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Highly identified females athletes' retirement from collegiate sport

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HIGHLY IDENTIFIED FEMALES ATHLETES' RETIREMENT FROM COLLEGIATE SPORT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Kinesiology

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of the Arts

by

Christy Taylor Richardson

May 2009

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HIGHLY IDENTIFIED FEMALE ATHLETES' RETIREMENT FROM COLLEGIATE SPORT

by
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ABSTRACT

HIGHLY IDENTIFIED FEMALE ATHLETES' RETIREMENT FROM COLLEGIATE SPORT

By Christy Taylor Richardson

This thesis examines the highly identified female athletes' retirement from collegiate sport. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to conduct a longitudinal, qualitative examination of the retirement experiences of NCAA Division I female water polo players. A secondary purpose was to determine the effects of athletic identity on the emotional adjustment during the retirement experiences. Twenty women's water polo players from five Northern California Universities were administered the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) to establish strength of athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder, 1993). Nine athletes with the highest athletic identity and who had exhausted their eligibility for college athletics, participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were conducted at four points over 11 months: 1) one month prior to retirement 2) two weeks following retirement 3) one month after their former team began fall practice, and 4) when their former team began season play. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and subjected to inductive analysis. Themes were established for each interview period. Recommendations for further research on retirement experiences of college athletes are also proposed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

According to Coakley (2004), sport is a major institution in our society, and its omnipresence in the US is unparalleled. It saturates our backyards, our schools, our workplaces, our televisions, and the Internet. The popularity of sports has filtered down to the youth level. Children in contemporary US society not only play sports at increasingly younger ages, they do so at higher levels of intensity and skill (Coakley, 2004). In addition, the growth in youth sport participation includes early identification and early specialization of athletes. The transformation from traditional models of youth sport into an elite model of participation may lead to better fundamentals, but it often requires young athletes to limit development in other areas of their lives (Coakley, 2004; Parham, 1993).

Parham (1993) claims that children are socialized into sport at a much younger age than they were just a few decades ago. When successful, they are praised and identified for their success in sport. For talented children, physical growth tends to mirror athletic prowess, causing their success in athletics to become closely connected to their sense of self worth (Parham, 1993). The formation of athletic identity stems from this intimate connection, yet it can be dangerous to the athlete if it becomes one's only source of identity (Parham, 1993; Thomas & Ermler, 1988).

A substantial amount of the literature on athletic identity indicates that the higher the level of the athlete, the more exclusive the athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raalte, Linder, 1993; Grove, Lavellee, & Gordon, 1997; Miller & Kerr, 2003; Sparkes, 1998;

Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres 2003; Wiechman & Williams, 1997). Athletic identity is defined by Brewer et al. (1993) as “the degree to which an individual athlete identifies with the athlete role” (p. 237). The research findings clearly indicate that athletes who maintain a high, exclusive, athletic identity often have trouble transitioning out of sport when the sport career ends (Grove, Lavellee, & Gordon, 1997; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Hendrick, 1998).

Identifying as an athlete is not gender specific. Researchers have found that both men and women are capable of developing a high athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Horton & Maack, 2000). Previous to Title IX, elite-level athletics, particularly contact sports, were generally reserved for men. In the 35 years since the passage of Title IX, however, increasing numbers of college-aged women have grown up in the sporting environment. Contemporary female college athletes are reaping many benefits of elite athletics, including college scholarships, high-level competition, and, for a select few sports, professional careers. Thus, many young female athletes are now building their identities around their athletic achievement.

With the influx of young women into college sport, many women have chosen to participate in sports that have not historically been associated with traditional female sporting activities (Coakely, 2004). One sport that has experienced a rapid and significant increase in participation is water polo, an aggressive, contact team sport. In the year 2000, women’s water polo was designated as an official Olympic sport, and in 2001 it became an official NCAA sport. Surprisingly, however, very little research exists on the psychological and sociological factors associated with women’s water polo.

In Division 1 collegiate sport, success often requires an almost exclusive commitment to the athlete role. At many universities across our country, the expectation is closer to the “athlete-student” model than the much hyped “student athlete” model (Coakley, 2004). The majority of the athletes’ time goes into preparing for competition, and they are encouraged choose the area of study that keeps them eligible to play. These factors only increase the influence of sport participation on the athletes’ life. In these cases, the overwhelming focus on athletic identity can be detrimental. Thomas and Ermler (1988) argue that “when one’s self-worth is contingent on success in a particular sport, such narrowness creates a vulnerability that is inevitable with declines in and/or termination of one’s performance” (p. 139). When the athletic identity becomes prominent and exclusive, the athlete is prompted to find a new basis for finding self worth at the conclusion of a career. Many high level athletes are certain to experience this often painful identity crisis sooner rather than later, because most of them will end their careers in college (Coakley, 2004).

For athletes who participate in sports without professional leagues, the pinnacle of their career is the four years the NCAA allows athletes to compete. It is the highest level of competition that most athletes will ever experience. Even in the sports where professional leagues exist, only one percent of athletes who play at the collegiate level will ever compete professionally. The majority of elite level athletes, excluding professional and national team athletes, will conclude their athletic competition following their collegiate career. Career retirement at a relatively young age is the norm for many

college women's water polo players, because there is no professional league to move into after graduation.

The research that has been done on collegiate athletes contends that the end of a collegiate athlete career is one of the most difficult struggles student athletes face (Baillie, 1993; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Parham, 1993). When the inevitable time comes for retirement the athlete faces a tremendous transition. It can best be described by Thomas and Ermler (1988):

The skills the athlete has perfected for so long are now useless in a world that no longer sees him or her as special. Much of our personal identity and self-esteem rests on what we are able to do-cognitively, affectively, and physically. To be able to do nothing very skillfully in the real world (in some cases not even read or write) is to be cast into nothingness, loneliness, and isolation (p. 142).

In American society, prestige is often associated with being an athlete. It is a respectable endeavor, based, hypothetically at least, on values such as perseverance, work ethic, and teamwork (Coakley, 2004). It is an easy, respectable identity to claim and a very difficult one to give up.

Research on elite level athletes has determined that athletic retirement is often characterized by a long and painful transitional period (Bailie, 1992; Stephan & Bilard 2003; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Other researchers compared the transition to the experience of a kind of symbolic death (Blinde & Stratta 1992; Wolff & Lester, 1989). Of particular relevance to the present study, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) examined the experiences of elite level female gymnasts. They found that the gymnasts experienced great difficulty during the transition out of sport. The authors broke down the transition into three stages: retirement, nowhere land, and new beginnings. Their findings have

demonstrated that female athletes are susceptible to the same issues as male athletes, but more research is needed on female athletes' retirement experiences.

This study by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) was an interview-based qualitative study and the researchers called for further qualitative research in the area of athletic retirement. As they stated, "an increase of qualitative methodologies in sport psychology research will certainly facilitate our understanding of idiosyncratic experiences such as retirements" (p. 131). Through listening to what the athletes feel, we will hopefully gain a better understanding of what transition out of sport involves, and how it can be handled in a healthy manner.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the retirement experiences of Division I female water polo players over the course of several months before and after graduation. A secondary purpose of the study was to determine the effects of athletic identity on the athletes' emotional adjustment during retirement experiences. This study gathered qualitative and quantitative data on Division I athletes in their last season of competition and throughout the first nine months of retirement. The quantitative data was used primarily to select participants to take part in the interview portion of the study.

Hypotheses

1. A significant number of the Division I senior athletes will score high on the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale, demonstrating their high, exclusive athletic identity.

2. A significant number of the Division I senior athletes will experience some problems transitioning out of sport.
3. Exclusive athletic identity will correlate strongly with emotional disturbance experienced following the completion of the collegiate athletic career.

Delimitations

This study is delimited to the following:

1. A sample size of approximately 8-10 athletes.
2. Female, water polo athletes between ages 21-24 years old.
3. Athletes in their last year of competition at a NCAA Division I institution in California.

Limitations

This study is subject to the following limitations:

1. The participants' ability or willingness to fill out the questionnaires honestly.
2. The participants' ability to convey their feelings with the questions asked in the interviews.
3. The participants' motivation and ability to complete all of the interviews for the study.

Definition of Terms

1. Athletic Retirement: is defined as "the process of transition from participation in competitive sport to another activity or set of activities" (Coakley 1983, p. 1).
2. Athletic Identity: is defined simply as "the degree to which an individual athlete identifies with the athlete role" (Brewer et al. 1993, p. 237).

4. Eligibility: The four years the NCAA allows athletes to compete at the Division I level.

Rationale for this Study

Throughout the literature on athletic retirement and athletic identity, numerous scholars have noted that there is a need for more research in the area. For example, Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) argued “further research is required to explicate the relationship between athletic identity and the emotional adjustment to injury or sport career termination” (p. 241). Webb, Nasco, Riley, and Hendrick (1998) also stated “the arguments connecting athletic identity to post-retirement adjustment difficulties are compelling. And, yet once again, few direct empirical demonstrations of the relationship can be found” (p. 340).

Perhaps the most compelling and relevant plea came from Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, and Delignieres (2003). They examined the phenomenon of transition out of sport with retired Olympic athletes and determined that some important gaps in the current research exist. Specifically, they stated that in future research the “evaluations and interviews must begin *before* retirement, to identify a potential decrease in subjective well-being between the sport career and the beginning of the transition” (p. 368). They also noted that further research is needed on athletes who retire involuntarily, because “these involuntarily retired athletes could present different dynamics in their adjustment to the transition, with a more pronounced crisis stage” (p. 368). In short, this study helped to address several of the most pressing questions posed by previous researchers in the area of athletic identity and retirement.

Women's water polo is a classic example of a Title IX sport. It is widely popular and has grown dramatically in the collegiate world over the past fifteen years. It is a contact, team sport about which little research exists. Although it is a fairly new sport for women, currently there are nearly sixty NCAA teams across the country. The largest water polo population is in California; therefore, the research was conducted on female water polo athletes from California universities.

Water polo was a viable source of participants for this research for other reasons. Few opportunities exist for women to continue to play water polo following their collegiate careers. A chosen few will go on to a national team level, and a few others may play semi-professional in Europe or Australia. However, for the majority, college marks the end of their elite level of play. It is also a sport that is difficult to continue on a recreational level because of the large amount of conditioning required and the cost of pool time. Isolation from the sport tends to occur rather quickly for athletes who finish their collegiate careers.

Ideally, this study will aid parents, coaches, and sport psychology consultants in their relationships with high level athletes whose careers are coming to an end. Sport has the ability to consume athletes' time and take priority over other interests, including, at times, their education. Based on the level of success an athlete achieves, sport could consume a young person's life for 15-20 years, from childhood, through adolescence and young adulthood. As Parham (1993) states "the actual termination of student-athlete's career is the kind of experience for which no amount of preparation and foresight seems adequate" (p. 416). Lavalley and Robinson (2007) discovered that the practice of helping

athletes retire from sport is a rapidly growing part of sport psychology. They call for a strong training program that will teach the future sports psychologists to help these athletes effectively.

The information derived from this study will be important to the development of youth sport as well. If a connection between high, exclusive athletic identity and emotional distress following retirement exists, it is possible coaches and parents will recognize the potential dangers involved in sport specialization. Crook and Robertson (1991) argue that “problems associated with retirement from sport often relate to athletes’ dependence on sport for their identity” (p. 118). They also state in their article that “sport may be the athlete’s central commitment, but other pursuits or roles should not be neglected” (Crook & Robertson, p. 118).

Summary

The reality that collegiate athletes must retire from athletic competition created a critical need for research to determine how they cope during the transitional period. The information gathered from this mixed methods study provides some further research on what high level female collegiate athletes experience when there is nowhere else for them to go and play the sport that has been an important part of their lives and identities. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the effects of athletic identity on the emotional adjustment to retirement among Division I female athletes.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Relevant literature that pertained to the study of highly identified female athletes and collegiate retirement was reviewed. This literature related to 1) athletic identity 2) athletic retirement 3) the relationships between the two. From the review of previous studies, current gaps were exposed in the existing knowledge about athletic identity and sport retirement.

Coakley (2001) argues sport has become a major foundation in our society. Although it was primarily a masculine domain, it is quickly becoming an institution that affects both sexes. Coakley (2001) states “most parents now encourage both their sons and daughters to participate in sport” (p. 111). In sport, the level of dedication it takes to be successful is staggering, and it begins at a very young age. Before children can walk they learn to swim; before they can crawl, they are given their first baseball. Werthner and Orlick (1982) contend that “now in order to be a world class athlete, in most sports, it is often impossible to be much else” (p. 337). If success is defined as becoming an elite athlete, requiring total dedication to one’s sport, it would seem the best athletes will have the most difficult transition.

Athletic Identity

Quantitative Research

Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) concluded that athletes who sacrifice being involved in other activities to pursue their sport would have a self-identity composed nearly exclusively of their athletic involvement. To make it to Division I

collegiate level requires a huge athletic commitment. In the competitive athletic environment, an average of one out of five involved with scholastic athletics will receive college scholarships; one percent of them will go on to play professionally (Ogilvie & Howe, 1986). With athletic retirement quintessentially inevitable, how do retired athletes answer the question, “What am I now?”

Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) conducted a study to look more deeply into athletic identity. In their research, they found four, different, existing measures that are relevant to athletic identity. These measures are Fox’s (1987) Perceived Importance Profile, Kendzierski’s (1988) exercise self-schema measure, Anderson and Cychosz’s (1990) exercise identity measure, and Curry and Weaner’s (1987) self-role scale. All of these measures, according to Brewer et al., addressed athletic identity in some form; however, none of them looked at the importance of exclusivity. Following a review of the current instruments available to study athletic identity, Brewer et al. created a scale that would gauge the strength and exclusivity of athletic identity.

This scale, the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), was the quantitative instrument used in this research. To establish validity for the AIMS, the researchers conducted three different studies using different types of participants and different numbers of participants. The two preliminary studies concerned students who were enrolled in an introductory psychology class. The first participant group included 124 females and 119 males. The second study gave the same test to 449 students enrolled in an introductory psychology class. The researchers found males had a significantly higher

AIMS score than females. In their third study, Brewer et al. (1993) administered the AIM to the ninety members of the UC Davis football team.

The internal consistency of the AIMS was determined to be reliable. In the first two studies it was ($\alpha = .87$). In the third study internal consistency was not as strong but was still consistent holding at ($\alpha = .81$). Therefore, they concluded that the AIMS is an internally consistent, reliable tool and recommended it for further research in this area (Brewer et al. 1993).

Since the creation of the AIMS, the scale has been used to assess athletic identity in other studies. In 1997, Wiechman and Williams followed up on the research of Brewer et al. (1993) using the AIMS as a gauge of athletic identity at the high school level. In their study, Wiechman and Williams (1997) examined the relationship between athletic identity, injury, and mood disturbance. The AIMS was administered to 389 interscholastic athletes from nine different high schools.

Wiechman & Williams (1997) concluded that athletes with more years of playing experience had a higher athletic identity. They also found that athletes who expected to go on to play at an elite level had a higher level of athletic identity. Their research stated that 75% of males and 60% of females expected to play at the collegiate level. The study assessed the different aspects of athletic identity at the high school level. It also established the validity of the AIMS and identified many variables that could be related to athletic identity at the collegiate level.

Hale, James, & Stambulova (1999) used the AIMS and a modified version of the AIMS in a cross-cultural examination of athletic identity and its effects. They found that

athletic identity should be examined using a “three dimensional construct consisting of ‘social identity’, ‘exclusivity’, and ‘negative affectivity’” (p. 98). They also suggested that future research should be done to make slight modifications to the AIMS. Since the publication of their study, no research has been done to modify the AIMS. As a result, the more recent research on athletic identity has used the original version of the AIMS.

Many more recent studies employed the original version of the AIMS to assess athletic identity in their research. Horton and Mack (2000) looked at the athletic identity in marathon runners. To conduct their study, they administered 236 runners a questionnaire that measured the runners’ commitment to sport, athletic identity, sport performance, physical, psychological, and social consequences of running. They used extreme groups and bivariate analysis to assess the scores of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer, Van Raalte, Linder, 1993) and all the other variables they considered.

Horton and Mack (2000) found that athletic identity did not cause the runners to neglect the other important aspects of their lives. They did find that the runners generally had less time for family and non-running friends. However, the results also showed an increased social networking with people in the running world. Horton and Mack also saw many other benefits, including increased self-esteem, positive body image, and increased social networking. This study found that a high athletic identity in marathon running had a positive effect on self-esteem and body image, increased social networking with runners, and improved performance.

The same year another study utilized the AIMS. This research by Young and Bursik (2000) examined the identity development and life plan maturity of college women. Their study established that women who participate in sport can reap many positive effects from their athletic identity. Young and Bursik's research was a comparison study of female non-athletes and female athletes. They surveyed fifty-nine women, twenty-six of whom were athletes for a Division III institution. They found women who identify themselves as athletes have higher levels of self-esteem and a more direct career plan. This study specifically focused on athletic identity and its correlation to life plan maturity in women athletes.

In 2002, researchers using the AIMS looked at the impact of athletic identity on motivation goals and self-perceptions of 258 high school students. Ryska (2002) sampled 134 males and 124 females who were active high school athletes in a variety of sports. Ryska (2002) used the Task and Ego Orientation in Sports Questionnaire which was created by Duda (1989) to assess motivational orientation. The AIMS was used to assess the level of athletic identity, and the Self-Perceptions Profile for Adolescents (Harter, 1988) was used to examine the participants' level of perceived competence. Ryska (2002) found "athletes' motivational orientation moderates the impact of his or her athletic identity on various global competence perceptions" (p. 122). Ryska (2002) also found in the area of social, academic, and vocational competence, the participants who were high-ego/low-task had negative effects from their athletic identity. For those athletes who were high-task/low-ego, athletic identity was a positive influence in the area of academic and vocational competence.

A more recent study to investigate athletic identity using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer, Van Raalte, Linder, 1993) examined changes in athletic identity following team selection. This study by Grove, Fish, and Eklund (2004) administered the AIMS at three different points during a tryout for an elite team. The participants were forty-seven female athletes with a mean age of 16.82. The AIMS was administered prior to selection, the day of selection, and fourteen days after. Prior to selection, the average AIMS score of the participants was 47 giving them a high athletic identity, according to Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993), who determined a score of 50 to be the average for female athletes. Subsequent AIMS scores remained unchanged for the thirty players who were chosen for the elite team. For the 17 players who were not selected, there was a significant decrease in their AIMS scores over time. Grove, Fish, and Eklund (2004) determined these findings to show “self-protection processes may be related to short-term changes in domain-specific self-concept measures such as athletic identity” (p. 75).

One final study sought to create an alternate scale to measure athletic identity. Anderson (2004) designed a scale to evaluate athletic identity in people at various levels of involvement in sports, exercise, and physical activity. This scale is a 21 item scale that is multidimensional: the Athletic Identity Questionnaire. Anderson argued that previous athletic identity scales such as the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) focused on elite athletes and not the average athlete. Anderson’s research sought to create a scale that was appropriate for athletic populations that were not at the elite level. The research looked at athletic identity and its relation to

exercise behavior. With roughly 900 student participants in two samples Anderson (2004) found a basis for the initial validity of the Athletic Identity Questionnaire.

For the current study the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) was the most appropriate scale. Since the AIMS focuses on assessing athletic identity in the elite level athlete, it was more applicable to participants in this study.

Qualitative Research

The qualitative research specifically in the area of athletic identity is quite scarce. However, it is becoming more prevalent when athletic identity is studied as a component of other experiences, such as athletic retirement. [Note: Studies involving athletic identity and athletic retirement are discussed later in the literature review.] For this research two qualitative studies regarding athletic identity were relevant.

Stephen, Yannick, Brewer, and Britton (2007) used qualitative analysis to gain further insight into the factors that contribute to athletic identity. Through interviews with ten retired Olympic athletes, they determined personal and social factors strongly contributed to a self-perception as an elite athlete. Personal factors included bodily dimension of elite sport and identification with the lifestyle of an elite athlete. The contributing social factors were teammates, social recognition, part-time employment, and the sport environment. This study also discussed how these factors could lead to a crisis if the athlete career were terminated. The analysis by Stephan et al. adds to the understanding of what determines athlete identity and how it is maintained.

Research by Miller and Kerr (2003) examined the role of experimentation among intercollegiate athletes through qualitative research methods. They conducted in-depth interviews with eight collegiate athletes, four male and four female. Through open-ended and probing questions, the researchers found some connection with experimentation and identity formation in college athletes. Miller and Kerr (2003) labeled athletic identity as ‘over-identification’ with the athlete role. They found “students invested heavily in the athlete role during the early and mid periods, often at the expense of meaningful exploration of other roles, consistent with the definition of athletic identity as strong and exclusive commitment to the athlete role” (p. 213).

This research was especially pertinent to the current study. Miller and Kerr conducted their qualitative research with eight participants, which was within the target participant range in the current study. The Miller and Kerr publication also called for subsequent research, which would further examine the strength of athletic identity and its influence on “emotional reaction to the atrophy of other roles, and their exploration of former and future selves” (Miller & Kerr, 2003, p. 214).

Athletic Retirement

The majority of the relevant literature in this area focuses on the retirement experiences of the professional and elite level athlete. Much of it is retrospective and qualitative in nature (Werthner, & Orlick, 1986). Early research in the area of athletic retirement was conducted by Werthner and Orlick (1986), in their study of successful Olympic athletes and their experiences with retirement. This qualitative study examined 28 of the best female and male amateur athletes who had retired from

international competition. After an extensive review of literature, these researchers identified a need for an interview protocol for athletic retirement and developed the Elite Athlete Retirement Interview Schedule.

Werthner and Orlick (1986) found 6 athletes of the 28 stated they had no difficulty adjusting, 13 athletes experienced some problems, and 9 athletes had a very difficult transition. Some common themes emerged in the group of athletes who indicated transition was not difficult for them. All of them suggested they were ready to move on to a new life. They all had new careers which they entered immediately following retirement. Nevertheless, five out of six remained involved in their sport in some form. Of the group of 13 athletes who encountered some problems with retirement, many admitted they had difficulty deciding to retire; if it were not for external factors they would still be competing.

The nine athletes who experienced an extremely difficult transition suffered from severe depression upon leaving sport. Some of their issues included disappointment in their sport performance, the 1980 Olympic boycott, and an unanticipated end to their career. For some, the effects of retirement were still problematic.

Werthner, and Orlick concluded that seven factors could impact the transition to retirement. The factors they identified were a new focus, a sense of accomplishment, coaching, injuries and health problems, politics / sport association problems, finances, and support of family and friends. Importantly, the transition experience is not contingent on one factor but on a combination of the elements, which are unique to each athlete (Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

Another study by Baillie (1992) surveyed 260 elite level and professional athletes about their retirement. The participants, who responded to the survey, were former football players from University of Southern California, U.S. and Canadian Olympians, Major League Baseball players, and National Hockey League players.

Baillie (1992) was able to draw some significant and interesting conclusions about the athletes' retirement experience. A majority stated that they had made the transition to retirement successfully but that it took an average of about two years. For some athletes 10 years had passed and they were still struggling. Baillie (1992) identified some of the same key factors as Werthner and Orlick (1986). Baillie found that remaining involved with the sport and having a new focus in life helped to ease the transition. Baillie (1993) stated the results from his study conducted the previous year might be applicable to adjustment experienced by athletes of levels upon retirement from sport.

Werthner and Orlick (1986) and Baillie (1992) both determined a set of factors that influence the experience of retirement from sport. But what occurs to an athlete who is struggling in the life transition? One theory in the area of athletic retirement has compared it to dealing with death. The question that arises is, "are athletes dying to sport?"

Athletic Retirement as a Symbolic Death

Wolff and Lester (1989) contend "retirement of professional athletes is compared to the dying process since, by retiring, athletes lose their personal identity which is dependent upon their careers" (p. 1043). There is a similarity between the retirement

experiences of retired athletes and a person who is coping with a terminal illness. Wolff and Lester relate the five stages of the process of dying described by the research of Kubler-Ross (1969). These five consecutive stages are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Wolff and Lester develop the parallels further. They state denial could be exemplified when the individual refuses to accept approaching retirement. Anger occurs once athletes accept that retirement will occur soon, but they do not want to accept it. As the athletes move through the anger stage they begin to bargain. In this stage they look for any possible way to lengthen the career. In the fourth stage the athletes encounter depression. It could thrust the athletes into a deep depression or create acute anxiety. Eventually, athletes may 'accept' their career is over, the final stage of grief.

Another study that compares the athletic retirement process to death was conducted by Blinde and Stratta (1992). This study examined collegiate athletes whose careers were cut short by the elimination of their sport at their university or by being cut from the team. This research included 20 participants whose sports were eliminated. Through the interviews, Blinde and Stratta came across a common theme in the analysis of the transcriptions. Sixteen out of the twenty athletes interviewed related the feelings they experienced in retirement to a dying process. Of the five Kubler-Ross (1969) stages of dealing with death, depression was found to be the longest lasting stage for these athletes who had unanticipated sport exits. Blinde and Stratta offered conclusions about the retirement of collegiate athletes; the focus of the study was on athletes who experienced involuntary or unanticipated sport exits.

Influencing Factors in Athletic Retirement

Athletic retirement can be multifaceted and complex according to Erpic, Wylleman and Zupancic (2004). Therefore, it is important to examine the factors that are found to influence the process. Two studies on athletic identity attempted to identify some of these factors.

The Parker (1994) study examined college football players' career experiences and their exit process from intercollegiate athletics. This research was an analysis of the experiences of seven former NCAA Division I-A football players. These participants had been in retirement between eight months and three years when the interviews took place, and they were not currently playing at the professional level. The interviews ranged from one and a half hours to six hours, and were done in either one or multiple sittings depending on the needs of the participant.

The interviews targeted the transition from high school to college sport, learning behavior not appropriate for the real world, power and control issues in college football, and transition experiences into retirement. Factors discovered to impact the retirement process for these college football players were their specific sport setting, being past orientated, having unresolved business or goals, and feeling a lack of control in their life and retirement. These factors are important in identifying athletes who may have a problem transitioning out of college football.

Parker (1994) felt the most important information gleaned from this study was that "athletes have a lot to say and perhaps no one to tell. These unresolved feelings and emotions, coupled with the lack of a safe forum of expression, was potentially harmful to

the mental health of these individuals. Transitional athletes need to be afforded the opportunity to vent and clarify their feelings about their sport careers without fear of reprisals.” (p. 301).

Another study by Erpic, Wylleman, and Zupancic (2004) entitled “The Effect Of Athletic And Non-Athletic Factors On The Sports Career Termination Process” researched 85 former elite athletes who had been retired less than four years and ranged in age from 21-44 years. Two questionnaires were administered and the data processed. First, the Sport Career Termination Questionnaire was administered to examine characteristics of the sport career process. Second, the Non-Athletic Transitions Questionnaire was administered to assess the influence of non-athletic events on quality of life. All the participants competed that the national or international level in an Olympic sport. Several athletic factors found to influence sport retirement were: voluntariness of career termination, participants’ subjective evaluation of athletic achievements, and the prevalence of athletic identity. Non-athletic factors included educational status and the occurrence of negative non-athletic transitions. According to Erpic, Wylleman, and Zupancic (2004), the factors identified in this research greatly influence the difficulty of transition out of the elite sport career and enhance the knowledge about the career termination process.

Athletic Retirement in Stages

Recently, the subject of sport retirement and its effects have been given more attention. The process and characteristics of transition have been investigated. Two

studies specifically looked at the stages athletes go through as they transition out of their sport career.

Chow conducted a study in 2001 with elite Hong Kong female athletes and their retirement from competitive sport. The participants were six former and six current elite female athletes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a life-history approach and based on the Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) transitional model. Three stages were characterized in the retirement process. The first phase was pre-transitional to competitive retirement phase. In this phase athletes discuss their recruitment, family and social support, training and competition, and their decision to retire. The second phase was transition to sport retirement phase. This was a confusing time involving choosing to retire and moving to life without competitive sport. This stage was a time of loss, relief, and new identity challenges. The final stage was a post-transition phase. Here athletes described their new career and life paths and how they were coping.

Chow (2001) discussed some suggestions for sport leadership including coaches and administrators. It is essential that the athletes maintain their academic life as well as sport to ensure they have career options following sport life. Support is needed for athletes who are approaching retirement and in transition. Chow suggested a network of former athletes to help each other through the process. Chow also suggested needs for future research. More longitudinal research should examine the support systems in place to aid the athletes to retirement. Further the roles of family/marriage in the transition out of athletic life are important to assess. Finally, "the phenomenon of migration in elite

athletic careers and its implications for satisfying retirement from competition is also little understood; again comparative studies would be worthwhile” (Chow, 2001, p. 57).

Other research also found that athletes experience three stages of transition. Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) conducted seven, in-depth interviews with retired elite, female gymnasts. Through semi-structured interviews, they gained insight about the gymnasts’ retirement experience. Kerr and Dacyshyn found the transitional process to occur in three stages: retirement, nowhere land, and new beginnings. They argued it is important to be aware of the difficult transition that can occur for many elite athletes and work to aid them in this time. In closing Kerr and Dacyshyn stated “recent increase in qualitative methodologies in sport psychology research will certainly facilitate our understanding of idiosyncratic experiences such as retirement” (p. 131). The current study answered the call for more qualitative research in sport psychology, particularly in the area of retirement.

Cultural Differences in Athletic Retirement

Few studies have examined how people from different cultures cope with athletic retirement. Two recent studies have taken a closer look to determine if culture influences the sport career termination process.

The first study was a cross-national comparison of elite athletes’ reaction to sport career termination. Alfermann, Stambulova and Zemaityte (2004) examined former elite athletes from Germany, Lithuania, and Russia for the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional consequences they experienced in sport career termination. The tool employed was the Athletic Retirement Questionnaire, which was developed by the first two authors.

The questionnaire was administered to 88 German athletes, 65 Lithuanian athletes, and 101 Russian athletes in their primary languages. The dependent variables for the study were coping reactions, emotional reactions, athletic identity during and after sport career, adjustment to life after sport, and reason for career termination. The independent variables were national identity and planning for retirement.

Major findings in this study showed planning for retirement had a positive effect on adaptation, but a high athletic identity contributed to more struggle in the adaptation process. Some cultural differences were found in the study. In the area of reasons for career termination, Lithuanian and Russians gave sport related reasons most often, whereas Germans sighted job-related motivations. The Germans in this study also planned retirement and therefore had easier transitions. The Lithuanians had higher athletic identities and ambiguous coping strategies. Russian and Lithuanian athletes had longer transition periods and lower satisfaction with the process than the German athletes.

In the discussion, Alfermann, Stambulova and Zemaityte (2004) also made suggestions for application of this study and future research in this area. In regard to application, they felt psychological help should be made available to athletes facing retirement, as well as career planning assistance. Based on this study they determined future research should focus on the relationship between reaction to sport career termination and national sport systems. Another area of interest is transition readiness and developing an instrument to evaluate readiness levels of athletes. This study found some cross cultural differences and similarities in sport career termination for German,

Lithuanian, and Russian athletes. The second cross-cultural study on athletic retirement examined the differences between French and Swedish athletes.

Stambulova, Stephan, and Japhag (2007) conducted a cross-cultural study on athletic retirement of elite French and Swedish athletes. Using the same questionnaire created by the authors of the previous study, they studied pre-conditions for retirement, coping, and long-term consequences of the transition. The Retirement from Sport Survey (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004) was administered to 69 French athletes and 88 Swedish athletes all of whom competed at the international level. The sample of 157 athletes consisted of males and females from various sports.

The results found regardless of nation retirement planning lead to better coping and more positive emotions in the process but did not relate to long-term consequences of transition. The French sample had higher usage of avoidance coping strategies and perceived difficulty finding a new career. The Swedish sample had a higher duration of transition, current athletic identity, and career/life satisfaction now. According Stambulova, Stephan, and Japhag (2007) “transition out of elite sport is a dynamic, multidimensional, multilevel, and multifactor process in which nationality and culture plays an important role” (p. 102).

Clearly athletic identity is impacted by a number of factors, including culture and nationality. For this study, although it is possible there will be slight ethnic differences, all the participants will be from the United State of America. Culture and nationality will not be a primary focus of this study, due to the need to keep a homogenous sample based on sample size.

Athletic Retirement and Body Image

A study by Stephan and Bilard (2003) used mixed methods to study athletic retirement and its effect on body image. This study followed sixteen transitioning athletes over five months following retirement. Using the (Bruchon-Schweitzer) Body-Image Questionnaire, along with interviews, they found that between six weeks and five months following retirement the body satisfaction decreased. Stephan & Bilard (2003) determined that retirement should be viewed as a process that involves many stages, not an abrupt end. They argued more research is needed, particularly “a longitudinal study of transition would also better document the reactions and feelings experienced by Transitioning Athletes and the adjustment process” (p.103).

Athletic Identity and Athletic Retirement

Although the research on athletic identity and athletic retirement has been around for a considerable amount of time, the research that investigates the connection between the two is relatively new. Webb et al. (1998) conducted one major study that probed deeper into the relationship between athlete identity and athletes’ reaction to retirement from sport. In this study Webb et al. sent a questionnaire to 136 current University of Notre Dame students and ninety-five alumni. The questionnaire explored the athletic history of the individual and the experiences they had with retirement from sport. The questions regarding information about their involvement with sport, such as time played, highest level reached, and reason for retirement were left open-ended. The other questions were based on a five point Likert scale. These areas of questions pertained to psychological reactions to retirement, and athletic identity. Ninety-one participants

returned the questionnaire and they had athletic experience ranging from high school to professional level play.

In their findings, Webb et al. (1998) determined “athletic identity is strongly related to both retirement outcomes” (p. 339). They also determined that athletic identity is related to self-esteem and to the feeling of uncontrollability. This study was instrumental because it studied both athletic identity and athletic retirement and the correlation between the two.

The struggle to cope with athletic retirement is a battle elite athletes must face. The connection of athletic identity to this process is increasing, and Grove, Lavellee, and Gordon (1997) attempted to gain better understanding of the influence of athletic identity in their study on coping with retirement and sport. To do this they sent out questionnaires to fifty-one retired members of the Australian state and national teams. All but three were returned. The questionnaires included the AIMS (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) and the COPE inventory (Carver et al., 1989). Twenty-eight of the participants were females and twenty of them were males. They came from an array of different sport backgrounds. Grove, Lavellee, and Gordon (1997) found that the athletes used a variety of different coping strategies, including avoidance-oriented strategies, along with emotion-focused strategies. They also found “athletic identity was strongly related to both the degree of psychological adjustment needed and the time taken to make that adjustment” (p. 199). Another important finding was the association of poor, pre-retirement career planning and high scores on the AIMS. These highly identified athletes seemed to be the ones who struggled most with the transition. Grove, Lavellee, and

Gordon (1997) called for more research and stated, “There is much to be gained by a comprehensive, multi-method examination of the sport retirement experience” (p. 199).

The majority of studies on the connection between athletic identity and athletic retirement have used qualitative methods. Sparkes (1998) conducted in-depth interviews with one athlete who suffered a career-ending injury. The purpose of this study was to demonstrate how debilitating an athletic identity can be to the survival of self. Through nine interviews over two years, Sparks gained insight to the effect of a strong, athletic identity on transition out of sport. Spark (1998) found that there were stages associated with the process. The first stage was “the emergence of the high performance body” (p. 651). This is the establishment of the athletic identity and the attachment to flow and success. The next stage included feelings of loss and fragmentation, which can last for a long time following termination of the athletic career. The other stages are the demise of the disciplined body-self and the demise of the glorified self. Once the body and the glorified self are gone, athletes cling to past selves. Finally, the athlete will reach a place of reconstructing the self. This can be a difficult process and is often one that requires aid from other people. This qualitative research provided deeper insight to the ability of a strong athletic identity to be an “Achilles heel” to the athlete transitioning out of sport.

One of the more comprehensive qualitative studies conducted on the connection to athletic identity and athletic retirement was entitled the “Repercussions of Transition Out of Elite Sport on Subjective Well-being: A One Year Study” (Stephen et al., 2003, p. 354). This study was longitudinal and consisted of following 16 retired, French Olympians through their first year of retirement.

Through four meetings during the year, the researchers collected quantitative data about the participants over all well-being. They also gathered qualitative data through a brief interview. The data showed that in the well-being assessment there was a slight increase, stabilization, and another increase. Researchers found that during the two months following retirement athletes experienced a loss or void in their lives. Up to five months post-retirement, the athletes used avoidance to cope with their loss. In the final stages of the year post transition the athletes gained a sense of personal control. Particularly in the eight to twelve month stage post-retirement, the athletes were moving on. Overall, Stephen et al. (2003) concluded that even if the transition were difficult the first six weeks the voluntary nature of the athletes' retirement made it easier to adjust to a new life plan.

Since the initial proposal for this study, more research has been done in the area of athletic identity and its effects on athletic retirement. These studies were all qualitative in nature. The first study by Stier (2007) examined the retirement experiences of eight ex-professional Swedish tennis players. All had been in the top 100 rankings during their career and were retired at the time of the interviews. Two interviews were conducted with the participants. The process of retiring was found to have five overlapping stages: doubting, reality testing, seeking alternatives, deciding to quit, and establishing the ex-role identity. Each stage forced the athletes to make difficult life choices which impacted and altered their identities. This research found "career retirement was a gradual, transitional process of psychological and social adaptation and quest for self-identity" (Stier, 2007, p. 99). All the interviews were retrospective and

biographical in nature. Stier calls for future research to be qualitative as it seeks to find links between current identity, ex-status, and role exit.

Another recent study by Lavallee and Robinson (2007) examined the retirement experience from women's artistic gymnastics. The participants were five, former elite-level gymnasts. Each took part in a semi-structured interview regarding their careers and experience with retirement. Four major domains were identified: the path to excellence, the balance of power in coach-gymnast relationship, the search for an identity, and the fluctuating sense of control in retirement. Their findings concluded these gymnasts adopted identities based entirely on gymnastics which left them feeling lost in retirement, unsure of what they wanted in their lives once gymnastics ended. Lavallee and Robinson determined that the stress and distress of athletic retirement could be abated with gradual withdrawal and pre-retirement planning.

The Lavallee and Robinson (2007) data was not gathered until after retirement had begun. Also, the sample was entirely composed of all Olympic level athletes who had chosen to retire following the Sydney Games. Both of these factors could have impacted the ease of their transition.

The final study to add to this body of literature dealing with athletic retirement and athletic identity was conducted by Lally (2007). The study followed six student athletes through their retirement process, using in-depth, one-on-one interviews at three points. The participants were chosen at random and the only requirement was they were facing retirement from collegiate sport with no plans to pursue their sport at an elite level beyond college. The participants were three males and three females from a large,

Canadian university. The interviews were timed prior to retirement, one month post-retirement, and one year post-retirement. The goal of Lally's study was to examine identity reformation through athletic retirement.

The Lally interviews were transcribed and analyzed inductively following the guidelines established for interpreting qualitative data by Cote, Salmela, Baria, and Russell (1993). Lally's results revealed that five of the six participants had a very smooth transition. This was attributed to the participants' withdrawal from their athletic identity prior to retirement, during which they utilized coping strategies to deal with the transition and establish a new identity. Although it was forced retirement, five athletes did not experience an identity crisis. They acknowledged in the pre-retirement interview that sport was ending and that they had begun withdrawing from their athletic identity. Lally (2007) believes "they consciously elected to shift the athlete role from its central to a subordinate status in their identity hierarchies and explore other available roles" (p. 96). For the one participant, who did not choose to alter his athletic identity prior to retirement, it was a sudden end and took him the entire year to establish a new sense of self. This participant felt a sense of void and had a difficult adjustment. Contrary to the fear of many coaches, the diminished athletic identity did not have a negative affect on the final performances of these five athletes.

Lally's research was a prospective study with a very small sample size. In the discussion she addressed the need for more research in this area. Specifically, she calls for more longitudinal research with larger sample sizes from various levels of athletic competition. In addition, all the participants in this study were completing their

undergraduate work as well as their athletic careers. This may have enabled their exit from their situated identities because it gave them more freedom to construct new selves.

Research Gaps

The research in the areas of athletic retirement and athletic identity have significant gaps which need to be addressed to create a better understanding of what is actually happening to the athlete as they leave elite level competition. For parents and coaches of young athletes today, it would be useful to have a more concrete base of the dangers and advantages to developing a strong exclusive athletic identity. Very few studies explore the relationship of athletic identity and athletic retirement and of those that do only one has explored the transition in a longitudinal manner starting prior to retirement. Research on the association of athletic retirement and athletic identity is very scarce in the area of involuntary retirement, and only one other study has utilized the use of mixed methods for gathering research.

CHAPTER III

Methods

This study followed Division I female water polo players through their final season and into the first nine months of retirement. The purpose of this study was to examine the retirement experiences of Division I female athletes. A secondary purpose of this study was to determine the effects of athletic identity on emotional adjustment during the retirement experience. The study quantitatively gauged the level of athletic identity prior to the retirement process. In addition to quantitative measures, longitudinal, qualitative research was conducted to gain a better, more in-depth analysis of their retirement experiences over time. This chapter outlines the process used to select the participants, the instruments that were used, the procedure the study followed, and the ways that academic rigor was demonstrated.

Participants

The participants in this study were nine Division I female water polo players between the ages of 21 and 24 years. All participants were approaching their final year of eligibility, but only five were graduating immediately following their final season. Further, because the study dealt with retirement experiences, prospective participants included only those players whose final competitive game at the elite level was their final college game. Therefore, they could not be planning to play professionally in Europe or Australia or to an active member of the USA National Team. One participant did not complete the final interview because she chose to play semi-professionally in Australia, but her results were included in the analysis of the first three interview sessions. The

athletes who participated were from Division I universities located in California. These institutions were chosen based partly on their location and partly on the extremely high national ranking each of the teams have had over the past several seasons. As previous research has suggested, athletes at the highest levels may have an especially difficult time transitioning out of sport, particularly if they are highly identified as athletes.

Instrumentation

The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) was used to identify a sub-sample of participants to take part in the longitudinal, qualitative portion of the study that involved in-depth interviews conducted over a period of approximately nine months.

Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS)

This scale was designed by Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993). They found a “lack of an extant instrument with item content reflecting both strength and exclusivity of identification with the athlete role” (p. 242). Using three initial studies, they found the AIMS test to be a reliable and valid measure of athletic identity.

The AIMS uses ten 7-point Likert scale items that range from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) designed the item pool “to be a face valid representation of the social, cognitive and affective aspects of athletic identity” (p. 242).

These are the 10 descriptive items:

1. I consider myself an athlete.
2. I have many goals related to sport.
3. Most of my friends are athletes.
4. Sport is the most important part of my life.
5. I spend more time thinking about sport than anything else.
6. I need to participate in sport to feel good about myself.
7. Other people see me mainly as an athlete.
8. I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport.
9. Sport is the only important thing in my life.
10. I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Four times throughout the study, the researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant. The interviews included both open-ended and probing questions about each participant's experience with transition out of sport. The initial interviews were one to two hours in length. Subsequent interviews ranged from ½ hour to 1 hour. [See the examples in Appendix B]

Procedure

The researcher contacted local Division I head coaches to locate possible participants. With permission from the coaches, an initial meeting with their senior athletes was set up. A total of five meetings took place over the year, and therefore the participants needed to be accessible for the entire duration of the study.

Bracketing Interview

Prior to interviewing the participants, the researcher participated in an in-depth bracketing interview. The bracketing interview was conducted with each of the interview schedules prior to interviewing the participants. This was an important step to give the

researcher experience with the interview process and the interview guide. More importantly, as Dale (1993) suggests, the bracketing interview allows the researcher to lay out his or her preconceptions and potential biases about the research topic and helps to identify any potential issues with the structure or flow of the interview guide. Another purpose for the bracketing interview was to gather the researcher's personal history within the area of collegiate athletic retirement.

Initial Meeting

Brief meetings were held in February 2006 with athletes who were beginning their senior season at the participating universities. For teams that included multiple participants, group meetings were conducted. During this initial step, the athletes were asked to fill out personal background information and consent forms. Participants received an overview about their role and responsibilities in the research process. After consent forms and personal information sheets were completed, the athletes completed the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). A total of 22 athletes completed the AIMS. Results of the AIMS data will be briefly discussed in the next chapter.

The top 11 athletes who scored the highest on the AIMS were contacted and asked about being a participant in the study. One participant was disqualified for not meeting the criteria, and one chose not to continue in the study. For the nine women who agreed to participate, a meeting was set up approximately one month prior to completion of their senior season.

The four interviews at specific points are crucial: one month prior to retirement, two weeks after retirement, five months into retirement, and ten months into retirement.

All interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview guides. In the following sections, the results of the four interviews will be discussed, focusing on the major themes that emerged from the data.

Interview One

The nine athletes who were selected had an individual meeting approximately one month into their senior season. This meeting consisted of a semi-structured interview, which lasted approximately one to two hours. This interview revealed information about each participant's entrance into sport, her athletic identity, and her feelings about approaching retirement.

Interview Two

Approximately two weeks following the completion of the season, each participant met with the researcher for a second, individual meeting. This interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to 60 minutes. The interview investigated the completion of her final season and her initial feelings about retirement.

Interview Three

This interview took place at the beginning of preseason play for their former teams. This interview addressed how they were dealing with transition out of sport approximately five months into retirement. Similar to the second interview, it lasted roughly 30 to 60 minutes.

Interview Four

The forth and final meeting took place in the spring of 2007. This was approximately ten months into retirement. This interview focused on the participants'

adjustment to retirement, what it is like to watch their former teams compete, and advice each had for future athletes reaching retirement. Following the final interview, the researcher thanked the participants for all their help with the study.

Data Analysis

The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale is based on a Likert scale, spanning from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The total AIMS scores range from 10 to 70, with the lower score indicating low athletic identity, and the higher score indicating high athletic identity (Wiechman, & Williams 1997). The AIMS was used to determine which athletes had the highest athletic identity at the initial meeting. The 11 participants with the highest athletic identity were asked to participate in four interviews over the next year. Although 11 were asked to participate, one declined to continue in the study and another was disqualified because she did not meet the required criteria. Ultimately, nine participants continued in the qualitative portion of the study.

Following the interviews, the information was transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read and re-read to become familiar with the text and the athletes' experience. The qualitative data analysis followed the process established by Cote, Salmela, Baria, and Russell (1993). Initially the data was divided into meaning units. The meaning units were then organized higher order themes. Finally, the themes were organized into meaningful categories. Cote et al. (1993) emphasized in this form of qualitative data analysis "there are no predetermined categories or patterns before the data collection" (p. 132).

Establishing Academic Rigor

To ensure the trustworthiness and academic rigor of the qualitative data, appropriate methods were applied to maintain the standard of the research. First, the researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process (Schneider, 2004; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003). The reflexive journal was used as a tool for the researcher to reflect on important decisions regarding the research. This included but was not limited to the interview process, data coding, establishing themes, and relating the data to the research.

In addition to the reflexive journal, member checking occurred following each interview. Member checking allowed the interviewed participant to review the material gathered and the interpretations of the researcher to verify a proper representation of what was stated (Miller & Kerr, 2003; Schnieder, 2004). Finally, eight peer review sessions were conducted with a faculty advisor with an expertise in qualitative research during the course of the study. Several of these sessions took place during the data-gathering phase. The sessions involved conversations focused on the interview guide and the quality and thoroughness of the initial interview transcripts which had been read by the faculty member. The other four sessions occurred during the data analysis and write-up phase of the study. The peer reviewer prompted the researcher to talk through the results, particularly the rationale for coding the data. These sessions also involved the faculty peer reviewer asking for points of clarification and justification for how and why specific things were included in the final thematic categories. Finally, following Sparkes (2004),

the researcher attempted to create rich, thick, and descriptive portraits of the participants' experiences.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the retirement experiences of Division I female water polo players over the course of time. A secondary purpose of the study was to determine the effects of athletic identity on the emotional adjustment during retirement experiences. The method was designed to enhance the current research in the area of athletic retirement and athletic identity. The study generated rich data offering a greater understanding of athletes' attitudes and experiences. Eventually, this knowledge should lead to improved techniques and experiences to prepare athletes for their transition out of sport.

CHAPTER IV

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the retirement experiences of nine Division I female water polo players utilizing a mixed methods approach. Specifically, this study examined the effect of athletic identity on emotional disturbance experienced during retirement. As previously noted, it was imperative to acquire in-depth, qualitative research about the subject as they completed their careers and negotiated the first nine months of retirement. Understanding how elite-level female water polo players coped with retirement will be useful for current athletes, sport psychology professionals, coaches, and parents.

In the fall of 2006, twenty-two female water polo players from six Division I universities agreed to take part in this study. The AIMS (Athletic Identity Measurement Scale) was administered during the initial contact and basic personal and water polo career history were collected. The AIMS is a 10-question survey with a standard 7-point Likert scale. The possible scores range from 10 to 70. The resulting AIMS scores of these 22 women ranged from 41 to 64 with a median of 50. The women who scored in the upper 50 percent were contacted to continue in the study. One declined to participate. Another was disqualified because she chose to graduate early; therefore, she was not experiencing forced retirement. The remaining nine participants were interviewed at four points over a one-year period.

The interviews were conducted during their final collegiate season and continued through the first nine months of retirement. The interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 90

minutes. During the first interview, rapport was established quickly; the women were candid regarding their experiences and feelings. At times, it was difficult for them to verbalize their feelings, especially in regard to their immediate emotional state. The women found it easier to speak about experiences or feelings from the past that they had already reflected on. Thus, the researcher made a conscious effort to elicit additional responses via follow-up probing questions, some of which were included in the interview guides.

Throughout the four interviews, each participant explained her journey through retirement. At the end of the fourth interview, many of the women expressed that the interviews helped them negotiate the process. They also hoped their stories will help others. To preserve the identities of the participants, their names, as well as those of their teammates, coaches and opponents, were changed. The following participant profiles provide background about each participant and are meant to help the reader better contextualize the results.

Participant Profiles

Melissa

Melissa was a senior at a top ten Division I university where she had been a starter on the team since she was a freshman. She was raised in a sports-oriented family and began competitive swimming at age six. Growing up, she achieved success in swimming and softball. Ultimately, she chose to focus solely on water polo during her sophomore year in high school. She was a member of one of the most successful high

school programs in the country. Her college team struggled, but she focused on her team advancing to the NCAA tournament in her final season.

Joan

Joan was a senior at a top ten Division I university where she had been a key player throughout her four years. She began swimming competitively at age five. Her older brother and father swam as well. She was always involved in sports growing up, either swimming or soccer, but began to focus on water polo in high school. Along with Melissa, she played for one of the most successful high school programs in the country. It is important to note Joan and Melissa were teammates in both high school and in college. Joan also hoped for a spot in the NCAA tournament.

Kara

Kara was a senior at a top twenty Division I university where she had been a member of the team for four years. She was a member of the travel squad but had never been a star player on the team. She was the fourth child in a very sports-oriented family. All her older siblings went on to receive scholarships for college athletics. She began gymnastics at age two and was an elite-level gymnast until age fourteen when she burned out. Unsure what to do without gymnastics, she took up multiple sports including softball, diving, water polo, and track. She discovered a love for water polo and decided to pursue it in college. She chose her university for its engineering program; the water polo program was a bonus. She had learned from her siblings that education lasts longer than that sport.

Sally

Sally was a senior at a top twenty Division I university and started all four years. She had always been involved in athletics. She was attracted to the competition and the rewards. Initially, she was attracted to water polo as a way to bond with her dad who played in college and currently plays at the masters' level. She chose her university for its academic program. Water polo was a second consideration, but it was important to her that she would be able to be a key player on the team. During her four years her team had improved in the rankings. In her final year, she was the captain and hoped it would be their most successful year ever. It is also important to note Sally was a teammate of Kara.

Carrie

Carrie was a senior at a top ten Division I university, where she was a key player for her team. They were very successful during her four years. She began swimming competitively with her sister at age six and continued through high school. She was also involved in soccer when she was younger. She discovered water polo at age 12 and played year-round on one of the most successful club teams in the nation. She was recruited to her university and, although her team had been very successful, she still dreamed of her first NCAA championship ring in her final season. Every class prior to hers had won the championship at least once in their four years. She hoped the tradition would continue.

Sarah

Sarah was a senior at a top ten Division I university where she was the starting goalie. She played many different sports growing up but none very seriously. She came from a family of water polo goalies. In high school her teammates were very close to each other. When a teammate was diagnosed with cancer, she and several other teammates shaved their heads in support. It became very evident that 'team' still meant a lot to Sarah. She was recruited to play at her university along with others, but chose it partly for its proximity to her family and friends. In her final season, she desired her team to achieve success and for herself to play hard.

Jessica

Jessica was a senior at a top ten Division I university where she had been a contributing team member, but she had struggled to make the travel squad during her four years. She had swum since third grade but was never highly competitive. It was her brother who introduced her to water polo. Her parents were very supportive and came to every meet and every game. Jessica was also a talented trumpet player and was part of the university marching band. Her collegiate career had been challenging because she was not a major player but did not want to be a quitter. In her final season, she hoped her team would be successful and that she would play in the final games.

Mallory

Mallory was senior at a top ten Division I university where she was a major asset to her team during the four years. She was a starter and co-captain of her team her senior year. Mallory's father pushed her into athletics at an early age. Although she did not

always like the pressure, she was very grateful. She was an All-American soccer player and trained at the Olympic training center for hockey, while playing for one of the most successful water polo club teams in the nation. She was heavily recruited for water polo and hockey but decided water polo was her passion. She sustained a shoulder surgery during her collegiate career and, due to an error by her coach, lost a year of eligibility. Despite this setback, she was determined to make the most of her last year and hoped to see her team at the NCAA tournament. It is also important to note Mallory was a teammate of Joan and Melissa.

Kelly

Kelly was a senior at a top twenty Division I water polo university. She was a valuable player all four years and a team captain as a senior. She started sports around age six and discovered water polo at age ten. She played for a very successful club team in inner city Los Angeles. Unfortunately, the team disbanded. After the team dissolved, her parents drove her over an hour each way so she could continue to play with a successful team. Her love of the sport kept her motivated to play even on teams where she did not always feel accepted. Her desire to play also forced her to transfer high schools to find a team. She felt her smaller size hindered her perceived ability to play in college. Although she was recruited to her university, she felt she never got the amount of playing time she deserved. In her final season, she desired success for her team and to play well.

Pre-Retirement Interviews

The first round of interviews took place in person during the participants' final season of play. These interviews lasted between 1-2 hours. These interviews were especially lengthy, and important, because they covered the participants' experiences playing water polo throughout high school and college, as well as their current attitudes about concluding their final season. The current well-being of the participants was also evaluated in the pre-retirement interview as suggested by Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, and Delignieres (2003). These researchers determined that establishing the mental state and well-being of the participants prior to the transition was critical. These interviews led to three major themes: 1) identity formation 2) career, and 3) anticipated retirement. Within each theme, minor sub-themes will be discussed.

Identity Formation

One of the major themes in the first interview was identity formation. The participants discussed at length their athletic background and the development of their athletic identity. In addition, three minor themes emerged that impacted their identity formation: 1) relational influence 2) early athletic success, and 3) specialization.

Relational influence. Throughout the participant's childhood athletic experiences, relationships with friends, family, and coaches were instrumental in their entrance into sport and their level of involvement. All nine participants had positive reinforcement for their athletic participation from people in their lives, but the most influential people were family.

All of the participants had family members who had been involved in athletics as they grew up. Sport was part of the family culture for many participants. All the athletes attributed strong parental support for their athletic involvement. Mallory and Kelly, for example, noted that their parents would drive for over an hour to get them to and from practice everyday. In addition, Melissa and Joan stated their parents never missed a game, even during their four years of college. Although they all felt supported in their involvement, four of the athletes expressed that their involvement did not feel like a choice but rather an expectation. Kara described her family's relationship with sport:

That was the focus of our lives more than doing whatever other people do when they don't have sports. I don't know...it was always the focus of our lives. I never questioned what else I could do with my life.

Carrie, Mallory, and Kelly shared Kara's feelings that they did not have a choice to be an athlete. Despite feeling "forced" into athletics, they all felt it was for the best.

The influence of family on a child's decision to participate in sports is consistent with the work of Coakley (2001), who determined that sport participation is encouraged by most parents in today's society. It is also in line with research by Chow (2001) and Baxter-Jones and Maffulli (2003) which states family support was an intricate part of sustaining a sport career in younger athletes. For this study, encouragement and support from important relational influences played a major role in the athletic involvement and identity formation of these women water polo players.

Early athletic involvement. Another sub-theme that contributed to the participants' athletic identity formation was their early athletic involvement. All of the participants were competitive athletes from a young age, many as early as five or six

years old. Many were in rigid programs which practiced throughout the year. For the most part, the athletes spoke casually about their introduction into sport and described the experience in a favorable manner. Kelly explained her experience of beginning her athletic career:

Well, when I was six...actually. I originally started out playing, doing martial arts. But my brother had asthma so we had a local pool and my dad just said, "Go to swim!" And then we ended up just doing water polo for like the rest of my life (laugh).

For the majority of their lives, these women had been heavily involved in athletics. As previously stated, these women demonstrated a high level of athletic identity. This connection between early athletic involvement and identity-formation is consistent with the research. For example, Wiechman and Williams (1997) found that more years of playing correlated to a higher athletic identity. Along with relational influence and early athletic involvement, specialization played a key role in the development of a strong athletic identity for the participants.

Specialization. The final sub-theme in identity formation was specialization. For the purpose of this study, specialization was defined as the choice to neglect other sports or interests to focus entirely on water polo. The six participants who discussed specialization felt it was difficult but necessary to be successful. Joan, for instance, felt it was necessary to give up other things she liked for her love of water polo:

I am really into art and it's hard because coming into college I thought I would be an art major but it just takes up so much time. And, there is no time when you have water polo, and so that was kinda hard for me, but you give up so many things that you love...not love...you give up so many things that you like to do because you love water polo.

The research shows that athletes who sacrificed being involved in other activities to pursue sport had a self-identity made up almost exclusively of their athletic involvement (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder 1993; Lally, 2007; Lavalley, & Robinson, 2000). The research suggests having a strong and virtually exclusive athletic identity may be detrimental to maintaining other selves. Lally (2007) believes, “this identity narrowing, while typically beneficial for the dominant role, often comes at the cost of exploration of and investment in other age appropriate or available roles” (p. 86). However, the participants felt specialization was the obvious choice for them because success in water polo was their goal. This was similar to the findings of Lavalley and Robinson (2007) who contended that for the gymnasts in their study giving their life to gymnastics was not an issue because gymnastics was all that mattered to them.

For the women in this study, relational influence, early athletic involvement, and specialization were all contributing factors to their high athletic identity formation. Interestingly, during discussion of their feelings about athletic identity, the participants became more uncomfortable. All of them mentioned that they felt defined by water polo and believed others identify them mainly as “a water polo player.” Jessica began to cry as she spoke about how much water polo defined her:

I think it's a really big part of my life. Just cause, I started a while ago and I've been a player and I've been a coach. So, it's a really big part of my life. So yah, it defines me a great deal. People ask so what do you do? I play water polo.

The other athletes expressed similar attitudes. This qualitative data is consistent with the quantitative data collected using the AIMS, as both determined that these participants had a high athletic identity. Through this qualitative analysis, it was possible to see more

clearly how some of the identity formation developed through relational influence, early athletic involvement, and specialization.

Career

A large percentage of the initial interview sessions were dedicated to becoming familiar with each participant's story, specifically her previous sport experiences.

Therefore, a major theme that emerged involved a career in sport. From the data, a few sub-themes emerged that related to the larger category of career: 1) love of the game, 2) team, and 3) injury.

Love of the game. Throughout their discussion of their individual careers, each participant expressed their love of water polo. To better understand this love of the game, discussion questions were crafted to more precisely elicit an emotional response from the subjects. The women shared their love of competition, the aggressive nature of the sport, and their enjoyment of the sun and water. Competition is not unique to water polo, but many of these women came from a swimming background and shared a love for the competitive game of water polo. Others shared that they enjoyed the team competition water polo provided. When asked to share what she loved about water polo, Kara felt it was both the competition and aggression:

I like the competition; I like the wrestling that goes on, and the aggressiveness. No other sport can you just grab someone's suit underwater, and kick them, and do whatever you want underwater and be like ahhh, ha-ha, the rules don't apply! So, definitely the aggression and competition.

In all, five participants specifically discussed their affinity for the aggression in water polo. Melissa was particularly candid about her feelings:

I think I am really competitive, you know, and I like being able to fight with people even though I am small. And its fun and in the water you know. Yeah, a bigger person can hold you, but you can still tool them back. You know, I think you are even more on an even level when you are in the water. You know, like I am quick, so I have different strengths over other people. But, I just think I like being able to fight with other people who are bigger.

The love of aggressive play and competition in women has not always been socially acceptable. With Title IX and the gradual social acceptance of women as athletes, aggressiveness has become more common. Yet, in other aggressive sports such as hockey and lacrosse, the women's game has different rules about contact. Water polo is somewhat unique because the women's game and men's game have the same rules. Black eyes, bleeding, bruises, and ripped suits are commonplace in both the men's and women's game. The physical experiences that come with water polo were an attraction for the women in this study, a finding that supports some previous literature. In an interview of the New Zealand women's rugby team, researchers found "the physical nature of the sport was an attraction rather than a deterrent for these women" (Chu, Leberman, Howe, & Bachor, 2003, p. 118). Similar results were found in the study of female soccer players who found "active physicality to be both positive and pleasurable" (Scranton, Fasting, Pfister, & Brumel 1999, p. 107). The women may enjoy the physical nature of aggressive games, but as Cox and Thompson (2000) concluded, they are proud of their physicality in sport. Unlike the findings of Cox and Thompson, none of the women in this study specifically articulated pride in their enjoyment of aggression. That being said, they were not shy about the topic, and the women seemed confident and unapologetic about their physicality in water polo.

The final minor theme that related to the love of water polo was the ability to be in the water and the sun. It is worth noting that these women were all from teams in California and practiced outdoors. The love of the water was evident from many who shared they had always been involved in water. These participants felt being around the water was a major part of their life.

Team. A second major theme was the importance of team, and the value these women put on the relational aspect of playing water polo. In the first interview round, ‘team’ was discussed throughout their water polo history. All of the participants stressed the importance of the team and camaraderie. For six of the participants, their best experiences and memories came from the team. Melissa was open about her feelings with team relationships and stated, “I will miss the camaraderie, like all the girls and building a team. You know, getting close and um supporting each other.” Her statement served as a good representation of the feelings of the other women. The importance of team agreed with the findings of Miller & Kerr (2003), whose qualitative study college athletes found that team relationships were mostly positive and very strong. Similar to the women in this study, the participants in the Miller & Kerr study (2003) felt their most memorable experiences were from their sport relationships.

The most stunning description of the importance of team came from Kelly, who said the team became her life:

It’s just, this is who we are, you know it’s a whole general feeling it’s like, our team is pretty...it [the team] becomes your life. These are the girls you see day in and day out. I have class with them. I live with them. I play with them, and we do everything together, and we are a pretty out-going group of girls so we do so much together. It’s just more of a feeling, like, I guess you always have a place, and stuff like that. I guess I don’t know how to explain it.

Kelly's view that team had become her life is supported by Miller & Kerr (2003). They found that among their study of intercollegiate athletes "participants' social identities were constructed almost exclusively by friendships with teammates" (p. 211).

The importance of team relationships was a major aspect in the careers of these women water polo players and is an area that could use further research.

Injury. Injury plagued the careers of three women in this study, and for them the experience was very significant. Therefore it cannot be overlooked as a major factor, particularly because they experienced injuries causing them to miss part of or entire seasons. During the interview, all three became visibly upset when discussing their injuries. It was clear coping with injury was emotionally difficult. All three women described being depressed about their injury. Carrie found it particularly challenging because her injury occurred toward the end of her college career:

Junior year was hard water polo wise, like I wasn't able to do a lot of practice. I was always getting these cortisone shots and [I] barely made it through the season. You know, like I just made it through and then had my surgery scheduled a couple of weeks right after the end of the season. And then I just spent the whole summer rehabbing, which, you know, is depressing going into your last year. And also not knowing necessarily if I would be able to get back to the level of the team playing. Well because, who knew if I was going to be successful or not, and how rehab was going to go? So, yah I'm lucky it went well (laughs) but that was definitely a lowlight.

These feelings of depression experienced by the injured participants is consistent with existing research; high level athletes who experience prolonged injury develop a depressed mood state (Johnson, 1997; Rodrick, Waddington, & Parker, 2000).

Further questioning revealed greater insight about their experience of injury.

Each felt injury had prevented them from playing to their full potential. They also shared the challenges and frustration of playing in pain. Kara described her experience vividly:

You just keep playing through injury, and it keeps getting worse, worse, and worse till the fact that you physically couldn't. Well, with my shoulder I just kept playing, and I couldn't put my shirt on in my room. I couldn't lift my arm above my head to get my shirt on, and I couldn't sleep on that side, and iced all the time, and I could barely write. I couldn't do anything.

The concept of playing through pain is common at the elite level. Rodrick, Waddington, and Parker (2000) found that it is the norm in the world of elite footballers. It is a necessary part of the game; players would rather be on the field than watching from the sideline. For these three women in the current study, it came down to their love of playing. Kara shared her brief experience of being forced to sit out. "I just, can't do it. It's so, it's so hard to sit by and watch your team play a sport you love. I just couldn't handle not being in the water every day." Carrie and Mallory mentioned similar sentiments. It was obvious, for these three women playing took precedence over the pain.

These first interviews with each of the participants offered considerable insight into their personal background and their experiences in water polo. The rapport established during this interview was crucial to the success of the subsequent interviews, given that previous research on retirement experiences suggests that the process can be an emotionally stressful one. The final part of their initial interviews dealt with their attitudes about the end of collegiate play and their pending retirement.

Anticipating Retirement

Toward the end of the first interview, the participants were asked to look forward to their life after college water polo. For the most part, prior to this, the women had shared openly and comfortably about their entrance into sport and their playing experiences through college. When the time came to discuss the looming end of their careers, they became more uncomfortable. This part of the interview involved more silence, as they pondered their feelings. Ultimately, the data analysis yielded three sub-themes related to anticipation of retirement including emotions about retirement, concerns about retirement, and future plans.

Emotions about retirement. The women expressed feelings of fear, nervousness, and apprehension about the transition into retirement. It was clear they did not know what to expect or how they would react. Joan's feelings represent what many of the women shared:

I'm facing the end of my like college career and like realistically if I don't go on and play its like the end of being involved in competitive sport. You know, I have been competing in sports since I was five. (nervous laugh) That is pretty scary to think this thing that you have done for so long is gonna be done.

In addition, several women expressed concern that they will have too much free time.

For most of them, sport was something they had built their life around, and soon it would be gone. As Melissa explained:

I think one thing people take for granted is that it takes so much of your time, you know. But also you learn to schedule around that, you know, and you learn to have this routine. Well, you know, I have practice from this time to this time, so I study at this time, and you do different things. I think it is going to be hard with all my free time, and what to do with it. Well, I am definitely nervous about that.

There is little research on athletes' anticipation of retirement, but the void these women anticipated is consistent with the research about athletes' experiences after retirement.

Much of the research describes feelings of loss or a void following completion of their career (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Sparks, 1998; Stephan et. al., 2003; Stier, 2007).

While all the participants expressed some fear and anxiety about the transition, a few of the women shared their concern about its effect on their identity. Melissa's answer was very straightforward: "I try not to think about it because, when I do, I am like 'oh crap, what am I without water polo?'" This concern for her identity was shared by Mallory and Kelly. Although Kelly was not always happy playing water polo, she voiced concern for her future identity:

I have such mixed emotions, you know. It's like, it [water polo] is like the abusive boyfriend that you always want to go back too, you know. It's like, 'I hate you; you treat me so bad.' I mean, I want...I love water polo. you know, it's, it's not even 'Do I love it anymore....it's just me' that's how it is. So I do it, and the only way I feel good about myself is if I'm doing well in water polo. And, water polo is done very soon, so it's kinda like, you know, life as I know it is over. You know, the way it's been for as long as I can almost remember is going to be done.

A few participants openly discussed their fear about the transition to retirement and how it would affect their identity. Their comments were insightful. In subsequent interviews, the topic became a focus of all the women in this study.

Concerns about retirement. Throughout the conversation about their impending retirement, two major issues surfaced. First, the women in this study were concerned about the abrupt nature of their retirement. All of them were facing forced retirement; therefore, they did not have any control over the end-date of their careers. Secondly, these women shared concerns about physical changes in their bodies and learning to exercise independently.

Seven of the participants expressed concerns about ending their careers, and, more specifically, none of the seven felt they were ready. There seemed to be two major factors contributing to this perception: unachieved goals and wasted potential. Sarah shared her thoughts when she finally realized her career was ending:

I didn't think about it until probably two weeks ago when, like, I actually looked at the calendar and saw our final tournament was in three weeks. I don't know, it's that, like three or four weeks, thinking, 'oh crap! I only have three more weeks left! I have to do something within those three weeks to make it memorable. to make it, like, okay, I can finish now.

The research is clear; forced retirement is especially challenging for athletes because they lack control over the decision (Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004; Parker, 1994; Stephan et al. 2003; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). The panic expressed by Sarah, and the general lack of readiness described by the others, demonstrated their feeling of helplessness in the process. The effects of forced retirement recur in the analysis of their later interviews; therefore, these results will be discussed later.

Body image and staying in shape were concerns for eight of the nine participants.

Joan summed up her worries:

I think about water polo being done. I am not going to be working out three or four hours a day. That is another thing that scares me 'cause you think people that work out on their own, with work and stuff. They go to the gym like an hour, you know, or go for a run, or something like that. I am used to working out three or four hours a day! To keep, like, your physique, how am I going to do that if I only work out like an hour?

The participants shared Joan's anxiety about future exercise schedules and possible changes to their bodies. These were legitimate concerns according to the research (Chow, 2001; Strawbridge, 2001). In a study of elite women athletes of the late 1960's

and 1970's, it was reported only forty-five percent of athletes continued to engage in vigorous exercise on a regular basis (Strawbridge, 2001).

According to Tracey and Elcombe (2004), the future is even bleaker for highly identified athletes. They contend a strong athletic identity may deter former athletes from engaging in moderate exercise regimes. They suggest some reasons may be an inability to get the same amount of satisfaction or praise as they once did and no longer being the star athlete. This concern about body and exercise continued to be a theme in the participants' subsequent interviews.

Despite the emotions and concerns regarding their upcoming retirement, the conversations were not all negative. Many of the women had big plans for the future, and all of them had big plans for the end of their senior season. This positive outlook is the final sub-theme of the initial interview phase.

Future Plans

The women were less than one month away from retirement and in the middle of their final season as a Division I collegiate athlete when the initial interviews were conducted. Therefore, it was not surprising they each had a vision of how they wanted their careers to end. The pictures were different: for one, a dream of the NCAA ring that had eluded her; for others, a bid to the NCAA tournament for their team; and others to play their best, to leave without regret, and be remembered. When they discussed their goals, the women's faces were bright and their speech was excited. They were full of hope, because, after all, it could still end the way they dreamed. Carrie was very straightforward about how she wanted it to end:

With a ring! (laughs) I want to win. I want to win because I think that we finally...I believe our team has the talent and the strong experience, the skill, like the hard work, the everything.”

Carrie was passionate as she discussed her dream, and even though Sara’s dream was different the passion was similar:

I don’t know. I feel it is really important. I would love to walk away from this program knowing that I changed it. And I guess, it is more of your senior year that you are recognized for changing something, versus the other, where it is not as evident. So, I would like to walk away thinking that I was team captain, and part of a team that was able to accomplish their goals.

Similar to Carrie and Sarah, all the participants desired to play well and longed for success for their teams. The discussion about their visions of an ideal ending was important background and useful in future interviews when they compared and contrasted expectations to what actually happened and their reflections about it.

Besides plans for their final season of competition, they were asked to share their plans for life after water polo. Of the five participants who were graduating, four of them had active career plans and were excited about their future as career women. Joan was still in the planning phase and a bit unsure of her future. The remaining four participants had not completed their degrees and would be returning to their universities for another semester. Due to early specialization in their sport, many of them would be able to explore other interests for the first time. Interestingly, eight of the nine participants expressed their intent to remain involved with water polo through either a masters program or coaching.

Although the participants mentioned their plans for life after water polo, they were much more engaged and specific about their plans regarding water polo. Whether it

was how they wanted it to end or their goals to stay involved with the sport, water polo dominated the future plans discussion. In contrast to the findings by Lally (2007), these women did not seem withdrawn from their athletic identities and none had begun to pursue other interests prior to retirement. At the time of this interview, all the participants were focused on finding success and enjoyment at the end of their collegiate athletic careers.

The first round of interviews went very smoothly. These discussions were conducted in-person. The interviews were also conducted at the participants' universities, which provided a familiar setting for them. Although this interview contained a lot of background information, rich data emerged that was crucial in understanding the process of retirement from collegiate water polo.

Round Two Interviews

The second round of interviews was conducted about two weeks after the completion of the final season of play. The interviews were conducted in-person at the participants' university. The focus of this interview phase was to gain an in-depth look at the end of their careers and the beginning of the retirement process. The women discussed openly and vividly about the end of their career and the first two weeks of retirement. From these in-depth interview sessions, three major themes emerged: 1) experiencing the end, 2) forced out, and 3) the next step. Sub-themes also emerged.

Experiencing the End

In our first interview, the athletes were immersed in the middle of their athletic season. When we sat down for the second interview and as they reflected on ending their

athletic careers, it became evident these women had been experiencing a wide range of emotions. Each story was different, but some important sub-themes emerged across all the participants' reflections: 1) last playing experiences, 2) feelings on retirement traditions, and 3) team relationships.

Last playing experiences. The majority of the second interviews consisted of hearing the stories of the athletes' final playing experiences. They were very recent memories ripe with emotion. It became clear since we had previously met; each had endured a lot physically and emotionally. Their range of emotions was dramatic. For some, satisfaction filled their conversation because their team had succeeded. For others, sadness and disappointment littered the descriptions of their experiences because they felt they had fallen short. Through all the stories of the culminating playing experiences, the women were open about their experiences. Yet, at times, some did require additional probing to help them elaborate on their feelings. Within their experiences of their last playing experiences, final practices, final games, and team performance were important reference points in their stories.

Their last practices were a common experience for seven of the nine participants.

These athletes savored the moment. Carrie described it well:

Really weird 'cause I (sigh)...practices, you know, you go up and down, and you have good ones and bad ones. But, I think that the last week we had like the best week of workouts ever. And so, leaving was that much more bittersweet. Yeah, it's just weird 'cause everything you do is for the last time. And so, yeah, it was kinda sad. Walking out I, like, looked back and looked at the pool, and then walked out.

Taking it all in for one last time and striving to appreciate it were shared feelings of the last practice experience. The majority of the athletes commented on the last practice, but all shared in-depth about their feelings of their final game.

In their final game, the athletes tried to make it memorable. A few experienced extreme rushes of emotion and a sense of uncertainty about what to do when it was over.

Melissa shared her desire to go out strong and to be remembered:

I felt since I knew it was my last game, I was just, like, I had to do something...every play. And not like I was putting a lot of pressure on myself, but I definitely felt like I have to make a stand. You know, I have to just ball in this game 'cause it was my last one.

The majority of the athletes shared the sense of urgency to play well in the final games, as Melissa described. Most of them attempted to enjoy the experience. Sally reflected:

I can remember thinking, like when I was getting out of the water, that this is the last time I am going to play in this pool. So you start to, like, remember little things, like that. Or, I don't know, you look around the pool a little different and just kind of try to remember. What did that look like, what did that feel like?

This desire to remember the surroundings and how it felt to play at the elite level was also shared by most of the athletes. Kara's team successfully met their goals, and she described her feelings during the post game celebration:

We did it! Congratulations! I was still crying, so, all the other girls were coming up to you, and 'oh my gosh I can't believe you are done!' Just makes you cry a lot harder. Just, like for ten minutes just crying, talking to each other. I was just trying to figure out it was over.

Joan, Sally, Carrie, and Sarah shared this rush of emotion. Carrie was overcome after the loss at NCAA's, and, as she stated, "Like I could not stop crying after the game. We were a little disappointed with our finish, so some of that was disappointment. But mostly it was just knowing, knowing that, that it, it's done." These four women were also

emotional discussing the experience. As they shared their stories of the end, they were very reflective, often looking down, and taking long pauses as they gathered their thoughts. It was obvious they were uncomfortable discussing the experience.

The common feeling about the last game was their concern about what to do now that it was over. Melissa's last game was at home. She shared this about her feelings after the game: "I don't remember. I think I felt lost. I was like 'where do I go now?' I was like 'do I just go home?'" Joan felt similarly after her last game; she shared, "you have no where, you are not going anywhere, you don't have anymore water polo to play." For so long their lives had been surrounded by the sport. This was the first time in a long time organized sport was not part of their lives. Some did not know what to do.

The athletes' descriptions of their last playing experience did not demonstrate a withdrawal from their sport identities as Lally (2007) found in her research with retiring athletes. However, the reflections of the retiring water polo athletes were consistent with some of Lally's findings. Lally (2007) did note that, "events marking retirement-last practice, last warm-up, last game, last home game-were difficult. Feelings of loss and sadness erupted during these moments" (p. 93). The feelings of loss and sadness following the last playing experiences discussed by the participants in this study, as well as by the athletes in the research conducted by Lally (2007), are validated in other athletic retirement studies (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Sparks, 1998; Stephan et. al., 2003; Stier, 2007).

Feelings on retirement traditions. Common experiences evident throughout the interviews were the retirement traditions: Senior Day, banquets, and senior rituals. All

nine of the women shared experiences about a Senior Day, the last home game during which the team recognized the seniors and their accomplishments. All of the women had positive comments about this experience. In addition to the positive memories, five of the nine women described a feeling of disbelief that they were the senior being honored.

Kelly summarized her feelings this way:

It was kinda weird because it was kinda, I mean it wasn't that big of a deal. The years before, they talked about the seniors. This year we just got presented with flowers and our accomplishments were listed off, and its just weird to thinking 'oh my God! I can remember watching this when I was a freshman and now it's me? How is it me?'

Kelly's disbelief was very similar to the comments made by the other four athletes.

Besides Senior Day, the athletes discussed other positive end-of-the-year traditions, including team banquets and senior rituals. However, not all the final events were joyful experiences. Carrie spoke openly about her struggle with the finality of cleaning out her locker:

When I felt that wave of like, oh my gosh, this is my last time doing this was actually yesterday cleaning out my locker, in the locker room. (begins to tear up) Our coaches were, like, everyone has to clean up their lockers. Seniors you have to get rid of all your stuff. Take home your name plate, and like, make room for the incoming freshman. And that was weird, because I'm like this could be the last time that I'm in this locker...that I have my own locker...that I have had for four years. And then, like, walking out of the pool, cause it feels like you have been dethroned, when you don't have your locker anymore. So I was like 'wow yeah, I am like an outsider now.' And for me, that was like the moment.

Realizing that their career was ending was mentioned by three of the participants. For Carrie, it was the act of cleaning her locker; but for Kara and Sally, it was the team banquet. Kara shared her team banquet experience:

It was really sad when the slide show came and then the freshman came up and gave us presents, they wanted to give us, and then they gave us senior presents. I

was crying the whole time it's just a huge end. I don't know what I am going to do.

For five of the women, the final events were sobering. Nonetheless, all of the participants shared positive feelings about these events as well.

Similar to the last playing experiences, the final events brought the issue of retirement into focus for the women. For a majority of the women feelings of sadness and disbelief were experienced. This seems contrary to the findings by Lally (2007) who found the expected identity crisis never occurred, and no evidence was found of identity confusion. But, in this study, the feelings of disbelief and the athletes' inability to comprehend that it was their turn to exit led to identity confusion. Perhaps their confusion was due to their lack of withdrawal from their sport identity prior to retirement, as Lally hypothesized.

Teammates. Reflecting on their final water polo experiences, all participants mentioned the importance of teammate relationships. These feelings about their teammates were mingled with the conversations about the final playing experiences. Whether it was the connection they had in the water or shared victories and losses, the relational aspect of playing was very important in the end. Melissa and Joan were teammates through high school and college. Melissa described their last game together:

Joan and I, we have a bunch of different rituals that we do before every game. Like, we always hold hands during the National Anthem, and we, like, jump in together, and yell underwater together and everything. It was when they were doing the National Anthem and we were standing there like holding hands, it was like I don't know, it was sad thinking that was the last time we were going to do that. Cause I love when the national anthem is being played to just like remember that moment you know. But, definitely I remember just going through my head like this is it for Joan and I. This is the end. It was sad but I definitely remember

that, you know. I don't remember every shot I took, or whatever the goals but its like. I remember more the camaraderie part just getting ready for the last game.

Mallory echoed the important role of teammate relationships as she described warming up for her final games. "Just looking around at each other and looking at everyone's eyes and, know, this is what we really want". These moments shared between the participants and their teammates reinforced the importance of 'team' for the women athletes in this study. In addition to playing experiences, the closeness of the relationships was central to their reflections. Joan mentioned she "loved the sport but really it's all about the relationships you make." Mallory said her team became her family, and as she put it, "It is just really nice to have a family here, and I don't think I will have the same thing next year when I am here just taking classes. And I don't think people realize how strong a bond it is with each other." Joan also used the word 'family' to describe her relationships with her teammates. Teammate relationships were a major aspect of the retirement experience for the women athletes in this study.

The value of team relationships has been affirmed in the research. They become major part of the athletes' social life and provide meaningful support to the athletes (Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2003). The importance of team relationships described in the research helps to explain the emphasis on these relationships.

During this second round of interviews it was clear that the end-of-career experience was full of a wide range of powerful emotions. Meeting with the women just a few weeks after the completion of their final season offered a rich insight, in part because the experience was very fresh in their minds. Thus, the longitudinal design used in this study allowed for the gathering of data that may not have otherwise been available.

Descriptions of their final events and final playing experiences were very lengthy and vivid. Near the end of the interviews questions were posed about their current feelings about retirement. From this part of the interview, the second theme emerged.

Forced Out

The participants were very expressive regarding their feelings on retirement. Again, given the previous research on the psychological implications of retirement from sport, it is important to note that they experienced forced, rather than voluntary retirement. The most prominent feeling the participants experienced was that of feeling forced out from their life as a college athlete before they were ready. Within the theme of feeling forced out, two sub-themes materialized, including time and accepting retirement.

Time. With retirement being forced on these athletes, the issue of time became a common topic. Some discussed how fast the time went. They felt they were not given enough time. This conversation about retirement gave them a moment to ponder their careers. Six of the nine shared they felt they would play forever, yet everything had ended so quickly. Carrie realized, when she simply looked at her locker, “I have like this collage on the front of my locker that I have had since freshman year. And I was looking at all the pictures and, just realizing how, fast the time went by.” She was very quiet and thoughtful as she described this experience. The other participants mirrored her demeanor, quiet and reflective, as they shared how fast their careers passed.

Another issue that presented itself was the feeling they did not have enough time. For some of the women, a desire for more time to reach their potential; for others, it was more time to capture the elusive win. Whatever the reason, all nine participants felt time

had slipped away. Sally described her feelings in one of her last games, feeling “it went by way too fast and I remember once it ended I was kinda like wait! Where is our second shot! Like I just want a second shot at this team. It...I...it just slipped out of our hands way too fast.” Sally’s question regarding a second shot represented the feelings of the other women.

The research finds forced retirement like these athletes experienced adds to the difficulty of the transition (Chow, 2001; Ungerleider, 1997; Werther & Orlick, 1986). Forced or involuntary retirement may be more challenging due to lack of control and unmet goals. When athletes have unfulfilled competitive goals it is likely they will experience feelings of serious loss, anger, and failure (Chow, 2001; Ungerleider, 1997). For the women in this study, their careers ended too quickly and they felt they had more to accomplish. Retirement was forced upon them, and how they dealt with it during the first few weeks led into the next sub-theme, accepting retirement.

Accepting retirement. When retirement came up a majority of the participants felt they did not realize it had happened for them yet. Although they had experienced all the final events and cognitively knew their collegiate water polo careers were over, they still felt it had not hit them. Most attribute this feeling to the lack of change in their schedule. Even during their active career they had experienced a break at this time so their schedule was not altered from any previous year. Melissa stated:

I still don’t feel like it has hit me really. I mean I don’t think it will hit me until, you know, obviously after season ends you have a couple of weeks and you just hang out and then you start up again. I think its going to hit me more next year, when they start practicing and start playing and I’m, you know, not playing.

This feeling that it had not hit her and probably would not until practice began in the fall was mentioned by six of the nine players. Mallory was straightforward with her feelings on retirement. She stated, "I am still in denial and I want it to be that way." Not all participants were concise about their emotions on their retired status, but most acknowledged an unawareness that it was really over.

The athletes expressed anger and frustration with retirement. Six of the nine stated they were not ready to be done. Sarah's feelings were in line with the other participants: "I don't know I was mad that I am never going to be able to play a game again. All those things, just like playing a game, you kinda take for granted you know. You have been playing so long." She continued by saying "ok, I will say this, it doesn't feel like it is time for me yet. Like I have had this career and it doesn't feel right to end now."

The athletes' feelings of denial and anger were consistent with research. Denial and anger were the first two steps in the five stage dying process according to Kubler-Ross (1969). These stages of death have also been used to describe the process athletes experience when they retire from sport (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Wolff & Lester, 1989). The study by Blinde and Stratta examined athletes who experienced involuntary retirement. They found athletes go through the Kubler-Ross stages of death. Considering the participants' experienced involuntary retirement, their feelings of denial and anger were directly in line with this research.

In the last part of the interview we discussed the future. This lead to the third and final theme in this round of interviews.

The Next Step

Discussing the future appeared easier for some participants than others. All discussed the plans they had for the future. A few of the athletes expressed excitement and eagerness to move on to the next stage. Others were not sure how it was going to work out. There were two sub-themes in the next step: 1) looking forward and 2) concerns for the future.

Looking forward. We discussed future plans. At this point, all the participants had developed some sort of a plan for post-water-polo life. They differed greatly on their mood and excitement level regarding the change. Some felt excitement to pursue something new, yet for others it was a reluctant necessity. Five of the athletes were graduating and planned to enter the workforce. Joan felt she was ready, "I don't know. I feel like I am ready to kinda figure out where my niche is outside of sports." Carrie felt it was more ready or not. "I took a job as a paralegal. That is my real life coming up!" Sally agreed with Carrie "there is always a time when you have to go to the next stage of life." In the discussion about their future careers there was a lining of excitement, but apprehension hung in the air. Despite Joan's eagerness to find her new career, she discussed her apprehension: "I think it's hard, maybe the only reason I have, I mean you are so used to having water polo so you don't know what it's like without it." All of the participants had been actively involved in sport since childhood. Joan's comments are a prime example of the mixed emotion expressed by the women as they began to look forward.

Of the women who were not graduating, Melissa, Mallory, and Sarah planned to finish school and remain actively involved with water polo. Kelly planned to replace water polo with a part time job to stay busy. These four participants seemed to feel good about their plans but openly shared some concerns about their future life as a student and not a student-athlete.

The research finds career planning for retirement is an important part of the retirement process. This research discovered having a solid plan for the future leads to an easier transition process (Alfermann, Stambulova, Zemaityte, 2004; Chow, 2001; Stambulova, Stephan, & Japhag, 2007). For the women in this study that was not the case. Eight of the nine women described a plan for the future including starting a new career or completing their college degrees. Seven of the eight women described their overall transitions as very difficult. Yet, the participant who had no clear future plans at this interview felt she had a very successful transition. Therefore, this study did not find career planning to be a factor in a smooth transition.

Throughout the discussion of future plans, the women expressed many of the concerns they were anticipating. These concerns formed the next sub-theme, concerns for the future.

Concerns for the future. Major concerns surfaced during the discussion about the future. Some of those concerns were desire for closure, working out, and fear of losing friendships. Earlier in the interview, the athletes shared they had not meet their goals. For some, they shared it was challenging to move on when they had not accomplished what they desired. Carrie said it best:

Just cause you can't change what happened, and like grieving your season isn't going to change it. Its not going to make you feel good about it. But at the same time you have to like, mourn things properly, you know. If it is something that you have spent four years dreaming of, you are going to be pretty sad.

It had only been a few weeks after the completion of their season, but for the athletes who struggled with unmet expectations, a concern was finding closure. According to the research, the desire for closure is warranted. Grove, Lavalley, Gordon, and Harvey (1998) argue to successfully move on from sport, it is important to find a sense of closure. The desire for closure was not the only concern of the women as they approached the future.

Another concern that was shared by all the participants was the change in their exercise regimen. Kelly was open about her concern:

I don't know. You know someone is telling you to go to the pool for three hours every day and work out an hour with weights in the morning. No one is telling you to do that now. So, I don't even know if I will be able to do it.

Six of the nine athletes shared this concern for exercising on their own. The other three, Melissa, Kara, and Mallory felt they had to work out to feel good. Mallory stated, "I have actually been trying to keep myself busy, I've been going in and working out with the strength and conditioning coach just to kinda make me feel like I am still an athlete." All the athletes strongly felt exercise was in their future and it would be a priority.

This fear of body change following retirement is a concern echoed by other athletes in the research. Sparks (1998) determined the demise of the disciplined body was a major concern in retirement. Similarly, Lavalley and Robinson (2007) observed retiring gymnasts were fearful of losing their sense of control over their body in retirement. All the athletes planned to remain active, but it is unlikely. According to

research by Tracey and Elcombe (2004), former athletes fail to be more physically active, healthier, or live longer than the average population.

The final concern the athletes shared was the possible change in their relationships with their teammates. “I hope to keep connection with my team but it is weird not to have that every day. So, yes it’s different. I am ok with it now, but we’ll see how it is later (nervous giggle).” Her feelings were similar to the others who expressed concern for the future of team relationships. Many of the participants mentioned they anticipated change. They realized they would not see each other everyday. Despite this concern they all hoped to remain in contact at least with the teammates they felt the closest.

The importance of team relationships to the athletes in this study was previously discussed (Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2003). Therefore, their fear of losing these important relationships was understandable. The research notes the fear of losing teammates relationships is common in the retirement process. Lally (2007) contends “the participants had developed strong ties to the student-athlete subculture and their teammates in particular and feared they would be alienated from both upon retirement” (p. 92). The fear of losing teammate friendships was an important sub-theme.

The timing of the second interview found the women full of mixed emotion, a combination of excitement for moving on to new things and apprehension for leaving behind the athlete life they knew so well. They felt trapped between acknowledging retirement was upon them, but not grasping the reality of it. A comment by Carrie summed up the mood of the women as they took the step into their new lives: “I don’t

know we will see, I hear it's a hard transition from student-athlete to your first year out. So, I don't expect to be ecstatic or anything, ready or not".

The round two interviews were not as lengthy as the first, but still provided detailed rich data regarding their experiences at the end of retirement, their feelings on the first few weeks of retirement, and their concerns for the future. The third round of interviews took place in the fall once their teams had begun practice. Unlike the first two interviews, the third and fourth interviews were conducted over the phone.

Round Three Interviews

At the time of the third interview the participants had been in retirement for five months. In prior interviews, many participants had anticipated this time would be especially challenging. The focus of this interview was to explore how they were feeling about retirement while their former teams began new seasons. Three themes emerged 1) looking back, 2) excluded, and 3) evolving self.

Looking Back

The interview began with a look back at how the past few months of retirement had gone for the athletes. Unlike the second interview where the transition was very new, in this interview the women had been in transition for a few months. Therefore, they were able to speak about their feelings on transition and their thoughts about water polo now.

The discussion about their transition out of elite college athletics revealed all the participants were still working through the process, but to varying degrees. A few described it as very challenging and nearly debilitating at times. For others, it was a

small concern in their life. The five participants now with full-time careers provided varied results. Kara, Sally and Carrie all felt they were struggling with the transition, whereas Joan and Jessica felt it was going well. A common factor was Joan and Jessica moved out of state to new cities for their new jobs; Kara, Sally and Carrie remained close to their universities. Of the four women who were finishing their degrees, Kelly, Sarah, Mallory, and Melissa shared that it was a challenging change, but did not appear as debilitated as Kara, Sally, and Carrie. Each group had common feelings about transitioning out of college sport.

Kara, Sally and Carrie just a few months earlier had discussed their new career plans with excitement, but in this interview it had worn away. Sally felt the change was out of her control: "Its kinda sad that that is not who I am anymore. I don't know its just a change in your life and there is nothing I can do about it." Carrie described in detail what about the transition was challenging for her:

You know it is like weaning yourself off a drug almost. Something that you are almost addicted to because you have relied on it for so many things. Be it, the reaffirmation of, you know, your work or your hard effort put into something that you can see. You know, visible success you can see where your work is paying off and then there is also the camaraderie, the teamwork. It's just different working in, in a company because you have people of all different ages and different backgrounds and people who maybe want different things in life and so you have I would say less connection with people. Then there is the exercise factor, I miss being able to workout for three hours a day

Carrie's feelings encompassed what Kara and Sally shared as well. For these three participants this portion of the transition was particularly difficult. Feeling a lack of control in the retirement process has been linked with a harder, longer transition process out of sport (Erpic, Wylleman, & Zumpancic, 2004; Parker, 1994; Wethner & Orlick,

1986). Although all three women went on to new careers, they perceived a lack of control over the decision to leave their sport career. This could explain some of the emotional distress they were experiencing at this point in the retirement process.

