# Cardiff School of Sport

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**Dissertation title:** Is There Life After Sport? An analysis of the positive transitional experiences within society of elite male athletes after sporting retirement

**Supervisor:** David Brown

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|          | To include: description and justification of data treatment/data analysis procedures; appropriate presentation of analysed data within text and in tables or figures; description of critical findings. |
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Is There Life After Sport?
An analysis of the positive transitional experiences within society of elite male athletes after career-ending injuries or sporting retirement and how these experiences might contribute to counselling

(Dissertation submitted under the discipline of SOCIO-CULTURAL)

James RAYBAUDO

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Certificate of student

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this study was to examine some examples of successful transitions from athletic retirement using a critical paradigm in an attempt to draw useful contributions to counselling and existing support mechanisms.

Method: One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four former elite athletes within a university context. Three of the participants were undertaking teaching roles at the university with one student completing an undergraduate degree at the onset of the study. The unstructured raw data was analysed and organised in key themes following procedures established in the literature (Creswell, 1998; Sparkes, 2002; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Silverman, 2004).

Results: The findings revealed that even though none of the participants had taken part in formal counselling sessions, they had all taken part in more informal support such as simply confiding in friends and relatives which highlighted the usefulness of counselling techniques to enable athletes to overcome the challenges of athletic retirement. The research also identified career planning as being a determining factor in the success of the participants’ transitions whilst also acknowledging athletic identity as having an important influence on the transitional experiences.

Conclusion: All the participants agreed that athletes should be better prepared for transitions out of sport and that it should be an ongoing process. The experiences analysed suggested that intervention strategies put in place by governing bodies and implemented at club level could prove beneficial to athletes subjected to difficulties linked to athletic retirement. This study also highlighted the need for further research to be conducted upon the potential benefits of counselling techniques whilst taking into account elements such as gender and individual sports.
Introduction:

Sport offers a unique environment which allows athletes to create their own identities. Indeed, elite athletes report high life satisfaction during their careers because of the living, loving relationship they develop with their sport (Stephan et al. 2003). Unfortunately, this relationship is temporary, and often rather short, as sporting careers end in different ways: through serious injuries, through drop-outs or through voluntary retirement (Howe, 2004). Although many studies attempt to conceptualise the transition process, most of the literature is predominantly focused upon the difficulties experienced by retiring athletes (Lavallee and Wylleman, 2007). There is therefore a lack of knowledge concerning the experiences of those who have completed a successful transition into working life post-career. This would be relevant to research considering the scale of the sports industry as well as the fact that the high number of athletes working in it will be experiencing similar transitional issues. In the context of this study, the termination of sporting careers through drop-outs will not be looked into as we focus solely on former elite athletes who are now in active employment or full-time education. In order to gain an understanding of what represents a successful transition, it would be crucial to analyse and discuss the manner with which elite athletes experience this transition into ‘normal’ life. Indeed, knowledge in this area would create opportunities for counselling to be given to those in need. In order to maximise the potential outcomes of this study and the usefulness of its contribution to counselling, solely the experiences of former elite athletes who have performed a ‘positive’ transition will be looked at. In order to facilitate this exploratory study, a review of the existing research literature in areas of career termination and transition in sport will be conducted. This research literature base spans both socio-cultural and psychological disciplines and therefore the review will draw eclectically from these. Furthermore, as this kind of study relates to the attitudes and behaviours of a specific group in order to gain understandings of its inner workings, it is suited to an interview-based study approach (Fetterman, 1998). According to Sands (2002), the fieldwork required in conducting such a study relates to empirical research methods as well as the collection qualitative data.
Therefore, in accordance with this, the literature review will focus most particularly on studies undertaken using a similar methodology and the results shall be categorised using a thematic analysis in order to highlight key findings.

**Literature Review:**

There exists a large body of literature on the topic of career transitions in sport, with around 300 empirical and theoretical studies identified by Lavallee and Wyleman (2007). It would be relevant to firstly draw knowledge from a few of these studies before undertaking original research concerning the transitional experiences of elite athletes. Lavallee and Wyleman's (2007) collaboration with international sport theorists and scholars represents one of the most complete academic works on career transitions in sport and provides great insight into the difficulties involved in completing a successful transition as well as into different intervention strategies. Although their work upon career transition presents interesting topics of discussion, a critique can be made upon the basis that the research uses a narrow focus on the psychological impacts relating to career termination and fails to bring in ways in which the negative transition may be avoided. As a result it would be of interest to not only examine existing literature on career termination and transitions from sport but also draw out three key themes which may help in the data analysis process. The themes of identity, age and body and culture were brought out while reading around the subject of sporting career transitions.

**Identity:**

Most of the studies examining the topic of career transitions in sport adopt a focus on the notion of identity. Before looking at studies that focus on a combination of the notions of identity and athletic retirement it would be relevant to gain an understanding of how identities are constructed. Donnelly and Young's (2001) work on identity construction and confirmation within the fields of rock climbing and rugby enabled them to draw out three stages of identity construction which may be applied to any sporting context. Firstly, the Presocialisation stage is identified by the authors as being ‘where non-participants learn about specific sport subcultures from a variety of different sources including families and peer groups’ (p61, 2001) and demonstrate an initial desire to participate.
This ephemeral stage is ended when the individual gets into direct contact to become a participant and is followed by the Selection and Recruitment phase which consists, as its title suggests, in the recruitment of the individual within a specific sporting subculture. This is then followed by the Socialisation stage where the individual receives training in the skills and culture required by the activity. Once the identity is constructed, the novice is then either accepted or ostracised by veterans during the identity confirmation stage. This particular research provides relevant information concerning the formation of an athletic identity and the various stages representing its construction.

Identity studies often further focus on the cognitive, behavioural, emotional and social consequences of athletic retirement (Alfermann et al., 2004; Lally, 2007; Erpic et al., 2004) or the different adjustment difficulties related to identity that elite athletes may go through (Kerr and Dacyshyn, 2000; Fernandez et al., 2006). Findings of these studies show that athletes are prone to identity confusion due to adjustment difficulties regardless of whether they had retired voluntarily or were forced into it (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Similarly, Wylleman, Alfermann and Lavallee’s (2004) work explores the concept of transition and through the use of an extensive literature review, identifies a number of cases who experienced traumatic results upon athletic career termination such as alcohol and substance abuse, acute depression and eating disorders linked to identity confusion. Linking in with similar concepts to Wylleman et al.’s study is Alfermann, Stambulova and Zemaityte’s work on reactions to sport career termination (2004). Indeed, the researchers used a cross-national comparison of German, Lithuanian and Russian athletes in order to assess the cognitive, emotional and behavioural consequences of athletic retirement across the three nations. Their quantitative study revealed correlations between retirement planning and positive adaptation as well as links between strong athletic identity and difficulties in the adaptation process (Alfermann et al. 2004). The later has also been the subject of quantitative studies (Fernandez, Stephan & Fouquereau, 2006). Indeed, the authors developed a quantitative method (the Athletes’ Retirement Decision Inventory) to assess the reasons behind athletes’ retirement. Their four dimensions model drawn from the results of this research enabled them to find that athletes tend to develop a strong athletic identity which impacts negatively on their attempts to move on. Although their findings are significant and of interest, there are inherent limitations with the methodology used to produce knowledge on this topic.
This is because career transition is a process of subjective nature and as a result more qualitative studies are needed to better understand the lived experiences of athletes in transition. There is some precedence for a qualitative approach. For example, a series of in-depth interviews enabled Lally (2007) to discover a relationship between athletic goals and anticipated disrupted identities upon retirement. As a result, it was found that the athletes employed several coping strategies including the proactive diminishment of their athletic identities prior to retirement. Decreasing the prominence of their athletic identities precluded a major identity crisis or confusion upon and following athletic retirement. Lally (2007) identifies the need for a redefinition of self which should take place long before the sport career transition in order to protect the athlete’s identity. This is a very interesting notion and although the term ‘redefinition’ might seem a somewhat extreme requirement for elite athletes who have built a strong identity around their sport, this study questions the existing support mechanisms available for athletes and emphasises the need for them to be enhanced in various ways. The difficulties in career transitions can also be different depending on the function of the sport. Indeed, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) used a qualitative methodology to examine the unique problem linked to gymnastics. Elite gymnasts retire at a very young age compared to other athletes from different sports. The authors identified a number of key phases drawn from in depth interviews with seven former national or international level female gymnasts. Although the study deals with participants from the female gender, their findings were of interest as they indicated that there was no clear distinction between voluntary and involuntary retirement as athletes who retired of their own accord were still prone to adjustment difficulties due to identity confusion. Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) argue that athletes should be discouraged from making sport the only avenue from which they derive a sense of personal worth and identity. Young athletes should maintain a focus on their overall long term psychological, physical and social well-being. The authors also identify the need for further research in order to better assist athletes with their adaptation to life without sport. This study represents valuable work as it raises important questions concerning the elements required for an athlete to perform a successful transition out of sport but also enables us to identify other key themes such as age linked to Sports career transitions.
Age:

Age can be an important factor which may force athletes into engaging in the retirement process. Young et al. (2005) work on former elite Australian female tennis players showed that a planned transition out of sport or into a sport related field, has a better chance of being successful than non-planned transitions. The authors also found that a majority of former elite athletes make their transitions within the same sport, either through playing at a lower level, through coaching or through administration. Studies have also looked at the way with which athletes view the retirement process (Torregrosa, Boixado, Valiente & Cruz, 2004). The authors identified three different stages related to the athletes view on retirement: an initiation/training stage, a maturity performance stage and the anticipation of retirement stage. Torregrosa et al. (2004) argue that active athletes gradually build an image of sporting retirement throughout their career. These findings would suggest that a forced transition out of sport at an early stage of the career would present the most potential difficulties and as for counselling, a support system which would enable athletes to gradually build an image of the retirement process would be most beneficial. In parallel, Park et al. (2012) focus on the decision making process the career transition phase of elite Korean tennis players. Their study has enabled them to identify the transition out of elite sport as a dynamic process accompanied by various cognitive and emotional responses which require different coping strategies at different periods in an athlete’s career. This seems to suggest the need to provide further interventions at different stages in the career and raises the question of their application. Indeed, North & Lavallee (2004) explore the short term and long term plans of athletes across the UK and argue that there is a great margin within the retirement ages across the different sports and as a result there is a need to tailor specific intervention aspects in function of the sport and age. Additionally, the authors identify unwillingness among young athletes to develop plans about their retirement as well as the prevalence of short term planning amongst the majority of the athletes. They also highlight the need for further research to be conducted in that area in order to assess the needs of athletes around Europe in terms of career development. But age can also be the catalyst for positive transitions as well. Indeed, Swain (1999) argues that interviews with former professional athletes who have decided to retire from their sport due to their age have shown that they were able to preserve health, self-respect and the regard of others.
Over time athletes were confronted by both internal and external pressures for change and although they experienced confusion and indecision regarding the difficult career choices, the participants of this study did not find the transition to be traumatic (Swain, 1999). Observations upon ageing can have close links with the relationship between the athletes and their bodies. Indeed, Phoenix and Sparkes’ (2006) analysed athletes’ perceptions of their aging bodies through a range of interviews with young athletes. The participants were sensitised to the impact of ageing which, for them, meant a decline in their future performances and, for male participants, a possible loss of control and independence. The participants of this study recognised that they would have responsibilities towards their jobs and families which would constrain the time they would have available for exercise (Phoenix and Sparkes, 2006). Although this study presents valuable data, the sample used included athletes who had competed at a range of different levels and therefore an exclusive sample could have been more beneficial. Existing studies have also linked ageing bodies with athletic identity (Sparkes, 1998; Wainwright et al., 2005; Phoenix, Faulkner and Sparkes, 2006; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2007). The results suggest that an exclusive athletic identity might act as barrier when imagining the ageing body-self (Phoenix et al., 2006), that athletes displaying a strong sense of physical self-worth had a tendency to experience positive attitudes towards retirement (Sparkes, 1998; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2007) and that injury could seriously impact an athlete’s perception of self and even destroy the embodiment of values attached to the sport (Wainwright et al., 2005).

It would therefore be interesting to carry on part of the focus on ageing bodies and further explore examples of positive transitions from elite sports while combining it with a range of other themes such as cultural pressures and embodied experiences.

*Body and Culture:*

The body represents an interesting theme in this study as it enables the research to include aspects and embodied narratives which other studies, more oriented towards psychology, cannot draw upon. Shilling (2008) argues that sport has ‘transformed the body into a physical instrument of rationalising processes’ (p.101). This enables us to view the body as a vehicle for understanding. Including this approach enables
a differentiation from existing studies and orients the research towards a more sociological nature. Understanding and interpreting the participants’ relationship with their body and discussing their embodied experiences in relation to their transition out of sport would provide an excellent contribution to existing knowledge. Young and White’s (1999) work on elite athlete’s experiences of pain and injury offers an interesting qualitative framework for further research. Indeed, the researchers interviewed a sample of elite male and female athletes who had experienced extremely painful injuries and investigated the athletes’ experiences through pain but also how they dealt with it and moved on with their lives. The findings suggested that athletes subjected themselves to risk during injury and using specific strategies to do so; some athletes used denial as a coping strategy, suppressing the physical and mental impact of injury on the body while others displayed complex relationships to injury where pain was ‘unwelcome’ and ‘depersonalised’ (Young and White, 1999). The majority of strategies used by athletes facing injury involved the suppression of emotion except frustration and anger and a language of conquest was largely used in regards to injury and overcoming it (Young and White, 1999). It would be relevant to use similar methodology to explore the impact of career-threatening injury upon transitions in sport.

Other literature shows that the retirement process has a physical impact on athletes (Stephan, Torregosa & Sanchez, 2007). Studies have been undertaken in order to assess whether there is a link between bodily changes after the retirement process and the perceptions of self (Stephan, Torregosa & Sanchez, 2007) but also in order to assess whether there is a link between sporting injury and self-identity (Brewer, 1993). The authors discovered that the difficulties associated with the body can be negatively related to global self-esteem, physical self-worth, perceived physical condition, sports competence and bodily attractiveness. Stephan et al. (2007) argue that along with social and professional changes due to athletic retirement, athletes also experience bodily changes which might be a cause of distress. This is due to the physical dimension of sport and the important place which the body plays in performance. The body becomes an important factor in sport transitions especially when a sport injury has occurred. Research undertaken by Brewer (1993) has indicated that athletic identity can be associated with depressive reactions to sport injuries. This indicates that factors who determine the nature of the career ending may also influence the quality of the transition experienced.
Indeed, Erpic et al. (2004) work on the athletic and non-athletic factors affecting the transition process have led them to argue that the quality of this process depends on the voluntariness of the career termination but also on the prevalence of an athletic identity, the educational status of athletes and the occurrence of negative non-athletic transitions.

Understanding the sports career termination process therefore represents a complex and multifaceted perspective on the course of the athlete’s career but also upon his adaptation to life post-career.

**Counselling and Support Strategies:**

As this study aims to draw on positive experiences of former athletes in view of potentially applying the findings to facilitate future transitions out of sport and reduce the margin of individuals who might experience difficulties once their career have ended, it would be relevant to examine existing literature on intervention strategies for athletes in transition. Career transition literature seems to suggest that a number of therapeutic approaches, including cognitive restructuring, stress management, and emotional expression have been proposed as intervention strategies for athletes experiencing distress linked with athletic career termination (Gordon, 1995; Ogilvie and Taylor, 1993; Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994). In their review of existing literature on this subject, Lavallee and Wylleman (2007) state the benefits of working through and confiding. Indeed, the authors highlight the benefits of ‘simply having someone to talk to […] about problems regarding sporting career termination’ (p116). This enables athletes to rhetorically work through retirement-related difficulties.

Counselling, whether through formal channels (with sport psychologist or specialised counsellors) or informal channels (friends and family) represents an important aspect of career transitions as athletes often lose their primary social support group upon career termination (Kane, 1995; Murphy, 1995).

The review of literature on the notion of career transitions as well as the existing support and counselling mechanisms portray the retirement process as being a complex process which involves elements such as the athletic identity (Sparkes, 1998), the relationship with the ageing body (Swain, 1999, Phoenix et al., 2005) and the influence of injury on the transition process (Young and White, 1999). As well as presenting interesting findings, these studies highlight the need for further research.
There is no obvious gap in the research yet it would be interesting to combine these theories and apply them to a sample in an attempt to find potential applications to counselling.

It would therefore be relevant to establish links between different career transitions and explore a range of sporting transitional experiences whilst adopting an appropriate methodological framework.

**Methods:**
**The Qualitative Approach/Paradigm**

A majority of studies have used quantitative data collection methods in an attempt to establish findings that were applicable to a large number of athletes (Fernandez et al., 2006; Stephan et al., 2007). As a result, although these studies discovered relevant material, most of them interpreted the contribution to psychology and highlighted the need for further research in the context of sporting retirement. Existing studies have looked into the cognitive and behavioural impacts of sporting retirement (Alfermann et al., 2004; Lally, 2007), the different factors associated with career termination (Erpic et al., 2004), the way which athletes view the retirement process (Torregosa et al., 2004), and upon the transition process itself (Wylleman et al., 2004; Park et al., 2012). Another quantitative study relating to any of these subjects may not help answer the question posed. Additionally, and in contrast to the quantitative studies examined, this research deals with a singular topic which needs to be explored as opposed to a comparison of variables (Creswell, 1998). Therefore a qualitative study looking to examine the positive experiences of a select number of former athletes in view to draw out some major criticism of the transition process across different sports as well as the possible applications to counselling, would be highly interesting. Existing qualitative studies (Young and White, 1999; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2006; Donelly and Young, 2001) provide excellent methodological frameworks on which to base further research. Phoenix and Sparkes (2006) identified the sporting university as being an environment which would yield useful data. Based on their study it would therefore be relevant to select the same sampling environment in order to approach the matter of transitions out of sport.
Because this study is of qualitative nature, an alternative paradigm to quantitative research along with its unique set of criteria needs to be developed (Sparkes and Smith, 2009). Qualitative data also present important validity and reliability questions. In order to avoid any misinterpretations, the research must attempt to align itself as much as possible to the views expressed by its participants (Sands, 2002). Thus, a critical paradigm is used to better understand the ‘subjective meanings behind individual perspectives and gain a grasp of their social reality’ (Sparkes, 2002). The idea behind using this particular form of paradigm is to locate the thoughts and actions of individuals and groups within a wider sociological context (Sparkes, 2002). This form of paradigm enables the researcher to analyse the construction and re-construction of athletes’ realities while also understanding the difficulties of adapting the results of such a study on a society level. As such, the results yielded by this study may only be applicable to individuals experiencing similar social and organisational contexts.

**Participants and Sampling**

Identifying participants that will yield good data is a vital step towards successful research (Sands, 2002). In light of this, this study was aimed at a small sample of male retired elite athletes who have represented their country at various levels and disciplines and possessed a professional contract or equivalent, in order to focus solely on elite athletes and avoid the possibility of including drop-out in this study. Participants had either retired from their sports voluntarily (due to age, financial reasons, etc.) or due to a serious injury deemed to be ‘career-ending’. The participants were all contacted through the university network, three of them undertaking lecturer and coaching roles with one student at the onset of the study. The ages of the participants ranged from early twenties to late forties with a wide variety of sports represented such as gymnastics, trampolining, rugby and football. All of the participants were involved in the same organisational context at the time of the study. Profiles of the participants, identified by their pseudonyms and including their approximate age at the outset of the study, follow.

John, in his early twenties, a rugby player, was near the completion of a sport coaching undergraduate degree at the outset of the study and had suffered a serious leg break at the age of 18 which ended his professional career. He represented his country at Under-16s and Under-18s levels.
Franck, in his mid-thirties, a footballer, was an accredited sport psychologist and took a lecturer role at university. He retired from the sport voluntarily after playing for a club in the football Premier League and representing his country at the University Championships.

Ben, in his late twenties, a gymnast and trampolinist, was an accredited trampolining coach and took a lecturer role at university at the outset of the study. He retired from sport voluntarily after representing his country a number of times at British Championships.

Sam, in his late forties, a gymnast, was an accredited gymnastics coach and also took a lecturer role at university at the outset of the study. He retired from sport due to an illness after representing his country on a number of occasions at World Championships but also at Olympic Games.

It is also important to bear in mind that the number of participants was restricted due to the strict nature of the sample selection as well as the population available at the university to the researcher in the context of an undergraduate study. It was not the initial purpose of the study to examine solely male experiences in the context of sporting transitions and as such, the results of this study may not be applied to female athletes as they were not included in the sample.

**Study Design:**

As this research aims to explore and discuss the experiences of a select number of individuals within a critical paradigm, a grounded theory study is required (Creswell, 1998). The nature of such studies is to ‘generate or discover a theory [...] that relates to a particular situation and in response to a phenomenon’ (Creswell, 1998, p56). The use of a grounded theory study would enable the researcher to draw out topics relating to existing theories before concluding with a ‘substantive-level theory’, an emergent theory written by the researcher concerning a specific problem or population of people. In terms of data collection and with the debate upon naturalism, its validity and implications (Speer, 2002), a more non-directive approach would be preferable in order to minimise the influence of the researcher on
what is said and facilitate the open expression of the participant’s perspective (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

In the field of sport research, open-ended interviews or semi structured are the easiest to set up but present difficulties to ‘mine’ for specific information (Sands, 2002). For the purpose of this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to allow a better understanding of the participant’s background as well as give the interviewee margin to answer. In order to facilitate this process and gather relevant information, a chronological approach was used to preserve a sense of structure and accommodate the participants before gradually engaging in their experiences of sporting retirement. These interviews lasted between 25 and 47 minutes.

Data Analysis:

Once the data was collected, each interview was recorded and then transcribed and an open coding, as described by Creswell (1998), was conducted in order to facilitate the emergence of key themes, either similar to the existing literature relating to sporting retirement or emergent themes relating to the analytic nature of the study. The approach of theoretical sampling was used in the analysis phase as key concepts were drawn out and discussed (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Indeed, the coding of the relevant data and its analysis enabled the research to develop the theoretical framework to support key findings. Reducing the findings into small categories or themes facilitates the analysis and the discovery of emerging patterns (Silverman, 2004). The research then proceeded to discuss the emergent theme of Education followed by the themes of Identity, Age, Body and Culture, and Counselling and Support Strategies, underpinned by the theoretical themes identified in the review of literature.

Ethical Considerations

In compliance with the Data Protection Act (1998) the anonymity of each participant was preserved and pseudonyms were given to participants in an attempt to maintain their privacy. Once the recurrent factors which have influenced the participants’ transition out of sport were identified and categorised, major links to support schemes and the potential benefits/changes that could be applied were discussed.
Results and Findings:

Education

Education was very much an emergent theme with a sizeable amount of time from the participants’ childhoods spent practising their sport. This showed that from an early age, participants were actively involved in their respective sports and were already prioritising their sporting activities over other potential outcomes. This had major impacts on Sam’s experience of transition as he was left with some hard realisations.

