

1. If an athlete expresses an intent to harm themselves or other, I must disclose information as necessary to protect those involved.
2. If the researcher has a reasonable reason to believe that anyone under the age of 19-years-old needs to be protected from abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional) or neglect, I must disclose that information to the Ministry for Children and Families.
3. If I am served with a valid subpoena, court order, or search warrant, we must comply.

Do you have any questions before we begin?”
Appendix F

General questions to orient the interview

To explore the experience:

- Could you please describe for me, as fully as you can, the experience of your transition from sport.
- What is the experience of disengagement from sport after having a career-ending injury?

To explore pre-conditions of the experience:

- What has happened in your life that brought about this experience for you?
- How did your experience of a career-ending injury impact your transition from sport?

To explore coping mechanisms:

- If you have experienced negative encounters with respect to your experiences, how have you coped with them?

To explore identity changes:

- If you have experienced any changes in your sense of “who you are” throughout this process of retirement?

To explore the after-effects:

- What have you learned or how have you grown as a result of these experiences?
- What are the effects of your experiences on you personally?
- What are the effects of your experience on your relationships with your partners, parents, friends, family members, others?
- What are the effects of your experience on your career choices?
Appendix G

Poster advertising study

A Study Exploring the Elite Athletes’ Retirement from Sport After A Career-ending Injury

Here is an opportunity for you to contribute to academic research regarding your experience.

The current research that exists on athletes’ that retirement career-ending injuries in sport is limited in its scope. There is a need to explore the transition from sport, coping, and changes in identity after leaving sport in order to better understand the process and assist athletes through the transition into retirement.

If you are an elite athlete that retired from sport after a career-ending injury (minimum 1 year ago), I would love for you to take part in this study. If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to reflect on specific experiences of your transition from sport, your coping, any identity changes and the impact these experiences had on who you are. The purpose of this study is to obtain descriptions of your physical, psychological, and/or emotional experiences as they relate to your retirement experiences. I am also interested in the pre-conditions that lead you into retiring from sport, the coping mechanisms you may have used, identity changes and after-effects of any of these experiences. The participation in the study may be beneficial for you as it might enhance your self-awareness and increase your understanding of the experience. Such changes may promote growth, happiness, and life satisfaction.

If you are willing to dedicate time and have the courage to share such private aspects of your life, please contact Anne Muscat (a Doctoral student in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia) at (778) 838-0271 or muscat@interchange.ubc.ca. Further information will be forwarded to you.
**Appendix H**

**Groundwork and principles – interpretive description**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design Components</th>
<th>Guiding Principles and Scientific Integrity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-analytic Framework</strong></td>
<td>1. Historical locations of interpretive description.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Philosophical and epistemological assumptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analytic Framework</strong></td>
<td>1. Locate the inquiry within the field of knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Make explicit the theoretical assumptions, biases and empirical preconceptions that are the foundation of decision-making. That is, the theoretical scaffolding provides a base from which to start the process and then let go of information until data is reviewed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Theoretical forestructure involves making transparent researcher assumptions and relationships to study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sample Selection</strong></td>
<td>1. Sample theoretically and purposefully.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Seek maximal variation on themes that emerge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Develop a strong database to enhance credibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data Sources</strong></td>
<td>1. Determine who experiences phenomena and who could best describe the phenomenon—the experience and variations of such.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Examine relationships between data sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Actively seek data sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data Analysis</strong></td>
<td>1. Analyze inductively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Maintain perspective on the data, avoid fracturing (or labelling) the data too soon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Emphasize synthesizing, theorizing, and recontextualization.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scientific Integrity

1. Rigour is a critical component of interpretive description and includes credibility, fittingness, consistency and confirmability.
2. Ethical obligations and considerations include protection of participants’ identity, power imbalances, and maintenance of data privacy.

Note: These principles were initially drawn from Thorne and colleagues (1997, 2004, 2009) and adapted from MacPherson (2007). In order to make the framework comprehensive, I expanded it and included the pre-analytic framework and scientific integrity.
**Appendix I**

**Ethics approval**

The University of British Columbia  
Office of Research Services  
Behavioural Research Ethics Board  
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road,  
Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

---

**CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:</th>
<th>INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT:</th>
<th>UBC BREB NUMBER:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beth E. Haverkamp</td>
<td>UBC/Education/Educational &amp; Counselling Psychology, and Special Education</td>
<td>H07-00862</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UBC</td>
<td>Vancouver (excludes UBC Hospital)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other locations where the research will be conducted: participant's home, if that is their preference

**CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):**

Beth E. Haverkamp  
Anne C. Muscat

**SPONSORING AGENCIES:**

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) - "Elite Athlete Retirement Experience Following A Career Ending Injury"

**PROJECT TITLE:**

Career Ending Injury and Retirement Experiences of Elite Athletes

**CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE:** October 3, 2008

**DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:**

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<thead>
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<th>Version</th>
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The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.
Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following:

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair
Appendix J

Four levels of immersion and abstraction of the data
Appendix K

Pre-injury patterns

Level 1  
Pre-injury Identity

Level 2  Level 3  Level 4  
Post-injury Identity

More Balanced  

Pronounced AI

Less balanced
Appendix L

Post-injury identity patterns
Appendix M

Post-injury identity factors

Level 1
Pre-injury
Identity

Level 2
Post-injury
Identity

Level 3

Level 4

More Balanced

More Balanced

Smooth Transition

Turbulent Transition

4 FACTORS
1. Internal
   Resources
2. Cognitive
   Style
3. Relational
   Connection
4. Continuity
   with Sport

Less balanced

Less balanced
Appendix N

Four identity patterns associated with retirement from elite sport
Appendix O

Four identity patterns in retirement associated with Marcia`s identity statuses

Pre-injury Identity

- More Balanced

Post-injury Identity

- Balanced
- Identity Achievement
- Smooth Transition
- Turbulent Transition
- Less Balanced

- Lost
- Diffuse
- Living for Sport
- Foreclosure
- Moratorium
- Intensification

Pre-injury to Post-injury Identity Statuses: