IDENTIFICATION OF INTRINSIC, INTERPERSONAL, AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS INFLUENCING DISENGAGEMENT FROM HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES (Counselling Psychology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

July 2005

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative multiple case study research design was implemented to investigate the experience of disengagement from high performance sport among athletes at different stages of this transitional process. The purpose of this study was to examine athletes' anticipated and actual disengagement experiences. Of particular focus were the intrinsic, interpersonal and contextual factors perceived to influence the disengagement experience. Two current high performance athletes, two athletes in the midst of the disengagement transition and two former athletes volunteered to describe their disengagement experiences in in-depth, audio-taped interviews. Interviews were also conducted with two individuals from the athletes’ respective personal and sport communities.

An analysis of individual cases as well as a cross-case comparison revealed the presence of intrinsic, interpersonal and contextual factors. Intrinsic factors include Positive Framing; Personal Identity; Post-competitive Career Plans; Competitiveness; Self-Confidence; and Cross-career Competency. Interpersonal factors include the Presence and Quality of Interpersonal Support. Contextual factors include the Quadrennial Cycle; Autonomy of the Disengagement Decision; Achievement of Performance Expectations; Organizational Focus; Educational Status; Concurrent Life Changes; and Employment Barriers. These factors were confirmed and refined through feedback interviews with participants. These findings are discussed in terms of their relationship to and extension of earlier research pertaining to retirement from sport. It is argued that these results support the conceptualisation of disengagement from sport is a complex, multi-faceted experience, influenced by a variety of factors.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge and thank all of the participants in this study who generously shared their time, thoughts and insights with me. Their disengagement stories brought life to this research.

I also wish to thank my supervisory committee for their continued involvement and support. Thank you to Dr. Lucie Thibault for her tireless editorial feedback and enthusiasm; to Dr. Bill Borgen for his methodological insights and encouragement; and Dr. Norm Amundson for his patience and sound advice. I couldn’t have asked for a better committee.

Finally, I extend my gratitude and love to my family. Many thanks to Grandma (Gail Newell) and Auntie Joy (Joy McLean) who provided Saturday morning babysitting so I could write. To my boys, Jack and Tyler, thank you for showing me what is truly important in life. Lastly, I want to acknowledge and thank my husband, Rob Newell, who has made life as easy as possible throughout the long haul of graduate school and this dissertation. I am truly grateful for his support and gentle nudging to “get it done”.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Retirement from one's career is one of many transitions (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Wylleman, Alferman, & Lavallee, 2004), characteristic of human life (George, 1980; Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). Transitions are inevitable and often unpredictable (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), invariably requiring a degree of adjustment (Coakley, 1983) on the part of the individual. Whether a particular transitional process is experienced positively or negatively is thought to depend on a number of factors, intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual. Using a multiple case study approach, high performance athletes and secondary participants provided rich, detailed narrative accounts of the various stages of disengagement from high performance sport. The purpose of this study was to identify those factors perceived to influence this transition in order to build upon and extend the existing research literature findings and contribute to future counselling practice with high performance athletes.

Research Problem

Just as all workers retire from their job at some point in their lives, it is inevitable that all athletes leave high performance sport (North & Lavallee, 2004). Unlike traditional retirement from the work force, athletes leave high performance sport following many years of training and competition. This disengagement process typically occurs during the athlete's early adult years, with current studies suggesting the average age of disengagement ranges from 26 years (Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004) to 34 years (North & Lavallee, 2004), thus differentiating the experience from the transitional process experienced by older workers at the end of their working life. One could argue that athletes undergo a transition similar to that experienced by other
young workers who can change career paths up to three or four times during their working lifespan. However, the high performance athlete represents a unique population as the athlete has typically devoted a significant portion of his or her life to intensive training and competition, often sacrificing other aspects of his or her lifestyle, including preparation for a career beyond sport (Shahnasarian, 1992; Swain, 1991). Therefore, the disengagement experience of leaving high performance sport to embark on a new career path is both a normative yet unique experience.

From this normative developmental perspective (Wylleman et al., 2004), issues related to leaving high performance sport and embarking upon a new career path should be included within the mandate of Counselling Psychology. As one of the foci of Counselling Psychology is to assist clients to effectively manage the stressors associated with different types of career transitions, including retirement, the disengagement experience of leaving high performance sport should be considered a normative developmental milestone for athletes (Wylleman et al., 2004).

Career Development Theories

Traditional career development theories view retirement as the disengagement (Super, 1990) from one's career, typically, although not always, a task associated with late adulthood (Sharf, 1997; Zunker, 2001). One such prominent career development theory is Super's life-span theory of adult career development (Super, 1990), which describes disengagement from one's career in terms of deceleration, retirement planning, and retirement living. Super (1990) believes that disengagement from one's career comprises one of four major lifestages (exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement) but can also occur at any age as individuals move from one career to the next. Recent research has shown that the retirement experience is
most successful when it is planned (Hanisch, 1994; Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004), with retired individuals adjusting well to this lifestyle change when they have stable and meaningful goals (Robbins, Lee, & Wan, 1994). Although Super's life-span theory of career development is intuitively appealing with its attention to maxi- and mini-cycles within one's career span, the theory has been criticised for its lack of applicability to women and its eurocentricity (Sharf, 1997; Zunker, 2001).

Ginzberg (1984) was one of the first theorists to acknowledge the impact of contextual factors on one's career development, visualising career development as a lifelong process where individuals attempt to derive satisfaction from work by making adjustments and choices. This concept of person-environment fit portrays career development as a dynamic process taking place over one's lifetime, focusing on work satisfaction and adjustments to meet personal needs (Ginzberg, 1984). Thus, career transitions are viewed as part of the personal adjustment process necessary to meet one's career goals and job satisfaction.

Recent career development theory has placed even greater emphasis on the interaction between intrinsic variables and contextual factors. This developmental-contextual perspective views career development over time, featuring the change of individuals and the environment (Sigelman & Shaffer, 1995; Vondracek, Lerner, & Shulenberg, 1983). This emphasis on change is not related to normative stages in the same way as Super's model, but focuses on individual change and individual responses to contextual change (Zunker, 2001). This conceptual framework places career development within the field of human development (Vondracek & Fouad, 1994) and has encouraged a multidisciplinary approach to career development research.

Current theories of career development (i.e., Young & Valach, in press; Young, Valach, & Collin, 1992) view career as a superordinate construct that extends over a long time period and
includes a broad range of actions, thus involving a complex interaction of emotion, social meaning, and manifest behaviour. Contextualist action theory is based on the notion of agentic persons who are goal directed and intentional. Career is perceived as a social construction of processes where manifest behaviour, internal processes, and social meaning provide the means by which to access phenomena such as retirement (Young & Collin, 1992). From this perspective, the context in which action takes place is highly significant in career research.

Previous Research

Although an athlete may spend many years perfecting his or her skills, the duration of one's athletic career at the high performance level, i.e., on the national and international stage, is relatively short in career terms. While some sports such as equestrian events, archery, and golf are noted for athletic longevity (North & Lavallee, 2004), many athletes compete at the high performance level for a shorter period of time due to the intensive physical demands and potential for injury, such as is the case in the average 3.2 year National Football League career (Shahnasarian, 1992). Based on this factor alone, an athlete's preparation for life beyond sport, level of career maturity (Super, 1990), and readiness to leave his or her sport likely varies significantly (North & Lavallee, 2004).

Current research indicates that the athlete's disengagement from high performance sport is also affected by a number of external variables including one's athletic accomplishments, one's socio-economic status, and the autonomy of the disengagement decision (Erpic et al., 2004). It is further postulated that athletes' age, gender, culture, organizational support or alienation, familial, and other social support will affect athletes’ disengagement experience. The extent to which the disengagement experience is positive or negative is, to some degree, affected by the above noted social structural factors (Coakley, 1983) as well as the athlete's psychosocial
well-being and level of career maturity (Super, 1990).

Early studies into disengagement from sport were linked to gerontological research (Lerch, 1984; McPherson, 1977; Rosenberg, 1981), likening the athlete's transition out of high performance sport to the process of retirement from the labour market experienced by older workers. However, one's career as a high performance athlete is much shorter than other careers and the reasons for retirement may be voluntary or involuntary (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). This brought forth the question of the appropriateness of a gerontological model to the transitional process of leaving high performance sport.

Other research into disengagement from sport conceptualises this experience as a social death (Blinde & Stratta, 1989; Coakley, 1983; Lerch, 1984; Rosenberg, 1982; Wolff & Lester, 1989), a crisis (Harris & Eitzen, 1971; Ogilvie & Howe, 1986), or a difficult and disruptive process (Baillie & Danish, 1992). While these negative views of disengagement from sport may not fully represent this transitional experience for all athletes, they do identify athletes as a distinctive population, suggesting that the disengagement issues experienced by high performance athletes may be qualitatively different from those faced by older individuals retiring from the work force later in life.

More recent research contradicts the universally negative views of disengagement from high performance sport, suggesting that for some athletes this transition can be a "rebirth" (Coakley, 1983, p.1), a smooth transition (Erpic et al., 2004; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), and non-traumatic (Allison & Meyer, 1988). Building upon the existing foundation of research, this study endeavoured to identify those factors associated with both positive and negative disengagement experiences as it is necessary to understand whether or not, and to what extent, athletes' disengagement experiences are influenced by factors intrinsic to the
athlete as suggested by traditional career development theory (i.e., Super, 1990) or contextually embedded and therefore a social construction of one's career development (Young & Collin, 1992; Zunker, 2001).

Sport psychology has attempted to apply a number of transitional models to assist athletes in effectively negotiate the transition out of competitive sport. These include the Kubler-Ross stage model of dying (Blinde & Stratta, 1989; Wolff & Lester, 1989), a social structural model (Coakley, 1983), a life development intervention approach (Baillie, 1993), an account-making model (Grove, Lavallee, Gordon, & Harvey, 1998; Harvey, Weber, & Orbuch, 1990), Schlossberg's model of transitions (Wheeler, Malone, VanVlack, Nelson, & Steadward, 1996; Danish, Owens, Green, & Burnelle, 1997), and an extension of Schlossberg's transitional model (Swain, 1991). Although these models provide some basis for understanding the issues faced by athletes over the disengagement process, a tendency towards pathologizing this transition is evident within the reviewed literature. Some of these models (i.e., account-making model, Kubler-Ross' stage model of dying) present a narrow view of disengagement from a sport career while sociological models are overly broad, and gerontological models are developmentally inappropriate (Wylleman et al., 2004). Thus, the purpose of this current study was to build on the existing research to identify those intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors perceived to influence the disengagement experience of six high performance athletes.

Multiple Case Studies

The use of multiple or collective case studies (Stake, 1995) permits each case to be instrumental in learning about the effects of retirement from sport while at the same time allowing for coordination between individual cases. The purpose of using a multiple case study approach was to thoroughly understand both the uniqueness of each case and the commonalities
between cases through in-depth analysis and interpretation of the presented issues (Stake, 1995). It is through this emphasis on interpretation that the preservation of multiple, and sometimes contradictory realities were maintained and even embraced (Stake, 1995). In order to thoroughly understand the relative and potentially interactive effect of intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors on athletes' disengagement experience, it was imperative to focus on the uniqueness and complexity of each case including its contextual embeddedness (Stake, 1995). Reliance on the particular perceptions of research participants (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) represents one method of identifying those factors perceived to be most salient throughout this disengagement experience. Moreover, the use of a multiple case study approach broadened the focus beyond each individual participant and his or her emic issues (Stake, 1995) to include those interpersonal and contextual factors, such as family or economic circumstances, which influenced their disengagement experience of research participants. This qualitative approach to the study of athletes' experience of leaving high performance sport identified those issues already noted in previous studies as well as emergent issues that were not the focus of earlier research. Because the acquired data arose out of interactions between the researcher and research participants, it cannot be assumed to be independent of the researcher's values or theoretical language (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, the data from this study was constructed by participants and reconstructed during data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), shaping both the content and understanding of questions and answers.

Rationale

My interest in the disengagement experience of high performance athletes arose from my own disengagement from collegiate sport. My disengagement from collegiate soccer in the late 1980s was unanticipated and emotionally challenging, requiring a shift in personal identity.
However, my disengagement experience was buffered by the presence of social support within the collegiate soccer community and the School of Physical Education. Moreover, I left soccer at a time when international competition had yet to be established and therefore a high performance career in this sport was not a possibility. While I was not a high performance athlete representing Canada in international competition, my own disengagement experience was nonetheless a significant life event and my reflection upon this experience stimulated my interest in the role that intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual variables play in the transitional process that unfolds as athletes leave sport and pursue other careers.

Relative to other counselling issues, there is little research addressing disengagement from sport (Baillie & Danish, 1992), particularly as high performance athletes experience it. Moreover, although a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies have been applied in past studies of retired athletes, multiple case studies have not been widely utilized, nor have previous studies examined the contextual factors affecting one's disengagement from of high performance sport. Finally, in an effort to identify disengagement expectations (Torregrosa et al., 2004) it was important to include athletes who were approaching the end of their high performance sport careers (Torregrosa et al., 2004; Wheeler et al., 1996) rather than relying solely on retrospective perceptions. Although Wheeler et al. (1996) reported consistent findings irrespective of the passage of time since athletes with disabilities retired from competitive sport, reliance on retrospective data, particularly for events that took place many years ago, not only shapes the perceptions of the participants but also serves to filter what information is actually recalled (Brewer, 1994).

Accepting that the disengagement from high performance sport comprises part of the normal career development of the high performance athlete (North & Lavallee, 2004), this
experience was studied from a career counselling perspective in which career development issues are best understood both theoretically and clinically.

Given the dearth of earlier research seeking to identify the independent and interactive effects of intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors affecting disengagement from high performance sport and the lack of adequate preparation available to this particular population, the purpose of this study was to examine the disengagement experience of high performance athletes at different stages of this process. Specifically, this study sought to identify those intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors perceived to influence the athletes' disengagement experience as they left high performance sport and engaged in a new career. The principal research question addressed in this investigation was: "What factors are perceived as having the most significant impact on the transitional process of disengaging from high performance sport?" Multiple case study methodology was chosen to provide multiple perspectives and examine the disengagement experience prospectively, mid-disengagement, and retrospectively.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This chapter opens with a brief overview of recent conceptual and empirical studies addressing career transition issues in general as such studies examine this transitional process from a career counselling perspective. An in-depth analysis of both conceptual and empirical articles pertaining to disengagement from sport is then undertaken, leading to the conclusion that a number of independent and interactive issues limit the utility of these research findings. Specifically, the conceptual models upon which early work is founded, namely gerontological and thantalogical models, are not appropriate for use with high performance athletes and the normative process of disengagement. More recent studies have led to the development of transitional, lifespan development, and account-making models (Wylleman et al., 2004). Although there is support for various aspects of the lifespan development and account-making models, they are incomplete and somewhat oversimplified in their respective theoretical frameworks. Schlossberg's (1984) transitional model is the most complete, examining both intrinsic and contextual factors thought to impact the disengagement experience.

Empirical studies pertaining to athletes' experiences of leaving high performance sport are scrutinized. Theoretical gaps and methodological insufficiencies are identified and discussed in detail as they provided a rationale for an increasingly comprehensive and clinically applicable approach to researching the disengagement experience of athletes when they leave high performance sport.

Career Transition Studies

The field of career development brings with it a longstanding tradition of theory and research demonstrating how personality factors, developmental stages, attitudes, and emotions

Developmental models of career have provided a superstructure upon which many counselling practices have been created (Manuele-Adkins, 1992), with increasing emphasis on the integration of personal and career counselling (Hansen, 2002; Niles & Pate, 1989). However, despite increasing emphasis on the lifelong process of career development, and the realities of third and fourth wave careers (Miles & Snow, 1997) typified by self-governance and the inevitability of multiple career transitions or adjustments, relatively few studies have examined the process experienced by individuals during career transitions.

**Davis and Rodela's mid-career transition.** Davis and Rodela (1990) identified three categories of principal transitional forces: (1) changes in the organization; (2) changes in the ways jobs are structured and designed; and (3) changes in individuals' psycho-physiologic make-up. These authors suggested that a failure to grasp the full meaning of these interactive, transitional dynamics may result in significant stress and negative consequences for the individual. Davis and Rodela's prescription for coping with multi-level change included the development of the knowledge and skill to understand, predict and control as much as possible the three major mid-career transitional forces. Although their focus on agentic, proactive
intervention represents a positive perception of individuals' coping abilities, Davis and Rodela's assumption that all workers' transitional situations are predictable and controllable ignored the realities faced by many. Having said this, there is no doubt that the coping mechanisms prescribed by Davis and Rodela, i.e., lifelong learning, particularly as it pertains to information technology; the use of reasoning and judgement to establish cause and effect relationships; predicting and acting; and controlling, represent effective problem-focused coping mechanisms that can encourage the positive management of one's job and career. Nonetheless, Davis and Rodela's concept of career transitions is outdated in terms of its narrow definition of what constitutes a career, and contextual influences upon career paths.

Salomone and Mangicaro's floundering and occupational moratorium. Salomone and Mangicaro (1991) described the transitional experience of young adults in their early to mid-twenties, particularly as it pertains to floundering behaviour. These authors viewed floundering as the experience of young adults drifting from job to job in an unsuccessful search for a vocational and psychological home. Other young adults who are in moratorium, having ceased a frustrating job search or floundering to take a job that meets temporary needs but does not fulfil deeper vocational and psychological needs.

From a clinical perspective, Salomone and Mangicaro believe that career transition provides young adults with an opportunity to modify an initial life structure and gives sis significant personal and vocational reassessment. They noted that social pressures (Schlossberg, 1976) further frustrate individuals in transition through comparison between oneself and others at a similar life stage. Finally, Salomone and Mangicaro cautioned that school-to-job or job-to-career transitions arouse affective responses such as decreased self-esteem, confused self-concept, feelings of loneliness, a desire for intimacy, and a search for personal fulfilment or
autonomy. They suggested that both occupational and psychological exploration is required for such individuals who need to acquire greater understanding of themselves, as well as their interpersonal and environmental situation.

Gothard's mid life transition and career counselling. Gothard (1996) examined mid-life career transitions from a psychodynamic position, applying Levison's (1978) four polarities: (1) young versus old; (2) feelings of destruction versus creativity; (3) masculinity versus femininity; and (4) attachment versus separateness. Gothard (1996) explored these concepts utilising a single case study to illustrate how these issues arise during mid-life transition and demonstrate how counselling can enable the client to work through these issues. Gothard (1996) noted that depression is a common state in individuals undergoing a major transition, citing feelings of powerlessness, feeling as though aspects of one's life are out of control, and the fear of loss of control over one's emotions (Hopson, 1982) as features of transitional experiences. Gothard (1996) concluded that a psychodynamic theoretical framework will allow clinicians to work more effectively with adults in mid-life career transitions than traditional career models oriented towards assisting adolescents to formulate career plans. Acknowledging that many transitional experiences are fraught with feelings of depression, hopelessness and loss of control, it should be borne in mind that this is not a universal experience. Rather, career transitions can be non-traumatic (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Curtis & Ennis, 1988; Prus, 1984) and thus clinical interventions should be varied accordingly.

Borgen's people caught in changing career opportunities. Borgen (1997) suggested that assumptions regarding the contextual variables underlying traditional career development theories need to be questioned. In particular, he scrutinized two assumptions: (a) the ability to enter an occupation once an individual has arrived at an informed career decision; and (b)
opportunities for career progress in a career path or changing paths within the context of stable or expanding labour market opportunities. Borgen (1997) questioned these assumptions, noting that career opportunities are rapidly shifting with decreasing full-time jobs, long-term stability, and increasing instances of structural unemployment. Borgen (1997) suggested that traditional trait and factor career theories are less useful for many people negotiating career transitions involving movement from uncertain situations to continued uncertainty. Viewing career change as a transitional process, Borgen (1997) focused on the middle and end of the transitional process. He noted that because of contextual factors contributing to decreased job stability, individuals caught in career changes may be forced to move from relatively stable jobs into a career transition characterized by an extended middle period of uncertainty and an endpoint of continued uncertainty, precipitating more frequent transitional experiences. Borgen (1997) suggested that traditional career counselling models require revision to: (1) challenge assumptions individuals make about their situations; (2) challenge the ways they understand their inability to move through the transitional process; and (3) examine their expectations of success at the end of the transitional process.

Blau and Lunz's incremental effect of professional commitment on intent to leave one's profession. Blau and Lunz (1998) longitudinally examined external, personal, and work-related correlates of intent to leave one's profession. In particular, these authors focused on the influence of professional commitment on intent to leave one's profession. The median age of medical technologists comprising this study's sample was only 25, having recently earned certification in this field. Reliance on newly graduated medical technologists may not capture the influence of professional commitment. Nonetheless, the findings of this study suggest that professional commitment accounts for 11.6% of the variance in intent to leave the profession.
whereas age, sex and overall job satisfaction accounts for only 8.2% of the variance. These findings were reported to support Morrow's (1993) position that professional commitment is a stable type of work commitment transcending situational and personal influences. The authors did note that further testing is required in recognition that initial professional commitment level and stability of commitment are partially based on an individual socialization into the profession (Hall, 1987), which primarily occurs through education-related training (Wanous, 1980).

Summary

The aforementioned studies of career transition represent a broad range of conceptual viewpoints with respect to the relative influence of personal, developmental, and contextual factors upon career transitional experiences. These disparate viewpoints have significant clinical implications for working with individuals negotiating various career transitional processes. Davis and Rodela (1990) focused on the agentic actions of middle-aged individuals to learn, understanding, predict, act, and control their career transition. For young adults in a floundering or moratorium state, Salomone and Mangicaro (1991) focused on personal identity, environmental exploration, and increased understanding of the meaningful connections between oneself and the world of work. Gothard (1996) linked psychodynamic constructs to mid-life and mid-career issues to explain career development and guide individuals to fulfil their personal and professional potential. Borgen (1997) noted that traditional trait and factor career theories require revision given the effects of the changing labour market upon career transitions. He suggested that particularly useful counselling components for working with clients in career transition include building a collaborative relationship, defining specific or concrete issues, normalizing clients' reactions, focusing on clients' assets or strengths, and developing immediate, mid-range, and long-term plans. Blau and Lunz (1998) did not examine the clinical implications
of their findings regarding professional commitment and intent to leave one's profession, simply noting that their findings reinforced the importance of job satisfaction as it relates to pay, supervision, co-workers and the work itself.

Theoretical Models of Disengagement from Sport

Thantalogical Models. Early research examining athletes' adjustment to retirement from sport has relied on thantalogical models such as Kubler-Ross (1969), equating the retirement experience to the grieving process associated with death and dying (Ogilvie, 1986, 1987; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982), a social death (Lerch, 1984; Rosenberg, 1982), or a sport career death (Blinde & Stratta, 1992). Kubler-Ross' (1969) stage theory identifies five stages through which dying individuals commonly progress. These include: (1) shock and denial; (2) anger; (3) bargaining; (4) depression; and (5) acceptance. While it has been postulated that this stage-oriented theory may provide a useful framework for understanding the psychological dynamics associated with leaving sport (Rosenberg, 1981; Wolff & Lester, 1989), questions have been raised with respect to the ability of this model to adequately capture the process experienced by athletes leaving sport (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985), particularly as one's exit from sport may be precipitated by a variety of factors (Blinde & Stratta, 1992). This model has also been criticised for its negative portrayal of retirement (Coakley, 1983), raising the question of its generalisability to the majority of athletes (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Crook & Robertson, 1991).

Social Gerontological Models. Social gerontological models equate retirement from sport, which typically occurs in young adults, to retirement from the work force experienced by older workers. The theories supporting these models include disengagement theory (Cumming, Dean, Newell, & McCaffrey, 1960), which proposed that the mutual withdrawal of society and the aging individual from one another is beneficial to both. Activity theory (Havighurst &
Albrecht, 1953) suggested that a smoother transition out of the workplace occurs when there is no appreciable change in the retired individual's level of activity. Social breakdown theory (Kuypers & Bengston, 1973), as presented by Rosenberg (1981), assumed that external labelling becomes more likely when a role is lost and if the label is unfavourable, social withdrawal is likely. Continuity theory (Atchley, 1980) suggested that the energy previously devoted to a major role, such as that of worker, is redistributed among remaining roles, requiring a subtle shift in energy and interests. Not surprisingly, these models do not adequately explain athletes' responses to retirement (Crook & Robertson, 1991) as their focus is on aging and life satisfaction (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985). Similar to thantalogical models, social gerontological models presuppose that athletes experience adjustment difficulties upon disengagement from sport such as psychological disruption (McPherson, 1977) or substance abuse (Hill & Lowe, 1974; Mihovilovic, 1968), which is not the case with all athletes (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985). As with thantalogical models, athletes' positive experiences during the disengagement process were not accounted for (Crook & Robertson, 1991) nor was the influence of many mediating factors (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985).

**Transitional Models.** Schlossberg's (1984) model of transition has been readily supported in the existing literature pertaining to retirement from sport (Swain, 1991; Wheeler et al., 1996). According to Schlossberg (1984), adaptation to a transition depends on the interactive effects of (a) the characteristics of the transition; (b) the individual; and (c) the environment. The athlete can perceive the aforementioned variables as potential assets or liabilities, depending on the individual's appraisal of the transition, him- or herself, and the environment. This model clearly encompasses a broader range of influential factors upon one's experience of leaving sport (Swain, 1991; Wheeler et al., 1996) and broadens the range of focus to include positive
transitional experiences. Interestingly, factors such as socio-economic status and gender roles were situated in the individual (Schlossberg, 1984) rather than understood as contextual variables, whereas environmental factors were limited to (a) the interpersonal; (b) the institutional; and (c) the physical setting (Schlossberg, 1984). Thus, the adaptation of Schlossberg's (1984) model of transitions to disengagement from high performance sport appears to lack a relational perspective that accounts for the independent and interactive impact of contextual factors such as culture, socio-economic status, gender, political power, team versus individual sport participation, public status, and recognition.

From a social structural perspective, Coakley (1983) reviewed the existing transitional literature, although his review was not limited to professional or high performance athletes. He concluded, "leaving sport is not inevitably stressful or identity-shaking, nor is it the source of serious adjustment problems" (Coakley, 1983, p.10). However, Coakley (1983) did hypothesize that adjustment problems are more likely if one's sport career has restricted the development of other skills and attributes; for athletes whose interpersonal relationships have been restricted to other athletes; if one's family has provided little social or emotional support for involvement outside the physical dimensions of sport activity; for athletes who, by virtue of their backgrounds, have been provided little access to activity alternatives and role models outside of sport; and athletes who lack the material resources and social contacts to make the transition into a new career, expressive non-sport relationships, and satisfying leisure activities. Coakley's (1983) hypotheses stressed the need for research examining both the independent and interactive impact of intrinsic, interpersonal, and socio-structural factors.

Life Span Development Model. Danish et al. (1997) argued that transitions such as leaving sport must be placed within the context of the life of the athlete, assuming that a critical
life event such as disengagement from sport is not a discrete event but part of a process, commencing prior to leaving sport and continuing well after the event itself. Danish et al. suggested that an athlete's experience with past transitional situations enables him or her to apply transferable skills from one setting to another. These authors purported that viewing resources, level of preparation, and past experiences as life skills allows athletes to perceive change as a challenge rather than a threat. Certainly, this developmental perspective serves to normalize the disengagement process experienced by athletes. Further, the focus on cognitive reframing as a coping strategy in terms of identifying transferable skills applied to past situations has clinical utility in terms of assisting athletes to prepare for, and cope with, disengagement from sport. However, this perspective focused on intrinsic qualities only without addressing the concomitant contextual (Coakley, 1983) and interpersonal issues that also need to be considered.

Account-Making Model. Harvey, Weber, and Orbuch (1990) adapted Horowitz's (1986) model of coping with loss to produce a general framework for understanding how people cope with extremely stressful experiences. Harvey et al.'s (1990) model was based on the supposition that account-making of the traumatic event is an essential coping mechanism and that individuals' understanding of their situation is refined through confiding activity. Harvey et al.'s (1990) model argued that people react to traumatic stress in a series of steps identified as (1) the outcry phase; (2) getting by a day-at-a-time phase; and (3) the working-through phase. Although this model may be useful for working with a minority of athletes for whom disengagement from sport is exceedingly distressful, to conceptualise disengagement from sport as traumatic serves to pathologise this normative, developmental process. Furthermore, the positive contribution of this model in terms of its constructivist representation of persons' understandings of their situation is limited by the assumption that individuals' understanding of the transitional process is
so heavily influenced by the reactions of confidants. This appears to be an overly simplistic view of how one's understanding of his or her story is refined and perspectival changes take place.

**Developmental Model.** Wylleman et al. (2004) reviewed and integrated current research literature pertaining to career transitions in sport. These authors concluded that the concept of transition is currently viewed from a holistic, life-span perspective that includes both the sport and post-sport career and includes within-sport transitions as well as those occurring in other domains of athletes' lives. Wylleman et al. suggested that a developmental model of transitions includes individual, psychosocial, and academic/vocational shifts in athletes' lives with the focus of interventions shifting away from traditional therapeutic approaches to athlete life skill programmes. These authors recommended that future research examine the characteristics of specific transitions as well as sport-, gender-, or cultural-specific factors on the quality of the transitional process.

**Summary**

In sum, research examining the process of, and adjustment to, disengagement from high performance sport has relied on a number of theoretical models. Early work in this area applied existing social gerontological models traditionally used with older workers facing retirement. Thantalogical models, particularly Kubler-Ross' (1969) thantalogical model, have also been employed with athletes reporting distressful reactions to the process of disengaging from sport.

Schlossberg's (1984) transitional model has been embraced by much of the recent literature examining the process by which athletes leave high performance sport. This multifactorial model has been used to examine the assets and liabilities of the transitional event, the individual, and the environment to provide a more contextually focused view of what contributes
to the adjustment of athletes to the disengagement process.

A developmental approach to the transition out of sport is evident in Danish et al.'s (1997) lifespan development model, which posits retirement from sport as a critical life event similar to other life transitions. Cognitive reframing was proposed to assist athletes to examine how they can apply adaptive coping skills acquired in other life experiences to more effectively negotiate the process of disengaging from sport. Wylleman et al. (2004) extended this developmental model to incorporate the entire sport and non-sport life-span of athletes, moving toward a psychoeducational focus within athlete intervention programmes.

Harvey et al.'s (1990) account-making model, which described the contextual journey taken to cope with traumatic events, has been adopted as a model to be applied to retiring athletes for whom the process is extremely distressful (Grove et al., 1998).

Overall, the current theoretical models employed to understand the experience of disengaging from sport serve to highlight particular aspects influencing athletes' adjustment to this transitional process. Insufficient attention to social structural factors and interpersonal variables is apparent, representing a significant gap in the extant literature. Additionally, these theoretical models have failed to spawn a comprehensive clinical model by which to guide counselling interventions with prospective, transitional, and former athletes.

Methodological Considerations

**Disparate Theoretical Backgrounds.** There is an abundance of research literature addressing issues related to participation in competitive sport as it pertains to adolescent, high school, collegiate, high performance amateur, and professional athletes. However, as noted by Baillie and Danish (1992), actual studies of disengagement from high performance sport are relatively uncommon. Of those studies that did focus on the disengagement experience of high
performance athletes, both professional and amateur, the existing literature tends to serve one of two functions; to identify the issues arising as a result of the transition (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Coakley, 1983; Curtis & Ennis, 1988; Erpic et al., 2004; Mihovilovic, 1969; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stephan et al., 2003; Wheeler et al., 1996; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) or, to develop a theoretical model to explain the transition process and offer clinical interventions (Baillie, 1993; Danish et al., 1997; Grove, Lavallee & Gordon, 1997; Grove et al., 1998; Shahnasarian, 1992; Swain, 1991; Ungerleider, 1997; Wolff & Lester, 1989).

Interestingly, this research is multi-disciplinary with authors grounding their work within the study of human movement, leisure and sport studies, psychology, experimental psychology, human kinetics, sociology, kinesiology, and counselling psychology. Given the range of disciplines from which this research is generated, the majority of which are not normally associated with either the theoretical development or the clinical practice of career counselling, one questions the degree to which these researchers are conversant with career counselling theory and its normative, developmental approach to career transitions.

Representation of Different Athlete Groups. Not unexpectedly given the disparate backgrounds of researchers interested in sport-related issues, research seeking to identify and understand issues related to athletes' disengagement from high performance sport has taken a variety of methodological approaches. Study participants represent a broad range of individual and team sports at the collegiate (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985), high performance amateur (Erpic et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1998; Stephan et al., 2003; Torregrosa et al., 2004; Ungerleider, 1997), high performance athletes with disabilities (North & Lavallee, 2004; Wheeler et al., 1996), semi-professional (Curtis & Ennis, 1988; Grove et al., 1997) and professional (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Shahnasarian, 1992; Swain, 1991) levels. While most
studies focused on one group of athletes, others (i.e., Grove et al., 1997) combined athletes from amateur and semi-professional sports.

While disengagement commonalities likely exist across athlete groups, it is possible that between group differences outweigh similarities. In this vein, viewing sport as a career raises the question of whether disengagement from collegiate sport at graduation is comparable to retiring from high performance sport. Moreover, among Canadian athletes, the disengagement experience may differ depending on the level of financial support available. In some sports athletes receive no federal funding. Other athletes rely on a meagre federal government monthly allowance while higher profile athletes may see their income rise with the provision of corporate endorsements. This brought forth the question of whether or not, and to what degree, the relative profile of one's sport is an influential factor. Additionally, the question of athletic longevity was considered as the duration of a high performance sport career differs significantly depending on the specific physical demands of the sport. Relatively short careers are common in sports such as competitive gymnastics, football, hockey, and downhill skiing whereas athletic longevity is more common in golf, baseball, curling, shooting, and equestrian riding (North & Lavallee, 2004). None of the existing studies appear to have closely examined the relative impact of the aforementioned factors on the quality of adjustment to leaving sport.

Contextual Factors. Other contextual factors given limited consideration in the existing literature include culture, education, financial circumstances and support networks (Erpic et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997). Researchers such as Erpic et al. (2004) and Grove et al. (1997) recommended that qualitative methodologies be employed to address the potentially mediating influence of such external factors. Moreover, no studies to date have examined the potentially interactive effect of contextual factors, intrinsic characteristics and relational factors.
**Research Design Issues.** A variety of methodological approaches have been applied to address research questions related to adjustment issues arising out of disengagement from sport. Most commonly, survey questionnaires were employed (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Curtis & Ennis, 1988; Erpic et al., 2004; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Haerle, 1975; Mihovilovic, 1968; North & Lavallee, 2004) to elicit descriptive demographic, career-related, and disengagement information from athletes. Uses of these data have been varied. Mihovilovic (1968) and Haerle (1975) used survey data of professional male soccer and baseball players to describe the transitional process of leaving professional sport, findings that may not be generalisable to female athletes and those competing at the amateur level.

Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) relied on questionnaires containing fixed-alternative and open-ended items to operationalise indicators of (a) degree of commitment to sport role; (b) educational and occupational preparation; (c) post career sport participation; (d) social interests; and (e) adjustment to sport retirement. A response rate of 42% (n=697) was reported for female subjects and 38% (n=427) for males. Although the authors are to be commended for including female athletes, the question needs to be raised of the appropriateness of collapsing male and female data together as one group given the potential differences in their respective collegiate athletic experiences and the duration of time since retirement (females had been retired 2-8 years and males had been retired 4-14 years).

Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) indicated that frequency and chi-square analyses provide information for each notion and factor analysis provides information relative to the notions of continuity and transition. However, only frequency data and factor analyses were presented. The use of frequency data is appropriate given the nominal data obtained via questionnaires. However, the absence of results from the chi-square analyses is disconcerting and unexplained.
One would presume, based on the exploratory nature of the study, that the authors conducted an exploratory factor analysis.

The authors indicated that the questions related to leaving intercollegiate sport provide little information relative to athlete adjustment suggesting that their questionnaire failed to capture data of significance to the study of adjustment of retirement.

Curtis and Ennis' (1988) study of former junior hockey players is unique in that it is one of the only studies employing a comparative analysis, comparing data acquired from retired junior hockey players to a sample of males in the general population on three aspects of life satisfaction from interview surveys of the Canadian Quality of Life Study: life satisfaction; employment status; and marital status. A number of methodological issues are apparent in Curtis and Ennis' (1988) study. First, no information was provided regarding the statistical tests used in this study. Based on the reported results, it is presumed that multiple t-tests were used to compare mean scores on the Canadian Quality of Life Study. Because the use of multiple t-tests leads to greater error, the use of a one-way ANOVA may have been more appropriate, providing more useful information regarding main effects and interaction effects. Second, an alpha level of .10 was set to determine statistical significance. Third, F scores were not reported for any of the analyses, most of which yielded non-significant results. These statistical problems may limit the utility of Curtis and Ennis' findings.

Allison and Meyer (1988) supplemented the data accumulated by their survey questionnaire with qualitative insights from a key informant. The rationale for the use of a key informant is that she provided insights regarding the daily personal and organizational requirements and demands of professional tennis, thereby elucidating and clarifying various aspects of tour life (Allison & Meyer, 1988). While serving a potentially valuable function,
reliance on one key informant may colour the survey data based on a single perspective, thereby overshadowing the voices of the study's participants.