‘During my career my life revolved around the sport but it was only until I went into the ‘real world’ that I realised that being a coach wouldn’t be enough to support the family I was building. [...] From the time I started gymnastics that was it; school just went out the window’ (Sam)

This was in contrast with other experiences such as Franck’s and Ben’s who, whilst attending some of the top academies in the country for their respective sports, still went through the process of completing further education. This had significant impacts upon their experiences of the transition as Franck displayed satisfaction with his current position within the university and even though John was forced into early retirement through an injury his experience was greatly helped by the fact that he was still in education.

‘I continued with GCSES and A levels at the Academy they let me do that and kind of promoted that. They said: ‘If you got any opportunity to get those A levels then we’ll support you whilst you’re playing for us’. [...] I don’t have anxiety now I mean I have a great job, I love my job’ (Franck)

‘My distraction was trying to ace my course so instead of that I just took my time to focus on my work and didn’t drop a mark 2 out of the 3 years so that kind of took up my time.’ (John)

This hints at a possible correlation between positive transitions out of sport and education. Furthermore, all of the participants had completed or were in the process of completing higher educational qualifications at the time of the interviews.
Achieving these qualifications enabled Franck, Sam, Ben and John to apply the transferable skills that they had acquired all along their careers in order to achieve respectable working positions in the university context.’ Stopping my career and looking back at it has instilled a set of values in me that made me want to succeed in other careers’ (Franck). These are pertinent findings but as this study was conducted within the university context; major links with higher education were inevitable and as a result should be carefully considered before applied to a larger sample. Indeed, three of the four participants continued their studies alongside their careers. It is also important to note that while John had his career cut short by a serious injury at the age of 18 thus enabling him to return swiftly to full-time education, Franck chose to follow the route of higher education and thus limiting a little his career outcome, and Ben was forced to compete on a part-time basis due to lack of funding in his sport. A larger sample size would be needed in order to fully assess the possibility of maximising the sporting career outcomes along with completing educational qualifications.

**Identity**

Using a chronological approach enabled the interviews to firstly bring up the athlete’s perception of his athletic identity during his career before discussing the transition out of sport and its impact on the participants’ athletic identity. Participating at an elite level and being deeply involved within their respective sports proved to be a major contributor in the athletes’ athletic identity. Indeed, when asked whether their participation within their sports contributed to their personality and even their identity, John and Sam argued that being selected for their countries contributed in making them feel like an integral part of their sport.

‘Yeah that is everything. For a rugby-player to play for your country or for any sportsman to play for your country it’s the ultimate goal’ (John).

‘Definitely. It was at that stage part of my life and it reinforced that because I was fortunate enough to be at the top. [...] I would say it had become part of my personality yes’ (Sam).
The participants identified themselves as being members of the different sports but were also perceived by others as representing their sports on days when they weren’t performing. ‘I was known amongst my friends to be ‘the trampolinist’ so it I was kind of pigeon holed in that respect’. Ben’s participation in his sport went as far as conditioning his social interactions and constructed a strong athletic identity through others’ perception of his involvement within the sport of trampolining.

‘I suppose that’s always the hardest thing about moving in and out of sport (when asked if participation in sport formed part of his personality). When you’re in it, because of the pedestal you kind of get put on with your peers and family and those people who kind of know you, it becomes who you are, you’re not this person anymore, you’re a person who plays football at a good level and it kind of takes away from everything else, no matter what else you do or who else you are, you’re a footballer that’s it and I kind of struggled with that a little bit because I didn’t really want that identity. I loved playing football but I still wanted to be me and I probably didn’t really fit well with this traditional mould of what a footballer does and looks like’ (Franck).

Franck seemed to display a feeling of rejection when it came to others’ perception of his identity during his career and although he still displayed a strong sense of belonging to the sport of football he didn’t appreciate being associated with a set of values that he didn’t believe belonged to him. In accordance to Grove et al.’s (1997) work on self-identity, Franck seemed to display a low sense of athletic identity enabling him to explore other vocational identities and prepare adequately for a career outside of sport.

‘I never really felt that I fit within that identity, I didn’t really like it, but it was and it is who I am and as you start to move out from football you start to realise that actually I have lived that identity, I’ve like what it brought me, I like all the stuff that its giving me, and once you start to take that away you start to think: ‘oh Christ I have to develop a new identity now and figure things out’.[…] The identity issue is a very difficult thing to manage and like I say the traditional identity associated with football at that level at that time, it didn’t really suit me but it’s not until looking back that I’d actually lived up to a bit more than what I thought I did at the time’ (Franck).
Franck’s realisation that he possessed a stronger athletic identity than he had perceived whilst in his sporting career seems to suggest that there isn’t a strong correlation between successful athletic transitions and a low athletic identity in contrast to Alfermann et al.’s (2004) suggestion that athletes with low athletic identities tended to adapt to their lives post-sport in a more effective manner. With this said, and although Franck seemed to suggest having difficulties with his self-identity, he also displayed a strong example of a positive transition having completed many qualifications in order to become an accredited sport psychologist and held a well-established position in the context of the university at the time of the interview. This seems to suggest that there is still a link between athletic identity and positive transitions in sport but that self-identity issues do not represent determining factors in the final outcome but rather provide complications to the process. Franck also seemed to adopt a coping strategy to help him deal with his perception:

‘Football is becoming more of a memory now rather than a forming element of my life. I don’t like to talk about this too much because I does upset me, I suppose that’s my coping mechanism at the minute.’

Franck’s desire to avoid the subject hints at deeper underlying issues with his athletic identity and seems to suggest that managing a strong athletic identity isn’t essential towards achieving a successful transition.

Other participants also experienced noticeable shifts in relation to their perception of athletic identity at the time of their career termination. Indeed, Ben experienced a strong athletic identity during his career as a trampolinist and during his transition he expressed minor difficulties in coping with the non-performance side of his ‘new’ career.

‘I do travel to competitions and wish I was competing with the other athletes but the positives outweigh the negatives. I got to a stage where I was happy with what I had done, what I had achieved and where I got to so I don’t think I can really have any negative experiences linked to my retirement because I got as far as I could go. I didn’t experience any anxiety or stress either linked to my retirement.’ (Ben)
Similarities between Ben’s experience of transition and Lally’s (2007) work on identity and athletic retirement begin to appear as, in accordance to the established theory, the participant proceeded to alter his perception of self before the career termination actually took place. Ben’s sense of satisfaction concerning the extent to which he had competed as well as his personal achievements enabled him to anticipate his transition out of sport and begin to redefine his perception of his athletic identity (Lally, 2007). This particular experience provides an interesting example of a positive transition out of a successful career at top level sport yet it is important to bear in mind the fact that due to the lack of funding available to him in the sport of trampolining, Ben had always planned for his athletic retirement:

‘I worked at this university for a good number of years now and it was kind of included when they offered me the job. I was a trampolining lecturer/coach during the day and got to train 5/6 times a week in the same facilities. I also did my coaching qualifications as soon as possible and after coaching for a while and thanks to my participation in gymnastics/trampolining this opportunity came up. At the start I was trying to fit both the coaching and the competing/training in.’

Ben’s transition out of sport and the evolution of his athletic identity also displays similarities with other participants’ experiences. Indeed, Sam argued that towards the end of his career he had started to consider planning for his retirement from the sport but a major illness forced him out of the sport and brought up a whole different challenge:

‘I think I was planning for the end but the end quite of jumped in and stopped me before I was completely done. It’s difficult to describe my feelings at that time. I think there was nothing I could do about it at the time. I was gutted as I wanted to go on but I think the major concern at that time was whether I was going to live or not. That kind of masked everything else really’

Sam’s struggle with athletic identity was quickly replaced with a more important problem which makes it difficult to analyse that particular period of time during his career.
The fact that the participant’s career was terminated relatively late and that he admitted to having started to plan for the transition seems to hint towards a positive correlation between retirement planning and a positive transition, as suggested by Alfermann et al. (2004).

**Age**

Swain (1999) argues that upon their reflection to withdraw from their careers, the participants in his study displayed satisfaction at the conditions and timing during which they decided to terminate their sporting careers. Similarities can be drawn with a few experiences in this study, most notably Sam’s and Ben’s. When asked about their perception of their performances and whether they could identify a point in their careers where their better performances were behind them, the participants answered with the following:

‘No I don’t think it was a case of my better performances being behind me. I think it was more of a case of I realised that the youngsters coming up were simply better than me or were going to be better than me or had more potential. I had probably reached my potential so I don’t think I was getting any worse in terms of how I was performing it was simply that the younger gymnasts coming up were simply doing things that I wouldn’t even dream of.’ (Sam)

‘Well actually I did that thing where I retired once and took about a year out but I sort of said ‘I can’t just stop’. That was around the time I had been competing for about 9 years. After a few months whilst I was still thinking about it, I realised that there was probably one more crack to the whip. I knew that I could only be coming back for another year and I got to the national final and did the job. I think the feeling of accomplishment afterwards helped me retire once and for all. I got to a stage where I was thinking ‘okay I’m done with that part of my life”’. (Ben)

Sam displayed the most similarities with Swain’s (1999) findings as he expressed a sense of satisfaction and perceived that he had retired while maintaining his self-respect and the regard of others. Ben’s use of the word ‘accomplishment’ illustrates of that element and represents a strong indicator of a positive experience.
Both participants also displayed strong senses of self-worth with the use of words such as ‘potential’ which demonstrated a willingness to move on with their lives along with a deep understanding of the link between their aging bodies and their performances. This is highlighted by Sam’s recognition that younger athletes in the same sport were able to perform moves that he could ‘only dream of’ and Ben’s desire to delay his retirement for another year in order to compete in the national finals for a final time and ‘do the job’. The notion of self-worth displayed by the participants correlate with Phoenix and Sparkes’ (2005) study on narrative maps of ageing in which they concluded that athletes who had strong feelings of self-worth had a tendency to adopt a positive attitude towards retirement. On the other hand, the retirement process can represent a more difficult process for those with an exclusive athletic identity (Sparkes, 1998; Wainwright et al., 2005; Phoenix, Faulkner and Sparkes, 2006; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2007). Indeed, Franck’s struggles with managing his athletic identity seemed to have followed after his retirement: ‘There is no reason I couldn’t, obviously if I got a bit fitter, go out and perform better than I ever performed now but I think at 34 I probably had my best days.’ Franck’s uncertainty concerning the outcome of his career seems to be closely linked with his sense of achievement as well as his athletic identity, making his experience more difficult to manage.

Body and Culture:

While an exclusive athletic identity may make the retirement experience a more challenging one, an injury may seriously impact the transitional experience of athletes through the loss of embodied values linked to their sport (Wainwright et al., 2005). John’s career-ending injury meant that he was forced into a negative spiral of events and emotions which forced him to re-assess his life objectives:

‘That’s what terminated everything. At 18 I went away on a sevens tournament with the academy and I broke my leg. When I broke it, at hospital, the break was so bad they told me I would never be able to play rugby again. Obviously, the contract can’t keep the guy around who can’t play so I had to terminate the contract. Everything just goes downhill then. You’re used to training every day, going in and doing this and this and this, and now you’re just sat doing nothing, my worst nightmare, just watching tele all day or reading a book. Just not being active was rubbish.'
[... ] I kind of looked at the bright side, saying that I, kind of, like, being friends with people that know, people that’ve broken their necks and things. They can’t move. So I just thought ‘I’ve only broken my leg and they’ve told me that I can’t play, I can do other things’ so I just switched to another side and got on with life really’ (John)

The injury experienced caused the participant to have serious physical and biographical disruptions. Taken-for-granted embodied aspects of daily life were shaken by the inability to ‘function’ (Sparkes, 1999). John displayed his experience of his injury as a ‘nightmare’ where it was hard for him to adjust himself to life without sport. Asked to look back on this stage of his life, John displayed a sense of uncertainty to what his career would have been like without the injury; ‘I think about what could have been different, if I didn’t do it where I could be now.’ The participant’s ability to retain a relatively positive attitude towards his career termination, as opposed to falling into a chaos narrative where the individual believes that life never gets better (Sparkes, 1999), validates his experience as a positive example. Understanding the elements involved in his transition could prove valuable in an attempt to help others.