Other questionnaires have been developed to focus on the retirement experience of athletes. Sinclair and Orlick (1993) relied on the Athlete Retirement Questionnaire (ARQ), a 34-item instrument utilizing a 5-point Likert scale. While this questionnaire was pilot tested with 12 retired athletes, the authors provided no information regarding the psychometric properties of the questionnaire. This is of concern given the reliance on the ARQ as the sole instrument of data collection.

Grove et al. (1997) relied on the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), a 10-item instrument, to assess high or low athletic identity among retired athletes. No psychometric research was reported to support the modified use of this instrument with retired athletes and the classification of low versus high athletic identity may not accurately represent the continuity of one's identity with the role of athlete. Additionally, Grove et al. (1997) modified the COPE inventory, which in its original form has been reported to demonstrate acceptable psychometric properties (Grove et al., 1997). The question of its ability to maintain these psychometric properties is raised when modified for use with former athletes. No information was provided in this regard.

North and Lavallee (2004) sent out questionnaires to 988 athletes registered in the ACE UK programme, with a response rate of 57%. Respondents included both able-bodied athletes (83%) and athletes with disabilities (17%), equally comprised of males and females. These authors used a one-way ANOVA to examine the career planning differences between sports, genders and able-bodied versus disabled athletes. While this study was successful in accessing a large group of active high performance athletes in the UK, one questions the extent to which
self-selection influenced the nature of the sample participating in this study versus those who chose not to participate.

Erpic et al. (2004) assessed the effect of "athletic" and "non-athletic" factors on the sports career "termination process". In their investigation of 85 former elite Slovene athletes, these authors relied on the Sports Career Termination Questionnaire (SCTQ) and the Non-athletic Transitions Questionnaire (NATQ) to assess participants' perceptions of the characteristics of the sport career process and the influence of non-athletic events and transitions on the quality of life respectively. The SCTQ, using a Likert-type scale, was developed on the basis of a qualitative pilot study with former elite Slovene athletes who had left their respective sport careers an average of seven years ago (Erpic, 1998). This questionnaire was designed to measure one's subjective evaluation of characteristics of the "termination process" from one's sport career. The NATQ, also developed by Erpic (2000) requires participants to retrospectively assess the influence of non-athletic events and transitions on the quality of their life. NATQ items were generated from a study on the development of life structures during adulthood among young Slovenians. Of the 106 former elite athletes who were mailed these questionnaires, the response rate was 80.2% although no information was provided regarding the demographic and sport career make-up of this sample. Erpic et al.'s reliance on the self-designed SCTQ and NATQ require that a number of questions be raised, particularly in terms of the cross-cultural generalisability of findings and the lack of information provided with regard to the sample upon which this study's findings are based. Although high performance athletes across the globe likely share many intrinsic qualities, the social structures in which one's sport career takes place and the implications of these structures upon one's disengagement experience and post-sport career need to be considered.
Qualitative research on the topic of disengagement from sport has typically relied on open-ended interviews following a structured interview schedule (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Stephan et al., 2003; Swain, 1991; Torregrosa et al., 2004; Ungerleider, 1997; Wheeler et al., 1996). Blinde and Stratta (1992) relied on a grounded theory approach to develop an analytical framework corresponding to the responses provided by athletes to the two interviewers. Wheeler et al. (1996) also drew from grounded theory, developing three open-ended questions based on Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) transitional model. Torregrosa et al. (2004) endorsed a grounded theory approach, interviewing 18 active athletes. Swain (1991) adopted a narrative approach to describe the career transition experience as a general story, identifying those experiential units that reflect the shift in focus from sport to other careers within the athletes' common experience. Ungerleider (1997) used 25 questions to elicit interview data, using the initial biographical material to compose a biographical sketch. A content analysis was performed to assess categories in which to place each of the 57 former Olympians' transitions. It appears that the content areas were created prior to the analysis of interviews and that the athletes' transitions were categorised according to these pre-determined classifications rather than interpreted in a more emergent manner. Stephan et al. (2003) administered the 12-item General Health Questionnaire four times and conducted four semi-structured interviews with 16 athletes over the course of their first year of disengagement from high performance sport following the Olympic Games in Sydney.

Summary

In sum, studies to date have relied on the use of standardized and non-standardized questionnaires, some of which have been modified for use with samples of retired athletes, to produce descriptive statistical findings related to retrospective accounts regarding the degree of
difficulty experienced during disengagement from high performance sport (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Curtis & Ennis, 1988; Grove et al., 1997), the identification of intrinsic factors affecting this transitional process (Grove et al., 1997) athletic and non-athletic factors (Erpic et al., 2004), and the utility of various coping strategies employed by retired athletes (Grove et al., 1997) during the transition of leaving sport.

Research Findings

Although the extant literature is replete with general discussions on the topic of retirement from high performance sport (i.e., Baillie, 1993; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Coakley, 1983; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Danish et al., 1997; Grove et al., 1998; Shahnasarian, 1992; Wolff & Lester, 1989; Wylleman et al., 2004), few studies have actually been implemented (Baillie & Danish, 1992). The results articulated in the reviewed research literature are mixed. A multitude of factors have been offered as explanatory variables with respect to the ease or difficulty of the disengagement experience.

Mihovilovic's analysis of former sportsmen. In one of the earliest studies, Mihovilovic (1968) reported that only 5% of male Yugoslavian soccer players retired voluntarily. For 52% of the sample, retirement was a sudden event while 48% experienced a gradual retirement. Reported difficulties include feelings of distress, loss of social interaction, and substance abuse. Mihovilovic (1968) suggested that maintaining contact with the sport may facilitate a smooth transition out of sport. While this appears to be a sound conclusion based on the reported findings, one questions the external validity of this study conducted during the 1960s in an Eastern block country with an entirely male sample.

Haerle's career patterns and career contingencies of baseball players. In another early study, Haerle (1975) surveyed 312 former baseball players. The findings indicate that 75% of
respondents did not begin to consider post-baseball life until they were in the last quarter of their playing careers, usually in their early thirties. Given that the longevity, prestige, and income of professional baseball players differ significantly from most high performance athletes, once again the question of external validity is raised.

Greendorfer & Blinde's survey of intercollegiate sport. Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) examined survey data from 1,123 former intercollegiate athletes (426 males and 697 females). One strength of this study is that it was one of the first to examine disengagement from sport from a non-pathological perspective in an attempt to construct a theory separate from the predominating social gerontological and thantalogical theories popular at that time. The male sample was comprised of former basketball and football players, retired between four and 14 years whereas the female sample was drawn from all of the female athletes who competed in various intercollegiate sports. Although the authors are to be commended for including female athletes, one questions whether males and females should be examined as one unit given the potential differences in their respective collegiate athletic experiences, particularly with respect to disparate public status, media coverage, and financial support.

The authors relied on questionnaires containing fixed-alternative and open-ended items to operationalise indicators of (a) degree of commitment to a sport role; (b) educational and occupational preparation; (c) post career sport participation; (d) social interests; and (e) adjustment to sport retirement. Stage-related factors were reported to indicate that interest and investment in sport vary over time, suggesting that disengagement from collegiate sport may be conceptualised as a process rather than a discrete event. However, the use of retrospective data to measure subjects' investment in sport from childhood through adulthood may be problematic given that perceptions of past experiences may change over time. Greendorfer and Blinde
indicated that questions related to leaving intercollegiate sport provide little information relative to adjustment issues, suggesting that their questionnaires failed to capture this construct. The majority of subjects did not report strong feelings of loss or disruption upon leaving sport.

This study is notable in that it was one of the first to suggest that alternative perspectives stressing transition, reprioritised interests, and disengagement as a process, may offer a more suitable theoretical framework from which to conceptualise disengagement from sport. In this regard, Greendorfer and Blinde's study can be considered a forerunner in the examination of the disengagement process. However, this study is not without its limitations and despite its challenge to existing thanatological and social gerontological theories, the authors failed to offer a new theoretical and operational definition of the concept other than to describe retirement as a transition.

Werthner and Orlick's examination of former Olympic athletes. Werthner and Orlick (1986) surveyed 28 Canadian athletes who (a) medalled at the Olympic Games; (b) who finished in the top six in individual Olympic events; or (c) whose Olympic teams finished in the top half of the field. The participants in this study represented basketball, canoeing, diving, equestrian, skiing, swimming, rowing, track and field, and wrestling.

Werthner and Orlick indicated that 32.1% of participants described their disengagement from high performance sport to be "extremely difficult/traumatic", 46.4% described the transition as "moderately difficult/some problems", and 21.4% of participants described "no major problems". It is noted that within this latter group, five of the six athletes continued to be involved in their sport in some capacity, similar to the findings reported by Allison and Meyer (1988) and Curtis and Ennis (1988). While 88.8% of participants rated their life satisfaction lower than their life as an athlete immediately following disengagement, at the time of interview
(mean duration of retirement not reported), 95.8% of participants rated their life satisfaction as being close to or above the level experienced as an athlete. To know the average duration of time that had elapsed between disengagement and participation in this study would be informative in terms of better understanding the implications of these findings. Werthner and Orlick concluded that seven factors contribute to the nature of the transition out of high performance sport. These include: (1) having a new focus; (2) a sense of accomplishment; (3) coaching; (4) injuries/health problems; (5) politics/sport association problems; (6) finances; and (7) support of family and friends.

**Allison and Meyer's survey of female tennis professionals.** Surveying 20 female professional tennis players, Allison and Meyer (1988) conducted in-depth qualitative analyses of career and retirement patterns and problems. Allison and Meyer found that the process of retirement was not as traumatic as anticipated with 50% of athletes reporting their first emotional/psychological response to retirement as "relief", with another 30% identifying feelings of isolation and loss of identity. Five major reasons for retirement were reported: (1) frustration (40%); (2) travel (25%); (3) injury (15%); (4) other opponents (10%); and (5) age (10%). In describing their current emotional response to their retirement, 50% reported a sense of satisfaction and 40% indicated they experienced feelings of stability/acceptance with their decision. Allison and Meyer interpreted these findings as support for Prus' (1984) lifestyle model, suggesting that many athletes welcome disengagement from competition as it allows them to pursue other life roles. Like Greendorfer and Blinde (1985), Allison and Meyer suggested that their findings do not support gerontological or thantalogical models because the athletes perceived opportunity rather than discontinuity at the time of retirement. Rather, they suggested that their findings lend credence to Coakley's (1983) proposition that retirement may
serve as a form of social rebirth. Allison and Meyer's findings contribute to the growing movement towards a normative, developmental conceptualisation of the disengagement experience. Limitations of their study include reliance on retrospective data, over-reliance on one key informant, and their niche sample of female tennis professionals whose financial standing and level of public recognition exceeds that experienced by most high performance athletes.

**Curtis and Ennis' comparative findings for former elite-level hockey players.** Curtis and Ennis (1988) compared a sample of former junior hockey players to a sample of same-aged peers from the general population on three measures of life satisfaction. Among 129 former junior hockey players, whose age range from 17 to 40 years, 50% of respondents reported that retirement was "a difficult thing" and while 75% reported feeling a loss at leaving hockey, only 14.6% reported "quite a loss". There were no significant differences in measures of life satisfaction among very recent "retirees" relative to their same-age cohorts in the general population. Curtis and Ennis maintain that the length of time since retirement does not affect attitudes toward hockey and disengagement in any consistent way. However, this supposition is tenuous as these authors relied exclusively on retrospective data, which may not provide insight regarding the adjustment issues experienced prior to and during the disengagement process. In both this study and Allison and Meyer's (1988) study, a large proportion of participants (75% of female tennis players and 76% of junior hockey players) continued to be involved in their respective sport, thought to act as a "buffer" (Curtis & Ennis, 1988) during the disengagement experience.

A significant positive contribution of Curtis and Ennis' study is their comparative approach. Moreover, this study represents a step towards conceptualising disengagement from
sport as a process or transition rather than a discrete event. They also have an excellent response rate (72.3%), having recruited their sample from former members of a junior hockey club. However, Curtis and Ennis’ findings may need to be viewed with caution given the numerous methodological and statistical concerns, particularly the complete lack of information regarding the types of statistical analyses used in this study and the change in focus from non-significant statistical findings to descriptive data not as relevant to the study's stated hypotheses.

Blinde and Stratta's "sport career death" of college athletes. Blinde and Stratta (1992) conducted interviews with 20 college athletes who had either been cut from their sport team or whose entire sport programme had been suddenly eliminated. Interestingly, Blinde and Stratta interviewed athletes four months after the actual termination decision. Their rationale for this decision was that they view the exit from sport as a process, requiring sufficient time to elapse between the termination of the sport programme and the interview. Given the abundance of retrospective information already in the existing literature, it is unclear why these authors did not access athletes in the earliest stages of the disengagement process. To their credit, Blinde and Stratta did conduct a follow-up interview five months following the initial interview in order to capture the athletes' experience of the ongoing process of termination.

For these athletes, all of whom experienced an unplanned and involuntary termination of the collegiate athletic career, the results identified feelings equated to those related to death and dying (16 of 20 participants). Blinde and Stratta paralleled these athletes' experiences to those stages identified by Kubler-Ross' (1969) theory of dying. Factors reported to make the disengagement experience problematic include the suddenness of the termination decision (Sussman, 1972), a sense of unfinished business in terms of not having the opportunity to achieve individual and team goals, a sense of loss as the role of sport had consumed a major
portion of the athletes' lives (Ball, 1976; Hallinan & Snyder, 1987), the university environment in which athletes lived following the termination of their sport career, and frustration and anger that decisions beyond their control challenge their internal locus of control and perceptions of invincibility. Blinde and Stratta concluded that these factors are similar to those that make the process of death and dying a difficult phenomenon with which to cope. These authors suggested that athletes may benefit from support systems similar to those offered to grieving individuals. Blinde and Stratta's sample is unique in that for many of the collegiate athletes in this study, their entire sport was cut out of the varsity athletic programme. Consequently, their experience of the disengagement transition may also be unique.

Swain's withdrawal from sport and Schlossberg's model of transitions. Swain (1991) assessed the transition of voluntary withdrawal from sport among 10 professional male athletes using Schlossberg's (1984) model of transitions. The first component of Schlossberg's (1984) model, which considers the transition in terms of its type, was reported to reflect the features of the transition, helping to explain the meaning an athlete might attach to career termination. Swain found that the context of the experience is significant to understanding the individual experiences due to different relationship issues and settings between athletes. The impact of the transition was reported to differ for athletes as well. The second component of Schlossberg's (1984) model considered the individual's coping resources. Swain found that the timing of the withdrawal to be important, as is previous experience with similar transitions, ego development, and social support. Swain also reported that the source of transition, concurrent stress and commitments, and values are also significant, suggesting that this component of Schlossberg's (1984) model may need to be further expanded. Schlossberg's (1984) third component considered the transition as a process. Swain's findings support Schlossberg's concept of
transition as a process in which individuals' reactions may change over time. Swain noted that while Schlossberg emphasised the basic pattern of assimilation of a transition, his study emphasised the beginning of the transition.

Sinclair and Orlick's positive transitions from high-performance sport. Sinclair and Orlick (1993) studied athletes who represented Canada in international competition. These authors used the Athlete Retirement Questionnaire (ARQ) to access information regarding athletes' national team career, their retirement transition, and the practicality of providing transitional services to athletes.

Sinclair and Orlick found that those athletes who achieved their sport-related goals and those who had post-retirement options on which to focus (i.e., employment, interests, relationships) reported a more positive adjustment to retirement from high performance sport. Sinclair and Orlick further found that in contrast to previous studies (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1984; Coakley, 1983; Ogilvie & Howe, 1986; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), adjustment to retirement from high performance sport may not be as distressing nor as liberating as previously suggested. Although this study reported to have sampled 199 elite amateur athletes from 31 different sports, it would be helpful to know the breakdown of individual versus team sports as well as the relative prestige attached to the sports and the economic and educational status of athletes sampled in this study.

Wheeler et al.'s pilot study of retirement from disability sport. Wheeler et al. (1996) adopted a grounded theory approach to interview 18 athletes with disabilities using a semi-structured format based on Schlossberg's (1984) transition model. One of this study's primary contributions is that the authors interviewed athletes at different stages of the disengagement process, classifying ten athletes as permanently retired, four as semi-retired, and four as actively
competing in their respective sports. This was the first study to examine the experiences of athletes during the pre-transition period.

Wheeler et al. noted that the rapidity of national and international success is striking in all three groups, with athletes having achieved this level of athletic success in two years or less. This rate of athletic accomplishment is exceedingly rare among able-bodied athletes.

In the pre-transitional phase, major categories include the meaning and value of sport, commitment, and lack of institutional support. Former athletes indicated that most preparation was intrinsically motivated and based on readiness for retirement, goal attainment, and lack of potential gains from remaining in sport. However, those athletes still competing reported that they have not really considered retirement and semi-retired athletes reported that they have received no support, counselling, or career advice.

Categories describing the disengagement process were reported to include gains and losses, emotional responses, voluntary/involuntary retirement, readiness, timing, and permanence of the decision. Voluntary and involuntary retirement define the major difference between retired and semi-retired athletes, with all former athletes describing their retirement as voluntary.

In the post-transition phase, major first-order categories include gains and losses, coping, desire to return to sport, and fear of the future. The last first-order category pertains to fears for the future and aging with a disability, particularly in relation to the concept of secondary disability. Fear of future loss of identity was also indicated.

Wheeler et al. interpreted their findings as consistent with the existing literature that retirement from sport is not necessarily associated with difficulties (Crook & Robertson, 1991; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wolff & Lester, 1989). However, Wheeler et al. concluded that findings from athletes not yet retired suggest that lack of consideration of retirement
accompanied by references to chronic injury and intense commitment to sport may predict future
difficulties for some athletes. Notably, involuntary retirement was suggested as a predictor of
emotional difficulties in retirement, supporting Blinde and Stratta's (1992) findings that a sudden
termination of an athletic career and a sense of unfinished business may be associated with
disengagement difficulties. Wheeler et al. further concluded that positive adjustment to, and
coping with, retirement may be associated with external interests and future plans, supporting
Sinclair and Orlick's (1993) findings.

Wheeler et al.'s findings should be viewed in the context of disabled sports where the rise
of athletes to the level of international competition occurs much more quickly than is the case for
most able-bodied athletes. The combined impact of disability issues and the short duration of
high performance athletic careers may serve to separate the disengagement experiences of
athletes with disabilities from other high performance athletes. However to their credit, by
including pre- and mid-transitional athletes in addition to those already retired, Wheeler et al.'s
study was able to present perspectives of athletes at different points along the disengagement
process.

Ungerleider's Olympic athletes' transition from sport to workplace. Ungerleider (1997)
interviewed 57 former U.S. Olympians, ranging from age 24 to 83 years (mean of 45 years).
These athletes represented 12 sports, both individual and team sports. Within this sample, it is
notable that 63 percent of athletes completed at least four years of university and another 30
percent attended graduate school. Moreover, an overwhelming majority of these post-
disengagement athletes work in professional occupations. As athletes, this group of 57 earned 42
gold medals, 15 silver medals, and 11 bronze medals, suggesting that among high performance
athletes, this group represents the upper echelon of Olympic competitors.
Ungerleider indicated that 18% of athletes reported no transitional issues moving from sport to the workplace, 42% of athletes expressed some minor transitional difficulties, 21% identified serious transitional problems and 19% reported very serious problems and were unable to make an adjustment to a full retirement from sport. Ungerleider described these athletes as emotionally unprepared and had never visualized a life without training and competing. Their major fear was the loss of attention and how that would affect their self-image.

Ungerleider reported that athletes sought support from a variety of sources. Participants with no or few transitional problems reported seeking assistance from coaches, parents and significant others. Those with serious or very serious problems reported seeking support from a mentor or outside professional consultant including the services of a psychologist or counsellor. These findings suggest that transitional problems may be avoided or minimized with the provision of external social support prior to as well as during the disengagement process. Preventative counselling for those identified as at risk athletes may also serve to reduce the numbers of serious or very serious transitional issues faced by retiring high performance athletes.

Grove et al.'s influence of athletic identity in coping with retirement from sport. Grove et al. (1997) obtained an excellent response rate (94% of 48 athletes) from former Australian national and state athletes who completed the Athletic Identity Measurement Scales (AIMS) and the COPE inventory. Of these athletes, the majority were semi-professional athletes who, when competing in their respective sports, received training and competition subsidies from the government. This study was purely retrospective with participants having retired from sport an average of 3.44 years. Grove et al. described positive correlations between social adjustment, emotional adjustment, anxiety about career exploration, and decision making after retirement and the time taken to adjust (emotionally and socially) to retirement from sport, with athletic identity
(athletes classified as high or low in athletic identity based on scores obtained on the 10-item AIMS). A negative correlation was reported for the relationship between AIMS scores and the amount of pre-retirement planning. Unfortunately, no information was provided with respect to the reasons athletes retired from sport, thus failing to discriminate between athletes who retired voluntarily versus those who were forced to leave sport due to involuntary reasons.

Grove et al. stated that participants with extremely high and low AIMS scores differ significantly in how they coped with retirement. Those with strong AIMS scores were more likely to use venting of emotions, mental disengagement, and behavioural disengagement as coping mechanisms. Additionally, high AIMS scorers reported greater seeking of instrumental social support, suppression of competing activities, and seeking of emotional social support than low AIMS scorers. It would be interesting to know if such differences are also found between genders, between individual and team athletes, and high versus lower profile athletes.

Grove et al. indicated that retired athletes employ a variety of coping strategies during career transition, specifically relying on a combination of emotion-focused, problem-focused, and avoidance-oriented strategies. Moreover, these authors concluded that individuals who maintain a strong and exclusive athletic identity up to the point of retirement may be vulnerable to career transitional difficulties, although this conclusion is somewhat tenuous in light of the lack of information provided regarding the reasons for retirement. Given the disparity between high and low AIMS scorers with respect to identified coping mechanisms, further information regarding gender and sport affiliation is required.

Stephan et al.'s one-year study of the transitional repercussions of leaving elite sport upon subjective well-being. Stephan et al. (2003) investigated the dynamics of subjective well-being over the course of French high performance athletes' first year of disengagement following
the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. Stephan et al. administered the Global Health Questionnaire four times over the course of a 12-month period to 16 transitional athletes and 16 active high performance athletes. At the same time, semi-structured interviews were held with all participants, focusing on transitional athletes’ perceptions of lifestyle changes and changes in socio-professional situation. Active athletes were asked only questions about their years of high performance sport competition. Results from the Global Health Questionnaire were analysed using repeated-measure ANOVAs to compare results between athlete groups and across time.

It is interesting to note that all 16 transitional athletes held part-time jobs during their sport careers, adapting their jobs to meet their high performance needs. Upon disengagement from sport, all 16 participants had full-time jobs on which to focus, with three teaching high school, six coaching, three returning to school, one working as a public relations consultant, and three employed in government administration.

Stephan et al. identified four phases in the dynamics of subjective well-being and perceptions of changes in life style and socio-professional situation. These were categorised as follows: (1a) confrontation with a whole new life style; (1b) confrontation with a new socio-professional situation; (2a) difficulties accepting a new life style seen in the avoidance of a more passive life style; (2b) new beginnings in the socio-professional area; (3a) the reconstruction of a healthy lifestyle; (3b) the paradox of adjustment to the socio-professional situation; (4a) the balance in life style; and finally (4b) adjustment to the socio-professional situation.

Stephan et al. contend that the results demonstrate the shift in psychological adaptation to changes in life style and socio-professional situation, highlighting coping strategies used by transitioning athletes and the mediating role of social support during adjustment to the transition. Stephan et al. further concluded that their results confirm that adjustment to disengagement from
high performance sport results from a change in the place of sport in the life and history of an individual.

Measures of subjective well-being dropped in the first months of the transitional experience, increasing after 8-12 months of retirement from sport, attributed to an increasing sense of personal control and the implementation of leisure time physical activities. In the vocational lives of these participants, increased well-being was attributed to reaching goals, thus enhancing one’s perceived workplace competence that is then reinforced by peer recognition. In contrast to the transitional participants, active athletes’ subjective well-being remained stable across one year.

Erpic et al.’s effect of athletic and non-athletic factors on the sports career termination process. Erpic et al. (2004) investigated the way in which the quality of Slovene high performance athletes’ sport career termination is affected by athletic factors (voluntariness and gradualness of the termination, subjective evaluation of athletic achievements, post-sport life planning and athletic identity) and non-athletic factors (age, educational status, positive and negative non-athletic transitions). Dependent variables included psychological difficulties, occupational difficulties, psychosocial difficulties, organisation of post-sport life, and the total difficulty of the sport career termination (SCT). Erpic et al. relied on the self-developed Sports Career Termination Questionnaire and the Non-athletic Transitions Questionnaire to operationalise their athletic and non-athletic factors. The results of this study indicate for 82% of participants, their disengagement from sport was voluntary, perceived as gradual by half (51%) and rather abrupt by the remainder (49%), with a little over one-third having planned for life after sport. Interestingly, only one-quarter (27%) of participants felt that they had reached their athletic goals while 41% of participants reached “none” of their sport-related goals, perhaps a
reflection of Slovenia’s stature in international sport. Most participants perceived the disengagement process to be relatively unproblematic, with only five percent of respondents unsatisfied with their post-sport career and eight percent of former athletes describing the adaptation process as negative. Athletic factors having a statistically significant influence on the transition include voluntariness of disengagement, having achieved one’s athletic goals, and the degree of athletic identity. Non-athletic factors of significant influence include negative non-athletic transitions and socio-economic status. Erpic et al. concluded that the way in which athletes retire from high performance sport affects their disengagement transition, as do other athletic factors such as athletic identity. However, these authors further discovered that events related to athletes’ other social roles also influence the transitional process. Erpic et al. contend that athletic and non-athletic aspects of life are closely connected and mutually interdependent with regard to the disengagement transition, supporting the rationale for this current study, which further distinguishes non-athletic factors according to intrinsic qualities, interpersonal variables and contextual factors.

Torregrosa et al.’s elite athletes’ image of retirement. Torregrosa et al. (2004) relied on a grounded theory approach to interview 18 active elite Spanish athletes to “add a prospective view of retirement” (p. 35). Eleven men and nine women representing nine Olympic sports were interviewed. Half of the participants competed in team sports (soccer, handball, basketball, water polo and hockey) while the other half were individual sport athletes (track and field, swimming, gymnastics, sailing). Torregrosa et al. categorised participants’ images of retirement into three stages: the initiation - training stage; the maturity performance stage; and the anticipation - realisation of retirement stage. For those athletes competing in short cycle sports (i.e. swimming or gymnastics) a vague image of retirement occurs in the second stage of one’s
career whereas the anticipation – realisation of retirement stage was present primarily in long cycle careers. The most gradual and planned transitions were found in team sport athletes, particularly “the best paid athletes” (p. 40). Torregrosa et al. noted that when most athletes reached the point of worrying about the future, they chose to combine sport with higher education, “almost always studying subjects related or applied to sports” (p. 39). They further found that the “majority of athletes had a clear picture of what retirement is and what it could imply” (p. 40). Finally, Torregrosa et al. proposed, “in the case of top-level Olympic Spanish athletes the transition after top-level competitive sports should be conceptualised as a relocation in sport instead of a retirement from sport because most of the elite athletes follow a professional career in sports as coaches, managers, officials, media commentators, or by studying sport” (p. 41).

North and Lavallee’s investigation of potential users of career transition services in the United Kingdom. North and Lavallee (2004) sent a postal survey to 988 high performance athletes registered in the ACE UK programme, achieving a return rate of 57%. Participants included both males (54%) and females (46%), representing 37 individual and team sports, although the authors did not break down the proportion of team versus individual sports. The majority of this sample was comprised of able-bodied athletes (83%) with the remaining 17% of made up of athletes with disabilities. The average age of participants was 26 years. North and Lavallee’s self-administered survey was composed primarily of closed questions focusing on expected years until career termination, short-term plans, and post-sport plans. They also included some open-ended questions regarding athletes’ post-sport plans. A one-way ANOVA was used to test for differences in retirement age across sports, between genders and between able-bodied and athletes with disabilities. Chi-square procedures were employed to test for
differences in the short-term plans of athletes with regard to increasing training, educational plans, and occupational plans over the next 12 months. The results of this study indicate that the average intended age of disengagement from sport was 34 years with females intending to leave sport earlier than males and able-bodied athletes intending to retire earlier than athletes with disabilities. North and Lavallee noted that athletes’ disengagement from sport begins around 25 years with percentage peaks around the ages of 30, 35, and 40 years, suggesting that athletes may plan their sport and post-sport careers around five-year cycles. Over the next 12 months, younger athletes intended to increase their training time more than athletes over the age of 30. Younger athletes (under 21) were also more likely to be entering education. Athletes intending to retire from sport in the next one to two years were less likely than average to suggest they were increasing the amount of time devoted to sports training and were more likely to be looking for paid employment.

With respect to long-term plans after sport, North and Lavallee found that 53% of respondents indicated that they had made plans while 47% had not. Looking only at athletes indicating that they planned to leave sport in the next one to two years, 79% reported that they had developed post-sport plans compared to 45% of athletes who did not anticipate retiring for six years or more. Notably, of the 561 total respondents, only 44 intended to retire in the next one to two years. Of these 44, 22 were 30 years or older, 16 were not employed or in school and six had no work experience. Of these 44 athletes, 81% indicated that they intended to start or increase the amount of time devoted to work with 32% working or intending to work in an area connected to sport.

Overall, these results were interpreted as indicating that younger athletes and athletes perceiving themselves as having a significant amount of time before retirement have yet to
develop concrete plans about their future post-sport career. They suggest that sport psychologists be aware that between five and seven percent of athletes retire annually, providing a general idea with regard to how much time they have to help athletes prepare for retirement.

North and Lavallee’s study is one of the few that examines current athletes’ prospective views with regard to disengagement, a departure from existing research. As these authors noted, their findings with regard to the perceptions of athletes with disabilities suggest that further information be gathered about this particular population. In this regard, building upon Wheeler et al.’s (1996) research, disability, health, and discriminatory issues could be further addressed.

**Summary**

In summary, while early studies of the disengagement from sport relied on gerontological and thantalogical models, more current studies suggest that this experience may not be as traumatic as earlier thought. Several models of transition have been proposed, as has the provision of pre- and mid-disengagement counselling. Existing research findings need to be viewed with caution as they are based on a variety of international athlete populations including professionals, semi-professionals, high performance, and collegiate athletes. The disparate environments, cultures, and conditions in which these athletes establish their sport careers may influence the disengagement experience, as might a range of other relational and intrinsic variables. Further caution should be employed in light of the highlighted methodological concerns within the extant literature. Additionally, only Wheeler et al (1996) included pre- and mid-disengagement participants while Stephan et al. (2003) and Blinde and Stratta (1992) focused on mid-transitional athletes and North and Lavallee (2004) and Torregrosa et al. (2004) examined only active athletes. Most of the earlier studies relied exclusively upon retrospective accounts.
A review of the literature indicates that a variety of intrinsic factors influence an athlete’s experience of disengagement from sport including the achievement of one’s athletic goals prior to disengagement (Blinde & Stratta, 1989; Erpic et al., 2004; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wheeler et al., 1996), athletic identity (Erpic et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997; Ungerleider, 1997; Wheeler et al., 1996), interests outside of sport (Wheeler et al., 1996), previous experience with similar transitions (Danish et al., 1997; Swain, 1991), ego development (Swain, 1991), readiness and preparedness for disengagement (North & Lavallee, 2004; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Torregrosa et al., 2004; Ungerleider, 1997; Wheeler et al., 1996), and workplace competence in one’s post-sport career (Stephan et al., 2003).

Seeking and receiving interpersonal support from family and friends has been found to positively influence athletes’ disengagement experience (Ungerleider, 1997; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), as does peer recognition of former athletes’ workplace competence (Stephan et al., 2003). Continued involvement in sport is thought to act as a buffer (Allison & Meyer, 1998; Curtis & Ennis, 1988) to disengagement from sport.

The extant literature identified a number of contextual factors that play a role in athletes’ disengagement experience. Most notable is the voluntariness of the athlete’s disengagement decision (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Erpic et al., 2004; Swain, 1991; Wheeler et al., 1996), with involuntary disengagement related to greater adjustment issues (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Erpic et al., 2004). The timing of disengagement has also been found to be influential (Swain, 1991). Politics and sport association problems are thought to negatively influence the disengagement experience (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Also, concurrent stressors or life events were identified as having a negative impact upon the disengagement experience (Erpic et al., 2004; Swain, 1991). Having a new focus (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) has been found
to have a positive influence on the disengagement experience, as does athletes' financial status (Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

The current study sought to identify intrinsic, interpersonal and contextual factors influencing disengagement from high performance sport. Focusing only on high performance amateur athletes, it was the intent of this study to determine whether or not, and to what extent, factors identified in previous research influence the disengagement experience of Canadian high performance athletes. Factors not highlighted in earlier research were also focused upon in the present study. Building upon Grove et al.'s (1997) findings regarding athlete identity as well as my own disengagement experience from collegiate sport, this study examined the extent to which athletic identity influenced disengagement from sport. Again, based on the existing research findings and my own disengagement experience, other intrinsic factors of interest included participants’ achievement of their athletic goals (Erpic et al., 2004; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), and perceived competence in one’s non-sport career.

Given the earlier findings (Ungerleider, 1997; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) with respect to the positive role social support plays during the disengagement process, this study sought to identify the degree of social support available to the athlete before, during, and after this career transition. Building upon Coakley’s (1983) contention that non-sport relationships are an important mediating variable, this study also focused on athlete’s social relationships outside of sport.

Given the limited focus of earlier research with respect to the influence of contextual variables on disengagement from sport and the contextual focus of recent career development perspectives (i.e., Vondracek & Fouad, 1994; Young & Valach, in press; Young, Valach, & Collin, 1992), contextual areas of interest in the present study included the potential impact of
variables such as educational status, financial status, culture, the longevity and prestige of one’s sport career, participation in team versus individual sport, and pre-disengagement career planning.

At the time this study was conceived, Wheeler et al. (1996) was the only researcher to investigate the prospective views of high performance athletes who have not yet left sport and athletes in the midst of the disengagement transition. Earlier research had focused exclusively on retrospective accounts of former athletes. Because reliance on retrospective data shapes the perception of participants and can filter recollected information (Brewer, 1994), this study sought to include not only former athletes but also those athletes in the midst of the disengagement process and athletes yet to disengage from sport, thus examining the disengagement experience prospectively, mid-disengagement, and retrospectively. Moving beyond earlier studies that focused only upon athletes’ perceptions of disengagement the present study sought multiple perspectives (Stake, 1995) through the acquisition of supplemental interview data with one member of each athlete’s sport and personal community.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify the intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors perceived to influence the disengagement experience of athletes leaving high performance sport. As indicated in Chapter Two, a number of factors have already been identified. These include voluntary versus involuntary retirement (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Curtis & Ennis, 1993; Erpic et al., 2004; Swain, 1993; Ungerleider, 1997; Wheeler et al., 1996), continued involvement in sport (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Curtis & Ennis, 1988), feelings of unfinished business (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Erpic et al., 2004; Ungerleider, 1997; Wheeler et al., 1996) versus having achieved one's sport-related goals (Erpic et al., 2004; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Ungerleider, 1997), timing of withdrawal from sport (Swain, 1991), previous experience with similar transitions (Danish et al., 1997; Swain, 1991), ego development (Swain, 1991), social support (Harvey et al., 1990; Stephan et al., 2003; Swain, 1991), concurrent pressures (Swain, 1991), and commitments and values (Swain, 1991), preparedness for life outside of sport (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Ungerleider, 1997; Wheeler et al., 1996), interests outside of sport (Wheeler et al., 1996), and degree of athletic identity (Erpic et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997).

While the existing literature has identified a number of contextual factors thought to influence athletes' experience of leaving sport, many more contextual variables have not been well delineated. Moreover, the majority of previous studies relied upon retrospective data from retired athletes, some of whom left their sport more than ten years prior to the study. Thus, there is a dearth of research examining the disengagement experience of leaving sport at different stages of this process. Specifically, at the outset of this study one of the primary goals was to describe and explain the relative impact of contextual factors perceived to influence the process.
of disengagement from high performance sport.

Although the function of this study was to elicit the perceptions, cognitions, and affective experiences of high performance athletes and secondary participants from athletes’ sport and personal communities, it is recognized that the acquired data stemmed from the interactions between the researcher and the research participants and therefore cannot be assumed to be independent of the researcher’s values or theoretical language (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Similarly, the values and natural language of the participants also impinged upon data, shaping it in the same way as the researcher’s biases and assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, the data brought forth in this study was both constructed by the participants and reconstructed during data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), influencing both the content and understanding of both questions and answers.

Researcher Reflexivity

While I am not a high performance athlete, my interest in this topic was stimulated by my own disengagement experience from collegiate soccer and to some degree, my disengagement experience influenced my perception and analyses of the experiences reported by participants in this study.

I cannot recall a time in my life that I have not been immersed in sport. Throughout elementary and secondary school I participated on school and community soccer, track and field, volleyball and basketball teams.

I established myself early as a competitive runner, earning a top five standing at the British Columbia Track and Field Championships by the age of 12. At the high school level I consistently won sprint events at the Vancouver Championships, and as a Grade 8 athlete, I qualified as one of the youngest competitors at the B.C. Track and Field Championships. I
continued to run competitively until Grade 11 when a quadriceps injury prematurely ended my racing season.

I also played on a community soccer team. I excelled in this sport, playing on one of the top teams in the province and despite struggling with a quadriceps injury during my last two years of community soccer, I was recruited by the University of British Columbia’s women’s varsity team in Grade 12, playing on their summer team before starting my studies at UBC. My strengths as a defender were my speed, my ability to read the game, anticipate opposing players’ moves, and win the ball. The UBC coach sought to capitalise on my speed and moved me to the position of striker, thus not allowing me to capitalize on my defensive strengths. While I was a competent striker, I was not a top goal scorer and given the choice, I would have much preferred to return to the role of defender.

Playing collegiate soccer required a year round commitment to the sport and being a member of a varsity team offered a sense of belonging and identity as I made the transition from the sheltered halls of high school to life on a large university campus. My focus narrowed to include only soccer and school, with most of my social activities linked to friendships developed with members of both the men’s and women’s soccer teams. However, I struggled with numerous injuries acquired on the pitch and as a result of over training. At the beginning of my third year, having moved up from being a rookie and sophomore player, the coach informed me that because of my injury problems, I was being demoted to a non-traveling member of the team, to be replaced by a less experienced and less talented rookie player. I was to be the seventeenth player on a team that travels with sixteen players. I was hurt and bewildered by this unexpected decision and so angry I simply walked away from the team. Within weeks of quitting the team, the coach asked that I rejoin the team as a traveling member. I refused to do so as I felt I had
been unfairly treated. My pride prevented me from accepting the offer.

My disengagement from collegiate sport was unanticipated and at the time, the decision to leave soccer felt as though it was one made for me rather than by me. As a student in the close knit School of Physical Education, I had to dig deep inside myself to hold my head high among fellow students and former teammates who were well aware of the circumstances under which I left the soccer team. What could have been a degrading and humiliating experience was buffered by strong support offered by former teammates who believed the coach made a poor decision. This social support and my continued friendship with team members allowed me to retain a sense of dignity at a time when my self-confidence had been shaken.

I also had to redefine my sense of identity, as I was no longer Colleen “the soccer player”. Still passionate about sport, I immediately immersed myself in other athletic activities, competing in duathalons and triathlons. Placing in the top five of my age group in duathlon and triathlon races allowed me to retain some of my identity as a competitive athlete. I also placed greater emphasis on my academic studies, building upon an already well-established identity as a student.

After university graduation, I traveled to New Zealand where my partner was working as a ski instructor. I learned to ski in the Southern Alps and discovered that I was good at it. A year after taking up the sport, I earned the Canadian Ski Instructors’ Association Level 1 instructor certification, followed several months later by Level 2 CSIA certification, and became entrenched in the nomadic lifestyle of a ski instructor, teaching skiing year round at resorts in Whistler, Australia, and Japan. My eventual decision to leave full-time skiing was made autonomously as I felt it was time to move into the next phase of my career and return to university studies.
How does my background in sport affect my interpretation of the disengagement experiences presented by participants in this study? When I played collegiate soccer in the mid 1980s, there were no opportunities for women to compete internationally and therefore I never viewed soccer as a career option and disengagement from soccer was not perceived to be a career issue. Moreover, as a young woman in her early twenties, I was at a different stage of personal and career development than the high performance athletes in this study, most of whom are in their mid-thirties.

I am aware that my own disengagement experience has shaped both the focus of this study and my perception and analysis of participants’ narratives. This is particularly the case in terms of my belief that disengagement experiences are influenced by the extent to which one’s identity is subsumed by the athlete role, the impact interpersonal relationships can have on one’s disengagement experience, and the context in which disengagement decisions are made. Consequently, I did ask primary and secondary participants about the timing and nature of disengagement decisions and the influence of interpersonal relationships on the disengagement process. When identity issues were raised, I explored these with primary and secondary participants in more depth.

I also am aware that my background in Physical Education and collegiate soccer allowed me to develop a rapport with participants that might not otherwise have been the case had I not come from a sport background. Participants generally expressed a kinship based upon common experiences and knowledge of Canadian sport culture. It is possible that such rapport influenced the recollections and projections shared by participants.

Finally, my athletic background grounded this study to the extent that my familiarity with the culture of sport allowed me to investigate participants’ sport careers without concern about a
power imbalance in the research relationship. While I certainly have the utmost respect for high performance athletes' accomplishments, I was not awestruck by their celebrity status. I believe I established a collegial relationship with participants where they were invited to adopt the role of co-researcher, working together to examine the disengagement experience in a safe setting.

Multiple Case Studies

The extant literature supports the contention that disengagement from high performance sport is a process rather than an event (i.e., Baillie, 1993; Danish et al., 1997; Swain, 1991; Wheeler, 1996; Wylleman et al., 2004). Viewing disengagement as a process, this study sought to examine the disengagement experience from prospective, mid-disengagement and retrospective perspectives. In order to achieve this goal, a multiple case study methodology was employed in order to preserve the multiple and sometimes contradictory realities of participants' perspectives (Stake, 1995). Because this research methodology encourages the acquisition of data from multiple sources (Creswell, 1998; Strean, 1998), the current study relied on interview data provided by athletes at different stages of disengagement. Additionally, data provided by primary participant interviews was supplemented by secondary interviews with one member of each athlete's sport and personal community as well as through the acquisition of media information and physical artefacts (Creswell, 1998). Reliance on data from multiple sources taken at different stages of the disengagement process allowed this study to examine multiple perspectives regarding the disengagement phenomenon as it was experienced prior to leaving sport, during the disengagement process itself, and retrospectively. The use of independent, secondary participant interviews represents one method of collecting collateral data, offering both confirmation and challenge to the perceptions of primary participants (McTaggart, 2000). Viewed as an extension of multiple case study methodology, interviews with secondary
participants allowed this study to focus on the multiple perceptions by which to understand the disengagement experience. While some qualitative researchers may view this as a softening of methods (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992; Stern, 1994), it has been suggested that greater attention ought to be paid to the substance of research rather than preoccupation with selecting and defending research methods (Janesick, 1994).

The multiple case study approach explored multiple "bounded systems" through the collection of detailed, in-depth data from multiple sources of information rich in context (Creswell, 1998). Data collection was extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information including observations, primary and secondary interviews, documents, and other media materials (Creswell, 1998). Yin (1989) recommends that six types of information be elicited: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artefacts. Analyses were rich in contextual information pertinent to each case (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998) and the use of multiple cases allowed both within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Creswell, 1998), leading to a more thorough understanding of both the uniqueness of each case and the commonalities across cases (Stake, 1995). The use of a multiple case study methodology was necessary to examine the independent and potentially interactive impact of intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors on athletes' disengagement experience of leaving high performance sport. Thus, it was imperative to focus on the uniqueness and complexity of each case including its embeddedness and interaction with its context (Stake, 1995).

Through the use of multiple-case studies, athletes' experience of leaving high performance sport was studied within the context it occurs (Yin, 1989). Understanding this phenomenon from a contextual perspective brought forth the question of how intrinsic,
interpersonal, and contextual factors affect the disengagement process (Yin, 1989), stepping beyond the knowledge generated in previous research, which simply sought to identify those factors arising out of retirement from sport. Moreover, supplementing primary athlete interviews with secondary interviews and other sources of data permitted examination of the disengagement experience via multiple sources of data (Stake, 1995) at each stage of the disengagement process, thereby maintaining the contradictory realities (Stake, 1995) contributing to the complexity of each case. The overriding aim was to enrich social knowledge and create a basis for addressing this developmental issue not solely for theoretical or academic purposes but so that future research can work toward the development of practical interventions to assist those in need (Rosenwald, 1988); in this case, high performance athletes requiring assistance to negotiate the disengagement process effectively as they embark upon this significant career change.

Understanding that individuals' subjective realities vary according to individual experiences, intrinsic, and interpersonal variables, and the context in which an event or process takes place (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a single case study could provide only a fragment of the whole picture. Through the synthesis of multiple viewpoints, the image became increasingly comprehensive (Rosenwald, 1988). Hence, in order to understand how the range of intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors influence disengagement from high performance sport, the use of a multiple case study approach provided the most comprehensive picture (Yin, 1989). Guiding this methodology was the search for "good examples" able to reveal the inner workings of the disengagement experience, with preference accorded to those who were candid, fluent, reflective, and different from one another (Rosenwald, 1988). Reliance on the particular perceptions of research participants (Geertz, 1973) represents a method for identifying those factors perceived to be most salient within the disengagement experience. Moreover, the use of
a multiple case study approach broadened the focus beyond each individual participant and his or her emic issues (Stake, 1995) to include those interpersonal and contextual factors affecting the disengagement experience of research participants.

Finally, the use of multiple case studies resulted in an in-depth qualitative analysis of high performance athletes' disengagement experience as they moved toward the end of their high performance careers, left sport, and became established in new career directions, examining those issues identified in previous studies as well as emergent issues not the focus of earlier research.

Research Procedure

Participants. Multiple case studies were examined through detailed, in-depth data collection (Creswell, 1998). This included an open-ended interview with each athlete guided by questions to outline particular topics of interest (Creswell, 1998). Each primary interview was supplemented by a secondary independent interview with a coach or teammate selected by the athlete and a selected family member or spousal partner. Additionally, data collection included the accumulation of other sources of information such as observational material, documents, media information, and personal artefacts (Yin, 1989). Subjective experiences and participants' insights were sought (van Manen, 1990) and thus, participants were viewed as co-researchers, selected for their ability to articulate their experiences as they pertained to the topic of interest (Colaizzi, 1978).

Criteria. This study focused on high performance athletes. To meet the criteria of "high performance", only athletes who have represented Canada in international competition within their respective sport were selected. Each primary participant was asked to select one individual from his or her sport community and one individual from his or her personal life to be
interviewed independently in order to acquire multiple perspectives as they pertain to disengagement from sport.

Because the process of leaving high performance sport was being studied from a career development perspective, primary participants represented three groups of athletes: (1) those still actively representing Canada in sport; (2) those in the midst of the disengagement transition and not yet established in a new career; and (3) former high performance athletes now settled into another career. Although multiple case studies typically include no more than four cases (Creswell, 1998), this study included six participants to acquire a broader range of data at the three stages of the disengagement process. These stages of disengagement represent the boundaries of each case (Creswell, 1998).

In addition to differing stages, other contextual factors were considered in choosing primary participants. These included the recruitment of both team and individual sport athletes, males and females, high and low profile sports, and varying levels of national/international success. Bearing in mind that primary research participants only comprised six cases, a broad range of athletes was sought in order to capture the potential effects such contextual factors may have on one's transitional experience of leaving sport.

Recruitment. This research study was subject to the University's ethical review procedures. After attaining ethical approval, participants were recruited via various informal recruitment methods including word of mouth and listserv advertisements through Sport B.C. and the Esteem Team. Because generalisability is of little meaning (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) to a qualitative study, the recruitment of more than six cases would be considered atypical (Creswell, 1998).

Individuals interested in participating in this study were initially contacted by telephone,
at which time they were provided information regarding the goals, nature of the study, and the
time commitment required. As well, participants were asked a series of screening questions to
ensure that they meet the inclusionary requirements. In keeping with the collaborative and
voluntary nature of this qualitative approach (Hoshmand, 1994; Osborne, 1990), participants
were invited to inquire about the study to ensure that consent was based on being fully informed,
not only about the nature of the study itself but also with respect to their right to refuse to
participate or to withdraw from the study at any time. All of the primary and secondary
participants were informed that pseudonyms would be used in the study and that the study would
become a public document. At this time, arrangements were made with participants with regard
to the date, time, and location of the first interview.

Participant Classification. Six primary participants were included in this study, divided
into three groups according to their proximity to the disengagement experience: (1) two high
performance athletes still competing in their respective sport who had not yet decided to retire
from competition; (2) two former athletes who had recently left high performance sport to
embark on a new career and are in the midst of this career transition; and (3) two former high
performance athletes now settled into a new career. Jody and Jack were included in the first
group as they continue to represent Canada in their respective sports of cross-country mountain
biking and soccer. Jody has competed internationally for 15 years and expects to continue racing
for two more seasons, possibly retiring from full-time competition after the 2004 Olympic
Games. Although Jack is young and has acquired only four years of international experience, he
had been sidelined for several months due to a groin injury. At the time of his interview, he was
a member of the U-23 Olympic team yet was not attached to a club soccer team either in North
America or Europe.
Mona and Chris comprised the second group, mid-transitional participants, interviewed approximately one year after their retirement from karate and field hockey respectively. As neither had left their sport with a specific career plan, both spent several months exploring different career avenues. In both cases, Mona and Chris had only just started their respective jobs as managing director of youth development and chief executive officer with the Esteem Team and thus had yet to fully emerge from the career transition following disengagement from high performance sport.

The final group of former high performance athletes included Dirk, a former rower, and Scott, a former wrestler. At the time of the initial interview, Dirk had left rowing two years earlier to begin a career as a full-time chiropractor, having worked in a clinic on a part-time basis for two years while pursuing full-time rowing. Four years ago, Scott retired from wrestling for the second and final time. He is well established in a business career, having worked in a number of sales and marketing positions.

Data Collection

In keeping with the multi-method of data collection as part of a multiple case study methodology, data collection drew on multiple sources of information (Creswell, 1998). In this study, these multiple sources included (a) an audiotaped interview with each athlete; (b) an independent audiotaped interview with the athlete’s coach or teammate; (c) an audiotaped interview with a family member, life partner or close friend chosen by each athlete; (d) observation of those athletes still participating in their sport; and (e) collection of available physical artefacts such as business cards, newspaper and magazine clippings, athlete biographies, fact sheets, Internet articles, and photos. All but three interviews were conducted in-person, either in the home or in a public setting chosen by each participant. Due to geographical
distance, three interviews were conducted over the telephone. Each telephone interview was audiotaped. The structure and content of the telephone interviews was similar to those conducted in-person.

Participant Interviews. The interview list is available in the following table:

Table 1: Interview List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Case</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Mountain Biker (Jody)</td>
<td>Athlete</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Athlete’s Mother</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Soccer Player (Jack)</td>
<td>Athlete</td>
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<td>Athlete’s Partner</td>
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<td>The Field Hockey Player (Chris)</td>
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<td>Athlete’s Coach</td>
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<td>The Karate Competitor (Mona)</td>
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<td>Athlete’s Partner</td>
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<td>Athlete’s Teammate</td>
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<td>The Rower (Dirk)</td>
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<td>Athlete’s Coach</td>
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<td>Athlete’s Roommate</td>
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<td>The Wrestler (Scott)</td>
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<td>Athlete’s Partner</td>
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<td>Athlete’s Coach</td>
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Although open-ended interviews were used as one mode of inquiry, it was important to outline particular topics of interest as the data obtained reflects the research questions being asked. Based upon earlier research findings, the contextual focus of current career theories, and my own disengagement experience from collegiate sport, I asked all of the primary and secondary participants the following questions:

1. Tell me about your/the athlete’s sport career.

2. Tell me about your/the athlete’s experience of leaving sport. For prospective athletes, tell me what you anticipate leaving sport will be like.
3. Are there any personal characteristics you think may have influenced the disengagement experience? For prospective athletes, are there any personal characteristics you think might influence the disengagement experience?

4. Are there any relational factors you think may have influenced the disengagement experience? Are there any relational factors that might influence the disengagement experience?

5. Are there any contextual or environmental factors that influenced the disengagement experience? Can you think of any contextual or environmental factors that might influence the disengagement experience?

6. Tell me about your/the athlete’s future career plans.

The goal of case study interviews is to elicit rich descriptions of the topic of interest from the participants' perspective (van Manen, 1990). Thus, the dialogical relationship (Hoshmand, 1994) was of utmost importance to the interview process as participants' accounts were co-constructed via the exchange of goals, assumptions, and values about the topic of inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As noted above, a short list of issue-oriented questions was used to provide some structure to the interview (Stake, 1995). However, it was the use of active listening, probing, and clarification that was of utmost utility in eliciting thoughtful, evocative responses. The purpose of the interviews was to elicit thick description of episodes, linkages, or explanations (Stake, 1995) with regard to those factors thought to influence the transitional process of leaving high performance sport.

In-depth, audiotaped interviews with the goal of acquiring thick description (Stake 1995) of the disengagement experience were conducted with each primary participant and each secondary participant. Both pre-disengagement athletes, who were active members of their
respective National teams, agreed to participate in the study on the condition that I not interview anybody from their respective sport community. Both participants expressed concern about the political ramifications of including a sport community member in this study. I agreed to this condition, interviewing only the athlete and a chosen member of his or her personal life.

Each audiotaped interview was transcribed and checked against the audiotape to ensure that a verbatim transcription was achieved. A research journal was also maintained, describing the interview setting, the participant, the researcher's thoughts and feelings at the time of the interview, and other relevant information such as organisational and secondary participant names and contacts.

Transcribed interviews were analysed prior to developing each case narrative. To assist the reader to develop a vicarious experience of working with the research participants, the physical space was well described (Stake 1995) in the presentation of each case. Other contextual factors of importance included descriptions of familial and relational status, educational attainment, socio-economic status, and cultural factors (Stake, 1995).

Additional sources of information were acquired through the review of various documents and artefacts provided by research participants and acquired through sport organisations and mainstream media sources. Although these sources were screened according to their relevance to the study (Stake, 1995), they offered a broader perspective with regard to athletes' sport and post-sport careers. Moreover, some documents served as substitutes for records of athletes' sport and non-sport activities that could not be observed directly (Stake, 1995).

Feedback interviews were conducted with the primary participants by telephone or in person. Prior to the feedback interview, each primary participant was provided with his or her
case narrative. They were asked to choose a pseudonym and provide feedback with regard to the accuracy of facts, data analyses, generated themes, and presentation. Their input was then added to their narrative. Each case narrative was then presented to Dr. Norman Amundson for further analysis and feedback regarding the accuracy of data interpretation and logical interpretation of the meaning of information (Stake, 1995).

Data Analysis

In keeping with the tradition of multiple case studies, which seek to examine the uniqueness of each case and the commonalities between cases, data analysis included a detailed description of each case, offering an analysis of within-case themes (Stake, 1995), rich in the context of the setting in which each case presented itself (Merriam, 1988). In addition to the within-case thematic analyses, themes and commonalities were examined on a cross-case basis (Creswell, 1998), culminating in a detailed comparative case analysis.

Case study analysis relies on both direct interpretation of each individual and the aggregation of individual instances (Stake, 1995). Thus, data presented by participants was examined both independently and aggregated by categories. This search for meaning may be construed as a search for patterns or consistency (Stake, 1995) through the aggregation and coding of interview data, review of documents and observations. In particular, the aim of both within-case and cross-case analyses (Creswell, 1998) was to achieve an understanding of behaviour, issues, and context with regard to both individual and multiple cases (Stake, 1995).

The translation of experiential language to formal language serves to diminish and distort some of the meaning of data (Stake, 1995). Therefore, in order to assist the reader to form his or her own thematic understanding of the data, each case description includes a narrative account, comprised of a chronological presentation and personal descriptions, with an emphasis on time
Given the importance not only of accurate interpretation of data but of being logical in interpreting the meaning of information, triangulation served as a deliberate effort to find the validity of observed or acquired data (Stake, 1995). In keeping with Denzin's (1984) triangulation protocols, this study sought to achieve (a) data source triangulation; (b) investigator triangulation; (c) theory triangulation; and (d) methodological triangulation. However, the purpose of instituting triangulation protocols is not simply to confirm a single interpretation but rather, to broaden one's understanding of data in terms of additional interpretations (Flick, 1992), reflecting a constructivist approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to qualitative inquiry. From this perspective, any position adopted needed to be argued persuasively in terms of its utility rather than the goal of incontrovertible proof (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Participant Feedback. Following the interviews, each case study was analysed and written. Each primary participant, that is the athlete or former athlete, was then contacted and presented with the written account of his or her disengagement from high performance sport. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym, provide feedback with respect to factual errors and omissions as well as offer feedback regarding my interpretation and analysis of their respective disengagement experience. After participants reviewed their case, a second interview was held either by telephone or in person to discuss their feedback. Participants also returned their narrative with written comments and changes attached.

Generally, participants thought I captured their disengagement experience. Because many months had elapsed between the time of the initial interview and the feedback session, some participants noted that they had moved forward in the disengagement process, resulting in a shifting perspective. Although already in the post-disengagement phase of leaving rowing at
the time of his initial interview, Dirk commented that until he read the case study he did not realize how depressed he had been during this transitional phase of his career. Upon reading my narrative, he recognized that his affective state both influenced and was influenced by his disengagement experience. Had he been interviewed at a time when he was further removed from the disengagement experience, his retrospective account would likely have been influenced by his increasing distance from the experience and would have less accurately represented his emotional state at the time of disengagement.

One participant, Scott, was initially concerned about how my analysis of his disengagement experience would be perceived by others. He believed that his experience was accurately understood and presented and outside of some minor factual corrections, did not request any significant changes to his case. Scott indicated that he had not realized that his real name would not be used in this study, despite having been informed of this both orally and in writing. Upon recognition that his name would not be used, all of Scott’s concerns dissipated.

Interestingly, none of the participants commented on the influence of multiple perspectives offered by family, spouses, friends, teammates or coaches, used in the analysis of their disengagement experience, instead solely focusing on the narrative and their perspective. Following the feedback interviews with primary participants, each individual case study was read independently by Dr. Norm Amundson to determine the best interpretation of data in an effort to reach consensus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Comparative Case Analysis

The purpose of comparing the disengagement experiences of six different athletes was to broaden the focus of this study beyond each individual and his/her specific issues (Stake, 1995) and thus identify the range of contextual, interpersonal, and intrinsic factors influencing the
experience of disengagement from high performance sport. Recognizing that each disengagement experience is unique and mediated by a complex interplay of intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual variables, cross-case comparisons sought evidence of commonalities among study participants. Specifically, this analysis identified common personal characteristics or traits perceived to affect participants’ disengagement experience. The presence and nature of interpersonal relationships were also examined, as were contextual factors in an effort to determine their respective influence on athletes’ disengagement experience. Finally, this analysis explored the extent to which the disengagement experience was influenced by one’s proximity to it. Are participants’ perceptions of the disengagement process mediated by the immediacy of their experience? Are there notable differences in perceptions reported by those established in a new career relative to athletes in the midst of the transitional process? Are there perceptual differences between athletes yet to disengage from high performance sport and those already in the post-competition phase of disengagement? These types of questions guided the comparative cases analysis rather than the identification of isolated themes.

The first step in this analysis was to develop outlines of the prominent intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors for each case, attempting to identify these characteristics more abstractly. By way of example, after leaving rowing, Dirk moved to Australia to live with his partner as well as to establish a chiropractic practice. However, as Dirk’s attempts to establish himself as a chiropractor in Australia were thwarted by his inability to secure a work visa in this country, he began to distance himself from his partner, ultimately resulting in the demise of the relationship. Outside of this disintegrating relationship, Dirk was living in a new country where he had yet to establish a social community, leading to feelings of isolation. In order to compare this interpersonal factor to other cases, Dirk’s relational situation was examined
more generally according to the influence of interpersonal support. Unique details were considered secondary in order to emphasise commonalities among cases.

When case outlines were developed with variables classified accordingly, comparisons across cases commenced. As specific factors were identified, they were compared to those presented by other participants, resulting in the inclusion or exclusion of the variable. Within the comparison process, factors were labeled in general terms and then re-checked against the actual narrative presented by the participant.

As common themes emerged, the comparative process continued, defining and redefining intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors followed by referral back to participants' narratives to ensure continued representation of the specific account. This process continued until factors were sufficiently well defined and generalised in a manner that captured common disengagement perceptions. Although this comparative process sacrifices the individual uniqueness of participants, it presents those common variables thought to be most relevant to the experience of disengaging from high performance sport.

Limitations

The limitations to the design of this study pertain primarily its inability to achieve a broad sampling of the aforementioned contextual characteristics with only six cases. Nonetheless, I endeavoured to capture as many of these contextual influences as possible within the confines of the multiple case study methodology through purposeful sampling of participants from a range of individual and team sports, high- and low-profile sports, and moderate to highly successful athletes, each at different stages of the disengagement process (Creswell, 1998).

A second methodological concern relates to the potential for analytical dilution with the addition of each new case (Creswell, 1998). Although the study of six cases served to decrease
the depth of scrutiny in any single case, the ability to capture the experiential elements of
disengagement process at different stages of this process outweighs the analytical depth accorded
to any individual case.

This study is limited in its ability to extend the themes generated by a small group of high
performance athletes to the greater population of Canadian high performance athletes in terms of
the development of clinical interventions to assist athletes to successfully negotiate the
transitional process of leaving high performance sport. However, the value of this study is not its
generalisability (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) to all athletes, but rather its ability to provide a rich,
descriptive account of those factors perceived to be influential in the disengagement process.
Thus, any future clinical interventions developed from the findings of this study may need to be
modified according to individual needs and circumstances.
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Participant Background Information

The primary participant group for this study was comprised of four males and two females. With the exception of Jack, who was in his twenties, the remainder of participants were in their mid thirties, having represented Canada in their respective sports for an average of 14.2 years (12-17 years). Prior to selection to the National team, primary participants competed in their sport an average of eight years (range: 1-14 years). From a career development perspective, a 14-year span as a high performance athlete suggests that the participants were well established (Super, 1990) in their respective careers at the time of disengagement from sport in their mid-thirties. Among the four participants who had left high performance sport, the decision to do so was made autonomously rather than as a result of catastrophic injury, failure to meet competitive standards, or organizational decisions. Three of four participants cited their reason for leaving sport to be “moving on” to the next phase of their career, suggesting the need for continuing career development. Within the pre-disengagement group, Jack anticipated that his departure from soccer would reflect his desire for continuing career development, despite an ongoing problem with injuries. Based on this assumption, he was exploring post-graduate programmes in preparation for a business career after soccer. The athletes in this study recognize that they sacrificed their non-sport career development to compete at an elite level and became increasingly aware of their non-sport career development status, particularly as they moved from their late twenties into their early to mid-thirties. As Dirk noted, it was time to begin the “next chapter of life”, a sentiment echoed by other participants.

Influencing the disengagement decision was the quadrennial cycle of the Olympic
Games, a four-year period guiding programme and athlete development. Notably, among Olympic sport athletes, the timing of the disengagement decision was influenced by the quadrennial cycle. As Dirk commented, “in that four-year quadrennial Olympic cycle, if you’re going to stick around for one (year) you may as well stick around for four”. Only Scott, plagued by an aging body no longer able to absorb the physical toll of wrestling, did not base his disengagement decision on the timing of the quadrennial cycle.

At the time of interview, three primary participants, Scott, Chris, and Mona, were married or living common-law. Scott and his wife were childless by choice while Chris was a new father and Mona was pregnant with her first child. Dirk, Jody, and Jack were single with no dependents. It does not appear that marital status played a direct role in participants’ decisions to leave high performance sport although both mid-transitional participants experienced a change in parental status during their disengagement process, resulting in shifting priorities that influenced their career decisions, actions and transitional experience. The acquisition of a parental role appears to have operated as a positive mediating influence during the career transition as career priorities fluxed with the onset of parenthood. By way of agreement, Scott’s wife noted that the absence of the parental role negatively influenced her husband’s disengagement from wrestling, supporting the contention that a shifting of priorities arising from parenthood may buffer one’s disengagement experience.

All participants were highly educated relative to the general population. Scott, Chris, Jody, and Jack completed Bachelor’s degrees. Dirk held a Bachelor of Science degree plus a Doctor of Chiropractic and Mona’s educational standing included a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Master of Laws degree. All participants competed internationally while attending university, typically joining their respective National team during their third or fourth year of undergraduate
Notably, all of the participants completed their university education well before their disengagement from sport. At the time of interview, Scott had been accepted into Simon Fraser University’s E-MBA programme, deferring his studies for one year while Jack anticipated further university studies in either an MBA or law programme. Unlike many professional athletes whose involvement in sport curtailed formal education (Swain, 1991), all participants in this study completed a baccalaureate degree prior to embarking on a full-time career in high performance sport. Dirk and Mona pursued post-graduate studies during their prime competitive years, sometimes at the cost of optimal athletic achievement during this period. In terms of educational attainment, the participants in this study represent a fairly homogeneous group, joining the 21% of employed Canadians who hold university degrees (Statistics Canada, 2003).

During university, Dirk, Scott, and Jack were members of varsity teams (rowing, wrestling, soccer) prior to advancing to their respective National teams. While Chris, Jody, and Mona did not compete in their sport at the varsity level, this was because varsity teams did not exist for cycling, karate, or men’s field hockey. Throughout university, all three competed at the club level in their community.

In terms of non-sport employment status, after graduating from university, Scott and Mona both balanced the demands of full-time training and competition with full-time employment. Notably, both competed in lower profile sports (wrestling and karate) with few opportunities for corporate sponsorship despite their international athletic achievements. As a full-time soccer player, Jack relied solely on government funding. Chris, Dirk, and Jody were full-time athletes who, in addition to government funding, received corporate sponsorships during their high performance athletic career. Chris, as one of the Canadian men’s field hockey’s team leaders, obtained corporate sponsorship for the last two years of his competitive
career. While field hockey is not a high profile sport in Canada, Chris was a prominent member of the Canadian team, and was well known in the high performance sporting community for his role on several athlete committees. Dirk and Jody, both high profile World Champions in their respective sports, held lucrative corporate sponsorships. In addition to a 40-hour per week training schedule, Dirk worked two afternoons a week in a chiropractic clinic. Earlier in his rowing career while attending chiropractic college, Dirk reduced his commitment to rowing in order to complete his chiropractic degree, albeit continuing to maintain his place in the top eight at the World Championships during this time. Jody, as a full-time cross-country mountain bike rider, owns a bed and breakfast operated by her mother, is involved in some part-time projects including the organization of mountain bike camps and clinics, and does some writing for cycling magazines. Dirk and Jody are well represented in the media as Olympic medallists (Dirk - 1992, 1996; Jody – 1996) and World Champions. Moreover, while rowing and mountain biking are not widely covered in non-Olympic years by the Canadian media, both Dirk and Jody are very well known and respected in Europe where their sports receive more extensive media coverage and spectator attendance.

Among participants, the level of international athletic achievement was variable although five out of six participants were at one time ranked no lower than eighth in the world. Among team sport participants, Chris participated in two Olympic Games (1988, 2000), the Pan American Games (1999), the Commonwealth Games (1998), and several World Cup tournaments with the Canadian men’s field hockey team, whose highest ranking was a respectable eighth in the world. Chris has represented Canada in 142 international field hockey games and was the recipient of the 1997 Harry Jerome Award (B.C. Comeback Athlete of the Year). Jack’s international experience includes playing in the U-20 World Championships in
2001 and U-23 Olympic qualifying matches. Thus, Chris and Jack represent the lower end of the continuum in terms of international athletic achievement. Scott’s highest World Championship standing was fifth place while Mona’s strongest World Championship placing was fourth, falling in the middle of the participant group. At the high end of the continuum are Dirk and Jody, both former World Champions and Olympic medallists.

Among those participants who have left sport, they did so after they reached a career pinnacle in terms of international athletic achievement. For instance, just prior to his disengagement decision, Scott won the National title for his weight class but failed to make a top ten standing at the World Championships. Dirk finished a disappointing fourth place at his last Olympic Games, while arguably an excellent performance even by international standards, nonetheless a profound disappointment for this medallist in two previous Olympic Games. Similarly, Chris was disappointed with his team’s tenth place performance at his last Olympic Games after having earlier won the Pan American gold medal and placing eighth at the World Cup. Mona, a nine-time National champion, had slipped to third place by the time she left karate. Thus, it appears that the timing of disengagement was influenced, to some degree, by one’s level of international athletic achievement relative to previous performances and expectations. Notably, nearing the end of her mountain biking career, Jody has 17 World Cup wins, but has not reached the podium in the past two years.
The Mountain Biker

I met Jody on a wet Tuesday afternoon at her “office”, the local Starbucks coffee shop where she conducts media interviews. Her North Vancouver home had previously been broken into, resulting in the theft of valuable bicycles, so she is understandably reluctant to invite strangers to her house.

I arrived at the Starbucks early and sat with my coffee, watching for Jody. Within minutes, she walked through the door lugging several bags of groceries with her. Obviously well known to the barista, she ordered a chai latte and sat down with me. Jody is tall and lithe, sporting short platinum blond hair and a baggy gray sweat suit. Initially, I was surprised by her seemingly benign presence, most notably the absence of any corporate branding on her casual attire. I was to later learn from Jody’s mother that Jody does not seek public recognition, preferring to be known for her athletic performance rather than her physical appearance:

...She does not promote herself. She does not do those little things that would attract the press like a lot of the other ones do you know, with the make-up and being feminine at the same time as being in sports. No...no, she doesn’t do that. There are cyclists who pull their zippers down when they come across the finish line and the cameras zoom in. Not Jody. No...that’s dishonest as far as she’s concerned. That’s not true to her sport. She’s an athlete’s athlete, I swear it, but she doesn’t help herself as far as publicity goes.

I am well aware that although many people in the coffee shop would not recognize Jody as a local sports celebrity, a devoted fan base in Canada and Europe has developed countless websites focusing on her career, and she is extremely well-sponsored within the sport of cross-country mountain biking. Jody is one of Canada’s most successful high performance athletes. Despite the multitude of media interviews requested of Jody over her long career, she spent two hours candidly sharing her thoughts about her cycling career, her perspective on the Canadian sport bureaucracy, and her post-racing career plans. Although Jody may seem laid back in
appearance, the firmly stated convictions expressed during this interview gave me a glimpse into the intensity of her personality and the strength of her self-confidence.

Jody commenced her cycling career as a road racer. Although she played many team sports during high school and was sought by the Junior National ski team, Jody did not take up road racing until 1987 when she was attending university. One year later in 1988, Jody earned a berth on Canada’s National cycling team and remained a fixture on the National team for the next 16 years, first as a road racer and later as a cross-country mountain biker. Jody’s cycling resume is awe-inspiring. She has won the Canadian National Road Race Championships four times and the Canadian National Cross-Country Championships seven times. She has won gold at the Mountain Bike Cross Country World Championships three times, silver twice, and bronze twice. On the Mountain Bike World Cup circuit she has been first overall for three years and has 17 World Cup wins. She is an Olympic medallist (silver), Pan Am Games medallist (gold, silver), and Commonwealth Games medallist (silver, bronze). As noted by the Canadian Cycling Association (2004), “...She continues to be one of the most successful mountain bikers on the international circuit”, despite the fact that she has been racing internationally for sixteen years and is now in her mid-thirties.

Initially, Jody balanced cycling with university studies, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in microbiology. Jody’s mother described her as “extremely intelligent” with the unique ability to be “totally focused”, a trait lending itself well to both academics and sport:

...There are many, many talented athletes but they haven’t got the mental ability to be able to cope. Jody is totally focused on what she is doing at the moment and she always has been...She was straight A’s, honours, you know, whatever it was, it was a hundred and ten percent given to that particular thing she was doing...she is a biochemist and a microbiologist. She took the two at the same time and she was focused on that so, in other words, she has to have something to focus in on and she will.
After university, Jody devoted herself to full-time cycling, thinking that after a few years of racing, she would apply to medical school. After four years on the National cycling team, Jody intended to “get on with life”. She was “fed up” with the politics inherent within the team/individual dynamic in road racing, the lack of support from the Canadian Cycling Association, and the dearth of high calibre races, prize money, and sponsorship opportunities for women. However, in the early 1990s Jody saw that the emerging sport of mountain biking could offer endorsement opportunities simply not available to women road racers:

...I saw a couple of Canadian women...(who) were from B.C., racing down in the States on American teams, making a good living and thought there might be an opportunity to see if I have any potential in that sport and just because it was kind of growing really quickly and I could foresee that this was something that a friend did in mountain biking. In road racing there was...a lot of discrimination against the women. You don’t have the same events; you certainly don’t have the same sponsorship whereas mountain biking was different. The women had the same events. The women had the same sponsorship. There were top athletes, half of them women (and) half of them men...There’s a lot of other women who could have done the same kind of transition into mountain biking but they didn’t...

Jody maintained a politically precarious balance between road racing and mountain biking until the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Victoria. She then left road racing completely to devote all of her energy to mountain biking, a career decision she does not regret:

...I guess it was obviously the smartest move that I’ve made for my career and I also ended up hitting a lot of things at a good time, like it was really good that I changed at that time and I also hit the sport, kind of coming into it just as it was...going up to its peak so I ended up...in the peak years. Now the sponsorship is quite a bit less than what it used to be but I was kind of hitting my peak in its peak years so it turned out to be a really, really smart move. There’s a lot of other girls who made that move later and didn’t have the same sort of sponsorship opportunities that I had because I had already made my name as World Champion by the time the peak happened.

Jody has achieved extraordinary success in mountain biking on both the World Cup circuit and at the World Championships. She has raced for two teams, choosing her teams with care to ensure that she remains marketable in terms of endorsements yet is able to work and live
in a positive environment that does not detract from the business of training and racing. She described her priorities as follows:

...I've put a lot of effort into wanting to be part of the best team in the world and, you know, getting involved in the management and other issues...For me, I'll stay with a team because of the people, because of...the staff...I look at happiness as being a big component in the success of sport and if you put yourself in a happy environment, in the end you're gonna win more races, you're gonna make more money anyway so I never look at what is the best opportunity financially. What’s the best opportunity for me to perform and do my job, that’s what I’m always looking at but also, you know, I’ve had very good luck in that, whether it’s luck or by design, I’ve ended up being on very solid teams...