One of the elements contributing to his transition was identified by the participant as being his positive experience of rehabilitation. Indeed, John stated that ‘it helped huge amounts. I was very grateful for where it got me today’. His perception of rehabilitation was mirrored by other participants:

‘[..]they gave me all the sorts of treatments, rehab, the kit that I needed, resources, the support, and it makes you think : actually I’m valued and I’m a valued part of the club, I’m not just another person that got injured and go out and get someone else’ (Franck)

‘I think there was a good team within the gymnastics set up that helped me overcome those injuries. The treatments were good as they gave me the direction and support that were required.[...]The thought of whether I was going to be able to get back into it crept in; that the injury was never really going to go away kind of thing. It did have negative feelings attached but I think it was perseverance to get back in and train after the injury that helped me overcome it and represented a major strength.’ (Ben)
Franck and Ben’s experiences showed that rehabilitation was a very useful support mechanism in dealing with career-threatening injuries which enabled them to feel ‘valued’ by the sporting environment in which they were in. Ben displayed a strategy similar to the one described in Young and White’s (1999) study where he used a language of conquest in relation to his injury and overcoming it. Additionally, Franck also displayed a coping strategy which consisted of trying to suppress the pain and mental impact of the injury and exposed himself to the risk of aggravating his condition:

‘I had problem with my shin when I was 15, first year at the club, only kept me out for a couple of games, could hardly walk on it but I got told out to play because we were struggling to play so I played, also broke my hand: played in goal with a broken hand so nothing has really threatened.’

Looking back at it during the interview Franck and other participants expressed how ‘lucky’ they were to have been able to overcome these injuries:

‘I think in trampolining if you get through your career without any major injuries then you can consider yourself lucky. That was one big relief because I was always thinking ‘when is it going to happen to me?’’ (Ben)

‘So you think the poor guy, he can’t do the only thing he knows how to do, so I’ve been lucky in that sense that it hasn’t been an external thing like an injury or an illness that would stop me from doing what I want to do.’ (Franck)

These displays of genuine compassion to the well-being of other athletes enabled the discussion to direct the participants towards considering potential changes to the counselling and support strategies available to current elite athletes.

**Counselling and Support Strategies**

Firstly, it is important to consider that none of the participants had taken part in formal counselling sessions. They perceived counselling as being something that they didn’t want to take part in but they also acknowledged the benefits of involved with it. Although none of the athletes took part in formal forms of counselling and were quick to display that fact, they also admitted participating in informal discussions with friends or co-workers which display similarities to a counselled
approach. Indeed, engaging in a confiding-social activity appears to be vital to positive psychological adaptation (Lavallee & Wylieman, 2007).

‘I was offered it when I was injured by the club but I just found that I didn’t really want that. The counselling sessions really came from the boys supporting me all the time so I didn’t really feel like I needed it. I was fine with the boys giving me banter and sometimes heart-to-hearts’. (John)

All the participants acknowledged the importance of talking about their retirement process. Ben stated that ‘I think counselling helps and that I kind of received forms of counselling; having discussions with other individuals and actually talking about it instead of bottling it up really helped’. This enabled the athletes to work rhetorically through the difficulties they had and were experiencing at that time (Lavallee and Wylieman, 2007). Because these former athletes were deemed to represent positive examples of successful sporting transitions, they were also asked about whether the sporting support systems for fellow athletes could be improved. Every participant seemed to agree that improvements could be brought upon the sporting structures relating to their sports and based their opinions around their personal experiences.

‘I would give it an ongoing process (when asked about when they would think giving support would be appropriate in relation to the athlete’s career). I think players need to know right at the start what the consequences are and what they need to do. I think that if you give it at the end then it’s too late because they are going to spend a year dealing with the fallout of not being a professional anymore and then they are going to spend more time re-training or re-considering their options whereas if they are doing it throughout then they are in a better position to excel as soon as they finish. […] What they need is to learn a set of skills that will set them up for life’ (Franck)

The other participants echoed Franck thoughts by suggesting that if there were to be a support to be given to athletes it should be created to run along with the career. He stressed the need for retirement planning as well as the implementation of transferable skills which would enable the athletes to go through a seamless transition. This draws similarities to Mayocchi’s (1999) work which suggests that athletes actually possess a wide variety of transferable skills.
In addition to that, Lavallee and Wylleman (2007) argue that athletes should be aware of these skills as it may challenge their doubts about their ability to begin a new career. Building upon those thoughts and attempting to identify potential areas which needed to be addressed was surprisingly easy with the participants more than willing to discuss at great length what they thought was wrong with the transition support in their respective sports.

‘If you get to the stage where you are involved with the national squad there needs to be some kind of strategy in place there. To a degree, while we see the people that are successful, there are a lot of people that put in the same amount of hours but just aren’t making it. They are in the same basket because they are putting in the same amount of effort so I would suggest really it needs to filter down to that level. We only see the people competing and the superstars but we must remember that there are others who are on the fringes might never get into that so what is going to happen to them? So I would suggest there definitely needs to be something in place to help the ones who are putting in a huge amount of time and effort to give them something back as well and to make sure they are not left high and dry at the end of it. Clubs and things like that need to be aware of this. There should be a duty of care to raise athletes’ awareness that their lives are going to change at some point. That they might not achieve extrinsic success and that they to make sure they are considering other things. So definitely think there should be something at national level but I can’t see why that can’t filter down at club level as well.’ (Sam)

In his interview, Sam expressed his concern for elite athletes who were spending a lot of time and effort towards their sport but weren’t achieving any extrinsic results or external recognition thus making their transition out of sport difficult without the adequate support. He also highlighted the need for intervention strategies to be put in place in view to help athletes not only at a national level but also at a club level. At a club level, Ben was adamant that forming coaches would potentially reduce the number of athletes experiencing difficulties:

‘So I do believe there should be some sort of process or training for the coaches who have to deal with it. Especially at the elite level there needs to be some sort of support mechanism.'
In the more funded teams there probably is a support mechanism in place but for some people who don’t have coaches who can help them deal with the process, they can experience difficulties. I reckon training isn’t up to the standards it should be at. I think I was just lucky.’