At the time of our interview, Jody had just returned to North Vancouver after living in Victoria for six years. Recognizing that she was unhappy with the training situation at the Pacific Sport Canadian Sport Centre, she chose to change her training environment in an effort to achieve a “stress-free life from now until summer 2004”:

...I could stay there and be unhappy and listen to all the athletes complain or...I tried to change some things...make the athletes who pounded all this stuff on the training rides and make those opinions heard at the top level of the Sport Centre but it was becoming a negative thing for me, it was taking a lot of energy from me and...I guess life is short...and you could just stay in a negative situation and keep banging your head against a wall or go after a positive situation so that’s something that drives me whether in sport, after sport, but to always recognize quickly when something does become negative and it’s not like popping out and abandoning but by moving on and putting yourself always in the best environment for your performance, you end up being more helpful so, by being over here and being a happier person and getting away from some of this stuff at the centre, I can probably go back on my visits back and forth, be a more positive, productive member of that group whereas I was becoming probably (an) unproductive, negative member of that group because I was getting too caught up in some of the other athletes’ problems...

In part, Jody was drawn back to North Vancouver by a longstanding friendship and training partnership she shares with Lee, a former road racer and mountain biker. Not only did Jody and Lee train together when they both were full-time athletes, but they started their own company, organizing mountain bike camps and clinics. Within this synergistic relationship, they draw on each other’s strengths:
...We’re very different people in a lot of ways but in certain basic values, we’re very much the same and there’s probably very few relationships that can come as close as training partner, roommate, basically...you not only work together, very closely...our years on the National Team, mountain biking, training together, but all this time you’re living with that person too and so like, if you get along, great. If you don’t, well it’s pretty hard but she’s become a very good friend and also there’s certain things for me in my career (she contributes to). You know, I’ve always been a little more of a scientific mind and she’s the more creative mind and I’m very into training physiology and organization of the training and travel and all that sort of stuff...so she’s taken a lot from me as far as that’s all concerned and learned a lot from me but then...on this business side, that’s who I’ve learned all my skills from and...as far as being involved and seeing how a marketing person works and seeing it first hand and just seeing how a small business person works and seeing it first hand...those are the skills for me that I’ve learned from her and so maybe in her (cycling) career I’ve probably helped her more with the training and the chance at the sports career but certainly for after (cycling), I know that I’ll be the one reaping the rewards of having built that relationship.

Jody’s mother agrees that Jody and Lee’s relationship is mutually beneficial, describing their respective intelligence as a major contributor to the duration of their relationship:

...Jody is definitely (intelligent), which is one of the things which has been hard for her as she doesn’t totally fit in with the cycling crowd. Lee is very close to Jody and Jody is very close to Lee because Lee is intelligent...Lee is the only one that she’s met all of the way through that has been constant, and that has the intelligence that Jody has and they’ve been able to be friends with that intelligence. The rest of them aren’t (intelligent). They really aren’t. ...Lee respects Jody because Jody is an incredible person. She really is and Lee acknowledges that and Jody respects Lee for her sheer ability to do anything and everything. ...Lee is a real go-getter. She is somebody who’s got all the balls in the air at once as well as being an athlete. She’s into everything and anything. She’s got enormous amounts of energy. Well, Jody is learning from her how to diversify and she’s intelligent (enough) to know that is what she’s doing.

Although Jody continues to compete as a full-time cross-country mountain biker on the World Cup circuit and has the 2004 Olympic Games in her sights, Lee has retired from full-time sport, continuing to race intermittently but primarily focusing her energy on a variety of business projects including the company she shares with Jody and three other mountain bike racers. As athletes, Jody’s cycling career was always one step beyond that of her friend and training partner and Jody has historically adopted more of the leadership role, particularly as it pertains to training regimes and organizational tasks. However, Lee was the first to leave full-time
mountain biking and Jody is cognizant of her disengagement experience and shift in career priorities. In the organization and fundraising for their mountain bike camps and clinics, Lee appears to have become somewhat of a mentor to Jody with respect to her post-racing career plans. The current interpersonal dynamic within this friendship places Lee in a leadership role, sharing her knowledge and experience with Jody as she contemplates her future career direction:

I’ve watched her in her career and I guess it’s kind of a marketing person, a PR person, a business person, you know, she’s had these skills from ... before she became an athlete, you know, that networking, the thinking ahead, always working on the next thing and watching her and being able to be part of some of the projects that she’s been involved (with)... but being able to just be kind of an athlete watching somebody organizing this and sort of being the little helper on the side but seeing how it’s done and kind of having this friend and this opportunity... and I think that’s really been a very important thing for me as far as a lot of things with preparing for finishing cycling and also, like all through my career, you know, I’ve started everything kind of a year before her: the road racing, then I went to mountain biking and she kind of followed a year after me, but then in the retirement, she’s hitting it... she hit it before me and so I get to watch her with everything she’s doing and although I know she had a business degree and a thirteen year professional career, I still see what she is doing and there’s no reason I can’t do (it). Maybe not to a certain degree but certainly with the coaching and the clinics and all that. There’s no reason why I can’t do that. You know, I see this person doing it and I’m fortunate that I have this great example to follow.

Jody’s mother laughingly commented that Lee “has retired from everything at some point”, noting that in addition to cycling, she is a former marathon runner and triathlete. Nonetheless, she believes that Jody is learning from her friend about “how to go on with life”.

Jody diplomatically attributed much of her athletic success to her longstanding training partnership:

...I don’t think Lee and I would be the same without each other... in our sport, if you look, oftentimes, at one really great athlete from a country, you usually find a second one and there’s usually people developing in twos in our sport and so I think if you have come along at a time where you do have that special training partner relationship, bond, you know, Lee could have raced for two years and quit, that would have been my bad luck. My good luck is that she stuck with it too. Not only did she come along at the same time, she had the talent, took the same direction I took, you know, we did the road racing thing together, then the next year I went to mountain biking, she went after, you
know...we lived on the North Shore...(I) had the luck to have that partner come along at that particular time...and that’s probably to me the most important, almost more important than a coach, more important than a supportive family, having this training partner relationship is possibly in our sport, the most important thing. If you could only pick one component of all of them, to have that relationship work out, that’s the most important relationship. You can do everything else yourself.

Jody is doing everything else including coaching herself. She said she is a difficult athlete to coach because she thinks for herself, although her mother described Jody’s relational difficulties with the National team coach as a reflection of the coach rather than Jody:

He’s a difficult person and he’s a very vindictive person. Well, he’s a puss to put it that way. He has his favourites. Coaches quite often do have their favourites and Jody has never really done what he said. She’s always trained herself. She hasn’t always listened to him. Coaches don’t like that...

In the past Jody has also adopted the managerial duties of her mountain biking team, making travel and accommodation arrangements although she has taken on these responsibilities at a cost to her performance:

...You know, in my last two years it’s been really terrible because we’ve had no manager or very terrible managers on our team and I’ve ended up half rider and half manager. I’ve been losing World Cup races by a minute, minute and a half and that’s like energy I needed so it’s been really frustrating because it’s not like I feel like I’ve slowed down or anything and I wasn’t able to get those results so, whatever. It’s just that I couldn’t...I think, I don’t know if it’s being a woman or whatever, just feeling more passion about the entity of the team, wanting it to be good and wanting things to run well and I’m a very organized person and I couldn’t stand things being chaotic and then I had just...it’s just guys you know. They’re roommates and they can just leave the dishes and leave everything and their threshold for that is so great whereas the woman is going to come in and she can’t stand it and finally cleans it all up and that’s the way I was with the team. The guys would just let things go and we’re just weeks before we’re going to Europe and there’s no plans at all and they’re just like, “Well, uh...” and I have to go in and make all the arrangements and plan the trip and everything ‘cause I just couldn’t rely on anybody else to do it and they’re just waiting and they could wait me out and I knew it and it’s positive stress so I had to do it so...but we have a good manager this year so it should change but at the same time also (I’m) making a bit of a personal decision—no more looking after the others. No more being mum on the team. That’s over.

Jody’s mother viewed the role of team caretaker as a reflection of Jody’s understanding of being part of a team, “...in order to be part of a group, you have to do your share and for Jody,
it's looking after people...I think that her role on the team was for harmony of the team and for caring”.

Jody was focused on the upcoming season with her sights set on competing at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. Beyond this she was uncertain of her future career plans. She loves her sport but was concerned about the declining sponsorship opportunities for cross-country mountain bikers:

(The economic downturn precipitated by the September 11th disaster)...had a really bad effect on what we do as a small sport and the marketing budgets that go to athletes like myself so, I think it’s been fairly natural for me coming from road racing, from an Olympic sport to look at (my goals) as a four year plan. You know, after the Olympics, you know I’ve committed to the next two years ‘cause the other years of my career I was committed to four years but you know, sort of getting a little older, not really, you never know when you’re going to start feeling a lack of motivation and I know that I will stay strongly committed for two years and then see and then get this much closer and there’s no way that I’m not going to take another opportunity with Athens so that’s pretty natural to plan but yeah, now it is getting to the point where, like I don’t feel as an athlete like I want to stop but, you know, I really don’t know...

Despite her professed uncertainty about her career plans beyond September 2004, Jody did note that the shift in mountain bike racing to the “extreme side of the sport, which I have no interest in”, may provide a natural exiting opportunity for her:

...I might be hitting a very good time where I get out of World Cup racing and still have a year of this if I want or like Lee, do kind of a transition where she still does a few events but at the same time she’s doing something (else)...I don’t look at this sports thing as being anything other than a career, especially since it’s gone on so long and in a sense I sort of look at retirement as getting out of sport gradually and I’ll have that luxury to do it and kind of on my own terms and not having to look for a job after...I’m not looking for a career necessarily, like I’ve made enough money in my racing career. I’m not a hockey player or anything but I set myself up so I don’t have a pressure, a financial pressure but I can do something I like and do it part-time so I’m not really concerned about how much money I’ll make but at the same time I don’t see quality of life without some sort of passion, without some sort of drive to do something. ...I mean, I’ll work on the website for the B&B or we have a little company that we started with Lee—myself and her husband and then two other ex-riders and work on that website and I do some writing for cycling magazines. Just little things but I just couldn’t sit around and do nothing. All those little things that have been hobbies could also turn into working at more.
Unlike the majority of Canadian high performance athletes, Jody’s longstanding success as a mountain bike racer has provided a good income. She is also financially savvy, investing in real estate and creating a pension for herself with her carding money. Moreover, as a single person with financial means, Jody is aware that her decision to leave full-time sport will be more self-directed than is the case for many athletes:

...I don’t have that pressure, like I said...I do understand when athletes get out and they’ve got loans and they’ve got stuff to pay off and they’ve got a family to support, you know, I don’t have that pressure so my situation is a little different.

Looking ahead to life beyond racing, Jody foresees increasing involvement in business ventures already started and is acquiring business knowledge through her relationship with Lee. She envisions herself an entrepreneur, building upon years of self-reliance as an athlete. Although she said she has been offered jobs by the Pacific Sport Canadian Sport Centre in Victoria she finds “the whole sport system in Canada frustrating” and incompatible with her personal values, noting, “you have to believe in what you’re doing right? Or I do anyway. I can’t just work for a pay cheque...if it’s not really a job that I believe in doing”. Rather, Jody anticipates that she will reap the greatest satisfaction from self-employment, working as an independent contractor:

...People want more flexibility now and they don’t want to have to be playing the office politics. They just want to be able to leave when they want to leave and so in that way, again kind of good timing too, because my career has always been like that, that’s always been my mindset. I’ve always had to have my office, work out of my home, and this is kind of something that we’re seeing a bit of modern phenomenon in our society and most people are going about doing their professions and jobs in this way anyway. ...I think it’s better for me to look at doing work on a contract basis, being a small businessperson. Doing that is going to be more suited to me...to me being able to use a skill set I’ve developed through my athletic career and be something that I enjoy...
When asked how her success in sport will influence her post-racing career, Jody did not hesitate to identify the same personal characteristics that led to her athletic success, namely the self-confidence to take risks and a willingness to work hard:

...Just my personal confidence. I’ve always had the feeling when I did sport, whatever I set my mind to, I could do it, you know and I always had that confidence I take to, you know I’m willing to work hard, I’m willing to swallow my pride where it’s necessary, start at the bottom where it’s necessary. I don’t care. I don’t expect anything from anyone and I’m willing to put the work into doing what I want to do and I’ll do it, you know, like when you have that confidence. I think it’s sort of self-esteem to do that (take risks). I don’t have any fear because I know I’m willing to work hard enough or you know, take the risk to do something that I want to do.

In addition to Jody’s intelligence, her mother identified other personal characteristics she expects will influence Jody’s career transition including her “very unique ability to be totally focused”, her intensity, her concern for others and willingness to be a team player, and her burgeoning business sense. She also noted that Jody is a very sensitive person, although through her racing career, has “gradually hardened” to protect herself from criticism and emotional warfare within teams.

Throughout my interview with her, Jody’s mother frequently referred to her daughter’s intelligence as a significant factor in her athletic and academic success but it is Jody’s need to fully immerse herself in a project or goal that her mother expected to fuel Jody’s post-racing career:

I think she’s got to find another all encompassing interest, which she will. She’ll find it. So, it may not be as hard as I think it (the disengagement experience) is because she’s already working towards it. ...She has to have something to focus on and she will. She will.

In the twilight of an amazing cycling career with athletic success and longevity incomparable to any other Canadian cyclist, Jody is looking ahead to life beyond racing. Because of her financial means, Jody anticipates that she will retire from mountain bike racing
on a self-directed basis, gradual or otherwise. Unlike many of Canada's high performance athletes, Jody expects her career transition to be about finding her niche rather than seeking the first available job to pay the rent. She appreciates her position and in an anticipatory and methodical fashion, she is laying the groundwork for small business ventures when she stops racing. Her career values and beliefs are firmly rooted, guiding her career choices, and she expects to benefit from witnessing her best friend and training partner's disengagement experience. While Jody can expect to encounter transitional challenges along the way, she plans to enter the next phase of her working career on her own terms, just has she has directed much of her career on the bicycle.
The Soccer Player

I met Jack on a hot summer afternoon in July. I arrived at a large house in an upscale neighbourhood in North Vancouver to discover that no one was home. A few minutes passed as I pondered how long to wait in the scorching afternoon sun. Suddenly, a large SUV came hurtling down the driveway, out of which jumped a young couple profusely apologizing for their tardiness. Both were young, blond and very attractive. Their physical beauty was striking and I have no doubt that they both turn heads upon entering a room.

We sat down in the kitchen to discuss life after soccer. Over juice and the sounds of workers building a fence outside, Jack talked about his life and both his immediate career plans and those he envisions for the future when his soccer career has concluded. Jack’s bags, dirty laundry spilling out of them, sat in the front foyer as he had just returned to town the day before our interview and would be leaving again the next morning. Dressed in a t-shirt and shorts, Jack’s deep tan and sun-bleached hair painted a picture of somebody who has spent much of the summer outside. Although he would prefer to be training for Canada’s upcoming Olympic qualifying matches, Jack was working his way back from a groin injury he sustained four months earlier. Sitting across the kitchen table from Jack, I could feel a strong energy and enthusiasm emanating from him. While I expect this energy to transform into a focused intensity during a match, Jack struck me as somebody who truly enjoys sport but is not consumed by it. He was friendly and extraverted, brimming with self-confidence. Jack’s partner, Molly, later described this energy as a facet of Jack’s “magnetic personality”.

Jack started playing soccer at the age of four. He played community soccer in his early years before earning a spot on the North Shore U-13 Metro team. That same year, Jack was selected for the Provincial team. At the young age of 16, Jack moved up to the men’s Premier
League, playing for the West Vancouver Rovers. He has been a member of Canada’s National programme for the past three years. Jack has played in 12 international games, representing Canada in the U-20 World Youth Championship and as a member of the U-23 Olympic team.

After high school graduation, Jack was recruited by Union College’s National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) soccer team on a full athletic scholarship. He moved to Jackson, Tennessee for one year. During his freshman year at Union College, Jack was the team’s leading scorer. However, Jack experienced a real culture shock living in the deep south of the United States, describing “a different way of life” in the “bible belt” among people highly dissimilar to himself. He further discovered at his first try-out with the Canadian U-20 National team that the coaching staff expected him to play for a stronger collegiate team to have access to higher calibre soccer. Reframing his first year of collegiate soccer as a period of personal growth and maturation, Jack described his time at Union College as a “great experience”, acknowledging that he would not have wanted to spend all four years of university “in the bible belt”:

...I’ve had negative experiences but...coming into them I was positive and I guarantee that I took more positive out of them than I did negative, like down in Tennessee my first year, it was horrible but I’m so happy I went and understood and realized, you know, what was going on down there and just opened my eyes to a whole new culture and I met a lot of good friends and I still have them and I’m...a very positive person...

While at the National camp in 2000, Jack was recruited by Fairfield University’s Double A – Division 1 team, a “step-up soccer wise”. On a full athletic scholarship, Jack spent the next three years playing soccer for Fairfield and working towards a Bachelor of Science degree in Finance. He graduated two months prior to our interview. In his last year at Fairfield University, Jack was the team’s top scorer. He was the team captain and was twice named to the all-conference team.
At the time of Jack’s interview, Canada’s U-23 team was preparing for Olympic qualifying matches against the U.S. Virgin Islands and El Salvador. As a member of Canada’s Olympic soccer team, Jack received government funding. As a funded athlete, he says he is not allowed to play professionally and while he has played “semi-pro” during the summer, he was not remunerated for his efforts. In the 2002 A-league draft, Jack was the Toronto Lynx’ top pick, selected seventh overall.

In addition to his commitment to the U-23 team programme and his desire to represent his country at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Jack is looking forward to a professional soccer career in Europe. He has had “a few offers from teams over in Europe” and he plans to move to Europe when his groin injury has healed. Jack noted that most of Canada’s U-23 team players already play on European teams. Indeed, a review of the U-23 roster includes a mix of collegiate players, A-league players, and members of a variety of European football clubs including FC Saarbruken, SSV Jahn Regensburg, Hannover 96, Moss FK, A.C. Isola Liri, Helsingborgs IF, Watford FC, and Tromso. Jack is not focused on playing for a specific team but believes that his experience with Canada’s U-23 team will grant him access to try-outs for professional teams where the coaching staff will view him as a serious contender:

...If you want to go out on a try-out in Europe, I mean, you may get a try-out but they’re not going to look at you long but if you go out on a try-out in Europe and you come in as an Olympic team player for Canada, you’re gonna get a serious look. And so in that regard it’s a huge benefit. I mean, it separates...it’s just a resume, it’s a paper separation, you know. If you have it, you have it and you’re regarded as a better player than a guy who is probably just as good but isn’t playing on the Olympic team.

In the three years that he’s played for Canada’s National team both at the U-20 and U-23 level, Jack’s experience has been overwhelmingly positive and he is motivated to continue playing for his country, be it at the Olympic Games or the World Cup:
...For me it's the biggest thing. Like, I'd rather play for my country than play professionally and make a lot of money. I mean, I just get shivers putting on a Canadian jersey and I love Canada and I love to represent them and you know, I'd do that any time and any day regardless if there was any bonuses or not and so I guess for me it's been the most exciting and biggest joy of any soccer experience I've had, for sure.

This sentiment was echoed by Molly who believes that one of the reasons Jack is pursuing a soccer career in Europe is to ensure that he continues to play at a sufficiently high calibre to meet Canada's National team selection criteria:

...One of the reasons he wants to play in Europe is that he wants to be on the Olympic team for Canada and he wants to go to the Olympics, you know, and down the road the reason could be (that) he wants to keep playing in Europe is that you have to be playing at a high level to be accepted onto this team...

While Jack's immediate plan was to pursue a playing career in Europe, he was also looking beyond full-time sport to a post-playing career in business where he could marry his education with his passion for sport. His optimism and self-confidence were evident as he described various career possibilities including business offers on the American east coast, running a soccer school, coaching, managing a team, working as a players' agent, working in an organizational capacity for the Canadian Soccer Association or the B.C. Soccer Association. Jack was also considering further post-secondary education and is interested in pursuing either an MBA or law school. He noted that the esteemed soccer management programme in Liverpool, England requires applicants to hold a Master's degree. On the one hand, he sounds typical of a recent university graduate with big dreams and his eye on the brass ring. However, Jack contends that he is not "typical" among his same-age cohort as he is more willing than his friends to create his own career opportunities and take the risks required to achieve his career goals:

...I know a lot of people my age who are just so scared of graduating. I mean some of them are taking extra classes at university because they don't want to graduate...they don't know what they want to do after and I'm just gung ho. I just want to let myself
loose on the world here and get going so I don’t know if it’s typical or not but I’d say there’s a lot on both sides but I’d say there’s a lot of doors open and I see that there are doors open for every single 22-year-old in the world, every single one I see doors open for but a lot of them don’t see it for themselves.

This willingness to take risks and embark on the unknown is not new to Jack, whose first adventure was moving to Tennessee where he “didn’t know a soul”. In this regard, Jack described his first year away from home as a maturational experience, instilling greater self-confidence to live his life experientially:

...I was 18 when I took off to Tennessee and I didn’t know a soul down there and, you know...it’s difficult and you’re on your own and sure, my parents, I could call them and what not and they didn’t get down there...I guess maybe I grew up quick, a little quicker. I don’t know how to explain it. I mean, there’s definitely a part of my mentality that growing up, it’s like I’ll do everything full throttle and you know, there’s not a lot of things that I wouldn’t do...whatever...that I wouldn’t try, you know? I’m very excited about every day and I love life and I can’t see any reason why it would ever be a bad thing to go (to Europe)...I think there’s definitely a connection there with being a top athlete. I don’t know if it’s common or not but it definitely helped me. It’s like I’ve come into a camp after an injury and a lot of guys are like, you know...nervous and timid. I’m injured and I’ll come in and I’ll take charge and jump right in and stick and tackle and it’s just kind of like...I’m very confident I guess. That’s what it comes down to maybe.

Looking ahead to a career beyond the soccer pitch, Jack believes that the transition of leaving soccer to pursue a non-playing career will be a positive experience ripe with potential:

...There’s a lot of different choices open to me that I could get into so, it’s just kind of keep(ing) the doors open and meet(ing) the right people and I’m sure it will fall into place somewhere.

Jack believes that his transition from soccer player to a new career in business will be positive, in part, because he expects the core “values” that have contributed to his athletic success will help him to establish himself within a business capacity. He cites passion, pride, loyalty, a team mentality, a propensity for leadership, and a “workmanlike” attitude as characteristics or “values” that translate well from the soccer pitch to the boardroom. Jack views these characteristics as highly portable and desirable both in sport and business:
...Succeed in sport, succeed in business. I mean, I can’t tell you how many times I could refer to anything I do in sport and put into a small business or a big business or a dance team or you know, or building a fence like this guy (pointing to the landscape worker outside), you know...with no cutting corners, or you know what I mean. We need the team, can we get everybody on board to be supportive and get the job done right and everybody’s got to do their own job and blah, blah, blah...there’s hundreds of things that I could relate to so yeah, I definitely think it’s universal traits and qualities that are successful (in sport and business).

Both Jack and Molly specifically cited self-confidence as a factor likely to have a positive influence Jack’s transition into the business world. Just as he is willing to “stick a tackle” on the pitch and is “committed to winning”, Jack’s self-confidence and belief in his abilities were expected to carry him into his next career. As Molly noted, his self-confidence allows him to try new things where others might shy away:

Well, he’s very confident. I think that will make (the transition) easier for him. He won’t be scared to do it. He’ll jump in, sort of, with two feet and not be afraid of failure. He’s definitely not afraid of failure. His favourite quote is something like, “those who fail, fail to try” or “scared” or something (laughing)...

Related to self-confidence, Jack presented as an individual whose locus of control is planted firmly within himself. In soccer, he seeks to improve his own game at every opportunity:

...I want to win every time, you know and when I get beat, I don’t think he deserved it, you know...I think he got lucky and I messed up and it’s my fault and I can definitely beat him next time...

Similarly, Jack firmly believes that any decision to leave international soccer will be made by him rather than the coaching staff, reflective of his internal locus of control:

...No one is going to tell me that I can’t play soccer anymore, unless it’s an injury or something and at that point, I mean, it’ll be my decision about whether I want to stay involved in the soccer world and coach, you know, the opportunity will be there for me. I know enough people already, or enough people respect me that they will help me and give me an opportunity and you know, like I say, nobody’s going to say, “you’re not good enough to play soccer in this world again”, you know, ‘cause there’s tonnes of places that I could go...Australia and play in a league in Australia and do really well, you know, so no one’s going to tell me I can’t...it’s going to be my decision in the end but I
can not make the team in Manchester United or even the Olympic team or the men’s World Cup team but that’s not going to be the end of my soccer career unless I choose it to be...

As I listened to Jack speculate about his future disengagement from soccer, I could hear the certainty in his voice that life presents opportunities and it is his responsibility to choose which direction to follow. Self-efficacy and a highly internalized locus of control project an image of a confident individual charting his career path, with sufficient flexibility to select a different route should the need arise.

Another major component of Jack’s personality is his competitiveness. For Jack, “competitiveness is huge” and what motivates him to train harder to achieve higher standards of performance:

...I thrive on (competition) and it pushes me to, you know, places that I couldn’t push myself so I definitely think that’s a huge part of where I am whether it’s playing ping pong...or you’re my check. I want to win every time, you know...

While Jack acknowledged that he is competitive with himself in his drive to improve his athletic performance, much of his competitiveness focuses on outperforming other “competitors” and he anticipates that this trait will propel him to succeed in the world of business the same way it has on the soccer pitch.

Notwithstanding his passion for sport and his intense desire to compete and win, Jack contends that his personal identity extends beyond that of athlete and allows him to view life beyond sport:

...You want to be a well-rounded person. I’d like to get into lots of different stuff, you know like that’s why all this business stuff I like...I’d like to start to try to do and maybe write for some papers and you know, all kinds of different things I’d like to get into. I think it’s important to be well rounded and you have to tie yourself into lots of different things to make sure that you...maintain that you do that and you know, it’s easy to get caught up in one narrow alleyway of life, whether it’s soccer or dancing or whatever it is. I think it’s easy to just commit your whole life to it but you know, all of my people, my girlfriend and my family will tell you that I’m a lot about soccer when I’m playing soccer
but you know, when the game’s over, I’m a happy guy. I’ll do anything. I’m happy with lots of different things I enjoy doing. Soccer isn’t my life. It’s part of it, so that’s cool.

Molly agrees that Jack’s sense of identity extends beyond his role as one of Canada’s top soccer players. In fact, she noted that he has chosen college roommates based upon their well roundedness in order to move away from the pressure of having soccer as his sole focus:

...He’s not really that close to people that are only about soccer, you know, he doesn’t like that quality particularly. Like, when he was in university, he lived in a house this past year and the year before last he lived in this house with all soccer players and it was...like they were all very serious soccer players on his team and you know, they would get mad at him if he went out and things like that and he felt really restricted and they didn’t like him to sort of do anything that was not soccer, soccer, soccer, soccer which he absolutely hated and then last year he chose to live with only one other soccer player and then a bunch of people that didn’t even play soccer and he found that a lot more relaxing, he found that he could be himself a lot more...like even though he loves soccer, and is very dedicated, it’s a different kind of dedication.

This “well-rounded” sense of personal identity has allowed Jack to extend his focus beyond soccer and view his undergraduate education as preparation for a career beyond his playing days. Although soccer has provided opportunities not otherwise available including an American university education, travel and the ability to represent his country, Jack is aware that there are other aspects of his life he wishes to develop, stating, “I’m almost a little wary of spending too much time playing soccer because, you know, I want to spend the time doing other things”.

In keeping with Jack’s stated intention of living a balanced life, his circle of friends extends beyond his soccer teammates. In fact, Molly knew nothing about the game when they started dating four years ago and Jack pointed out that his social circle is comprised of a “diverse group of friends”, some of whom have “never picked up a soccer ball”. Jack’s extensive social network is not surprising given his extraverted personality. As Molly noted, Jack has a “magnetic personality” and one of his strengths is his networking ability as he “attracts” people
who “want to work with him...they want to help him.” Jack connects with many people and is aware of which contacts will be helpful to him both now and in the future. Almost apologetically, Molly acknowledged that Jack’s networking skills are self-serving in terms of his career ambitions:

...You know, he’ll meet people and he’ll use those connections you know, and remember people and keep in touch with people and build his...people that he knows when they can help him down the road when he wants to get into something else... He makes a conscious effort to remember the people he’s met, especially people...I don’t know how this sounds...the people who could help him, you know...he’ll make an effort to know you if he thinks you can help him, which is not necessarily, you know, it’s a good thing, right?

Although Molly is uncomfortable with social connections she views as “business minded”, Jack described himself as “entrepreneurial”, noting that he has used social relationships to cultivate business opportunities both in and outside of the world of soccer:

You go through life like that and some people go through life and don’t keep numbers and don’t earn the respect of other people and whatever but everywhere I go, I always had great, great friends with great trust between us by the end of my time there, whether it be a year or three years and...I mean my e-mail list just keeps getting longer and I keep in touch with people and, you know, they know what they’re going to get with me and when I come on board and I think I can help at all levels at some point in some way or another, you know, so yeah definitely, I am well connected and I think that will offer opportunities for sure.

Beyond his expansive social network, Jack views his family, partner, and closest friends as his “support systems” who “trust my decisions”, whether these decisions pertain to his choice of soccer teams or his disengagement from soccer to move into another career in business.

While he genuinely appreciates the benefit of a supportive network of friends and family, Jack does envision himself as an independent thinker, directing his own choices:

I couldn’t say that I couldn’t do it without them but it’s huge, it’s just such as benefit to be able to say that I do have people like that who do love me and care so much and trust me enough to let me do those things...
Having recently graduated from Fairfield University and in the midst of a transitional period within his soccer career, Jack intends to move to Europe to try out for position on a professional soccer team. After a four-year relationship characterized by much time apart as they attended distant universities, Molly will be following Jack to Europe, putting her own career in event planning on hold for the present. She is hoping to continue working as a model in Europe. Whereas Jack anticipated that any disengagement decisions will be based upon “how far I can go in my (playing) career”, Molly adopted a more relational view on the topic:

I don’t know about leaving soccer altogether but leaving Europe, I think it would be...I wouldn’t like to say it a hundred percent, but I certainly (think) and I think he knows that I don’t want to be in Europe forever. We both want to live here. We both want to raise a family here. I think that if it got to a point where we were ready to have a family; that would definitely be one reason why soccer could end in Europe. That doesn’t necessarily mean it would end altogether. He could play here for the Whitecaps if he wanted to although the money is really not all that good (laughing)...so that may be a reason why he may choose to do something else at that point.

...At first I didn’t want to go (to Europe), like no way, I’m not going. I’m like a very homebody. I like it here. I don’t really want to go anywhere, but as I told you, I made that decision, I wasn’t going to stay here and let him go without me so that was definitely one thing and I would hate to have been the reason why he didn’t go over there now. He probably wouldn’t commit to a contract of more than two years. I think that he doesn’t want us to be not happy over there, just because he’s making lots of money or has prestige or whatever, you know, so I think that it will be an ongoing evaluation of how happy we are over there.

Jack is committed to following his athletic dream and although Molly remains supportive, she would prefer that greater priority be placed on the continuing development of their relationship:

...It was sort of a decision that I made...like we’ve been apart for four years and (I) had absolutely no interest in him going off to Europe and me staying here and starting a career and building two completely separate lives, which was obviously not what we wanted to do...

Molly laughingly commented that she will not move to Europe until Jack is awarded a contract:
So I won’t get in his way when he’s trying (out)...which I tend to do (laughing)...I want more attention that you can give me (laughing)...like what do you mean you can’t hang out with me? You have to go play soccer? I don’t want you to...

Beneath this humorous account of their relational dynamics, I could hear some degree of resignation in Molly’s voice as she talked about moving to an unknown European destination. She is doing this for Jack and for their relationship. Jack more bluntly described Molly’s stance:

...Like my girlfriend, she’s going to come with me (to Europe) and she’s freaked. I mean, she’s freaked and she’s so scared...and I’m sure she knows like, that it’s going to be alright in the end but like...you know...

Over the summer months, Jack has been living in the basement of Molly’s parents’ home. The two families have merged over the four-year period of their relationship and Molly believes her father, a successful entrepreneur, has acted as a mentor to Jack, further supporting and encouraging his post-soccer business plans:

...My dad is an entrepreneur and Jack’s dad is like...works nine to five, like, so he didn’t have that entrepreneurial influence that much growing up but since we’ve been together, he’s had...he’s learned a lot from my dad on the business side of things. You know, my dad’s always got lots of advice to give him about stuff like that and I think that source of information and being able to bounce ideas off of him will make a big difference for him as well.

Outside of describing his family of origin as part of his “support system”, Jack did not mention his parents or brothers as a major influence upon his career choice or direction. Molly sees Jack’s father likewise, as supportive of his choices yet having pursued a different career path, unable to relate to Jack’s vision of his future:

...There’s a side where his dad on one hand may feel more comfortable with a steady career because that’s what he had but at the same time, you know, he probably admires the fact that Jack is not interested in that and you know, is totally supportive of anything he does.
Molly did note that Jack’s closest soccer friends also tend to be business minded and he has shared plans and ideas with one friend in particular who currently plays in Norway. They understand each other and share a common view of the future:

...Some of his closest friends are guys that he’s played soccer with growing up or met through his Canada team and, you know...he really is close friends with people who are like him. Like his closest friends, I could pick them out a mile away...there’s something about them that’s different. He’s obviously got different friends...but the ones that are his closest and that he would say he could count on or whatever, are these few people, that you don’t meet very often, friends that are somehow similar to him and I think that a lot of times then, like having a business mind, is not just focused on sports...it is one of the things that attracts them to each other. Like, he’s got one friend who’s playing soccer in Norway and they’re talking about business they do together. They constantly talk about things that are going to happen when soccer is done, you know, and they’re wanting to buy property and...investments and things like that, you know, things for the future, right?

At the time of this interview, Jack was in the midst of a within-sport transition, having just graduated from university and about to move to Europe in search of a position within professional soccer. He anticipated establishing himself as a professional player in Europe while continuing to represent Canada in international competition. Not surprisingly, given his success in Canadian soccer and as a collegiate player in the U.S., Jack expects that the same personal characteristics and values he espouses in sport will positively influence his future transition into a post-playing career in business. Not unlike many new university graduates, Jack has high expectations for success within the world of business. However, unlike his academic peers, Jack has identified soccer as a niche market upon which he can establish himself, and he self-identifies as a risk taker, not an uncommon trait among successful entrepreneurs. He is using his strong social skills and engaging personality to actively network and make connections with influential people in both sport and business who can help him achieve his career goals. He is confident that his disengagement from soccer will be a positive experience from which he will grow and learn.
Interpersonally, Jack and Molly appear to be at a crossroads in their relationship as they negotiate their respective roles in each other’s personal and professional lives. Molly continues to support Jack’s athletic ambitions and it is likely that their relationship will move through a transition of its own as they move from courtship to a common-law relationship in Europe.

Despite his nagging groin injury, Jack assured me that the choice to hang up his cleats will be his decision alone. He plans to make future career decisions before the wave of his career crests, noting that the international popularity of soccer ensures that he can continue his playing career at different levels depending on where he plays, be it Europe, Australia, or North America. He is thinking about life after soccer but intends to enjoy every minute of his journey through sport before he says good-bye. If there is a brass ring to be caught, I can see Jack rising above the crowd and making the leap to grab it.
The Field Hockey Player

The director of the Esteem Team circulated a description of my study on the company’s listserv and within days, I received a reply from Chris, indicating an interest in the study. As he is a local athlete, I knew of Chris albeit I do not follow field hockey closely. However, when I set up the interview with Chris, I was surprised to learn that he had recently relocated to Ottawa with his partner and their four-month old baby daughter. As I was seven months pregnant at the time of the interview, traveling to Ottawa was not a feasible option. Consequently, Chris and I had our interview over the telephone one Friday afternoon in February while he was traveling by train from Ottawa to Montreal.

Our interview, although interrupted several times when Chris’ mobile telephone cut out, was friendly, relaxed and punctuated with frequent laughter. Chris, who is in his mid-thirties, recently moved to Ottawa as part of his new job with the Esteem Team where he was leading the nation-wide expansion of the B.C. organization. Moving to Ottawa allowed him to minimize the amount of overnight travel, an important consideration for a new father.

Chris began playing field hockey at the age of six years as an off-season form of training for soccer:

...(my friend’s) dad had played field hockey wherever he did and thought after playing a season of soccer it would be a good thing for the kids to keep on playing an active sport, not baseball but field hockey, so my brother got involved (in field hockey) and their whole soccer team started playing and they developed a whole club around maybe thirty kids or something like that and then my soccer team did the same thing...so it was sort of something within the neighbourhood we grew up in that a whole lot of the guys did. There were probably more guys playing field hockey than playing baseball, which was (in) the same season when we were growing up.

Chris and his teammates helped establish club field hockey on the North Shore and despite the fact that Chris played provincially within his age group, field hockey remained secondary to soccer until he was 15 years old, “I was starting to travel more with the B.C.
and traveled abroad and it became clear I was to go further with field hockey than soccer”. His stature as a field hockey player grew when he was selected for the National Under-21 team in 1986 and the Senior National team in 1988, representing Canada at the Olympic Games in Seoul. It was in Seoul that Chris suffered a head injury, causing him to stop playing field hockey in 1991 due to “concussion problems”. He did not play competitively for the next five years, returning to field hockey in 1996 subsequent to the team’s failure to qualify for the Olympic Games in Atlanta.

During his early years on the National team, Chris achieved a balance between his roles as an athlete and university student. He lived at home and attended the University of British Columbia where he majored in History. Although he had no concrete career plans at that time, he considered applying to graduate school. After leaving field hockey in 1991 Chris was uncertain of his career plans. During this time, he took some courses, worked as a waiter, and went backpacking in Argentina in 1995.

Chris’ decision to return to high performance field hockey came about while he was traveling:

…I’d been down to Argentina just backpacking for awhile in ’95 and had watched the team play at the Pan Am’s and kind of got thinking about playing again…and when I came back in’96…one of the things I had said to myself was I was gonna give myself complete rights to be a full-time athlete and that’s what I wanted to do, you know, I wasn’t going to worry about what my other tracks…whether it was more education or whether it was a job or…financial goals…it would be alright to do other things as long as I…was really able to say that hockey was my first priority and I wasn’t going to let myself get pulled away from that…

From 1996 to 2000, Chris devoted his energy to being a full-time athlete, supporting himself financially through government funding for National team members and, starting in 1998, through a corporate sponsorship:
I was able to acquire sponsorship that had, you know, a pretty extensive sort of servicing package that I was responsible for but it...wasn’t a job, and that kind of gave me that financial freedom to play full-time.

Chris was also active as an athlete representative with the Esteem Team and served on several committees. Having already left field hockey once, Chris had come to the realization that the “dilemma, a kind of a tension that always exists...with athletes (about) when are you...going to move on to your real life”, was a myth, thus allowing him to focus solely on his athletic career without feeling guilty about doing so.

The highlight of Chris’ later years in field hockey was winning a gold medal at the 1999 Pan Am Games in Winnipeg, thus qualifying the team for the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, an achievement that had eluded the team since the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul. Chris’ coach described Chris’ return to field hockey as a reflection of his motivation and commitment to the sport:

He played in the ’88 Olympics and that’s where he got injured in Korea and he made a comeback and he really wanted to represent Canada and win the Pan Am gold medal, play in the Olympics, play in the World Cup, you know, just representing himself and his country at the highest level and he was able to do that for years at a time and I think that’s motivation...there’s some reason why people choose to make all the sacrifices. Part of it is self-fulfillment. Part of it is goals in life. And what’s his motivation? It certainly wasn’t money. But other things came into it and I’m sure family and friends came a lot into it.

Chris was considered a leader on Canada’s National field hockey team. His partner noted that he is “a real kind of builder” who was “very invested in the leadership role”, always working toward “building the team”. This leadership role was also noted by Chris’ coach who described Chris as a team leader both on and off the pitch:

...sometimes (his leadership) extended beyond the field because what would happen is that we had a couple of guys on the team who couldn’t always afford to do things but Chris and some of the other senior players would then start raising funds for them too so they could participate and travel and do things with them. If somebody needed some support, you know, from an employer, sure I had to write a letter but Chris and the team
captain would make a pitch to the employer and say, look can you help this athlete get some time off, you know…

Beyond his leadership role with Canada’s National field hockey team, Chris’ coach contends:

Chris should be recognized as one of the leaders and not just because he was one of our team leaders but also just in the sport community. He represented us with Sport Canada, with the Athletes’ Council and so on, very very efficiently…(he’s) very well spoken, understands the issues very well.

Chris was disappointed with the team’s performance in Sydney where they placed tenth. Upon his return to Canada, he was uncertain about whether to continue playing field hockey with the national programme, a programme amidst considerable change:

I was sort of struggling a little bit with whether I wanted to continue or not and disappointed in the way…there was a lot of change happening in the programme and there was no coaching structure in place…to give us a shot to continue to climb the ranking…I wasn’t interested in a rebuilding kind of concept so…in the end that’s what made my decision more than anything else…If…a better coach (had been) hired and, you know, a real comprehensive programme that made me think we could have qualified for the World Cup…then I think I’d still be playing.

Following Sydney, Chris continued training with the National team for “a few practices” but the lack of organizational inertia to “give us a chance to keep improving”, the fact that his partner was now pregnant with their first child, and the presentation of “the Esteem Team opportunity…to build a national programme” coincided in early 2001, providing the impetus for Chris to disengage from field hockey for a second time, this time on his own terms. Chris wryly noted that his retirement “wasn’t a eureka moment”:

Well, I’d actually gone to a few practices and then…I was driving home with one of my teammates, giving him a lift home and I’d let him know that Kristen was pregnant and I was going to be a dad and he said, ‘so well are you going to retire?’ ‘No, no I think I’m going to keep playing’ but that was the last practice I went to.

Chris did formally and publicly announce retirement to the field hockey community:
I did write a letter... to Field Hockey Canada letting them know... why I was retiring, that it didn’t seem that the team was going to have the opportunity to achieve what I hoped they could.

Rather than a pre-determined career change, Chris’ disengagement transition is perhaps best described as a gradual shift in life roles arising out of the interplay of a variety of interpersonal, and contextual factors. These include the organizational and structural changes within the National field hockey team at the beginning of the new quadrennial cycle; the introduction of fatherhood; and the presentation of the opportunity to develop the Esteem Team into a national programme:

...you know...my reflection on things and my life now compared to when I was competing, you have the singularity of purpose as an athlete, or I did anyways, especially in the later years, that was clearly what I did and what I was doing and what I was about and (I had) real identity with it, and you know, it forms your social fabric and your network and your support and...everything kind of gets tied into (the) team sport...so when a lot of that came apart, losing some other leaders on the team and friends who were on the team, they weren’t going to compete anymore and...that starts to create a little bit of a void that...I’m going to fill somehow and either it was going to get filled with a new programme, a new coach, exciting opportunities, competitive opportunities, different training environment that was gonna...take it to the next level...and I think that would have filled that void that had been created, but when it’s not there, it’s an open bill, there’s a new challenge or a new opportunity over there...and soon enough my identity wasn’t as a field hockey player, as an athlete. It was becoming other things.

Chris is disappointed that leaving field hockey was not more difficult as he enjoys the game so much and would have continued to play had the opportunity for team growth been available following the 2000 Olympic Games. His disappointment is reflected in his disenchantment with Field Hockey Canada and the negative influence of the bureaucracy upon his sport:

...in a way, it should have been a tougher choice, you know, oh my gosh, I’m going to have a family and there’s other things I want to accomplish either with education or career or relationships and...yet there’s this great opportunity with field hockey...that wasn’t presented and...that was disappointing...it would have been a tougher transition if I had made the choice to pursue my career and leave field hockey behind...I wish I had that choice.
Although Chris does not perceive his disengagement from field hockey as a “real
struggle”, approximately one year after he left field hockey, his transitional experience
continues:

Is (the transition) over? You know...it’s pretty close but I don’t know. There’s still...you
know, there’s still a bit of, oh the team’s away and competing and it’s like...I scratch my
head, oh gosh, wouldn’t it be fun to be out there? So, I don’t think it would be quite
accurate to say my headspace is completely removed from my high performance
career...(but) it’s pretty close.

The same focus and energy that Chris applied to field hockey is now being directed into
his new job with the Esteem Team and he enjoys the challenges available to him in his job
including new learning and making the company grow. This fit between Chris’ personality and
his role with the Esteem Team was noted in his partner’s description of Chris’ job:

He definitely likes learning new skills and (having new) challenges, being more
challenged mentally (and)...he also has a real need to be part of building something.
He’s a real kind of builder...I don’t think he would have been happy had he made a
transition into a job where he was just doing a job that a million people had done before
him and anyone else could do. This way he’s part of a team, making something grow
which is something that has its own rewards...

Chris’ coach also views his job with the Esteem Team as an excellent fit with Chris’
leadership abilities and self-confidence, allowing him to exploit these personal qualities for a
positive cause:

Well, the number one thing is confidence. He’s confident in his manner, in his attitude.
He has a very positive attitude and outlook on life. He’s seen a lot of the world so he’s
able to draw on those experiences, you know, when he’s done. He’s working for the
Esteem Team right now and he’s able to speak to other younger athletes about the values
in life, what benefits we have as Canadian citizens compared to being in other parts of the
world because he’s seen so much now that he can draw on all that and relate to people.
He can talk about a passion for life that he has and how hard work and good work ethic
pay off in the end...and those are good values to develop as National team athletes and I
think that’s all part of Chris. He’s a very, very good leader and when you play on the
National team...you have to be a leader. You can’t be a follower and he’s certainly a
good leader.
The total focus and energy directed to this job has its costs and benefits. One of the positive aspects is that Chris feels as though he has been able to transfer the energy he previously devoted to field hockey to a job that provides significant satisfaction and is compatible with his personal values. Secondly, he has been able to successfully apply his knowledge of sport, leadership experience, and volunteer network to his new job. As observed by his partner:

...I just can’t imagine a single athlete, a retired athlete indeed who has...in one year gotten to where he has gotten to. You know, it’s absolutely amazing to me, the skills that he’s developed just by doing things and learning some form on the way are amazing, you know from a year ago today to now, all of this business savvy...

Despite Chris’ early success with the Esteem Team, one of the costs of Chris’ single-mindedness is that “...he (hasn’t) found that balance yet. He’s kind of gone from all sport to all work”. In this regard, both Chris and his partner commented that one of the consequences of this career imbalance is that Chris now struggles to maintain his physical fitness and has not established a regular fitness routine, “...I just haven’t been able to get back into it and get back in shape and that’s been the biggest struggle...that’s the real negative part of the transition”.

Finding the time to enjoy sport on a recreational basis has been a challenge for Chris as he balances the demands of work, travel and a young family. His partner commented, “He’s just having to figure out how to balance things”.

Chris and his partner planned to start a family after the 2000 Olympic Games and therefore, in the midst of his career transition, Chris’ daughter was born which, “in some ways aided the transition because life has completely changed”. Chris described his partner as having always been “really open” about his career as a high performance field hockey, and was supportive of whatever career choice he made:

(She) didn’t influence the decision but made it really peaceful. She was going to be supportive no matter what I did. But obviously then, my daughter, I mean that’s a huge influence. I was saying earlier that you go from this single focus of being an athlete and
then into a family where all sorts of different focuses and you know, a real big one is on our child... and... life's a lot more focused about family.

Chris' partner believes that the decision to start a family likely influenced Chris' decision to leave field hockey given the inherent financial responsibility of raising a young family. She asserts that his disengagement decision would have come later had Chris been single with no financial responsibilities:

...he may not have retired just yet. He may have gone back to school for instance. But because we're together and we were looking forward to having a family... in certain ways there was a pressure that he needed to become the breadwinner... that he has done the starving athlete thing for long enough that he needed to get into... making money and building a family.

Thus, having a baby influenced Chris' disengagement experience in several ways. These include a shifting of focus and priorities related to becoming a new parent, enjoyment and commitment to the new parental role, increased financial demands self-imposed by the new role of fatherhood, and a desire to find balance between work and home life.

Chris started playing field hockey as a young child, following his older brother's footsteps. He described a supportive family who came to cheer him on at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. Kristen believes that Chris' mother, who shares similar political views to Chris, has influenced Chris' career choices:

I think his mum probably played a big role. She works as an advocate in a non-profit group with childcare, but they're doing similar things. Chris is lobbying the government for support of his non-profit and she's doing the same thing for hers and they have similar kinds of outlooks, political stance, and so I think she has been an influence.

While Chris viewed the support and values gained from his family as "the usual thing", his coach contends that the support and encouragement of Chris' family throughout his field hockey career is a contributing factor to success as a field hockey player. Moreover, I can see Chris' mother's implicit influence in his description of the Esteem Team:
And, you know, it's right up my alley... it's still a connection to sport and a lot of advocacy work I've done in sport, and there was a connection to youth and trying to make a difference with them, so it was a bit of a social justice agenda which is something I'd been interested in...

Both prior to, and following, his disengagement from field hockey, Chris has been an active volunteer within the sport community, serving on several boards. His volunteer efforts and leadership abilities, as noted by his coach, are recognized within the broader sport community. Furthermore, Chris had developed a large network of connections within the sport community resulting in the job offer with the Esteem Team. Chris has also been able to capitalize on these connections in his efforts to expand the Esteem Team nationally. Kristen partially attributed Chris' current career success to his ability to access well-established connections within the sport community:

(His volunteer experience) not only influenced the opportunities that he had right then but his knowledge of what was out there as far as what was happening in the sports community where he could find opportunities and...when he took the job with the Esteem Team, where to pull strings, what connections he had that could make him successful at his job...his network knowledge really created the opportunities.

Chris agreed that his volunteer activities played a positive role in landing his current position with the Esteem Team, a position compatible with the value he places on social advocacy:

There's a bunch of volunteer things I'm doing with Athletes CAN and the board of directors there and then at a national level, there's a campaign that is going on called Sport Matters that's a push for a collective to be built around sport and maybe for the first time have a single voice for sport, lobbying or advocating to the government and the corporate sector and I've been quite involved in that so that and Esteem Team and a lot of the professional and volunteer responsibilities are tied together around things I care about, so I feel lucky about that. I'm sure a lot of people get great opportunities but this one seems to be a good fit for me.

Still within the transitional process of establishing himself as a business leader, Chris perceives his transitional experience thus far to have generally been a positive experience.
Although he may have delayed his disengagement from field hockey for another few years had Field Hockey Canada been sufficiently organized so as to have appointed a new National team coach and implemented a training plan building on the team’s previous success at the international level, unlike his first disengagement in 1991, Chris did leave the sport on “his own terms” in the words of his coach. Moreover, Chris left full-time high performance sport to pursue a job he finds challenging, allows him to remain connected to the sporting community, and aligns well with his social values.

Concurrent with his career transition, Chris was in the midst of the transitional experience of new fatherhood, an identity shift of its own, possibly serving as a buffer to Chris’ changing career identity. He recognizes how his priorities have re-aligned themselves with his partner’s pregnancy and the birth of their daughter such that his new family role has affected his career choices and values.

Despite Chris’ lack of concrete career plans post-hockey, his longstanding volunteer work as an athletes’ representative and member of various boards and executive committees ultimately brought forth both the job opportunity with the Esteem Team as well as aided Chris in his development efforts on behalf of this organisation. In this regard, Chris’ current job arose out of his volunteer efforts within the high performance sporting community. The result is a good match between Chris’ employment skills, experience, interests, values, and personality. The leadership skills contributing to his success on the field hockey pitch have been applied once again within a business context and Chris has applied these transferable skills to the advantage of both himself and the organization he represents. Kristen described Chris’ advancement as “amazing”, reflecting both the process and outcome of his career transition.
Chris' expectations remain positive as he continues to establish himself in his new career path. One of his goals is to achieve a satisfactory balance between work, family responsibilities, and leisure, reflecting the beginning of career establishment and homeostatic connections between career, family, and personal priorities.
The Karate Competitor

I met with Mona at the Sport B.C. office where she was working while in Vancouver. She is a slender, athletic Chinese-Canadian woman in her early thirties. We moved to a local café where, between sips of steamed milk, she educated me on the basics of her sport, karate.

Mona was born and raised in Kitimat, B.C. where her father practiced medicine and her mother dedicated herself to raising four daughters. Mona is the third of four sisters, all of whom were introduced to karate by their father. Studying martial arts was a key aspect of Mona’s non-traditional upbringing and an important part of the family identity:

...We’ve got four girls and I think we were all in a way raised as sons, and so we did a lot of things with our dad that...most of the time boys would normally do. We grew up on a farm and we learned how to use a chainsaw, fix a car, drive a tractor...a lot of work with our hands, cut the trees and all that kind of stuff and martial arts was part of it because (my father) had studied martial arts when he was in medical school and really loved it and wanted to do something with his daughters so that became part of our way of growing up so...in the mornings before school we would go downstairs and we had an area that we converted into a dojo with mats and a mirror on the wall and we’d all line up in age order and bow in and meditate and...work out, and this is what we did growing up.

When she was younger, Mona participated in both of karate’s specialties, kata and kumite, but once she reached international competition, she specialized in kumite or sparring.

She described matches as an incredibly intense two minutes of sparring including touch contact to the face and full contact to the body. Mona noted that kumite requires well developed technical skills, control, and discipline to accumulate maximal points without actually injuring one’s opponent:

Kumite is actual sparring so there’s nothing pre-arranged about it at all. You get points for executing attacks that are on target within the right time, right speed and power and they actually hit so it’s touch contact to the face...and you wear a small glove and a mouth guard and that’s it...so as soon as you touch, you have to pull back and then it’s full contact to the body so if you can make the person double over by hitting them so hard in the gut then that’s good because (laughing) then you’ll...get two points instead of one point if your technique is real powerful, whereas if you hit in the face, you’ll get a penalty if it’s too strong, it’s too hard and the other side will get a point.
As a child, Mona trained with her sisters in the basement dojo of the family home and at the local karate club. Within the community of Kitimat, most children played hockey or were involved in karate. Mona earned a berth on the Junior National Team when she was 15 years of age and joined the National team at the age of 17. Following high school graduation she moved from Kitimat to Vancouver to attend the University of British Columbia, and at this point, decided to place greater emphasis on training in order to “be the best in the world”. She embraced a fighting style made famous by the British; a more fluid, athletic style that suited Mona. Over the next four years, Mona rose quickly through the national and international ranks, winning the Canadian Championships and placing fourth at the World Championships by the age of 22 years. By the time Mona graduated from UBC, she had reached the next plateau in her athletic development and after one to two years of training independently, she began her search for a coach who could provide the level of training she required in order to advance her karate career. When Mona was 25 years old, she moved to England to train with a former World Champion who ran a small training facility. Smiling, Mona described her growth in karate as follows:

...There was a period of real growth probably from 17 to 22 or so and then I remember really plateauing out...by then I had come fourth in the world which was the best any Canadian woman had done and (I) had won the National’s a few times and there ...was no...great coach to take me to that next level so I ended up training a lot on my own and with my sisters. I would design my own training programmes and that was okay for a little while but then after a year or two I really felt like I was getting stagnant and I was searching for something to push me beyond that and that’s when this opportunity to go to England came because I applied for a scholarship for my Master’s in Law and I got it and I had wanted to train with this woman in England who was the six-time World Champion. So, I wrote her this letter telling her I was coming and I never heard back... (laughing)...and I went and I had her address so when I got there I called her club and...I went there and this is when I was 25 now...and that was another major, major turning point in terms of my athletic career.
Because karate is not an Olympic sport, Mona received very little federal funding to support her training and competition costs. Consequently, she has always balanced her training and competition schedule with the demands of university or work. While living in England, Mona completed a Master of Laws degree and then worked full-time in a management consultant firm, sacrificing income for flexibility to train and compete. Training in England provided Mona with the technical ability, self-confidence and enthusiasm for karate to move forward in the international ranks:

I was in England for three years and during that time...the first year I took off competition because I had become really disenchanted with the whole competition thing after being stagnant in Vancouver for awhile and my confidence was kind of low, so we...trained and I got that excitement for karate back and then I started competing and...the second year I was there I won the British Nationals which...was a big deal for me because the British were considered the best in the world and I had always...put them on this pedestal and (my) coach had always said, “you know, you can beat them, you can beat them” but I didn’t really believe it for myself and then when I did, it was a real psychological breakthrough for me and then I started doing a lot better internationally...

Although Mona never wholly dedicated herself to karate as a full-time athlete, she achieved almost every accolade in the sport except the World Championships’ gold medal. Her husband described how this title eluded her for most of her athletic career:

She had spent over ten years, I guess, competing for Canada and a lot of those years as their team captain and she had accomplished almost everything there was to accomplish in karate in terms of titles except for the one that was kind of elusive and she won a World Cup title but not the World Championships and I think that was what was really driving her for all these years because when she first...made the Canadian team, I guess it was now probably 14 years ago, so she went out and became fourth in the world during her first World Championships and she basically just lost the medal round by a hair and I think that always sat in her mind. She knew that she could do it. She tasted it early in her career but then this World Championships thing always became very elusive...

Mona echoed her husband’s perspective, noting that she used to view the World Championships’ gold medal as “a destination”, questioning whether full-time dedication to her sport would have been the difference in terms of winning the gold medal. However, later in her
athletic career, Mona’s perspective shifted as she began to embrace her “journey” through karate rather than focusing on the “destination”, the World Championships’ gold medal. This shift in thinking allowed Mona to appreciate karate as one passion among other valued aspects of her life:

Looking back...sometimes I wonder what more I would have been able to do if I had been a full-time athlete and...there’s no question it would have made a difference. I’m not sure if I would have still chosen that because...the place where I am now is that life is a journey and not a destination and I always used to think it was a destination which was a gold medal at the World’s for me and now...there’s so many things that have enriched my life. Like, when I went to England, karate was what drove me there, the law scholarship is what got me there and I ended up meeting my husband there and falling in love and changing my career there and...my sport took off as well but it was one part of my life...even though it was my passion and it was what gave me the drive and sustenance to do a lot of other things, it was never the only thing and I think that’s made a big difference in terms of...the transition of retiring.

Mona is acutely aware of how the transferable skills acquired in karate are applied to her personal, academic, and working life. Often questioned by the Chinese press about how she was able to balance karate and academics without sacrificing one for the other, Mona has been able to apply the self-discipline, focus, confidence, and intense concentration she acquired in karate to both her studies and work life:

In my experience, a lot of things I learned in sport actually helped my school. For example, focus. In karate you have to focus and learn to focus so intently for those two minutes so that literally if you lose focus you’ll get hit in the face which is a drastic consequence...a karate match is such an intense experience. I mean, if you ever get in a fight with someone on the street, you get very emotional, like it’s a contact and fighting is a very emotional thing for people and so you have to learn how to deal with it in a regular way and keep your emotions in check and...another thing is discipline, like learning to train when you don’t want to or to keep running or training even though your whole body is screaming at you to stop and...those things I could apply to work, my schoolwork and so homework would take me...an hour instead of three hours because I wouldn’t sit there daydreaming. Sometimes obviously, when you’re a kid you want to play too, but those were things that really enhanced each other and then...going the other way...doing well in school and feeling like you have your eggs in more than one basket is a bit reassuring because then you’re not putting the whole weight of the world on your shoulders and in an individual sport you don’t have anyone else to shove it off to...
After 12 years of competing as a National team member and as a nine-time Canadian Champion, Mona decided to leave competitive karate although she will continue to train karate for the rest of her life. By this time, she was married to an American economist she met in England and the couple had recently moved to Washington, DC when Mona’s husband was offered his “dream job” as an economist with the World Bank. Mona felt that it was time to stop competing as she no longer had a “burning desire to win” and wanted to focus on other aspects of her life including her career and starting a family. Having moved from England to America, Mona had given up her job as a management consultant and had no desire to continue in this field nor did she wish to practice law. Mona’s husband contends that despite the fact that Mona could have easily established herself in either of these professions in Washington, she was intent on finding a career where she could apply the same passion and intensity she had directed to karate:

She in fact got lots of job offers from investment banking to consulting in top firms in the world that are based here in DC and any law firm would have picked her up but she said, “No, I’m not interested in money. I’m not interested in these kinds of careers because it doesn’t interest me to help a corporation make more money or something like that...what interests me is something that I need to figure out”, and she knew it had to do with sports. She knew that it had something to do with karate but maybe more generally sport and she went out on this journey to try to figure out what exactly it was that was going to keep her happily pre-occupied for the rest of her life and through that time, boy she did everything...

Initially, Mona found her disengagement from karate to be a liberating experience, as her daily schedule was no longer dictated by the demands of training. However, she was uncertain about her career plans, searching for a career direction about which she felt passionate. Her first business venture involved opening a sport marketing company, with the intention of manufacturing karate gear. Upon visiting India to investigate the textile industry, Mona discovered that she did not want to carry the burden of worrying about quality control issues.
Having decided that sport marketing “wasn’t really it”; Mona entered the Hong Kong action movie industry, garnering a role in a movie as well as martial arts and movie magazine features. Expecting that she would “love” working in the movie industry, Mona found the work to be unfulfilling and was disenchanted by the shallowness of the people. Mona’s husband indicated that she was a major contender for the role of the evil princess in a Power Rangers film and that being turned down for the part “probably turned out to be a blessing in disguise because she didn’t think the movies, the television was actually her thing”.

Mona’s next business venture, Future is Female, involved using high performance athletes to combine motivational speaking with a fashion show, focusing on building a positive body image and self-confidence in young girls. Over the next six months, Mona discovered the perils of combining fashion and motivational speaking to create an appropriate message for young girls. As noted by Mona’s teammate, “the world isn’t ready to hear the words Future is Female”.

Outside of paid employment, Mona became involved in Toronto’s bid for the 2008 Olympic Games, ultimately in the role of athlete representative at the final bid presentation in Moscow, an ironic position for a non-Olympic athlete.

Through the process of trying out different projects, Mona was able to identify the work values most salient to her post-karate career choice. She became determined to find work that was philanthropic, provided a sufficient income, and was enjoyable. Thus, her career search was guided by these three priorities:

…I realized that what I was really interested in doing was something that combined doing good, making money, and having fun and these were all things that were equally important to me and I call it my three-legged stool ‘cause you know, stool means three legs to stand on. Four is one, you know, one’s unnecessary and it can’t stand with two and if I had just gone the route of making money, then I would have chosen law or consulting and I knew that wasn’t enough. And more money couldn’t compensate for
feeling like I was giving back or having fun in my job and yet having fun wasn’t all of it either ‘cause I’m not a hedonistic type of person and I get a lot of satisfaction from working before playing and knowing that I’ve earned it...and...well, the doing good things, well I’m not Mother Theresa. I need to make a living and I do get some satisfaction out of earning a wage...

Mona was extremely proactive in her search for her career niche, capitalizing upon opportunities as they presented themselves. Her self-confidence, sense of competence, and business experience is evident in her description of her initial approach to the Esteem Team:

...There were a lot of things that came up unexpectedly and yet I think my approach to them had a lot to do with it as well because my approach had always been, you know, when a door is there, open it and create whatever it takes to open it and so, when I saw Chris at the regional summit here in Vancouver, completely by chance and he said, “oh, we should talk”, well...I went back and I wrote this eight page memo about how I saw the Esteem Team unfolding as a national organization because he had been saying that he wanted to take it from B.C. to across the country and I had a lot of ideas about how that could happen and you know...strategically how it could work and so...that was what started the whole discussion about me getting involved in (the) Esteem Team and he said, “well, you know, how much would you want to get paid? And I said, “Well, I’m not interested in being an employee of Esteem Team. I want to be a partner, otherwise I’ll be an employee of a law firm and make three times as much money...”

Ultimately, after a long journey of trying out different business ventures, Mona joined the Esteem Team as a partner, working to expand the Esteem Team nationally and creating a youth development programme. She believes that through this partnership, she can achieve her three career priorities: altruism, economics and enjoyment.

Mona’s personal characteristics have influenced her career transition both positively and negatively. Through karate Mona has gained an immense passion for the sport that has taught her to “bring out the best in yourself”. Thus, her passion to “inspire other people” to follow a similar personal journey has guided her career choices. As Mona described it:

...It’s not just because of the...feeling of success. It’s because it’s made me discover a lot about who I am and in order to do well in sport you really have to know yourself and you have to know what makes you tick and you have to know what brings you down and you have to know how to get back on track when you’re not where you should be...
This need to find a career she is passionate about was echoed by Mona’s husband:

...She realized when she was retiring from karate, why should I settle for something in life in terms of my career that I’m not passionate about, so what became her main goal was to find something outside of karate that was going to be equally passionate for her as karate was for her during her years of competition and that became the trick and that became a major struggle for her...

From a positive perspective, Mona’s passion to share her self-knowledge enabled her to discriminate between career opportunities based on their compatibility with this passion. Locating her passion came at the cost of a year and a half discovery process, trying out different projects until Mona created her new job with the Esteem Team.

Another intrinsic factor influencing Mona’s disengagement experience is the role karate plays in the formation of her self-identity. Because Mona never pursued karate exclusively, she has developed other aspects of her identity as a student, lawyer, and management consultant such that she did not lose her sense of self when she stopped competing in her sport.

Karate also provided Mona the self-confidence, focus, and discipline to successfully balance multiple career paths, enabling her to move from project to project with the belief that she could achieve success within each one. As noted by Mona’s teammate however, her prior athletic successes and sense of competence acted a double-edged sword as she embraced different business ventures:

...For Mona I would say that whenever she’s set out to accomplish something, she’s generally able to do it on the first try and she couldn’t on the first try or the second try and it’s been the third or the fourth that she’s felt that she’s really come through with something, like a breakthrough...and I would say that she’s still got a ways to go before she’ll say that she’s gotten that crystal...that goal right in the palm of her hand.

Both Mona’s husband and her teammate describe Mona as cerebral and articulate, characteristics lending themselves well to both law and business. On the one hand, Mona’s preference for analytical thinking has and will foster success as she continues to work within a
business environment. On the other hand, this same preference has challenged Mona to step outside her comfort zone to embrace a more self-reflexive style of thinking as she examined why different business ventures were less than the success she envisioned. Her teammate described this metamorphosis:

I think she's become more attuned to that (self-examination) throughout this whole process...she’s more attuned to reflective thinking for herself and what works for her and why...but really looking at and catching herself when it’s not working and why it’s not working and how she can change it.

On an interpersonal level, Mona’s disengagement experience was enriched by her marital and family relationships. Through these relationships, Mona received both emotional and financial support, enabling her to spend the time and energy required to find her career niche. Moreover, her husband and family, while encouraging, offered Mona external perspectives with regard to her business ideas and her venture into the entertainment industry. In particular, Mona’s husband encouraged her to explore different avenues in an effort to locate a career path compatible with her passion and values. He reinforced the notion, “...that she doesn’t have to settle. She can focus and try to find something that is her passion outside of competitive karate”. Mona’s teammate views Mona’s husband as “very crucial in his support”, particularly encouraging Mona to find her niche:

...He knew how frustrating it was for her and knew how much, how important it was to maintain a connection with karate and what she’s gained from karate...he kept encouraging her to find avenues that would build on that and so that was...really, really key. I don’t know where Mona would be, I really don’t know where, if it weren’t for him.

Mona’s family have also supported and encouraged her to continue searching for her passion, providing another external perspective to her situation:

They’re a very close family and each of them talk about this concept of passion very openly all the time. It’s wonderful in fact...they speak about it candidly, openly and they’re very supportive of each other so I think that had a lot to do with it too so if Mona
was interested in movies, there was a lot of good critical thinking around the table (saying), “why the heck are you wasting your life doing movies when you have, you know, all these other things going for you?” But there was healthy debate and dialogue and through that debate and dialogue, I think it helped to clarify Mona’s own opinions about certain things as well as provide her some more direction about where she would like to go but she also knew that she had the support to try lots of different things...so it was an enriching experience overall.

Contextual factors also played a role in Mona’s disengagement experience, interacting with her personal characteristics to form career opportunities. First, several opportunities including the Toronto 2008 Olympic bid and the Esteem Team expansion presented themselves to Mona, somewhat through happenstance. However, Mona relied on her business savvy to recognize a good opportunity, her willingness to take chances, her self-confidence, and her proactive approach to life to use these opportunities to her advantage:

My philosophy is to open as many doors as you can because sometimes you don’t know which one you want to walk through and if you shut the door before you want to walk through it, then you can close off an opportunity that could have otherwise been great.

Secondly, Mona had sufficient financial stability to take the time to “pursue her dreams” so that she did not have to “settle” for the first available job in order to meet the basic needs in life. Mona supported her husband financially when he was a doctoral student in England and now that he was working in his dream job with the World Bank, his income allowed Mona to take as much time as she required to identify her career goals without significant financial concerns.

Acknowledging that while he and Mona are “in the top one percent of the U.S. income class”, Mona’s husband pointed to the importance of being raised in an immigrant family, particularly as it pertains to the development of Mona’s work ethic and achievement orientation, both in sport and work. In this regard, familial work values, cultural norms, and financial status
combined to provide an environment where Mona's athletic, educational, and employment goals were nurtured.

Thirdly, Mona was never able to fully devote her time and energy to karate because, as an athlete in a non-Olympic sport, she received little government funding and no corporate sponsorships. Consequently, in order to continue competing at the international level, Mona was required to pay the lion's share of her own travel expenses, "a big financial drain for yourself and whoever's supporting you". Therefore, partly out of financial necessity, Mona's career development outside of karate was enhanced, as she did not forsake education or professional employment to pursue her sport. Mona left karate not only with the acquisition of transferable skills gained by her athletic experiences, she re-entered the work force with a professional designation and work experience as a management consultant.

Although Mona believes that she has found her career niche with the Esteem Team, she remains within the transitional period as she begins to establish herself within this organisation:

I think I've found what I want to do and as much as it's a bit tenuous and there's no certainty with this thing we're working on...I really, like, deep down inside, I know it's going to work. I don't just think it's going to work. I know. So, in ten years from now, in twenty years from now, this is what I want to be doing...

The journey Mona traveled to join the Esteem Team was, at times, challenging. Nonetheless, she believes she has found an organization whose goals allow her to "feed my desire to give back and my desire to stay connected to my sport and my desire to run a business". She feels positive about the timing of her disengagement from karate and after a process of trial and error, has found a job compatible with her work values, abilities, and need for autonomy.
The Rower

I met Dirk on a rainy November afternoon in a local Kitsilano eatery. At six foot five inches, he is tall and broad shouldered, the ideal physique for a rower. We sat down over a cup of tea to talk and it was apparent through his easy manner that Dirk has been the subject of many interviews. He was startlingly frank about many aspects of his disengagement experience but more cautious about discussing his personal relationships, a reflection of his media savvy and awareness.

Dirk, who is in his mid-thirties, started rowing at age 19 with the University of Victoria varsity team. Within three years, Dirk made the National team, initially as a pair's rower. He then moved to the eight where he rowed for three years, earning silver medals at the 1990 and 1991 FISA World Rowing Championships and a gold medal at the 1992 Olympic Games. The following year, most of the 1992 eight’s crew retired and Dirk moved to Toronto to attend Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College, thus preventing him from training full-time with the National eights crew. Consequently, Dirk switched from being an eight’s rower to a single sculler, demonstrating a rare versatility in the sport of rowing. From a purely technical perspective, his coach described Dirk’s ability to move from the eight to the single as “amazing”:

...very few people have ever been able to go from an eight to a single. It’s very rare. People tried it from other countries after Sydney and they can’t...you know, it’s very, very hard to do. Very few people could do it and be successful and Dirk was able to win the Olympics (1992) and the next year win the World’s (1993) from an eight to a single so that in itself is pretty special.

Dirk was more modest, describing the differing technical and personality traits of a single sculler, failing to mention that he won the World Championships in his first year in a single until much later in the interview:

...you kind of find out if you’re a small boat mover or not. A lot of people aren’t. Like they’re good in eights and sort of more power athletes that might be a little rough around
the edges (but) put them in the middle of an eight and they look great because the boat is stable and you don’t have to worry about balance and... to a single it’s a bit more... a little more finesse... you’ve got to steer the curvature of the boat along a little bit more and have a bit more sensitivity I think towards the feel of the water and flow of the boat and all that stuff. A lot of people don’t respond to the single very well and then there’s a whole group of people that wouldn’t want to. Just the solitude of the single... so there’s a whole personality side of it that a lot of people just couldn’t handle the training by yourself for six hours a day on the water and with only yourself to motivate... I like the independence of it and I think that’s what drove me quite habitually was that I was starting school and I couldn’t really be in a centre with other athletes or in a boat in a team atmosphere...

In his first year as a single sculler, Dirk won the 1993 FISA World Rowing Championships, affirming his within-sport career transition. Over the next five years, Dirk made his education his first priority, limiting full-time training to the summer months. Between 1994 and 1998, Dirk’s international placing ranged from a silver medal at the 1996 Olympic Games to an eighth place finish at the 1994 World Championships. Despite his variable international performance during these years, he was willing to sacrifice his medal potential for his future career as a chiropractor:

You know, you want to be ideally prepared to hit the start line and know that you prepared as well as you possibly could and better than everyone else and instead I’d be going in thinking, “well, you know I’ve got four months of intense training, we’ll see what happens”... and inevitably you’d just have a good first half of the race and then everyone else would fly by which happened every year that I had to do that so... it was hard but at the same time if I took time right off I think I would have been worse off for it later down the road, for the 2000 Olympics so when I step back and think, “yeah, it was definitely the right thing to do” but during those summers it was pretty painful, you know, as an athlete totally unprepared so it was hard and I’m sure that my results would have been way better had I just stuck to rowing for a whole quadrennial between ’96 and 2000. You know, won a few more medals at the World’s and done this and that and it would have been kind of nice I guess to do, but I think at the end of the day I was happy... for my own peace of mind to be training knowing that as soon as I finished or retired from rowing, I had that (chiropractic) to go to, something I’m excited to do and want to do rather than being faced with the big “what am I gonna do now?” or starting school.

By 1998, Dirk had graduated from chiropractic college and devoted the next two years to rowing, training six hours per day on Elk Lake and working part-time as a chiropractor in
Victoria, "...a few people in the afternoon a few days a week". However, his primary focus was rowing, in particular, preparing for the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney.

Dirk entered the 2000 Olympic Games as a medal contender and expectations were high.

His coach said that Dirk, and most others in the sport, expected that at the very minimum, he would win the bronze medal:

...I think he was counting on being in the medals and retiring with the worst case scenario, gold-silver-bronze from each of the three Olympics...which I think that’s at least what he had in mind. I don’t think he ever thought that he would be...or even around fourth, right? Leading up to the Olympics, Dirk was the most successful rower Canada has ever had. He has more medals and has had more success than anyone in Canadian history...for a man, I mean, not on the women’s side but for the men’s side. So, for him, he was quite famous, he was being interviewed all the time. (When) he was seen on the street, people would know him. He was in the papers and all that and you go from that to a build up of the Olympics...at the Olympics you’re being interviewed all the time. CBC’s there and everybody...so you’ve got this huge media thing and all this attention on you...

It was not to be. Dirk finished in fourth place, much to his disappointment. In the final race of his career, he fell short of his own expectations, the expectations of the rowing community, and the media covering the Games. He lamented, “Fourth is like the world’s worst place to be”, describing the experience:

For most of my career I equated a good performance with medals, preferably a gold medal, depending on how prepared I was and what year and just because I knew I could do it...so I don’t like to say “yeah success is a medal or not a medal” but I just think that if I do have a good race I will medal at the level that I was at so anything short of that I feel like I probably didn’t have a good race if I didn’t make the podium, you know, I kind of had that mentality. ...It’s hard because I look back and think it would have been nicer to go out a little bit better, you know, and all that but most of that’s just an ego side of it. A lot of which is really important in sport which is not so much that and the more I am removed from that the more I realize the importance of just that process, you know, as much as you get fixated on medals, like especially me because I thought it was in my reach most of the time...it’s not that important in some respects, but it’s still tough.
Having earned a fourth place finish at the Olympic Games, Dirk hung up his oars. At 32 years of age, Dirk was ready to leave rowing to focus his energy toward opening his chiropractic practice, having earned his degree two years earlier.

The year following Dirk’s disengagement from rowing was tumultuous, characterized by multiple life changes, personally, relationally, and geographically. The net result was a difficult transitional period, experienced by Dirk as a loss of control, loss of independence, frustrating, and depressing. After Dirk left rowing, he relocated to Australia, moved in with his girlfriend, and unsuccessfully applied for the work visa he required to open up a chiropractic clinic in Sydney.

In the months leading up to his final Olympic Games, Dirk met a Canadian woman living in Australia, successfully pursuing her own career as a writer, model and television celebrity. It was this relationship that propelled him to Australia. Describing his “uncharacteristic” decision to move to another country to be with someone, Dirk was influenced by a fatalistic sense of synchronicity and the draw of new love:

Ironically, I toyed with the idea of going down (to Sydney) when I was still attending chiropractic college...so I thought I may go down there because a buddy of mine was thinking of moving down there and he had been living down there before and so I thought I could go down and start a practice there so that entered my mind but I didn’t think it would actually happen and then I met Tara who was living down there at the time, met her in Victoria...so it seemed like “wow, what a bizarre thing for this to happen”. She lives in Sydney where I wanted to eventually move to so it just made it so easy, it just felt so right initially and then just became so wrong (laughing) in the long run, which is sort of strange but I probably wouldn’t have moved down there, I don’t think, if it hadn’t been for her... My buddy never did move down there so it wasn’t like we could start a practice together...I wouldn’t normally move across the world for anybody (laughing)...of course that’s kind of uncharacteristic of me...it was good when it was good but...not meant to be, I guess.

Having left his sport on a disappointing note, Dirk moved to Australia and into a common-law living arrangement within a relatively new relationship, reflecting three major
overlapping transitions. In hindsight, Dirk can see how his disengagement experience was affected by the compounding impact of these major life changes occurring simultaneously:

...it was a unique time I guess for me and in that respect I think it was just too much change at once. I mean, if you look at it realistically, it wasn’t a smart thing to do in terms of stressful changes in your life, you know. Apart from having all of your friends and family die or getting divorced, it was just like moving across the earth, to (somewhere) a long way from everybody you know. It wasn’t like moving across the country. So that and the post-Olympic thing and moving in with my girlfriend who I had never lived together with before...so there were a lot of things that happened all at once which probably wasn’t the smartest thing to do. It felt like the right thing to do at the time but really I don’t think it was probably the easiest way to do things but...but I wasn’t in a good frame of mind to have those changes anyway. Like, if I’m at a stable base emotionally then I think it would be a lot easier to deal with more change but I was pretty depressed just from the Olympic results, and that combined with retirement...those two things were fairly big but it was not a good time for me to be doing anything in terms of major life changes.

Much to his surprise, when Dirk applied for an Australian work visa, his application was declined. Dirk, whose locus on control is firmly planted within himself, is used to achieving his goals through the application of talent, dedication and perseverance. In Australia, he was faced with the atypical experience of not attaining his goal as a result of decisions made by somebody other than himself. For an individual who craves independence and self-determination, the bureaucratic process associated with his visa application repeatedly frustrated Dirk. The decision most affecting his ability to practice his profession was beyond his control and his efforts were in vain. Ultimately, Dirk adopted the fatalistic perspective that “it probably just wasn’t meant to happen”. However in the meantime, he began to feel increasingly depressed.

Having moved to Australia immediately after the Olympic Games, Dirk was emotionally vulnerable, still digesting the experience of placing fourth. Added to this vulnerability, he had left his family, friends, and rowing career in Canada, starting over in a new country in the midst of a relatively new relationship. At a time when he “needed to...get into something and get into it right away and be busy and just focus on that new thing”, Dirk’s ability to practice his
profession was thwarted by decisions made by the Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA). The compounding effects of these multiple stressors took their toll and Dirk, who had never been depressed before, found himself sinking into a dysthymic mood, unable to shake his feelings of loss and frustration:

…it’s frustrating because it sounds so ridiculous to wallow in that kind of mood and it’s not really like me to do that but at the same time it was sort of this overwhelming thing and I just could not snap out of it, you know, and it wasn’t brutal-brutal, it’s not like I was suicidal or anything but if I had ever thought about suicide I would have thought about it then, you know, literally it entered my mind every now and again, like holy smokes! I don’t even want that to enter my mind even though it’s not like I was actually thinking of doing it but it’s just there’s that option, you know (laughing)...it was pretty bad which is pretty weird but it’s the first time in my life that I’ve had to deal with anything that’s been sort of negative...

While Dirk’s preference for independence and self-reliance served him well as a rower, his usual coping skills were not as effective when faced with depressive feelings. Laughingly, Dirk described himself, “kind of like the dog that crawls off into the forest and dies...you know, I won’t burden you with my death...” although his desire for solitude at a time when his mood was low, ultimately contributed to the demise of his relationship:

…it was good to have somebody around for that time of my life but it was probably hell for them at the same time so I almost feel like quite often in relationships I feel like if I’m being a burden on them I just want to leave it...there’s no point in having me be there. People have ups and downs and you (are supposed to) both balance out each other, each have your ups and downs but if I feel like I’m being a drag on somebody for too long I just don’t want to be involved at all and that’s what I felt like after awhile.

After several months of unsuccessfully overcoming the visa obstacle imposed by DIMA, Dirk concluded that he was not meant to start the next chapter of his life in Australia. Becoming stuck in the elevator at the DIMA offices represented a final “sign” that this direction was “probably not right”. Dirk left both his girlfriend and his dream of opening a practice in Sydney to return to Canada, ultimately settling in Vancouver.
Dirk opened up his chiropractic clinic in Vancouver and became consumed by the challenge of building his practice. On the one hand, Dirk is passionate about the practice and philosophy of chiropractic. On the other hand, he is highly self-critical and achievement oriented, thus placing pressure upon himself to meet his business goals. The adjustment of having moved from the elite ranks of sport to the more mundane position of being one of many chiropractors in Vancouver is something Dirk has had to address:

...I’m so used to being here working on the last one percent of fine tuning, you know, you’re 99 percent good at what you do—it’s just a matter of getting that tiny bit better whereas now you’re working on the basic, basic stuff and that is hard to do. I think for any athlete to move on from something they’re good at to something that is a big question mark is hard, I guess that would be the biggest thing transition-wise. I mean I enjoy the challenge of it on the one level but at the same time, there’s a side of me that craves being good at something and being in the limelight and...being recognized by people as being good at what you do, to having to prove it all over again or acquire the skills that enable you to be that way in some other area of life and it’s not necessarily ever going to happen, right? Unless you believe it will. Obviously there’s a set of skills, qualities that make a person good at what they do but that doesn’t necessarily transfer from your sport.

Dirk’s former eight’s teammate and roommate echoes this sentiment of adjusting to a post-rowing change in status:

His sense of identity went from being this person that had all these people around him, all this attention and all that to falling off a cliff, you know. I could see it in his...you know, it’s like a movie star or something that has all this attention and then all of a sudden they don’t get movies anymore. That transition from being famous and so for Dirk being this top athlete and having all this attention and sponsorship and money and all this stuff and then just basically jumping off a cliff to being an average resident in Vancouver would definitely, definitely affect him.

Dirk’s coach compares him to Tiger Woods in his intensity and focus on perfecting every stroke, commenting, “it doesn’t interest him to be anything less than that”. It is this intensity, this self-efficacious belief that he can “buck the trend”, that propels Dirk to set lofty business goals. Having said this, these expectations also generate anxiety and self-doubt in a man used to working on the last one percent of his skills:
I think it's been a hard thing to try and find myself in this new arena and be confident that I'm doing everything that I can do, you know. I just want to be great again, like that (snapping fingers). I don't want to work ten years to try to get great but that's what it takes so...I beat myself up continually over every weakness or fault that I have.

Dirk believes he is post-transitional as it pertains to having left his rowing career behind. He does not regret his decision to leave his sport when he did, describing his decision as "...book closed, done that...book of my life then let's start on the next one". Although he has the "base foundation" in his chiropractic career, Dirk will not settle for anything less than optimal:

I just have an idea of where I want to be and it's not where I am and (the more) I think of the disparity between those points, the more I beat myself up so it's a very all consuming thing...like I don't think I thought about rowing this much for example, when I was rowing I didn't go home and think about how I could get my catch better or my finish or my boat an extra centimeter. I mean, I thought about it a lot, like it was all consuming but this feels even more so and I think maybe it's because I've crossed into a situation where I'm a virtual novice but I'm trying to be at a level where I'm not whereas rowing sort of had a set of progressive steps where you feel comfortable at the place where you are at and you know you'll get where you're going. That didn't seem unnatural whereas now I just feel like I want to get this going now or I'm going to go bankrupt, you know. It's not like I have time to screw around.

The most difficult aspect of the chiropractic profession for Dirk is not the practice itself but marketing his business, "getting people in the door", as he says. This sentiment is echoed by Dirk's former roommate who commented that as a rower, Dirk never had any difficulty attracting sponsorship or media attention, "he'd constantly have media and sponsors and this stuff coming to him" whereas he is less comfortable using rowing or sporting networks to build his practice, "for some reason (he) looks upon it as not the right way to start a business". As such, while Dirk may be post-transitional in terms of his disengagement from high performance sport, the extenuating circumstances under which he attempted to open his chiropractic practice extended his career transition by several months. Although less than an ideal start to his new career, Dirk is committed to the belief that "chiropractic is for everyone" and remains optimistic
that he will “pay my dues” now and “hit that target” he has set for himself. Despite moments of self-doubt, the confidence and optimism of the world-class athlete shine through, leaving me standing outside in the pouring rain with absolutely no doubt that Dirk will achieve his career goals. He is simply not willing to settle for anything less.
The Wrestler

I met Scott on a warm mid-summer evening at his place of employment, an upscale hotel in downtown Vancouver. Surrounded by well-dressed tourists and business people, I was somewhat surprised to see Scott emerge from the elevator wearing a t-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops. He explained, as we adjourned to the lounge, he had just returned from the gym. It is evident in his powerful build that he still works out.

Over cranberry juice and club soda, Scott told me about his wrestling career, his exit from high performance sport, his varied working life, and his many volunteer projects. He has a dominant personality with strong opinions he is willing to share, aptly characterized by his former coach as, “the world according to Scott”.

Living in Vernon, Scott entered the sport of wrestling in grade eight, initially motivated to try the sport in an effort to become a better fighter:

“(I) wasn’t interested in sport at school. I just heard on the P.A. system, “Wrestlers, remember there is a practice at 3:00”...and I thought, ‘hmm, wrestling practice, maybe I’ll go out’ and...as I’ve told everyone, my motivation for getting involved in wrestling was to help me in case I got into a fight and it would assist me in doing better in the fight.”

With the exception of grade nine, when sidelined by two broken hands from a fight, Scott wrestled throughout high school. Scott applied to Simon Fraser University from high school but did not have sufficient academic marks to earn a seat in a first year programme. With an uncommon moxie for an 18-year-old, he successfully made his case to the SFU appeals board the Friday before university started. Scott’s sole motivation for attending SFU was to wrestle, describing their wrestling programme as “one of the best in Canada”. He admits that academia was of no interest to him as an undergraduate student although he did ultimately earn a Bachelor of Business Administration degree.
During his first year at SFU, Scott earned a spot on the Junior National team. As a member of the Junior team, Scott’s highest international placing was fourth. In his fourth year at SFU, Scott made the Senior National team where he remained until 1995. During this time he placed as high as fifth in the world, won a gold medal at the 1994 Commonwealth Games and attended the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona; significant achievements for a wrestler whose athletic talent coming into the National programme was described by coaching staff as “very average”. Scott’s former coach, now the head coach for the National Training Centre, attributes Scott’s athletic success to his determination and competitive fire:

I think Scott, (was) a very average athlete coming into the programme, very average, (but) what carried the day for Scott and being able to go to the Olympics and be a National champion and the success that he did (have), on, I wouldn’t say limited talent, but not as talented as a lot of the others, was his personality and his dedication and his desire to become the best that he could and find a way, to search for a way...to be successful so he...he had to...you know, he was very calculating in that regard.

Scott also described his approach to wrestling as tactical. By way of example, he laughingly recounted how he tricked an opponent into prematurely conceding a close match:

Even so, I’d play with them. I remember in a match against a French guy, he was so close to scoring to tie the score...if it was tied, a lot of times the way it used to work, with a tie the guy who scored the last point would win, so you could win on a tie so you didn’t want to give up that last point, so a lot of the matches are won or lost in the last ten seconds...so I remember in a match (the opponent) had his back to the clock and I could see the clock so I’d do this (Scott pretends to look over my shoulder) a lot of times with five or ten seconds left, I’d be in the middle and there would be breaks and I would kind of shrug it off as if the time is up now, you know, and just put my hand out to shake his hand and he’d kind of stop and he’d just lost all of his momentum now and uh...realized then, done the match is over so I’d just (laughing)...basically ran him out, time runs out now, so it was definitely a tactic, a game...

Scott’s tactical approach to wrestling extended beyond the mat. His wife described how he carefully planned his life around “what I am going to eat, when am I gonna sleep, and when can I train.” Even when traveling to international tournaments, Scott ensured that he prepared for his matches to the greatest extent possible:
I’m a very social person so I enjoy going out and meeting people and seeing everything but I was also very strategic and I would always bring stuff and prepare by buying a dictionary of the language and writing down phrases so I could communicate with people. The more you can communicate, the more you can get, you know? When you’re in these countries, you need help, you know, help may mean anything that can make your life easier there when you’re there competing, you want to go for it, right? So, like in Bulgaria, you couldn’t get milk anywhere but if you buy things to trade with the kitchen staff in the hotel, then I’d get free milk.

Scott’s “remarkable success” in wrestling not only reflects his tenacious dedication to winning but also his ability to identify his needs and ensure that he acquired every advantage possible, both on and off the mat.

Scott never had the luxury of exclusively focusing his energy toward wrestling. In his early years on the National team, Scott was a university student. Following graduation, he worked in a variety of jobs, squeezing in wrestling practice around his work schedule. Within wrestling, “progressing in all areas” is encouraged and while no formal protocol is in place, Scott’s former coach described the informal mandate of the National wrestling programme:

...(We) don’t want them to become a wrestling bum, you know, and just be an athlete in their late twenties without having anything to fall back on so...we certainly informally encourage the athletes to have something outside of their sport. ...It’s always a tricky business...we want more from the athlete in terms of their participation and commitment and dedication and desire to the sport but yet we have to be cognizant of the fact that they have to be progressing in these other areas and be able to pay their bills so it is a fine line...the best case scenario is if they’re able to get in a situation which would provide them with some of the experiences that they may use later in developing a portfolio. I maintain...and each coach has a different philosophy but, you know, my impression...my sense of this situation is if the athlete is able to take care of business off the mat effectively, (this) will allow them to take care of business on the mat so I can’t turn a blind eye to how they’re progressing and...I’m aware (that) it is nonetheless still very demanding of their time and of their commitment yet I have to be supportive...you know, if they have a seminar or they have something to go to or they’re volunteering here or they have an awesome job opportunity then I have to sort of gauge it and it comes down to time management essentially...we have successful wrestlers but they’re also successful people and we’re very proud of that fact...

Following university graduation, Scott continued to train with the National team. He also worked full-time. Initially, Scott worked in insurance sales for one year but found the travel
required in this job to be incompatible with the demands of training. He then worked at SFU for several years, initially as an equipment attendant and later as the university’s athletic coordinator, balancing his work schedule with wrestling practice. Although he developed excellent time management skills, Scott recalls that he was “always rushing” between the gym and his job, flexing wrestling practice into his work schedule. Despite the fact that Scott maintained a full-time job for the majority of his athletic career on the National team, his primary identity was, and still is, as an athlete. He self-identified, “I’ve always been ‘Scott the wrestler’ first. I still am essentially.” Scott’s wife echoed this perception:

Wrestling became a very large part of his identity and people would say, “Oh, Scott the wrestler” and it was always “Scott, the wrestler” because he did so well and had such longevity so to try to see himself as something other than “Scott the wrestler” was difficult...it was because he was something special, it was really hard to give that up.

In 1994, Scott won the gold medal at the Commonwealth Games in Victoria, an accomplishment of which he is deservedly proud of. Shortly thereafter, he left wrestling in response to an acrimonious disagreement with his coach:

I had this dispute with my coach. I had just won the Commonwealth Games. It was a good time to quit except the Pan Am Games were in Argentina or something like that...Buenos Aries? Argentina? And I was looking forward to that but my coach was pressuring me to do a bunch of stuff and creating problems for me and he was actually working against me, trying to get my money taken away, like my government money...so he was being a real jerk so I just kind of walked out and said, “Forget it. I’ve had enough.”

Although he never perceived his leave of absence from wrestling as a permanent state of disengagement, Scott did not wrestle for the next three years. He intended to return to competition to represent Canada at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta but did not follow through with this plan because, “I was promised a job and it didn’t materialize and I kicked myself.”
At the age of 33, Scott did return to wrestling, stating that his return was motivated by the opportunity to travel to Iran for the 1998 World Championships. He worked with a new coach and succeeded in winning the National title, thus earning him a spot at the World Championships. Although he competed at the 1998 World Championships in Tehran, Scott's coach noted that Scott did not achieve the same level of international success he had earlier in his career.

One year after returning to wrestling, Scott left his sport again, this time on his own terms. From Scott's perspective, the key factor in his decision to stop wrestling was that at the age of 34, his "body wouldn't handle" the enormous physical strain of training. At the same time, Scott's father offered what appeared to be a promising employment opportunity, thus partly influencing Scott's decision to leave wrestling.

In contrast to his 1994 disengagement from high performance sport, Scott's decision to leave wrestling in 1998 was made with complete independence. His decision was made without consultation or input from anyone else including his wife:

She knows there's nothing she can do about it (laughing)...so it's irrelevant what she thinks when it comes to wrestling...(laughing)...it doesn't matter...there's nothing she can do about that.

Scott's wife shares this perspective, noting that while she was "always ready for him to stop wrestling", she understood that any decision to leave high performance sport would be made by Scott and Scott alone:

I don't think I had any influence at all on when he decided (to retire) and nor did his parents or anything...

Ultimately, Scott's job with his father did not work out, resulting in an estrangement between father and son. Now looking to other career paths, Scott accepted a marketing position with Tourism Vancouver where he worked for three years. He then moved to the Pacific
National Exhibition where he worked in marketing for several months before he was unexpectedly laid off. While between jobs, Scott ran for a seat on the Vancouver Parks Board and while he was not elected, his experience ignited an interest in public life. As he describes it, “I’m destined for politics”. However, in the meantime, Scott works in the marketing department at a large Vancouver hotel and has successfully applied to Simon Fraser University’s E-MBA programme.

Outside of work, Scott has served on numerous sport-related committees including the Athletes’ Advisory Committee and the Accommodations Committee for the 2010 Olympic bid. He was candid about his volunteer activities in as much as he views committee work as a strategic component of his career development, offering opportunities to acquire a broader range of skills and experience, networking contacts, and publicity, all of which will aid in his career advancement:

Oh, there was very little altruistic interest. It was all about... a vocation. It’s like going back to school. It’s like going to college where I was learning different skills and that was the whole intent. You know, if I could do something, like if I was creating certain policies or adjudicating certain awards or (sitting on) decision-making committees, I was making a difference. That’s great. I felt great about that but my original intent wasn’t to... give back or have altruistic intentions but it was (about) the people I was going to meet, what I was going to learn, the skills I was going to develop, the contacts I was going to make, the publicity I would get because I always felt the more publicity, the more opportunity for jobs. I always felt that. You know, I’ve always wanted publicity, not for the sake of it, just that I need people to know who I am because I want them to know who I am so that when I’m applying for a job or running for a certain position, they know who I am, right? People sometimes get that a bit mixed up. They think I yearn for the attention for the sake of attention. That’s not really it. Everything is about strategy. What I can get out of it.

Scott’s volunteer contributions to the organisational side of high performance sport have maintained the public image of “Scott the wrestler” and although Scott’s identity remains highly connected to his former career as an athlete, the external perception of “Scott the wrestler” is a
double-edged sword. On the one hand, Scott thrives on external recognition of his athletic achievements. Conversely, he feels as though he continues to fight a multitude of problematic stereotypes associated with being identified as an athlete:

...They don’t realize who they’re dealing with or what they’re dealing with. They just see...a lot of times they just assume (I’m) some big dumb athlete, right? It’s funny; I’m trying to lose some weight. I’m trying...one good thing about this job is that I’m always in business attire, except (when) I’m hanging out a lot of times like this (interview) in here but it’s ‘cause I want to shake that athlete image. I want a more business approach but...you know, just my size, I can’t get away from it.

Compounding the problematic stereotype of the dumb jock is the reaction of Scott’s co-workers to his intensity and desire to “win”. Both Scott and his wife acknowledge that Scott’s workplace behaviour is viewed as bullying, particularly by female co-workers. They believe that this attribution is in part, a reaction to Scott’s size and stature as well as his highly competitive personality:

...people think I’m aggressive because I’m competitive, and my boss, she’d use the word aggressive and I don’t like that because if I’m getting in trouble about something, she’ll say, “you’re being too aggressive” where...so I’m trying to not be aggressive... but I was aggressive in sport, so in certain industries, being aggressive, meaning that determination and drive and intensity, not leaving any stones unturned is...(it) can be a benefit or a strength but a strength taken too far, as you know, is always a weakness, so it can be...it can be a potential weakness as well.

...There’s a stigma there that, you know, you create a certain persona in your sport and you try to do that. You want people to think you’re this strong athlete but that works against you once you step out of that genre.

Scott’s wife provided an analysis of Scott’s aggressiveness within the workplace, noting that an office environment has not provided an adequate venue for the personality traits that brought success to Scott as an athlete, thus contributing to some difficulties in his post-sport career:

...he’s so intensely competitive so there was also the aspect of giving up...the environment in which he could practice his competitiveness and be violent in a completely acceptable place...but in the workplace he does get really intense and he’s
been called aggressive in the past as well because if he’s at the board table, he’s like this (pounding her fist on the table) with his point, right? And I think because he’s a big guy too...he’s perceived as being a real bully sometimes at work and so it’s something that he tries to modify a little bit but it’s really hard because when he feels strongly about something...he doesn’t just want to be heard, he wants to win.

Just as he was a strategic wrestler, Scott recognizes that in order to succeed in business, he needs to shed his reputation as the office bully. Consequently, in his current job he has consciously modified his behaviour in an effort not to be perceived as intimidating or aggressive.

This strategy has proven challenging for Scott, working against the natural grain of his personality and belief system:

...I can’t be an alpha male at the bottom of the pecking order because I don’t have any power to exert or to use at all so...I act like a loser...basically walk in with my tail between my legs so people don’t think I’m...just barging in on them or whatever and, “oh, what do you think of what we’re doing? Is this okay to do?” instead of what I really mean, “I think we should be doing this” so I’m having to play this stupid game that everybody else has to play...it’s such a joke, you know...that’s why I need to be the boss sooner than later ‘cause I can’t handle this. It’s really tough, you know. I need to be my own boss.

Scott’s coach sees Scott as a complex individual whose true personality can be difficult to uncover. Nonetheless, he believes that the same strengths that Scott applied to sport, “the ability to deal with stress, to deal with pressure, to deal with expectation”, are positive attributes to be applied to any job. Similarly, Scott’s wife described Scott’s extraverted personality and confidence as positive traits to be exploited in his career. However, she did note another aspect of his personality that, within the world of business, can be either an asset or a hindrance:

...He’s not an empathetic guy at all. He’s sympathetic, but he’s not empathetic. He cannot, cannot understand people who feel or who have a different opinion or a different feeling or a different reaction to something than him and that has nothing to do with sport, I really don’t think. I just think that’s just who he is.
One example of Scott’s inability or unwillingness to be open to alternate worldviews is evident in his emphatic belief that the individual comes first and anyone promoting the concept of team is either lying or indoctrinated:

...That’s one thing I’m not afraid to say these things that I believe in and I just know...I always have a good sense of things and as much as people say that it’s not correct, if people really dug deep inside, I think there would be a lot more truth in what I’m saying than they want to give credit to.

Scott’s inability to empathise is not problematic in working relationships with individuals whom he respects but it can be detrimental in relationships where he perceives a weakness in another person. As his wife commented:

When he has had a really bright boss whom he respects, he flourishes, he works so, so hard for that person. If he has a boss that he doesn’t respect...it’s just a disaster....he finds it really hard to tolerate people who are shy or who don’t have a lot of self-esteem or who think very poorly of themselves...and it’s people who are like that who...have low self-confidence who don’t get along with Scott either because he scares them to death, they’re afraid that he’s going to say something...’cause we’ve analyzed this whole thing together...they’re afraid, you know, he’ll make them, you know, he’ll project on them in a crowd so he doesn’t get along with people like that.

Relationally, Scott asserts that he negotiated his disengagement from sport independently, perceiving himself to be self-reliant:

I never created a support network around me and I don’t understand people who do that. Like, I mean...it’s just that I don’t understand that and I’m glad that I don’t rely on that to tell you the truth because I think it’s a sign of weakness too...where you need to have family and friends around you to draw upon them for advice, information, support...it may be comforting but I think there’s also something these individuals have an issue with self-esteem too and if some of that support network...if there’s no safety net there, what would happen to those people?

Scott’s wife agrees that his decision to leave wrestling was one made independently. She also acknowledged that Scott did not turn to his family of origin for support during his career transition, congruent with Scott’s self-described estrangement with his father. However, she
believes that their marital relationship offered significant emotional support to Scott throughout his transitional experience:

Well, I would say that I definitely have (made a difference to him) because we’re very close and I know that he really respects me and I know he gets a lot of support, emotional support from me and a lot of me telling him, you know, “you’re fabulous even if you had never been a wrestler you’d still be fabulous” and so he knows he has my complete devotion so I know that makes a real difference to him and...and his ability to do the transition. Not a lot of support from his family at all but much support from people who know him, you know, “Are you kidding? You can do anything you want. You’re so hard working, you know, you just never give up”, so yeah, I’m sure he had a lot of very positive reinforcement from people in the sport community who know him, his friends, just a lot of connections he’s made through his volunteer work, so yeah, I know he’s gotten a lot of emotional support that way but you know, it’s something when you’re married and you have a really close relationship, it’s like almost anything can happen and you know that you’ll get through it because it’s not just you facing it alone, you’re both tied together and you’re both gonna get through it.

Scott’s coach views Scott as a “loner”, following his own agenda and therefore not someone likely to have sought relational support during his disengagement from wrestling.

Having said that, he noted that Scott “respects excellence” and any relational connection he sought, “…would be as a role model for him but I wouldn’t think that there would (have been) much personal…interpersonal contact because you know…that’s not what it (was) about”.

Scott’s coach described Scott as “a very complex person” whose “public persona” differs from the true individual. He does believe that Scott’s relational needs, verbalized or not, include a need for acceptance, prominence, and control.

I too left my interview with Scott concluding that he is indeed a complex individual, wondering where the public persona ends and the true man begins. Some four years after leaving wrestling, he is well entrenched in his new career in marketing, anticipating another transition into public life. However, despite his strategic and diligent efforts aimed at advancing his career in business, it appears that Scott’s sense of self remains on the wrestling mat,
continuing to beckon him back to his previous life. Scott himself summed it up succinctly, “if I could still wrestle, I would still do it”. I believe that he would too.
Comparative Case Analysis

The experience of disengaging from high performance sport and moving into a post-competition career has been separated into several descriptive sections. Each section includes salient intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors thought to influence the disengagement experience within a general account. In real life, intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors influence one’s experience both independently and interdependently. In this general account however, these factors have been separated to provide a greater sense of clarity with regard to their relative influence upon the disengagement decision and experience of moving from a career as a high performance athlete to a post-competitive career. Among the salient factors identified in the across cases, some were evident in all stages of disengagement whereas others were more stage specific. The following table assigns intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual variables to those stages where their impact is most profound.

Table 2. Intrinsic, Interpersonal, and Contextual Factors Across the Disengagement Experience

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The High Performance Career of an Athlete. Athletes devote countless hours to training for their sport, pushing their bodies to physical heights most of us can only imagine. Off-season, athletes focus on cardiovascular fitness, speed, strength, flexibility and technical skills, increasing both the quantity and intensity of training as the competitive season approaches. They often live away from home in order to access quality coaching, equipment, and athlete services available at the National Training Centre to which their sport belongs. Usually, at some point during the year, athletes will attend a National camp for a period of intense training, after which they travel to various competitions during their sport’s season, tailoring training programmes to achieve peak performance levels for designated events such as the World Championships or the Olympic Games. The focus of athletes extends beyond the technical and strategic components of their sport to include close scrutiny and monitoring of their nutritional intake, the use of supplements, sleep habits, and mental preparation. As Scott’s wife noted, “…elite athletes are completely egocentric. It’s about what am I going to eat, when am I gonna sleep and when can I train and if you’re going to be in the top ten, that exactly the way you have to be.” Thus, a career in high performance sport can be all consuming, requiring a high degree of commitment on the part of the athlete.

To compete on the world’s stage, personal and professional sacrifices are necessary. From a career standpoint, work outside of sport is often deferred or athletes seek employment offering sufficient flexibility to train and compete in their sport. Among those athletes who do balance sport and employment, they are typically underemployed and underpaid. For example, in choosing an employer who would allow Mona to train and compete, she estimated that she sacrificed “…a cut in pay by about fifty percent in order to be able to work in a place that would respect that.” In Canada, National team athletes receive a federal training allowance of $1,500
per month. Only those at the top of high profile sports are able to acquire corporate sponsorship to ease the financial stress of a career in high performance sport. Jody estimated that one needs to have “top ten status” internationally to make a living as an athlete. In an effort to increase financial support for their athletes, a number of National teams have initiated an adopt-an-athlete programme, seeking corporate sponsorships for their athletes from small and mid-size companies. Despite these efforts, the financial status of the majority of high performance athletes is well below that of their same-age peers whose careers are outside sport. For some, it is the continuing financial struggle that leads to early retirement before they have reached their peak competitive years. As Jody noted, for some athletes, trying to make ends meet on a training allowance “...gets to be a kind of degrading existence...they want to have families or they have families and they’re trying to make do on carding and they’re just down all the time”. For unfunded athletes, like Mona, who compete in non-Olympic sports, the cost of training and travel to international competitions is a “big financial drain for yourself and for whoever’s supporting you and very rarely do people get endorsements”.

For many, the role of athlete becomes an important contributor to their sense of personal identity. Within the sporting community and in the media, athletes become inescapably linked to their sport and some become the face and name associated with their sport. For example, names such as Nancy Greene Raine or Ken Read conjure up images of skiing while Ben Johnson and Donovan Bailey are inextricably linked to the 100-metre sprint. Moreover, many high performance athletes have been involved in their sport for many years. Thus, the athlete identity comes both from within the athlete as well as from external sources. The challenge for many athletes is to achieve a balanced sense of self where high performance sport forms an important facet of their personal identity without solely defining who they are. There is a fine line between
one's immersion in sport and being consumed by the role of athlete. Among participants in this study, some achieved this balance. Dirk described his sense of identity as "the academic side of me and the sport side of me". Similarly for Jack, "soccer isn't my life. It's part of it". Other participants' sense of identity is solely defined by their sport as described by Jody, or even post-competitively as is the case for Scott, "I've always been Scott the wrestler first. I still am essentially". To invest one's sense of personal identity in the one-dimensional role of athlete is risky when one leaves sport to embark on a career in which employers and co-workers may not acknowledge or even be aware of a former athlete's sporting achievements.

In most sports, athletes reach their competitive prime in early adulthood at a time when their non-sport peers are completing their education and entering more traditional careers. Because the high performance athletic career can span a decade or more, athletes may be in their thirties before they start to consider leaving sport to begin the next chapter of their lives, both professionally and personally. Unlike their non-sport peers who are often well settled in their careers, married, and raising young families, many high performance athletes have yet to reach these career and personal developmental milestones. It is only when they have reached their early thirties, just beyond the apex of their competitive careers that many athletes begin to consider life after sport. Their post-competitive career plans are often vague, similar to those proposed by adolescents and young adults with limited work experience or occupational knowledge. Dirk's focused preparation for a post-rowing career as a chiropractor was the exception rather than the norm. More commonly, athletes do not have a specific occupational goal in mind, only tentatively planning for their post-competitive careers. Despite significant educational attainment, the participants in this study generally had yet to establish a firm post-competitive career plan as they prepared to leave high performance sport.
Athletic achievement is performance based and quantified by time or score. While many athletes consider it an honour to represent Canada in international competition, this achievement alone is often insufficient to define athletic success. Success in high performance sport requires an athlete to be competitive at an international level. Sport is a competition and score, time, and placement relative to other competitors define athletic success. In this way, sport by its very nature is a competitive activity. Individual and team performances are judged upon the outcome of a match, race or routine. Meeting competitive standards is required to maintain one’s berth within the National programme or attend a major event like the Olympic Games and as such, competition is an inherent aspect of high performance sport. Therefore it is not surprising to discover that high performance athletes are generally competitive individuals. Competitiveness in part, propels athletes to strive for athletic greatness, achieve personal bests and beat one’s competitors. Outside of sport, competitiveness can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, to be competitive at national and international levels of sport requires vision, self-discipline, self-confidence, and commitment on the part of the athlete; all characteristics that would be considered positive contributions in any workplace. On the other hand, as Mona commented, “I tend to be really intense and results oriented”, which, as Scott discovered, can be offensive to co-workers when taken too far. Moreover, when athletes leave high performance sport, their competitiveness becomes more self-directed, seeking to achieve work-related goals with a sense of urgency, “I just want to be great again, like that (snapping fingers). I don’t want to work ten years to try to get great”. Thus, the competitive drive that contributes to success in high performance sport can propel one’s post-sport career as individuals strive to achieve their career goals. Conversely, this same competitive drive can frustrate former athletes when they do not achieve their career goals or milestones in the same manner they achieved their sport goals. As
the Olympic motto says, “swifter, higher, stronger”. This competitive drive is an important facet of athletic success and one not to be underestimated in athletes’ post-sport careers.

Competing in national and international sporting events is a difficult challenge, requiring athletes to call upon their training to produce a peak performance at precisely the right moment under conditions of incredible mental and emotional pressure. Peak performance requires focused intensity where one can put aside every distraction and summon the right combination of arousal, attention, emotion, skill, and effort. Peak performances are achieved when the mind and body work together in synchronicity or flow, a state every athlete desires. Top athletes are described as exuding a focused intensity in training and competition. They have often beaten their competitors before the event has even begun. Their personalities are described as “intense”, “focused”, and “perfectionistic”, traits lending themselves to successful athletic performance. Outside of sport, this intensity can be downplayed or expressed as enthusiasm, lending itself well to social relations. This is the case for the team athletes in this study, both held in high regard by teammates and coaching staff. For other athletes, the intensity that serves them well in competition can be perceived as overwhelming or arrogant, resulting in strained relationships with coaching staff, teammates, and sporting organizations. Three of the four participants who compete in individual events, all of whom were described by themselves and/or others as being intense individuals, were self-coached at some point during their career, while the fourth individual athlete was characterized as “difficult” by coaching staff.

Whether self-confidence is a product or a source of athletic success is uncertain, although it is likely both. High performance athletes exude self-confidence. They perceive themselves as highly capable individuals working on the “last one percent” of their performance. Each season they set personal performance goals and believe that with sufficient training and commitment,
they can achieve their goals regardless of how lofty. As Jody pronounced, "...whatever I set my mind to, I could do it". This degree of self-confidence allows athletes to take risks and pursue their dreams without fear of failure. Without such self-confidence how could Jody pursue a racing career in mountain biking when doing so put her berth on the National cycling team in jeopardy? How could Chris return to the National field hockey team five years after a devastating head injury? How could Mona move to England to train with a world champion karate sensei sight unseen? How could Dirk leave the security of the coveted stroker position in an eight-man crew to race as a single sculler? How could Jack move to Europe to try out for soccer teams on a cold call basis? How could Scott return to wrestling after a three-year hiatus?

High performance athletes possess an unwavering self-confidence both in terms of athletic performance as well as in life in general. This self-confidence manifests itself in post-competitive career plans as the expectation for career success. Prior to leaving sport, many athletes believe that they will succeed in whatever endeavour they pursue despite the fact that most have yet to identify a specific career goal. They express steadfast confidence in their ability to succeed in the work force. Fuelling this self-confidence is the belief that they will rise to the top of their respective profession in the same manner they did in sport. High performance athletes have often been at the top of their sport since they began competing and therefore assume the same trajectory in their new post-competitive career. Quite simply, they believe that if they work hard enough, they will achieve whatever post-competitive career goal they set.

**Contemplating Disengagement.** When does an athlete know when he or she is nearing the end of his or her high performance athletic career? Sometimes there is no warning as is the case when an athlete sustains a career ending injury. However, barring such unforeseen events, the end of a high performance athletic career typically comes into an athlete's consciousness at
some point after the apex of his or her career. No athlete wants to continue competing when he or she can no longer reach performance standards set earlier in a career and each individual must judge for him or herself when the time is right to exit from high performance competition. While all athletes acknowledge the precarious state of physical health and its implication for athletic competition, most athletes assume that the decision to stop competing will be made when they believe the time to be right. In this regard, it is viewed as an autonomous decision to be made independently of others and circumstances. While interpersonal relationships are viewed as supportive, athletes do not anticipate that interpersonal support will be a fundamental condition for a successful disengagement experience. Mid- and post-disengagement participants reported that prior to their departure from sport, the prevailing assumption was that the transitional experience would be positive with little need for emotional support from others. Three of the four participants who have undergone this experience reflected that the disengagement transition was more challenging than initially anticipated. As Dirk admitted, “...I definitely experienced a lot of that transition stuff, even though I thought I was pretty well prepared for it”. The gap between anticipated and actual disengagement experiences appears to reflect the effect of positive framing of athletes during the pre-disengagement phase. Such expectations are evident in Jack’s disengagement prediction, “Well, I’m sure that options are going to present themselves. I’m not worried. I’m going to be qualified and...you know...I just know I’ll be fine. There’s lots of opportunity there for me.” High performance athletes, accustomed to personal success, expect a similar career trajectory to continue following disengagement from sport. As the mid- and post-disengagement participants discovered, this was not necessarily the case.

For some athletes, the exit from sport is carefully planned with performance goals set according to the exit strategy. These athletes often have a particular goal they wish to achieve,
viewing this goal as a crowning exit to cap their athletic career. Performance goals and exit strategies are typically defined by the quadrennial cycle, which shapes athletes’ lives. Based on the quadrennial cycle, exit strategies typically focus on one’s performance at an Olympic Games or World Championships. A specific performance standard is identified as athletes strive to end their competitive career on a positive note or crowning performance.

Other athletes have less well-defined exit strategies, believing that they will know when the time is right to leave sport. Their end of sport vision is less clear and therefore exit strategies are less well defined. The decision to leave sport is more spontaneous. Such reflective decision-making often occurs after the athlete fails to achieve his or her goal at a significant event such as the World Championships or Olympic Games. It is during the reflective time that follows a major competition that the athlete begins to consider whether to remain in sport or move into the next phase of his or her career.

As athletes look ahead to life beyond sport, they frequently have not developed firm post-competitive career plans. They intend to work in “business” or “administration” but at the time of disengagement from sport, they have yet to develop a specific career plan by which to achieve their vision. While there are certainly exceptions to this, many athletes’ vague post-competitive career plans reflect a certain degree of career immaturity, exhibited in limited occupational knowledge and an inherent lack of post-sport career preparation. These athletes view themselves as well educated individuals with a plethora of transferable skills acquired from sport. Without any job specific skills, they emphasise the marketability of leadership, commitment, diligence, risk-taking, self-confidence, and teamwork within any career they pursue. Athletes are accustomed to success and view a career outside of sport to be easily attainable. After all, they are world-class competitors whose athletic achievements are far greater than those of the average
person, why would they not be successful in a more mundane career? High performance athletes are so well trained to employ positive framing that they cannot foresee failure, struggling within a new career, or in the worst-case scenario, incompetence, as a possible outcome. Looking ahead to a career outside of sport, athletes are highly self-confident that the disengagement transition will be positive with few obstacles or struggles. In short, they can often have overly positive expectations for career success outside of sport.

For corporate sponsored athletes, financial status does not appear to play an influential role in one’s decision to retire from high performance sport. Their income is sufficient to support full-time training and those inclined to do so are able to put money aside in preparation for life after sport. Jody invested all of her government funded training allowance in RRSPs to form a post-competitive pension whereas Dirk put some sponsorship money aside to finance start-up costs for his chiropractic clinic. Such economic independence allows these top athletes to view the disengagement decision as one to be made autonomously. They do not leave sport out of financial necessity.

For the majority of athletes who live and train without corporate sponsorship, the financial implications of continued participation in sport can be influenced by the economic status of one’s household. For some, there is increasing pressure to contribute to the household finances in a more substantial manner whereas for others, the household economic status is high enough that there is less of a financial impetus to leave sport. It is interesting to note that non-sponsored participants did not identify financial factors as influencing their disengagement decision whereas participants’ spouses did believe that financial responsibility affected the timing of the disengagement decision. This disparity in perception can be linked to the extent to which athletes describe disengagement as an autonomous decision not subject to outside
influence.

The Disengagement Process. Although disengagement from high performance sport is viewed as a process rather than a discrete event, athletes eventually arrive at the decision to step down from competition. For some, this decision is pre-meditated and they have identified a specific exit strategy. For others, the disengagement decision comes following a major event, often precipitated by a lower than anticipated performance. While a variety of factors influence athletes’ decision to exit sport, most reported that it was time to move on in life. Having said this, disengagement from sport often followed a high profile competition where the athlete did not achieve performance expectations. Dirk, a medal favourite at the Olympic Games, finished fourth, “the world’s worst place to be”. Scott’s performance at the World Championships dropped outside the top ten, below that of previous years. Mona’s national standing slipped from first to third. Although not openly articulated, it appears that athletes may choose to leave high performance sport when they realise they have moved beyond the pinnacle of their athletic careers. To remain in sport too long, one risks declining performance. It is far better to leave near the top than it is to slide further and further down the international rankings.

As mentioned earlier, one’s role as an athlete forms part of one’s personal identity. For some athletes like Mona, Jack, and Dirk, identification as a high performance athlete contributes to their sense of identity but does not define them entirely. Others like Chris, Jody, and Scott, define themselves as athletes first and foremost during their competitive years. During the disengagement process, those athletes able to shift their sense of identity beyond that of “athlete” generally negotiate the transition with greater ease. Those athletes who struggled the most with the disengagement transition were those whose sense of identity was more one-dimensional. Scott is a prime example of this. His wife aptly summed up the role of identity in Scott’s
disengagement experience, "Wrestling became a very large part his identity...so to try to see himself as something other than Scott the wrestler was difficult...because he was something special. It was really hard to give that up." Similarly, Chris commented that he still "talk(s) in terms of ‘the team’ and ‘our team’ and you know, as you catch yourself still being part of it and you’re not really”. Chris, still mid-transitional, thought it accurate to say his "headspace is (not) completely removed from my high performance career” while Scott, now far removed from his wrestling career is unable to move beyond viewing himself as “Scott the wrestler”.

Among other athletes for whom sport comprises only a portion of their sense of identity, the shift in status and external recognition that happens when they leave sport behind is a less negative experience. They are more comfortable with other life roles. As Dirk described his new role as a chiropractor, “...it feels natural, that side of it. I mean, not the doctor part of it, I don’t really care about the title...but just the educational side of it and the qualifications of getting to be at that level to start something else on your own is good...it doesn’t feel foreign”. Thus, the extent to which an athlete’s sense of identity is more well-rounded has positive transitional implications. Given this point, all four participants who had already left high performance sport have continued involvement in their respective sporting communities through participation on various committees, coaching, or paid employment. Similarly, in preparing for a career after mountain biking, Jody organizes and conducts mountain biking workshops and writes for cycling magazines. Therefore to some extent, athletes retain their identification as athletes beyond their competitive career, albeit through other sport-related activities.

Leaving high performance sport typically requires the athlete to leave behind an activity in which he or she is highly competent. For many years, athletes have focused on fine-tuning their skills to achieve optimal athletic performance. These athletes are accomplished specialists
within their respective sports, seeking technical perfection. At this level of sport, competency is taken for granted. Leaving sport to embark on a new career path, most athletes expect a high degree of competency from themselves and while some enjoy the challenge of starting a new career, many are surprised by their relative mediocrity. Issues of competency arise and while incidents of non-competence were not reported, athletes did express surprise when faced with challenges to their competency, requiring a shift in personal expectations. Prior to disengagement, highly self-confident athletes assumed post-competitive career success, anticipating a high degree of competence in their new work. Mid- and post-disengagement participants reflect upon their pre-disengagement expectations as optimistic and naïve. Those participants whose disengagement experience has been less disruptive are those for whom cross-career competency was not a major issue. For example, Chris, who accrued significant pre-disengagement volunteer experience as an athlete representative with Athletes CAN, developed a variety of organizational management skills that could be applied to his post-competitive job as the chief executive officer of the Esteem Team. For Chris, cross-career competency has not been an area of concern. Contrasting Chris’ experience, Scott expressed frustration with respect to his competence as a team player in the field of sales management. Having never developed teamwork skills and having an inflated sense of his own competency, Scott experienced difficulty working in this milieu. In cases where the former athlete must return to a steep learning curve to succeed in his or her new career, this experience can be unanticipated and unnerving. Those athletes who successfully negotiated new learning and regain their sense of competence are those willing to reframe their pre-disengagement expectations to more realistic short-term goals. It is nonetheless a challenging experience to be confronted by competency issues after many years of career success as a high performance athlete.
Because declining self-confidence is a common issue reported in career transitional research (i.e., Borgen, 1997), it would be reasonable to anticipate that a major career transition might spark decreasing self-confidence as the athlete leaves the highest echelon of sport to embark on a new career where success may be less certain. For some athletes, failing to live up to their pre-disengagement expectations served to undermine their self-confidence, at least temporarily. Having a business plan fail or being refused a work visa were unanticipated setbacks that rattled the self-confidence of Mona and Dirk although both “re-grouped” and pursued alternate paths to achieve their career goals. Others, at least on the surface, maintain a strong sense of confidence in the face of adversity. Many athletes exhibit a high degree of self-confidence enabling them to seize career opportunities that others might not, such as investing in a business, running for public office, and relocating to another city or country for the sake of a new job. While career setbacks undoubtedly affect their self-confidence, participants seem to be able to “shake them off” and move on to the next challenge. In Mona’s case, she moved from the failed Future is Female endeavour to the position of managing director with the Esteem Team as the company expanded nationally, while Dirk returned to Canada to start up his chiropractic clinic in Vancouver. Scott, undaunted by being laid off from one job and receiving several written warnings by his current employer, predicts that one day he will be the boss. “I’ll be that alpha male and you better work for me”. While these participants may have experienced a temporary setback in terms of self-confidence, they were generally able to locate it again, not falling into the “yo-yo effect” (Borgen & Amundson, 1984), discouraging many during a career transition.

For most high performance athletes, sport is their passion. Without this passion, it is unlikely that they would endure the strenuous training and personal sacrifices required over a
significant portion of their lives. Participants described themselves as passionate about their sport in many different ways, as a “singularity of purpose”, a “burning desire”, “what drove me habitually”, “still feeling like a junior”, or simply, “very passionate”. Looking to a career beyond sport, many athletes seek careers about which they are passionate as this is a work value held dear. Among participants working in their post-competitive careers, they have transferred the passion they felt about sport into their new job. Chris said that he took the focus and energy he put into field hockey and “shifted it into the Esteem Team” whereas Dirk described his chiropractic practice as “definitely an all-consuming type of thing”. Their passion requires an outlet and therefore post-competitive careers are more rewarding for those athletes able to identify a career path about which they felt passionate.

While participants generally perceived the decision to leave high performance sport to be autonomous, the presence and quality of interpersonal support influenced the transitional process following disengagement from sport. Both mid-disengagement participants described interpersonal support from significant others including spouses, close friends, and family members, as having a positive effect on the disengagement experience. Throughout the disengagement process, athletes’ respective relationships with spouses, family, and friends were described as “very close”, “a partnership”, “supportive”, “really open”, “that special…relationship bond”. In part, because these participants felt supported and encouraged by those individuals close to them, their disengagement experience was generally perceived to be more positive. Moreover, in addition to the emotionally supportive function of close interpersonal relationships, employment opportunities arose out of athletes’ connectedness to others, particularly other members of their sporting community. For Chris, Mona, Jack, and Jody, post-competition employment offers are directly related to social relationships within their
specific sport and the sport community in general.

The two post-disengagement participants, who perceive themselves to be more autonomous and self-reliant, tended to eschew the need for interpersonal support. While it is unclear whether this emphasis on self-reliance influenced the disengagement experience, it is notable that these participants generally experienced more difficult disengagement transitions. In contrast to the aforementioned group, these participants are both male and each competed in individual sports. It is possible that the combined influence of gender socialisation with its emphasis on individuation and the autonomous personality required for success in individual sport creates the expectation that the disengagement journey is one to be traveled alone. It is also notable that in their post-competitive careers, Dirk is self-employed and enjoys significant autonomy in his practice whereas Scott presented a well-developed pattern of interpersonal difficulties in the workplace, and is seeking employment with opportunities for greater control and autonomy. Their post-competitive career patterns thus highlight a continuing preference for autonomy and self-reliance.

For some athletes, the disengagement experience was accompanied by concurrent major life changes such as relocation to a new community or starting a family. Depending on athletes’ circumstances, these concurrent events served a positive mediating influence or further compounded stressors faced by the athlete. As a positive function, having a child redirected athletes’ focus away from career issues as their career and personal priorities shifted during and after pregnancy. In this way, concurrent life changes acted as a buffer, softening the intensity of the disengagement transition. However, in other instances, concurrent life changes heightened the disengagement experience by adding further challenges or stressors to overcome. Thus, the
presence of concurrent life changes had a variable effect on the disengagement experience, acting to redirect one’s focus or adding one more stressor to be addressed and managed.

Both the disengagement decision and the subsequent transitional period were influenced by a variety of contextual variables. Certainly, the timing of disengagement was affected by the quadrennial cycle of the Olympic Games. National training programmes are controlled by the quadrennial cycle with programme goals and initiatives driven by Olympic performances, as are coaching appointments and athlete selection. The focus and intensity of athlete training is directed by the quadrennial cycle and athletes’ career plans are bounded by the four years separating Olympic Games. Within this externally imposed framework, athletes engage in disengagement decision-making based upon their anticipated participation in the next Olympic Games. In making this decision, athletes ask themselves whether they are willing to commit to a further four years of full-time sport.

Somewhat linked to the quadrennial cycle is the organizational focus of the athlete’s National team. Is the National team in a rebuilding or refining phase? Who is coaching and what are the team goals for the next quadrennial cycle? The National team’s focus and performance goals depend on a variety of factors including recent Olympic and World Championship performances, the age and international experience of team members, organizational funding, and the media profile of the sport. By way of example, after Dirk’s departure from rowing there was no obvious heir apparent in the sweep programme and therefore Rowing Canada Aviron allocated the majority of training funds and team development efforts toward their stronger stroke teams. Given this organisational focus, athletes who are members of National stroke teams benefited while upcoming scullers had fewer financial and coaching resources available to them. Similarly, following the 2000 Olympic Games, the men’s National
field hockey team lost a significant number of experienced players and coaching staff. Whereas the team had previously posted a strong eighth place at the 1998 World Championships, post-Olympic international standings slipped to sixteenth, reflecting the team’s rebuilding focus. For participants in the midst of disengagement decision-making, their decision was influenced to some degree by the organizational focus of their National team programme as well as anticipated performance over the next quadrennial cycle.

Despite any concerns athletes might have with regard to the organizational focus of their respective National team programme, the majority of participants described a positive relationship with their sport organization. For these participants, their disengagement decision was proactively approached and did not reflect relational difficulties with their National team. Of note however, is the fact that half of the athletes at one time or another had relational difficulties with a National team coach, resulting in a premature yet temporary disengagement on the part of one athlete and a period of self-coaching among the other two. Despite these earlier coaching conflicts, participants asserted that their disengagement decision was made autonomously and most participants maintain a positive and involved relationship with their sport either in the form of coaching, mentoring, committee work, or related organizational involvement. For these athletes then, the disengagement experience was not unduly influenced by organisational relationships.

A related factor influencing the disengagement decision is the athlete’s age and its implication in terms of anticipated performance over the next quadrennial cycle as well as age-related perceptions about post-competitive career development. With respect to anticipated athletic performance, athletes do consider how age affects their cardiovascular fitness, strength, flexibility, and technical abilities. In some sports, improved technical skills acquired with
experience can offset declining physiological function whereas for others, the ability to endure intense physical training and competition declines with age and cannot be offset by increased technical proficiency. Such considerations are both sport and athlete dependent.

In terms of the relationship between age and career development, age can have a significant influence on post-competitive career planning. In some cases, post-competitive career plans required participants to attend school while pursuing full-time sport whereas for others, post-competitive career goals were postponed and eventually abandoned. For example, in 1988 when Jody first joined the National cycling team, her post-competitive career plans included medical school. Fifteen years later, these plans have been abandoned because now in her late thirties, Jody no longer views medical school as a feasible option to pursue.

Age also influences the timing of athletes’ disengagement decisions as athletes, like their non-sport peers, have been socialised to equate chronological age with personal and career developmental milestones. Because high performance sport is such a demanding career, many athletes have not married, started families, or established non-sport careers. As these athletes grow older, they begin to experience both internal and external pressure to “move on in life”. As the head coach of the National wrestling team commented, “…we certainly encourage the athlete to have something outside of their sport”, reflecting upon the National programme’s informal commitment to post-competitive career development among its athletes. As they enter their thirties, personal and career developmental milestones loom over high performance athletes and are the primary stated reason for disengagement. It is “time to move on”.

All of the participants in this study are well educated, generally having earned a baccalaureate degree prior to embarking on a full-time career in high performance sport. For many athletes, participation on collegiate teams was a stepping-stone to National level teams.
Because these participants held university degrees prior to disengaging from high performance sport, they were better equipped for post-competitive employment than had they not attended university. The educational status of participants is reflected in the professional employment sought post-competitively, with the majority of athletes seeking careers in business management.

By ensuring that they did not sacrifice post-secondary education in their pursuit of a career in sport, participants were better prepared for post-competitive employment than their less educated cohort. Moreover, the educational attainment of participants suggests that deferment of post-secondary education and career preparation need not be the norm for high performance athletes. Certainly for the participants in this study, educational attainment had a positive influence on their disengagement experience, as they did not leave sport lacking the necessary education to pursue their post-competitive careers, further delaying normative developmental milestones.

Reflecting upon his decision to complete his chiropractic degree during his competitive years, Dirk concluded that “juggling” training and education was a more desirable option than delaying his education until he was in his thirties and faced with the prospect of four years of school before starting his post-competitive career.

During their high performance sport career, participants’ financial status, while not uniformly equivalent, was generally above average relative to Canadian high performance athletes in general. The majority of athletes received a training allowance from the federal government. Half the athletes also held corporate sponsorships, making “life more tolerable”. Non-sponsored athletes were generally members of households with middle class incomes or higher, thus removing some of the financial impetus to leave high performance sport.

Consequently, from the athletes’ perspective, financial status was not cited as a prominent factor
in their disengagement decision. Similarly, for the majority of athletes in this study, financial status was not identified as an influential variable during the disengagement process.

A variety of athlete services are available through the National Training Centre. These include seminars and resources pertaining to career planning, employment, and personal and professional development. Participants generally did not avail themselves of these services at any point during the disengagement experience, partly because they anticipated few difficulties negotiating the disengagement transition. While some did participate in a career transitional workshop, they did not identify this or other athlete services as an integral factor influencing their disengagement experience.

For some participants, employment barriers had a significant impact on their disengagement experience. While these participants expressed specific career objectives, such as starting up a particular business, their ability to achieve their goal was hampered by unforeseen employment barriers. In each case, the employment barrier was unanticipated and participants eventually abandoned their respective goals altogether. While athletes were generally able to develop and pursue an alternate career goal, their disengagement experience was influenced by the presence of an employment barrier, particularly because athletes had not anticipated such barriers. This suggests that they may have benefited from pre-disengagement career planning that included occupational and labour market research.

 Reflecting upon the Disengagement Process. Former athletes reflecting back upon their disengagement from sport expressed surprise about the challenging nature of their disengagement experience. Generally, they felt that they were well prepared to leave sport to begin the next phase of their careers. Even for those individuals who left high performance sport with a concrete career goal, they did not anticipate employment barriers outside of their control.
For example, Dirk did not foresee that obtaining a work visa in a new country would be problematic and was stymied by Australia’s refusal to grant him a work visa. Similarly, Mona did not anticipate the failure of her business Future is Female, having not fully researched the marketability of female athletes to the youth population. These individuals, used to achieving their career goals, athletic and otherwise, were unprepared for failure. Looking back at these experiences offered some contextual perspective, allowing participants the opportunity to distinguish between internal and external factors contributing to their disengagement experience.

For many athletes, concurrent life changes accompanied disengagement from high performance sport. These included starting a family, moving to a new city or country, or moving into the next phase of a relationship. In some cases, these life changes served to buffer the disengagement experience while other life changes made the transitional experience more challenging. Reflecting on the disengagement process, participants commented on these multiple life changes, noting the variable influence of such concurrent changes upon their disengagement experience. Once again, athletes did not generally anticipate the effects of simultaneously exerting multiple life changes. In cases where the influence was less positive, athletes questioned whether they would again implement multiple major life changes during a highly dynamic period of their career.

Reflecting upon their disengagement experience, athletes generally noted that the career services available to them were minimal. Retrospectively, they believe that they would have benefited from working with a career counsellor in preparation for leaving high performance sport. However, they acknowledge that at the time of disengagement, their outlook was positive and they may not have been as open to receiving such professional assistance. In this regard, they concede that their foresight was coloured by their positive framing.
Multiple Disengagement Influences. For six athletes, the process of disengaging from high performance sport was influenced by a multitude of intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors. Over the course of the disengagement process, salient factors, independently and in combination, influenced the disengagement experience.

Intrinsic factors that contributed positively to athletic success also exerted influence over the disengagement process both positively and negatively. For example, having a balanced sense of personal identity, as was the case for Dirk and Mona, allowed athletes to move from one career arena to the next without losing their sense of self. Conversely, Scott continued to cling to his athlete identity despite having left sport four years earlier, expressing dismay when co-workers do not identify nor grant him the special status often accorded to celebrated athletes. The loss of the athlete role had significant implications for participants who strongly identified with this role. For some, this loss was too great to bear, forcing them to define themselves by their past rather than current life roles.

Although athletes did not anticipate that interpersonal support would play a significant role in the disengagement experience of moving from an athletic career to a new occupation, the presence or lack of interpersonal support appears to be a significant contributing factor.

The athletes participating in this study are high achievers, academically, athletically, and professionally, in part a reflection of the middle class to upper middle class status of most participants. Moreover, in their mid-thirties at the time of disengagement, athletes had completed their post-secondary education prior to leaving sport, typically placing the disengagement focus on direct-entry to the competitive labour market.

In all six cases, the anticipated process of disengagement was overwhelmingly optimistic and reflective of positive expectations. Transitional challenges were generally unanticipated and
reframing career expectations to match one’s marketable skills was challenging for some. As Mona’s former teammate noted, “…whenever she’s set out to accomplish something, she’s generally able to do it on the first try and she couldn’t on the first try or the second try and it’s been the third or the fourth… I would say that she’s still got a ways to go before she’ll say she’s gotten that crystal…that goal right in the palm of her hand”.

Participants’ perceptions of the disengagement experience were influenced by their position within this transitional process. Looking ahead to a new career is viewed as exciting and full of possibilities. As individuals confront barriers and stumbling blocks, their self-confidence is challenged to a certain extent. However, these supremely self-confident individuals appear to have the capacity to regroup and change their tact in order to achieve their career goals. Reflecting back on their experience provides a contextual perspective not otherwise anticipated, and for some, hindsight offers a view that allows them to acknowledge their shortcomings and offer alternate approaches to disengagement from sport.

It was also noted that concurrent major life changes, be it a new partnership, the addition of children, or moving to a new city or country, influence the disengagement experience. Becoming a new parent acted as a positive mediating force as one’s worldview and personal priorities shifted with the addition of children to the household. Conversely, choosing to forego parenthood meant that individuals maintained their focus on self, also influencing the disengagement process. Relocation presented its own challenges as participants started the next stage of their professional and personal lives in a new community, away from family and friends.

Reflecting back upon the disengagement process, participants note that the career transition was more difficult than anticipated, although all look ahead to their respective careers with optimism and determination.
Summary

Cross-case analyses identified a range of common themes with respect to intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors perceived to influence disengagement from high performance sport. As noted above, factors function independently and jointly to influence the transitional experience of leaving high performance sport to pursue post-sport careers.

The participants in this study can be described as focused, self-confident, and passionate individuals. Athletic success requires a competitive orientation and commitment to sport, although participants espouse varying degrees of athlete identity. For most participants, the pursuit of a post-sport career is a reflection of a developmentally appropriate milestone although prior to disengagement from sport, many participants' post-competitive career plans were vague and overly optimistic. Cross-career competency was a common issue for highly skilled athletes starting a new career.

Those seeking greater autonomy generally experienced more disruptive transitions than participants who sought interpersonal support. Moreover, many of participants’ post-sport employment opportunities arose out of interpersonal connections.

Disengagement decisions are heavily influenced by a quadrennial cycle imposed by the Olympic Games, with most athletes intending to leave their sport and the end of this cycle. Some athletes developed concrete exit strategies while others adopted a more reactionary stance, basing their disengagement decision on their level of athletic performance and/or the focus of their sporting organization. Typically, athletes had passed the apex of their high performance sport career when they chose to leave sport and move on in their personal and career development. Reflecting their educational status, participants sought professional post-sport careers in business and health care.
The transitional experience of leaving high performance sport was affected both positively and negatively by concurrent life changes. Some participants were faced with unanticipated employment barriers, extending the transitional period to some extent.

Generally speaking, the transitional experience of disengaging from high performance sport was more challenging for participants than they had anticipated. Reflecting upon their disengagement journey, many participants believe that they would have benefited from pre-disengagement counselling while acknowledging that positive expectations may have prevented them from seeking assistance.
CHAPTER 5

Discussion

This chapter will discuss the significance of findings of this study in relation to the existing literature on disengagement from high performance sport, career counselling practices, and future research endeavours. This discussion will open with a restatement of the purpose of this study followed by a detailed discussion of the theoretical implications of the study's findings and recommendations for future study of disengagement from high performance sport. A discussion of the counselling implications of these results will then be presented and this chapter will conclude with a review of the study's limitations.

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the disengagement experience of high performance athletes at different stages of this process. Specifically, this study sought to identify those intrinsic, interpersonal and contextual factors perceived to influence the athletes' disengagement experience as they left high performance sport and engaged in a new career. The primary research question addressed in this investigation was: "What factors are perceived as having the most significant impact on the transitional process of disengaging from high performance sport?" Multiple case study methodology was chosen to provide multiple perspectives and examine the disengagement experience prospectively, mid-disengagement, and retrospectively.

Theoretical Implications

The results of this study reveal that disengagement from high performance sport is a complex, multi-faceted experience, influenced by a variety of factors. Prior to disengagement, athletes generally anticipated that leaving high performance sport to embark on a new career
would be a smooth transition. They further anticipated that they could apply those transferable skills and intrinsic characteristics that contributed to their athletic achievements within a new occupational setting, similar to the pre-disengagement expectations reported by North and Lavallee (2004). Pre-disengagement athletes expected employers to highly value them in the workplace given their athletic achievements and personification of intrinsic qualities such as leadership, self-confidence, diligence, and competitiveness. Those athletes in the midst of changing careers and those reflecting back upon their disengagement experience described an evolution in terms of shifting passions, identity, and competency embedded in the context of a non-sport setting and other major life changes, both personal and interpersonal, similar to Stephan et al.'s (2003) description of transitional former athletes. These results can contribute to the existing literature on athlete disengagement from sport. Therefore, the following discussion will focus on comparing the findings of this study to those reported in the extant research.

Comparison of Findings to Theoretical Models of Leaving Sport

Thantalogical Model. Choosing participants immersed in different stages of the disengagement process permitted a cross-sectional examination of the disengagement experience not explored in retrospective approaches adopted in earlier literature on this topic. Viewing disengagement from high performance sport through the pre-, mid-, and post-transitional lenses of participants presented shifting perspectives through the course of the disengagement process. Pre-disengagement expectations focused on the portability of the intrinsic characteristics that lent themselves well to athletic achievement. Prior to leaving high performance sport, participants anticipated that future employers would welcome them based on their demonstrated level of commitment, leadership, self-confidence, and diligence within their respective sport. Their expectations were often so overwhelmingly positive and naïve that they appeared Pollyannaish.
Participants’ perspectives with regard to the relative influence of personal qualities and characteristics shifted as they worked through the disengagement process, often discovering that employment outside of sport placed less emphasis on generic personal characteristics such as self-confidence, passion, and diligence, instead focusing on tangible, job specific skills. Competency issues were sometimes raised and unanticipated employment barriers emerged, requiring some participants to re-evaluate their post-sport career plans. In some cases, participants were forced to adopt a secondary career plan in the face of untenable situations such as the failure of a business plan or the inability to acquire a work visa. Although not directly comparable, elements of Kubler-Ross’ (1969) five-stage model of grief are apparent in these findings. The disengagement experiences described by both primary and secondary participants in this study were not uniformly negative. However, the process of moving from a position of denial, represented by positive framing, to one of acceptance (modification or adopting secondary career plans) was salient for some participants. Having said this, it is imperative to recognize that the disengagement process was not always a negative experience for participants in this study and therefore cannot be fully captured by Kubler-Ross’ thantalogical model. Further, this model does not appear to adequately encapsulate the disengagement experience, particularly the multiple influences of context, social relationships, and intrinsic characteristics.

Social Gerontological Models. Elements of social gerontological models are also reflected in the findings of this study, particularly Atchley’s (1980) model, postulating that at retirement, energy devoted to one major role is redistributed to other remaining roles in one’s life. In this study, primary and secondary participants emphasised the need for athletes to redirect their passion for sport into another career path. It is notable that among those participants who experienced other major life changes during the disengagement process, such as
the acquisition of the parental role, the redistribution of energy and passion into this new role acted as a positive mediating factor at a time when individuals were faced with a significant shift in terms of their personal and career identity and sought another avenue toward which they could focus their energy and passion. Conversely, those participants who did not develop other life roles into which they could direct their energy, or were faced with obstacles to accessing these roles, generally reported more challenging disengagement experiences. Like older adults who retire from the paid work force in Atchley’s model, the availability of other life roles appears to assist former athletes to redirect their passion and expand their sense of identity beyond that of high performance athlete. Unlike the gerontological population upon which Atchley’s continuity theory is based, this study was concerned with exiting a sport career to engage in another career whereas Atchley focused on the transition from one’s career to a non-working status. Therefore, caution is warranted in the application of Atchley’s continuity theory to the much younger working population in this study.

**Transitional Models.** Lending support to Schlossberg’s (1984) model of transition cited in earlier studies pertaining to retirement from sport (Stephan et al., 2003; Swain, 1991; Wheeler et al., 1996), the findings of this study suggest that disengagement from high performance sport is indeed a process rather than a discrete event, with participants describing ongoing adjustment to leaving full-time sport and embarking on a new career path. Moreover, like participants in earlier studies (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Baillie, 1992; Curtis & Ennis, 1988; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Swain, 1991; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wolff & Lester, 1989) some participants reported positive disengagement experiences, also lending support to Schlossberg’s contention that adaptation to a transition depends on the individual’s appraisal of the transition, him- or herself, and the environment. The appraisal of the transition itself as suggested by Schlossberg is
particularly evident in the prospective narratives offered by pre-disengagement participants who predict that their disengagement from high performance sport will be a positive experience despite a lack of concrete post-sport career plans. Schlossberg’s perspectival focus in terms of how individuals appraise themselves is also evident in participants’ self-appraisal. Consistently, participants described the positive influence of self-confidence and commitment upon the disengagement experience, viewing themselves as agentic and empowered. Moreover, participants see themselves as competitive and passionate individuals albeit, describing these intrinsic characteristics as having a variable effect on the disengagement experience. These self-appraisals, generally supported by external perspectives offered by secondary participants, do influence adaptation to the transitional experience of disengaging from high performance sport, congruent with the findings of Swain (1991), Stephan et al. (2003) and Wheeler et al. (1996) who rely upon Schlossberg’s (1984) transitional model.

Unlike Schlossberg’s (1984) model of transition, this study did not assign variables such as socio-economic status or educational attainment to the individual, but rather, viewed these as contextual variables influencing the disengagement experience both independently and in combination with other intrinsic and interpersonal variables. Understanding these types of variables from a contextual perspective acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between individuals and the sociological forces of their environment (Sigleman & Shaffer, 1995; Vondracek, Lerner & Schulenberg, 1986). Participants in this study comprise a somewhat homogeneous group in terms of educational status, with all six participants having attained, at minimum, a baccalaureate degree. Not surprisingly, given the educational attainment of this group, post-sport career ambitions are limited to professional occupations in business and health care.
As active high performance athletes, participants' financial status varied depending on factors such as the availability of corporate sponsorship, the relative profile of the athlete's sport in the media and one's level of international athletic achievement. Financial status was not generally perceived to be an influential variable upon participants' decision to leave high performance sport. In some instances financial pressures did exert some influence on the disengagement experience in terms of imparting a sense of urgency to become established in the post-sport career. Under Schlossberg's model, the influence of one's financial status cannot be adequately examined where environmental factors are limited to (a) the interpersonal; (b) the institutional; and (c) the physical setting (Schlossberg, 1984). Thus, the adaptation of Schlossberg's (1984) model of transitions to disengagement from sport is incomplete, lacking in its ability to fully examine the independent and interactive impact of contextual factors.

One of the foci of this study was the influence of interpersonal relationships upon participants' disengagement experience, assigning interpersonal relationships as a separate variable rather than including relational factors under the heading of environmental variables (Schlossberg, 1984). Once again, the examination of relational factors as a separate entity reflects the divergent focus of this study relative to earlier literature.

Participants in all three phases of the disengagement experience emphasised the autonomous nature of their decision to leave high performance sport, despite the fact that the majority of participants were involved in common-law or marital relationships at the time they made their disengagement decision. While disengagement decisions were influenced by contextual factors such as the quadrennial cycle, the focus of one's sport organization, and socialised expectations with respect to the relationship between career development and chronological age, participants perceived their decision to be made freely and independently.
Although the disengagement decision itself was perceived to be made autonomously, the presence or absence of social support did influence participants' disengagement experience, warranting it status as an independent factor separate from environmental influences.

Relative to earlier retirement models, Schlossberg's model represents a step forward in its inclusion of a broader range of influential factors upon one's experience of leaving sport (Stephan et al., 2003; Swain, 1991; Wheeler et al., 1996) and an expanded focus that includes positive transitional experiences such as those reported by Allison and Meyer (1988); Baillie (1992); Curtis and Ennis (1988); Erpic et al. (2004); Swain (1991); Sinclair and Orlick (1993); Werthner and Orlick (1986); and Wolff and Lester (1989). However, the adaptation of Schlossberg's (1984) model of transitions to disengagement from high performance sport cannot fully capture the findings of this study, lacking the ability to fully account for the independent and interactive influences of both interpersonal and contextual variables.

Understanding disengagement from high performance sport as a transitional process, Coakley's (1983) social structural model provides a theoretical foundation upon which some of the findings of this study can be understood. Recognizing that Coakley (1983) did not limit his model to high performance athletes, he contends that adjustment problems upon disengagement from sport are not inevitable but are more likely if (a) an athlete's sporting career restricted the development of other skills and attributes; (b) if an athlete's interpersonal relationships were restricted to other athletes; (c) if the athlete's family has provided little social or emotional support outside the physical dimensions of sport; and (d) if the athlete lacks material resources and social contacts to aid in the development of a post-sport career.

Because Coakley's (1983) social structural model stresses the need to examine both the independent and interactive impact of intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors, this model
lends itself well to examining the findings of this study according to the four criteria outlined by Coakley (1983). Examining the anticipated and actual disengagement experiences of participants, it is apparent that the development of tangible employment skills does influence the disengagement experience as evident in the competency issues described by primary and secondary participants in this study.

Using the second criterion regarding the presence of social relationships outside of sport, most participants in this study do appear to have developed interpersonal relationships outside of their sport, often citing their involvement in other pursuits and relationships outside of sport as contributing to a more well-rounded sense of identity beyond that of athlete. Notably, Jody’s mother expressed concern about her daughter’s emotional well-being should her close relationship with a former mountain biker ever dissipate. This concern is likely a well-founded one in light of Jody’s focus on this one particular relationship with few social attachments to people outside the mountain bike racing culture.