Ben recognised that other athletes were prone to transitional difficulties and was particularly grateful for his smooth transition which he associated more to the luck of not sustaining a serious injury and getting involved in career planning process early on. Elite athletes would therefore benefit from intervention strategies both at national level and club level. Lavallee and Wylleman (2007) identify three strategies aimed at facilitating the transition process for athletes experiencing difficulties. All three are centred around the need for empathy and attentive listening and recognise the positive outcomes associated with encouraging athletes to make sense of their experience (Lavallee and Wylleman, 2007). Even though the participants stressed the need for such interventions and training schemes to be put in place, they also recognised that there was an effort by the governing bodies to assess this growing issue:

‘I can’t think you can put the problem within any individual party but the PFA can do far more but they are already doing a lot. They’ve put loads of money into re-educating and supporting players. The clubs could do a lot more as well as the FA and the Premier League can start to bring in legislation to make sure that clubs are doing things like that; that they are looking after their players to some extent.’ (Franck)

I think there are more and better support mechanisms in place. (Sam)

**Concluding Thoughts**

The sport career transition is therefore a complex process which involves a number of internal and external influences. The interviews of a number of former athletes who were deemed to have experienced positive career changes have enabled the research to draw out a number of key themes.

Firstly, the emergent theme of education was found to be a major factor contributing to the positive experiences of the participants, with all of them actively involved in completing or having completed higher education degrees after retiring.
Achieving these qualifications enabled the former athletes to make use of the transferable skills, such as interpersonal skills, ambition and will (Mayocchi, 1999) that they had gained along the course of their careers and then apply them in another context in order to benefit their new careers. Because the participant sample was shaped within a sporting university, the assumption that there exists a correlation between education and positive career changes remains inconclusive and would benefit from further research.

In order to achieve positive experiences, the participants seemed to deal with challenges brought up by their strong athletic identities. Indeed, being involved in their respective sports for a sizeable amount of time and being associated to their sport by their surrounding social environments reinforced the participants’ sense of belonging. As a result, this lead participants to either alter their perception of identity, or self-identity (Lally, 2007), or adopt coping strategies. Ben and Sam displayed a willingness to alter their self-identities which enabled them to undertake important steps in the planning of their future careers thus highlighting between athletic identity and positive career transitions. Furthermore, Franck’s struggle to come to term with his perception of his identity during and after his career meant that he was forced to adopt a coping strategy and reinforces the role that athletic identity plays during the career transition process. Indeed, with a number of studies suggesting that athletic identity may have a negative impact on the transition process (Wylleman et al., 2004; Alfermann et al., 2004), the experiences of participants in this study seems to suggest that athletic identity represents a disrupting factor as opposed to a determining factor in the outcome of sporting career termination.

The findings also bear significant importance towards career planning and the external influences which may have an impact on the outcome of the transition process. The experiences of all the participants showed that career planning and external influences such as a more prominent social life played a determining part in the success of their new careers. The ability of most of the participants to maintain a clear idea of what to do next enabled them to achieve, for the most part, a smooth transition. Having one participant having been the subject of a career-ending injury enabled the research to contrast his experience with the other participants and highlights the reason why the transition tends to be a planned process.
Indeed, John’s injury caused serious physical and mental disruptions which he had to deal with in a short period of time in order to emerge successfully. Even though the participant did not take part in any formal counselling sessions, he admitted that his positive attitude towards his sudden career termination was partly due to informal discussion with friends and relatives with enabled him to avoid falling into a chaos narrative (Sparkes, 1999). Similarly, none of the participants admitted to having taken part in any formal counselling but were keen to highlight the potential benefits of such an approach. Most of them deemed that they had experienced some kind of counselling, mostly taken through discussions in an informal setting with colleagues, friends or relatives. This did provide to be a slight limitation to this study as the aim initially was to also assess the effectiveness of formal counselling with former athletes. Although this proved to be an impossible question to answer in the context of this study, the findings showed that simple forms of counselling such as confiding and expressing concerns to other people cannot be underrated in its contribution to a positive transition out of sport. The research also allowed participants to express their opinions upon the support systems available to them at the time of their retirements and whether they would implement any change. The participants seemed to agree that even though there appeared to be some improvements in the support mechanisms at the onset of this study in comparison to when they retired, some more changes needed to be made. Indeed, the ideal support system would consist of ongoing process which would follow an elite athlete’s career and take the form of specific intervention strategies aimed at raising awareness of the career termination process and the importance of career planning. These strategies would be implemented by governing bodies, would run down to club level and also consists in counselling-training schemes for coaches in order to better assist athletes during a difficult period of their lives.

Finally, the findings highlighted the similarity with Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) suggestion that young athletes should be encouraged to think about their long-term psychological, physical and social well-being. The fact that Kerr and Dacyshyn’s concluding statement concerned a study based around female participants raises some interesting grounds for future research.
Indeed, it would be interesting to assess the contribution of formal counselling versus counselling of a more informal nature whilst including the variable of gender. This would allow for a better understanding of the benefits of counselling in view to assist with the apparent effort of governing bodies to implement change.

Reference List:


Grills, S. (1998) Doing Ethnographic Research,


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APPENDIX:

Ethical status letter:

Date: 19/03/14

To: James Raybaudo

Project reference number: 13/05/310U

Your project was recommended for approval by myself as supervisor and formally approved at the Cardiff School of Sport Research Ethics Committee meeting of 29th May 2013.

Yours sincerely

David Brown PhD

Supervisor