Applying Coakley’s (1983) third criterion, pertaining to familial support, to the findings of this study, it is interesting to note that the two participants who experienced the greatest adjustment issues described distant familial relationships and generally did not seek social support from family members during their disengagement process. These findings lend support to Coakley’s (1983) contention that interpersonal factors do play an important role in one’s adjustment to the disengagement process. Conversely, those participants who described close family ties did seek familial input and support during their disengagement from sport. These participants generally faced fewer adjustment problems during the transitional process of career change.

Finally, the fourth criterion refers to the presence or absence of material resources and
social contacts. As noted earlier, those participants feeling financial pressure did express some urgency to establish themselves in their post-sport career although financial pressures were not perceived as having a significant influence on the disengagement experience. With regard to social contacts, the presence or absence of social contacts certainly influenced the availability of employment opportunities for participants in this study. Jack, Jody, Mona, and Chris all reflected upon the importance of social networks as they pertain to post-sport employment availability, with both Mona and Chris securing their current positions through social contacts within the high performance sport system. A contrasting experience was described by Dirk, who found that by moving to a new country where he had a limited social network, he was unable to independently overcome an employment barrier and his initial disengagement experience was negative and emotionally distressing.

The findings of this study generally support Coakley’s (1983) social structural model although this model cannot fully account for the relative impact of intrinsic variables upon the disengagement experience, potentially overemphasizing the impact of external influences. While participants richly described external factors as influential variables, these variables need to be construed within their relationship to intrinsic variables and the entire disengagement process.

Life Span Development Model. The anticipated and reflective disengagement experiences described by participants in this study support Danish et al.’s (1997) and Wylleman et al.’s (2004) position that leaving sport is a normal developmental process, although it can be argued that the findings of this study refute Danish et al.’s (1997) underlying assumption that disengagement from sport is perceived to be a threat rather than a challenge. Contrary to this supposition, the findings of this study suggest that prior to leaving sport, participants’ career expectations were naïve and overly optimistic, reflected in the theme of positive framing. As
such, participants uniformly perceived disengagement from sport not as a threat or challenge but as a normative career developmental milestone within the high performance sport career.

The life span development model (Danish et al., 1997) purports that an athlete’s resources, level of pre-disengagement preparation, and past experiences will enable athletes to develop transferable skills to be passed from sport to the athlete’s post-sport career. The findings of this study suggest that regardless of how well prepared participants perceive themselves to be prior to leaving high performance sport, the experience of disengagement was unlike that which they anticipated. Moreover, many participants reported that because they had achieved such a high degree of success as an athlete, similar career success was anticipated in their post-sport employment. For some, the shift downward from excellence to mere competence or even mediocrity was disturbing. In short, these findings directly contrast the suppositions presented by Danish et al. Transferable skills accrued in sport do not necessarily translate well to careers outside of sport.

Another difference between the findings of this study and the life span development model is the influence of contextual variables upon participants’ disengagement experiences. Danish et al. do not focus on the context in which athletes leave sport or the environmental variables over which one has no explicit control. Nor do these researchers emphasise the influence of interpersonal relationships, suggesting that the incongruent findings in this study may reflect the differing foci of the current study relative to the life span development model. Focusing on intrinsic variables and the power of cognitive reframing, the life span development model provides no framework upon which to examine the influence of contextual and relational variables.

Account-Making Model. Grove et al. (1998) attempted to apply Harvey et al’s (1990)
account making model to athletes experiencing significant emotional distress in response to
disengagement from sport. Essential to this model is the perception that disengagement is a
"traumatic stress" that needs to be worked through by confiding in others. For most participants
in this study, disengagement from sport was conceptualised not as a traumatic stress but as part
of normative career development for high performance athletes. Therefore, this model does not
provide an adequate framework by which to understand the findings of this study.

Comparison of Research Findings:

The findings of this study both support and diverge from the existing research, in part a
reflection of differences between the athlete populations who were studied. For example, Haerle
(1975) found that among 312 professional baseball players, 75% did not consider their post-
playing career until they were in the last quarter of their career. While the majority of
participants in this study were also in their early thirties when they left high performance sport,
career preparation in the form of elemental career planning, attainment of a university education,
and non-sport work experience separates these athletes from the highly paid American
professionals in Haerle's study. These differences are easily accounted for by the disparity
between the sport careers of amateur and professional athletes. Similarly, while Mihovilovic
(1968) found that only five percent of players left professional soccer voluntarily, it is possible
that the context of disengagement for these eastern block professional athletes contributed to the
negative appraisal of their experience.

Allison and Meyer (1988) also studied professional athletes: female tennis players.
While the participants in the present study received significantly less remuneration than these
professionals over the course of their sport career, their collective disengagement experience
does support Allison and Meyer's contention that disengagement from sport is a normative
developmental process, uniformly stating that their decision to leave sport was because it was time to “move on” with life. Furthermore, like the female tennis professionals in Allison and Meyer’s study, some of the participants who adopted new life roles during their disengagement experience, described how these roles positively influenced their disengagement experience, once again lending support to Prus’ (1984) lifestyle model, suggesting that athletes welcome the disengagement experience when it allows them to pursue other life roles. Thus, the decision to leave high performance sport behind is viewed as part of normative career development. In this regard, both studies refute aspects of social gerontological or thantalogical models because the athletes perceive disengagement from sport as an opportunity for continuing development rather than discontinuity of their sport career. This would suggest that more developmentally appropriate theoretical models of career transition are warranted to conceptualise the process of disengaging from high performance sport as retirement focused models are inappropriate for this population.

Swain (1991) studied ten professional male athletes who voluntarily withdrew from sport. Congruent with Swain’s supposition that the transitional experience is influenced by one’s previous experience with similar transitions, participants in this study acknowledged that the transitional experience of disengaging from sport was challenging as this transition was indeed a novel event, thus limiting their experience in coping with such an event. Similar to Swain, this study also identified the importance of the presence or absence of social support and concurrent stressors in participants’ disengagement experience. However, because this study focused on pre-, mid-, and post-disengagement perspectives, the entirety of the transitional process is examined whereas Swain (1991) limited his focus to the beginning phase of this transition.

Like Swain’s (1991) findings, this study supports the contention that disengagement from
high performance sport is indeed a transitional process rather than a discrete event with continuing adjustment to a post-competitive career for many months subsequent to the actual disengagement decision.

Relative to collegiate athletes (i.e., Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985), a comparison of findings is problematic as it is difficult to know to what extent collegiate athletic endeavours were construed as a career. Moreover, in the case of Blinde and Stratta (1992), the collegiate athletes in their study had no control over their disengagement decision, contributing to the described thantalogical experience and sense of unfinished business. However, building upon Blinde and Stratta’s (1992) findings, the themes generated in this study suggest that having a sense of control over one’s disengagement decision has a significant influence upon the disengagement process.

Continuing to focus on age differences between studies, Curtis and Ennis' (1988) study of former elite-level hockey players included much younger athletes than the participants in this study. For the majority of junior hockey players who do not pursue professional hockey careers, disengagement from competitive hockey occurs in the late teens or early twenties. Thus, retiring junior hockey players are at a different stage of personal and career development than the majority of participants in this study whose sport careers spanned their twenties and early thirties. Moreover, it is also noteworthy that Curtis and Ennis (1988) sought retrospective accounts from former hockey players up to 20 years post-disengagement, likely resulting in reflections influenced by time, age, life and career experiences, as well as personal, career, and psychosocial development. Finally, the career lifespan of a junior hockey player is very short (2-3 years) compared to some high performance careers of participants in this study. Thus, viewing disengagement from high performance sport as a normative career transition, one questions the
comparability to the disengagement experiences described in this study to the retrospective account of leaving junior hockey at the age of 19 or 20 years.

Relative to earlier studies of high performance athletes, this study stands apart in terms of the inclusion of pre- and mid-disengagement participants, possibly accounting for some of the differences in findings. For example, one major difference between the findings of this study and those reported in Werthner and Orlick's (1986) examination of former Olympic athletes is that even for those participants in this study whose disengagement experience was challenging, they did not describe their experience to be "extremely difficult/traumatic" as was reported by 32.1% of participants responding to Werthner's and Orlick's (1986) survey. One reason for this might be that participants in this study generally perceived their decision to leave sport as an autonomous one over which they had control. In this regard, no one reported that they left their sport because of politics/sport association problems, financial difficulties, or coaching issues; three of the seven factors Werthner and Orlick (1986) identified as major contributors to the transitional experience of disengagement. A second reason for discrepant findings between these two studies might be that the participants in this study described their disengagement experience in their own words rather than responding to a forced-choice survey. A third reason could be that the experience of filling out a survey offered a greater sense of anonymity and fewer social desirability issues than is the case when one is personally engaged with the researcher.

Some similar findings are apparent between this study and Werthner and Orlick's (1986). In particular, factors such as having a new focus, a sense of accomplishment, and the support of family and friends were noted in both studies as factors contributing to the transitional experience of leaving sport. Also, mid- and post-disengagement participants in this study reported a high level of life satisfaction similar to the findings of Werthner and Orlick (1986).
Finally, despite the greater variability among participants in this study in terms of athletic achievement at the international level, there do not appear to be major differences in the contributory factors identified by higher and lower achieving athletes.

Sinclair and Orlick (1993) also focused on Canadian high performance athletes, reporting that positive post-disengagement adjustment was related to (a) the attainment of one’s athletic goals prior to retirement; and (b) the presence of post-retirement options on which to focus. While the findings of this study generally support Sinclair and Orlick’s contention that the presence of a post-disengagement career option is related to a more positive transitional experience, a clear career goal cannot guarantee a positive transition from high performance sport. This was particularly notable in Dirk’s case, where he was well prepared to start a new career as a chiropractor but his efforts to open a practice in Australia were thwarted by immigration barriers. These findings suggest that while a clear post-disengagement career option is conducive to a positive transitional experience, contextual and interpersonal variables can influence the experience as well.

In their study of 18 athletes with a disability, Wheeler et al. (1996) focused on the perspectives offered by athletes at different stages of the retirement transition. Wheeler et al.’s methodology is similar to that employed in this study, thus allowing a more direct comparison of findings relative to other research findings that relied exclusively on retrospective perspectives. However a comparison of findings is limited by Wheeler et al.’s (1996) exclusive focus on athletes with a disability, particularly in light of the rapid rise from recreational to high performance status within the disabled sport community.

Similar to the findings in this study, Wheeler et al. reported that among active athletes, a post-retirement career had not been seriously considered. For these athletes, their focus and
commitment was directed toward sport, similar to that reported by pre-disengagement participants. However, unlike the participants in this study, Wheeler et al. reported that there is an inherent lack of institutional support for athletes with disabilities. While this is also the case for some National level able-bodied athletes, most of the participants in this study received government funding with half securing additional corporate sponsorships.

Wheeler et al. (1996) described the next stage in the retirement transition as semi-retirement, comprised of athletes who experienced career threatening injuries. This transitional stage does not mirror the mid-disengagement phase of participants in this study, who left their sport voluntarily and view their disengagement decision as permanent. These differing categories limit the direct comparison of findings although some similarities are noted in terms of described identity issues, a sense of readiness, timing, and emotional responses.

Post-disengagement participants in this study can be compared to the permanently retired athletes in Wheeler et al.’s (1996) study. For some participants, similar reflections are apparent in terms of coping skills, loss of identity, and a desire to return to sport. Notable differences are also apparent in terms of Wheeler et al.’s (1996) fear of failure theme. This theme did not arise in this study and may reflect barriers to career development experienced by individuals with disabilities generally rather than specifically by former athletes. Because individuals with disabilities face employer discrimination and stereotypes, a fear of the future is not a surprising finding.

Within the context of the Australian sport system, Grove et al.’s (1997) findings with respect to the positive relationship between athletic identity and the time taken to emotionally and socially adjust to retirement from sport resonate with the perceptions articulated in this study. Among those participants who had already left their sport, the individual describing the
greatest affiliation with the athlete identity also described the most prolonged adjustment experience after disengaging from sport whereas other participants who were less exclusively tied to their role as athlete were able to refocus their passion and commitment to other career avenues, thus aiding the adjustment process.

One major difference between the findings of this study and those reported in Grove et al.'s study is the relationship between the need for instrumental social support and emotional support and high athletic identity. The findings of this study suggest that it may not be athletic identity alone accounting for this finding but rather, a more complex interplay of gender socialisation, personality characteristics, and participation in an individual versus team sport, propelling athletes to seek social and emotional support during the transitional period of disengagement.

A second difference between this study and Grove et al.'s study is the extent to which bureaucratic structures support Australian athletes not only at the National level but also at the State level. Because these athletes are well supported financially and are able to devote themselves to full-time sport early in their athletic careers, it is possible that the other career and educational avenues are not well developed during the high performance career of Australian athletes. In contrast, Canada's system provides less financial support for emerging athletes, often requiring athletes to juggle sport with other career and educational activities, potentially perpetuating a more balanced sense of personal identity and preparedness for employment after sport.

Grove et al.'s conclusion that athletes who have strong and exclusive athletic identity may be vulnerable to career transition difficulties is supported to some extent by the findings of this study. However, the similarities in this study and the results reported by Grove et al. should
be viewed with some caution in light of Grove et al.'s exclusive reliance on retrospective data, differing research methodologies, and structural differences between the Australian and Canadian sport systems where the context for career development in high performance sport is not equivalent across the two countries.

Although the participants in the present study do not uniformly represent the upper echelon of high performance athletes within Ungerleider’s (1997) study in terms of Olympic medal performances, some striking similarities are noted in terms of the relative homogeneity of participants’ educational attainment and the pursuit of post-sport professional careers. A second similarity between these two studies is the finding that a minority of high performance athletes experience very serious transitional problems resulting in the inability to adjust to life outside of sport.

Once again, some caution is warranted in the comparison between the findings of this study and Ungerleider as the latter study relies on retrospective data provided many years after the former athletes’ disengagement from sport, with the mean age of participants being 45 years. Secondly, the American sport system is vastly different from Canada’s system, likely influencing the sport career development of emerging and well-established athletes as well as post-sport career opportunities.

Compared to current studies of high performance athletes, similarities in research findings are apparent. For example, Erpic et al.’s (2004) investigation of Slovene high performance athletes paralleled some of the findings of this study, notably the association between strong athletic identity and a more difficult disengagement experience. These similar findings are not surprising in light of earlier related research (e.g., Erpic, 2001; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), supporting the contention that athletes with a strong
athletic identity tend to experience greater difficulties during the disengagement experience. Another similar finding pertains to the perception that one has achieved his or her athletic goals (Erpic, 2001; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) and this study’s findings that one’s exiting athletic performance affects the disengagement experience. The affective tone of athletes’ disengagement experience is bound to be influenced by the perception that one’s career goals were met. Leaving sport following a disappointing performance may discount prior athletic achievements in the mind of the athlete, just as a spouse leaving a troubled relationship may have difficulty recalling better times.

One prominent difference between Erpic et al.’s findings and this study is the role of post-sport planning. Erpic et al. found that planning had no significant effect on the quality of the disengagement process, contrasting the findings of both this study and earlier research (e.g., Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wylleman et al., 2004). Generally, not having concrete post-sport plans protracted the transitional process for participants in this study although it is possible that how Erpic et al. operationalised the construct of post-sport career planning differed from how it was understood by participants in this study.

Generally, the similar findings between these two studies highlight the need for continuing research that incorporates intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual aspects, reflecting the “complex and multifaceted perspective of the course of athletic retirement and adaptation to post-sports life” (Erpic et al., 2004, p. 57).

The findings of the present study, particularly the prospective views of participants, mirror the Spanish athletes’ desire for a gradual and planned transition reported in Torregrosa et al.’s (2004) study of elite athletes’ image of retirement. At the same time, pre-disengagement participants in this study, like those in North and Lavallee’s (2004) survey, often lack concrete
post-sport career plans. These findings do raise the question of accuracy as noted by mid- and post-disengagement participants who reported that their pre-disengagement expectations were unrealistic and naïve. While gradual consideration may well decrease athletes’ anxiety about post-sport life, the transitional process of changing careers may be better facilitated by more accurate perceptions. The positive framing theme generated in this study fully supports North and Lavallee’s conclusion that there is a need for career transition programmes to provide athletes “with a focus with which to consider their long-term career development needs” (p. 84).

As noted earlier, diverse cultural settings may account for some of the discrepancies between the findings of this study and those reported in the extant literature. One such of example of this is noted in Stephan et al.’s (2003) study where prior to disengagement, French athletes balanced part-time work with sport. Moreover, all of the French athletes moved immediately to full-time employment in their pre-disengagement jobs. It may be that the experience of not moving immediately to post-sport employment is reflected in the experiences described by mid- and post-disengagement transitions in the present study. The findings of this study suggest that in contrast to previous research (e.g., Brandao et al., 2001; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stambulova, 1997, 2001), the transitional experience of leaving high performance sport can last longer than 6-12 months. Depending on one’s post-sport career activities and trajectory, the transitional period can be 18 months or longer, likely reflecting contextual differences evident between different countries and cultures.

Summary

Comparisons between the results of this study and other research literature on disengagement from sport reveal the perception that disengagement from high performance sport is indeed a transitional process rather than a discrete event. This transitional process extends
beyond the actual disengagement event to the post-sport careers of former athletes. The extent to which the disengagement transition is perceived to be positive is influenced by a variety of intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors, including the athlete’s exiting athletic performance, the autonomy of one’s disengagement decision, the extent to which one’s sense of identity is linked to the role of athlete, the availability and seeking out of social support, the development of concrete post-sport career plans, the ease by which one is able to access a new career, one’s competency within a new career, and the redirection of one’s passion to other work and/or life roles. These perceptions resonate with, and advance the theoretical positions of, Schlossberg’s theory of transitions (Schlossberg, 1984; Swain, 1991; Wheeler et al., 1996; Wylleman et al., 2004) and Danish et al.’s (1997) lifespan development model, which posit retirement from sport as a critical life event similar to other life transitions. Notably, similar to other studies in which pre-disengagement participants were included (North & Lavallee, 2004; Wheeler et al., 1996), participants in this study generally expressed vague post-sport career plans embedded in positive framing about the transferability of intrinsic characteristics to careers outside of sport. These differences in anticipated and actual transitional experiences can be accounted for within a transitional framework, which postulates that individuals examine the assets and liabilities of the transitional event, the individual, and the environment (Schlossberg, 1984).

In keeping with the lifespan development model (Danish et al., 1997), mid- and post-disengagement participants describe the application of cognitive reframing as they called upon adaptive coping skills acquired in other life experiences to effectively negotiate the process of disengaging from sport, particularly when faced with challenges such as the failure of a business plan or immigration barriers. However, the results of this study expand beyond Danish et al.’s
model in its focus on the independent and combined effect of intrinsic factors, the availability and acceptance of social support, the implications of why and how disengagement decisions are made, and the mediating influence of contextual variables upon the transitional experience. In this study, disengagement from high performance sport emerged as a complex, multi-factorial experience affected by a variety of factors embedded not only within the individual but also in the framework of interpersonal relationships and contextual variables.

Extending beyond existing research literature is the representation of high performance athletes at different stages of the disengagement process, with compelling findings offered by pre- and mid-disengagement participants not otherwise evident in earlier retrospective data. Comparison of pre-disengagement participants’ expectations, where transferability of intrinsic characteristics was emphasised, to the experiences described by mid- and post-disengagement participants suggests that there are gaps between pre-disengagement expectations and the experiential process itself. This finding has implications for both future research and counselling practice as it pertains to helping high performance athletes prepare for careers beyond sport.

The current findings also support past research findings examining the impact of one’s identity as an athlete upon the disengagement experience (Erpic et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997; Ungerleider, 1997; Wheeler et al., 1996). Specifically, participants whose personal identity was entrenched within the role of athlete described greater difficulties adjusting to life beyond sport, both personally and interpersonally. This finding also lends support to elements of continuity theory (Atchley, 1980), which suggests that the energy previously devoted to a major role can be redistributed among remaining roles, requiring a subtle shift in energy and interests.

The current study potentially extends upon previous theories in its identification of the influence of other roles during the disengagement process. For example, participants who
experienced the onset of parenthood during the disengagement process described their shift in energy and focus as a positive coping mechanism. Adopting the parental role acted as a positive mediating force, thereby allowing individuals to more easily let go of self-identification as a high performance athlete. For participants with a strong attachment to identification as an athlete and for whom the parental role or other major life role was not sought, continued attachment to the athlete role was evident, the consequences of which included adjustment difficulties in the post-sport career.

This study differs from the extant literature in its methodological design, namely the inclusion of multiple perspectives from both the personal and sporting aspects of participants' lives. These supplemental perspectives build upon narrative data provided by athletes as well as provide secondary and sometimes differing perspectives on the role of intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual variables. The inclusion of multiple perspectives represents an extension of previous research in its interpersonal focus, and while the decision to leave high performance sport may not always be made jointly with one's spouse or partner, those individuals who are close to athletes share and influence the disengagement experience. Whereas other theoretical models focus exclusively on the athlete's perceptions, this study presented a fuller picture of the disengagement experience by viewing different stages of the process through multiple lenses.

The findings of this study also contribute an experiential perspective to the existing literature by suggesting that disengagement from high performance sport is an interwoven, multifaceted experience. Athletes begin to consider and plan for post-sport careers before the decision to leave sport is made, albeit sometimes in a vague manner. Athletes described an extended process of leaving sport and moving towards a new post-sport career. This process requires a shift in athletes' self and career perceptions and expectations. Intrinsic influences
include one's ability to shift one's sense of personal identity, a redirection of one's passion, development of non-sport career competency, development of a concrete post-sport career plan, and maintenance of self-confidence. Interpersonal influences include access to social support, continued positive relationships with one's sport organisation, and the development of positive social relationships outside of sport. Contextual influences include one's exiting athletic performance, autonomy over one's disengagement decision, the presence or absence of employment barriers, the presence or absence of concurrent life changes, educational achievement, and financial status. Over the course of the disengagement process, idealistic expectations were often modified or abandoned and participants’ self-perceptions co-existed with, and were even strengthened by, their post-sport career experiences. The disengagement experiences described in this study are appropriately conceptualised not as a discrete event but rather as a continuing, multifaceted process of adjustment to the ongoing experience of career development, moving out of the role of high performance athlete into new career roles and experiences.

Implications for Future Research

This descriptive study contributes valuable insights of high performance athletes in the pre-, mid-, and post-disengagement phases of leaving sport. Individuals who know the athlete well, both in the context of their sport and personal lives, offered multiple perspectives at each phase of disengagement. Future research may confirm and extend the findings of this descriptive study in a variety of ways.

The findings from this study were derived from a small homogeneous sample of high performance athletes at differing stages of disengagement from high performance sport. Participants in this study were generally in their thirties, having represented Canada in their
respective sport for more than a decade. All of the participants were university educated, espousing post-competitive career plans that included professional employment in business and health care. Future research examining disengagement from high performance sport using a larger and more diverse sample of participants may confirm and further extend the themes identified in this study. Conversely, studies investigating the disengagement experience of younger athletes who leave high performance sport in their early twenties may uncover different themes, reflective of their personal and career development at that stage of their lives.

This study relied on a multiple case study methodology using a cross-section of high performance athletes at different stages of the disengagement process as well as secondary participants. One of the strengths of this study is its reliance on multiple perspectives and inclusion of prospective views. However, a longitudinal study could verify and extend the current study’s results, following a high performance athlete from the mid-point of his or her sport career through the disengagement process and establishment in a post-sport career. This type of study could uncover themes and details pertaining to the disengagement process as they present themselves over a period of years. Moreover, a longitudinal design may reveal how different intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual factors interact and affect the disengagement experience.

Finally, the disengagement experiences of the high performance athletes in this study suggest that the process involved in leaving one’s sport to embark on a new career path is a normative transitional experience yet athletes were generally ill-prepared for inevitable transitional issues that arose. Mid- and post-disengagement participants stressed the need for pre-disengagement education for athletes as they prepare to embark on the disengagement journey. This supports the need for ongoing research upon which one can design a counselling
model to be applied to this population. It is inevitable that all athletes will leave their sport and the findings of this study suggest that one role of career counselling should be to assist this population prepare for the inevitable career transition at the end of their sport career.

Counselling Implications

The findings of this study can provide some insight for counsellors working with active athletes anticipating disengagement from high performance sport or former athletes immersed in the transitional process of changing careers. The value of this study’s contributions lies primarily in the sample of high performance athletes used in this study, particularly pre-disengagement athletes. By exploring the anticipated experience of leaving sport, this study has implications for the process by which counsellors can help prepare athletes for the transitional experience of leaving sport to pursue another career as well as assist former athletes as they negotiate the disengagement process.

First, by comparing athletes’ anticipated experiences of leaving sport to those described by former athletes, it is apparent that the athletes in this study were generally ill prepared for the challenges and adjustment issues arising during the disengagement process. Specifically, athletes’ post-competitive career plans were often vaguely described with an overemphasis on intangible personal characteristics such as self-confidence, diligence, passion, and leadership. Positively framed expectations regarding one’s post-competitive career may lead to distress upon disengagement in an otherwise self-confident and agentic individual. Counsellors working with these athletes should consider lack of concrete post-competitive career planning as an area of potential difficulty. When working with high performance athletes who are nearing the end of their competitive career, counsellors should focus on assisting athletes to develop concrete post-competitive career plans, avoiding the presumption that an athlete’s optimism and self-
confidence will support him or her to negotiate the transitional process of disengaging from sport in the absence of a specified career goal. Relative to the mid- and post-disengagement participants in this study, pre-disengagement athletes expressed the naïve belief that in the absence of a specified career plan, employment opportunities will avail themselves through their sporting network because the personal characteristics that contributed to their athletic success will be highly desirable to potential employers. Mid- and post-transitional participants in this study described similar pre-disengagement beliefs, citing the need for pre-disengagement counselling to assist athletes with their post-competitive career preparations. Counsellors can support high performance athletes’ pre-disengagement preparation by exploring their post-competitive career plans and expectations in an effort to identify potential transitional issues and develop proactive coping strategies by which to address potential areas of difficulty. One goal of pre-disengagement counselling is to assist athletes to identify a tangible career goal and develop a plan by which to achieve their goal. This recommendation builds upon Sinclair and Orlick’s (1993) finding that athletes who have post-competitive options on which to focus report a more positive adjustment to retirement from competitive sport.

The second counselling implication relates to participants’ description of autonomous disengagement decisions based upon the perception that it was time to “move on” in their career development, suggesting a sense of readiness to engage in a new career outside of high performance sport. However, some participants’ disengagement plans included exiting athletic performance expectations such as the attainment of an Olympic medal or specified placement at an international event. The clinical implication of these anticipated exit strategies relates to the potential incongruity between athletes’ expectations and their actual experience. Such discrepancies can have a negative effect on one’s disengagement experience, particularly when
one’s exiting athletic goals were not achieved or one’s disengagement from sport was unanticipated. Counsellors working with athletes in preparation for disengagement from sport can explore differing exit circumstances to assist athletes to work through unanticipated situations as well as implement both emotional- and problem-focused coping strategies. While pre-disengagement counselling is indeed proactive and positively focused, viewing disengagement from high performance sport as a normative aspect of career development, athletes who are encouraged to develop positive coping strategies when faced with unanticipated or negative situations may be more likely to retain an efficacious sense of control over their disengagement experience.

A third clinical implication pertains to the influence of identity upon athletes’ disengagement experience. Participants in this study whose sense of identity was solely defined by their connection to sport described greater difficulties adapting to work environments outside of sport, particularly if employers and co-workers did not acknowledge or revere a former athlete’s sporting achievements. As concluded by Sinclair and Orlick (1993), Grove et al. (1997) and Erpic et al. (2004), athletes espousing a strong and exclusive athletic identity may be vulnerable to career transitional difficulties. These findings are supported by this study, suggesting that counsellors need to work with athletes to examine the locus of their personal identity. Recognizing that individuals consumed by the athlete identity may experience greater transitional issues as they disengage from high performance sport, counselling can play a valuable role in assisting athletes to achieve a more balanced sense of personal identity. This can include an exploration of the meaning and values that underlie individuals’ athletic identity. The counsellor may also encourage self-exploration of gains and losses associated with a more balanced sense of personal identity. Additionally, counsellors can work with athletes to examine
how their athletic identity may be reinforced by the media or sport community, with the goal of assisting them to develop their own self-image, viewing themselves as holistic individuals whose athletic careers form an important facet of their identity without consuming their sense of self.

A fourth and related clinical implication focuses on the expansion of one’s sense of identity to include new life roles, thereby contributing to a broader sense of personal identity. Participants in this study described how the adoption of new roles acted as a positive mediating factor during the disengagement experience. Expanding one’s sense of personal identity alleviated some participants’ uncertainties as they moved from the familiarity of sport to the unknown territory of a post-sport career. A further benefit of acquiring new life and career roles is that some participants discovered avenues in which they could direct some of their passion and focus offering a repository that had previously been occupied by sport. Athletes able to redirect their passion and focus within a new role, whether personal or career focused, described a greater sense of satisfaction during their disengagement experience. Therefore, one therapeutic focus could include the exploration of the ways in which individuals’ sense of identity could potentially co-exist and even be enhanced by roles other than that of athlete. A counselling goal may be to assist clients to develop a vision of themselves outside of sport in a variety of career and life roles, encouraging a sense of personal identity that embraces multidimensional aspects of one’s self.

A fifth implication for counselling suggested by the findings of this study is the potential benefit of group support for athletes in the midst of disengaging from high performance sport. For some participants in this study, particularly those who did not seek support from interpersonal relationships, disengagement from sport was perceived as an isolating experience. For one participant in particular, facing unexpected challenges to starting a new career outside of
sport led to feelings of depression and uncertainty. Participating in this research project proved to be an illuminating experience for him as the participant realized for the first time both the depth of his feelings and the benefit of sharing his experience with another in the context of a safe and non-judgmental relationship. Other participants in this study described this experience as normalizing, realizing that other athletes also struggled with feelings of uncertainty about the future. The experiences of these participants suggest that group counselling, sharing one’s disengagement experience with others, may provide some athletes a supportive and normalizing environment in which they can explore their career transitional issues.

Finally, the anticipation of disengagement from sport as well as the actual transitional experiences described by participants in this study point to reciprocal influences of intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual variables upon one’s disengagement experience. From a clinical perspective, this finding suggests that counsellors need to examine not only the personal characteristics that clients bring to the counselling relationship but also explore the interpersonal and contextual influences that both shape and are shaped by the athlete. The participants in this study were all university educated individuals seeking professional post-competitive careers at an age when most of their peers are well entrenched in their respective careers and familial relationships. Moreover, outside forces such as the Olympic quadrennial cycle and sport organizations affected the timing of disengagement from sport. As such, counsellors should appreciate the multiple and reciprocal influence of interpersonal and contextual factors that may underlie clients’ concerns. Making sense of these multiple influences may assist clients to understand and possibly reframe their experiences so that they can work though the challenges imposed by the transition from sport to their new career.

In sum, counsellors who work with high performance athletes need to appreciate
disengagement from sport as an important part of one's athletic career. Therapeutic foci should include assisting athletes to prepare to effectively negotiate the disengagement transition. Counsellors need to recognize in the absence of concrete post-competitive career goals and plans by which to work toward such goals, athletes' personal characteristics alone are insufficient to effectively negotiate the transitional process of disengaging from high performance sport.

Disengagement from sport should be conceptualised as a normative transitional process for which athletes can prepare. Counselling can assist athletes to work through transitional issues and challenges in a positive and proactive manner, from the viewpoint that disengagement from sport is a unique yet normative aspect of career development.

For athletes in the midst of the disengagement transition, counselling offers clients an opportunity to explore the values and perspectives underlying their respective concerns with the understanding that disengagement experiences are independently and reciprocally influenced by a variety of intrinsic, interpersonal, and contextual variables.

Examination of athletes' sense of personal identity is an important factor to explore within the counselling relationship. The findings of this study support the existing research literature suggesting that moving towards a balanced sense of personal identity is an integral part of a positive disengagement experience.

Finally, working with clients within a supportive group environment can be useful as it can normalise what can otherwise potentially be an isolating experience. Working within a group environment offers individuals an opportunity to explore their experiences in a collaborative psychoeducational setting where issues can be addressed in a positive, proactive manner.
Limitations

Several limitations are pertinent to this study and therefore warrant discussion. While these limitations are generally inevitable in case study research, they nonetheless suggest that the findings of this study should be interpreted with some caution.

First, the results of this study were derived from a small, homogeneous sample of high performance athletes, particularly with respect to age, educational attainment, socio-economic status, and culture. While this study did succeed in sampling a relatively broad range of individual, team, high- and low-profile sports, with male and female athletes at varying stages of the disengagement process through purposeful sampling (Creswell, 1998), this study’s participants were relatively homogeneous in terms of non-sport contextual variables. The extended athletic careers of the individuals in this study, their top ten international status, university education, and relative cultural homogeneity do not reflect the diverse composition of all high performance athletes in Canada. The disengagement experiences articulated in this study therefore may not be applicable to all high performance athletes. Moreover, the anticipated and perceived autonomy with respect to participants’ decision to disengage from high performance sport in order to move forward in one’s career development implies a deliberate and conscious career choice and thus may not reflect the disengagement decisions of other high performance athletes. While the results of this study may only apply to the six participants, some of the study’s themes may resonate with the experiences of other high performance athletes.

A second methodological concern relates to the likelihood of analytical dilution with the addition of each new case (Creswell, 1998). While the depth of scrutiny in any single case was likely sacrificed, the ability to capture the transitional process in question at different stages of the experience and the presentation of multiple perspectives for each case outweighs the
analytical depth accorded to any individual case. In particular, inclusion of pre-disengagement participants broadened the focus of the disengagement transition; a phase largely ignored in the extant literature and thus setting this study apart from earlier research. The possibility nevertheless remains that the multiple case methodology used in this study did not fully capture individual experiences.

Conversely, some question is raised with respect to the counselling implications derived from the findings of this study, particularly as they pertain to younger high performance athletes at different stages of personal, relational, educational, and career development, thus representing a third methodological concern. The overwhelming majority of participants in this study were in their thirties, having represented Canada in their respective sports for more than a decade. The counselling implications arising from these disengagement experiences will likely need to be scrutinized and modified to effectively address the needs of a younger cohort. Having said this, the value of this study is not its generalisability (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) to all high performance athletes, but rather its ability to provide a rich, descriptive account of those factors perceived to be important to the transitional process of leaving high performance sport. Thus, this study has contributed to the foundation of research upon which counsellors can modify and further develop clinical models to proactively address disengagement issues with high performance athletes.

A fourth limitation relates to the inherent limitations of retrospective accounts provided by two of the six primary participants. Retrospective bias is a common phenomenon in social science research, reflecting the distortion of individual's recollections to match their current circumstances and perceptions (Christensen, 1991). This study sought to minimize retrospective bias through the inclusion of post-disengagement participants who had retired from high
performance sport within the preceding five years. Bias was also minimized through the elicitation of different types of information (Yin, 1989) including supplemental interviews with members of the athletes' personal and sport communities, thus providing multiple perspectives for each case. Thus, while retrospective accounts served as one source of data, they do not represent the only basis for data collection. It is nonetheless possible that post-disengagement participants may have forgotten or distorted particular facets of the disengagement experience.

A fifth limitation concerns researcher access to supplemental interviewees within pre-disengagement athletes’ respective sport communities. Both pre-disengagement participants provided rich narrative accounts of their athletic careers to date and consented to interviews with a member of their personal social circle. However, because these athletes are active members of their respective National teams with major international competitions pending, access to interviews with a member of their sport community was denied as a condition of participation in this study. This level of conditional participation had not been anticipated at the inception of this study, yet the concerns of these athletes were undeniably valid and these pre-disengagement athletes were included in the study. Thus, inclusion criteria for these pre-disengagement participants were altered to decrease any perceived risk of participating in the study.

A sixth limitation refers to the reliance on an exploratory research methodology in the form of multiple case studies. The descriptive focus of case study research is not conducive to an analysis of correlational or causal relationships between factors. As such, this research methodology was applied in a formative manner, contributing to the foundation of existing research and suggesting topics for future research. The use of multiple case studies was chosen for this study because it lends itself well to the qualitative analysis of high performance athletes' disengagement experience as they move toward the end of their competitive careers, leave high
performance sport, and become established in new careers, examining those issues identified in previous studies as well as those emergent issues which may have not been the focus of earlier research. The investigation of the relationships between variables identified by participants in this study represents an area for future study.

The final limitation of this study is the influence of researcher bias. My involvement in this study was all encompassing from conceptualising the initial research questions to conducting interviews and archival searches and analysing participant interviews. It is possible that my own athletic background, education and experience of disengaging from collegiate sport may have influenced my perspective. In order to minimize this potential influence to the greatest extent possible, I have endeavoured to clearly and honestly reflect upon and describe my own disengagement experience from sport in the researcher reflexivity section of this study. I have also relied upon participant feedback to validate my interpretation and associated trustworthiness of the research findings.
REFERENCES


If I have concerns about my treatment or rights as a research participant, I may contact the Director of Research Services at the University of British Columbia, Dr. Richard Spratley (604-822-8598).

**Consent:**

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences whatsoever.

I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

I consent to participate in this study.

______________________________  ______________________________
Research Participant Signature  Date

______________________________  ______________________________
Witness Signature  Date