Joan and Jessica were similar to Carrie, Kara, and Sally in that they entered the workforce. Unlike the others, Joan and Jessica felt their transitions were going well. They both attributed their success to moving away and being consumed in their new lives. Joan said this about her transition:

I feel good about it. You know I think a big part of my quick transition and my move away from water polo was...a big deal had to do with...moving to the east coast. Just because if I had been in California I probably would have been training during the summer, coaching during the summer, going to senior nationals. I definitely probably still be involved in water polo, but the fact that I kinda just picked up and came to the east coast has a big influence on my move beyond my move to life after sport. And being able to be away from it.

Jessica shared similar views. She had moved to a new area, loved her new job, and felt very happy in her new place. Their feelings were congruent with the research. Finding a new focus in life has been linked with a positive sport retirement (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte 2004; Miller & Kerr, 2003; Stambulova, Stephan, Japhag 2007). On a scale of ease of transition, Carrie, Kara and Sally were struggling while Joan and Jessica felt they were succeeding. The four participants who are still at their universities did not rate their transitions to the extremes of those that had entered the workforce.

These four women voiced a feeling of easing out of water polo. Two still attended practice with their former teams, and all four were still on campus daily to finish their degree programs. Mallory described it this way

I think the real test for me is when the girls start playing their games in season. As of right now I am ok with things, and I am easing into it slowly. Knowing that, you know, I am not on the team anymore, and that school and life come first

The attempt to ease out of water polo life was expressed by Kelly, Sarah, and Melissa as well. Despite the differences in how the participants felt their transition was going, they all acknowledged they still thought about water polo regularly.

‘Nearly everyday,’ was how often most of the athletes thought back about water polo. For Kara, “I think about it every day but you know there is not much I can do if I focus on it I just get bummed out.” Even Jessica who felt her transition was going very smooth shared her experience with thinking back: “I have thought about it a lot cause my mom had made a quilt and I had taken it to camp with me. Every time I got into bed I would see all the pictures of the water polo team, and I would get a little sad, a little bit but I think that is ok. I am ok.”

Although all the participants acknowledged they thought back about water polo regularly, many stressed they did not dwell on it. It is possible that they did not want to be perceived as unable to cope with the transition as Carrie expressed: “I feel like I have to act like I have moved on, so I don’t appear like one of those people who can’t deal with it I guess.” The only other participant to openly admit she felt a need to act like she was moving on was Sarah. It is possible others felt the same especially with their need to state they are not dwelling on thoughts of water polo and their career.

Excluded

The athletes described a feeling of exclusion from their team and the water polo community. In their explanation, the women described feeling like a former member.

They felt as athletes they were members of an elite club and now their membership had been revoked. Kara shared

I would always mention in conversation...like oh my team and people would be like they are not your team anymore. Like, you are not on the team anymore and I am like oh yeah, my old team. So just in the past month or so people have started saying that to me and I have actually had to deal with that its never going to be like that again. So I am starting to deal with it now. But, I don't really know how to let it go either and just say that part of my life is over.

In Kara's story she was reminded of her former team member status by people in her life. For Sarah she missed not being included in the team emails anymore "I think the weirdest thing was not knowing about everything. You know, when you are on the team you got emails from the coach all the time. Like you would get two emails a day from him and now I don't get any. So, I think that is the weirdest part." The feelings of Kara and Sarah were similar to those of the other participants. Common words used to describe their feelings regarding not being involved as the team began practice were "weird, outsider, and disconnected."

Feeling excluded and being defined as a "former member" is easily understood through the role exit process. According to the research in the area of role exit, it requires the person to disengage from the former role and essentially become an "ex" (Stier, 2007; Fuchs, 1988). Kara's comments of people viewing her as a former member were justified in the research by Stier (2007) who found "people around them responded to the player's withdrawal by distancing themselves, cognitively talking of them as 'ex-members'" (p. 106). Feeling like a former member contributed greatly to the women's overall feeling of exclusion.

Three of the participants shared they did not know if it were appropriate for them to wear their team gear in public after retirement. It seemed they were trying to negotiate what was appropriate to do as a former student-athlete. The athletes who mentioned this were still full-time students on their university campus, which may have contributed to their feelings. Kelly described her process of deciding to wear her gear as a former athlete

I mean I used to walk around all the time with my parka. Or I still wear water polo shirts all the time and then one time I put it on and I was like is it still ok to wear this? Then I was like yeah, yeah it is I played hard for four years. What, now all the sudden is like I can't wear this? No! I worked hard, I earned it, you know.

Sarah and Melissa shared Kelly's feelings. It was clear this was a challenging step in their path to coping with their former member status.

In addition to feeling like a former member, the participants felt excluded from their teammates. Six of the women mentioned they missed the interaction and togetherness they experienced playing sport together. For Carrie and Kara, who had entered the workplace, drew comparisons to how different the work environment was compared to their former teams. For them the work environment did not offer the same level of connectedness.

According to Miller and Kerr (2003) student-athletes create strong bonds and close relationships in a short time. Student-athlete relationships were fueled by their closeness and shared experiences: "teammates shared a common interest, similar schedules, and appreciate the demands of being a student athlete" (p. 209). The participants missed this closeness.

In addition to the loss of team, many felt a loss of sport. Although they all stated in previous interviews they planned to continue playing, for most that was not the case. Two participants continued to play with their college teams on a casual basis. For the others, the loss of water polo was challenging. A combination of lack of time, a new career, and limited opportunity lead to feeling excluded from the water polo game. Kara stated, “Well like today I was kinda having a break down about it. I just really miss the sport of it. I really miss it (water polo).” For these participants, feeling removed from water polo added to the feeling of exclusion.

The feeling of being excluded from the community and life to which they had belonged just a few months earlier was devastating, particularly for the athletes who maintained a high athletic identity into retirement. Prior to retirement their athlete status and team membership offered them a sense of pride and identity. Five months into retirement the majority of the athletes were still searching to find a new source of pride and identity.

Evolving Self

In the beginning of this study the quantitative research had shown the participants had a high athletic identity, which was reinforced in their first interview. They were without the athlete title for five months and it was important to discuss what defined them. From these conversations emerged the theme of evolving self, which included changes in their identity now, physical self, and their new life.

Identity now. The participants described changes in how they viewed themselves and how others viewed them. The biggest change for the women was a lack of feeling

special. Some described themselves as “normal” now that they were no longer athletes.

Others felt “regular.” Melissa described it as feeling lower:

Not that I am not proud, now but definitely before I was like walking around head high like I am an athlete here and I am proud of that, but now its different. You know I am not an athlete anymore so I feel like maybe, maybe I feel a little bit lower than I was before. Not that I feel bad about myself but definitely just that I am not as recognized, or, you know something like that.

Although Melissa was still on her university campus it was similar to the experience that

Carrie was feeling in the workplace:

you know you are back down at the bottom of the food chain and its hard. Going from being really, really good at something because you have done it your whole life. To starting out back at ground zero and trying to get back up to the level of achievement, or skill. Whatever, it may be that you were, I guess, for me that I was in athletics.

Whether it was described as feeling normal, regular, lower, or the “bottom of the food chain,” it was clear these seven participants were experiencing an evolving view of self.

In addition to their changing sense of self, all of these women shared a desire for co-workers and fellow classmates to know about their former selves. They expressed frustration that co-workers did not care, nor inquire about their past history in athletics. For Sarah it was not her co-workers but classmates: “Well, I am sure they realize that I am there, but I don’t think that they realize that I used to be on a team and that I used to have a big identity and now I don’t.”

The loss of perceived status upon retirement is a common theme in the athletic retirement research (Chow, 2001; Stier, 2007; Ungerleider, 1997). The athletes’ perception of feeling lower in life after the loss of their athlete title may be justified according to Royce, Gerbelt, and Duff (2003). They found female athletes were accorded

greater respect than male athletes from their university peers. Therefore, the loss of status experienced by retired female collegiate athletes may be even more challenging than it is for their male counterparts.

Another possible explanation for the comments by the women of “feeling lower,” and “not as special” was depression. If the athletes were experiencing depression, it could be considered the fourth stage of the dying process as described in research relating retirement to the stages of death (Blinde & Stratta 1992; Wolfe & Lester 1989). In the research, Blinde and Stratta also determined the depression stage is the longest, particularly for athletes who were forced into retirement. The women in this study have expressed denial, anger, bargaining and now possibly depression. The emotional self was not the only area that was evolving during this stage in retirement. The athletes discussed the physical self as well.

Physical self. Another area of the self that was evolving for the women was their physical self. All the participants had a desire to exercise more, but for five of them the change in their bodies was a big concern. Kelly stated, “My main concern is that I don’t feel my body, feels different. My body feels like it is changing and I don’t feel strong. I notice that I am out of shape and things like that.” Kelly’s concern was similar to the other women who mentioned concern about their bodies.

The distress about a changing body has been reiterated in previous research. Multiple studies of retired woman athletes found they experience a crisis stage initiated by the awareness of their deteriorating bodies (Lavalee & Robinson, 2007; Sparks, 1998; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003). In addition, Lavalee and Robinson (2007)

found this crisis stage could lead to eating disorders and unhealthy exercise processes. Although the women in this study did experience some trauma regarding their changing bodies, it did not lead to the disordered eating and exercise habits as found in previous research.

New life. Much of the conversation about their evolving selves was difficult for the women to share but one area that was very positive and upbeat was discussing their new lives. Five of the women had moments of excitement as they shared their new paths and careers. It was clear they were attempting to shift identities from athlete to whatever path they had chosen. As expected, Joan and Jessica had a lot of positive comments about their new lives but more surprising was Carrie. Despite her challenges with the transition, she did see a light at the end of the tunnel. She shared an exciting day at work: “I am working as a paralegal for a law firm now, and I had a thrilling day. I went to trial and I was watching one of the attorney’s in our firm argue a case.” She went on to say it gave her a vision of where she wanted to be headed. For these five participants who described their new exciting lives, it seemed they were working to forge a new path for themselves.

Miller and Kerr (2003) determined in the late period of transition out of the athletic sphere, a shifting focus would occur. This shift of focus was similar to that which women experienced as they worked to establish their new lives.

This interview raised three major themes for the women in this study, looking back, feeling excluded, and the evolving self. The women were open about their struggle with the transition from life as a college athlete. For the majority of the athletes, this time

in retirement was the most challenging thus far. Despite their struggle to redefine themselves, it appeared they were beginning to look forward and find new paths. The next and final interview took place five months later.

Round Four Interviews

The final interviews took place in March 2007 while their former university teams were in season. One participant was not interviewed because she chose to play semi-professional water polo in Australia for the spring which disqualified her from the study. From the interviews of the other eight participants, some common themes were discovered. The themes in the final interview were 1) life as a former athlete 2) coping and 3) new self. Similar to Round 3, these interviews were conducted over the phone because of geographical distance between the researcher and participants.

Life as a Former Athlete

At the time of these interviews, the participants had been retired 9-10 months. It had been over four months since the previous interview. In our discussion, the women opened up about their feelings on life as a former athlete including how it feels to be a spectator, exercise/body concerns, and evolving team relationships.

Spectator. Six of the eight women discussed their experience watching their former teams play. Both Joan and Jessica had been unable to see a game because of geographical distance. For the participants who discussed this experience, all found it to be challenging. Mallory described it as “its hard, like I said at first it was really tough seeing the girls play and not being part of it and not being special not....important...there is the word.” Similar to Mallory, Kara commented:

It was hard. It was really hard. I was tearing up and I had to keep telling myself I had a good four years and everyone only gets four years. I should be happy for what I got and stuff. But....it was very sad...very hard.

Mallory and Kara's feelings were a good representation of the comments by the other women. They all felt it was difficult to move into the role of spectator from the role of athlete.

Exercise/body. Exercise and body have been a common theme through out the interviews but it was most prevalent in this interview. All the women shared change in their body and finding time for exercise as one of the biggest challenges. In life as a former athlete exercise was a critical aspect in their lives and something they needed. Carrie realized her lack of exercise was contributing to her emotional state.

I would come home so stressed out from work the last thing I wanted to do was have another responsibility or commitment, but then, you know, I realized that that was adding to why I was feeling so horrible, and I think I was right on. I mean even though it is not comparable to 4-5 hour workouts a day, like getting what I can in at lunch and occasionally after work and on the weekends I know feasibly that is all I can do right now, and I think my body is adjusting better.

For Carrie, finding a way to add exercise back into her life helped her feel better about herself. Other participants echoed her feelings; they stated working out, even at a lower level, helped them feel better about themselves. Five of the participants mentioned how much they missed their old bodies; Joan shared "being in amazing physical shape, I miss that." Whether it was the discussion of their bodies or exercise in their life, it was an important issue in the transition process for these women.

Evolving team relationships. The final sub-theme that came from the conversations was evolving teammate relationships. This was another topic that was important to the women throughout the interview process. In the final interview, they

shared how the relationships had changed. All the women felt the relationships had become more distant. Unlike a year ago when they were together every day, now the relationships are reduced to emails, phone calls, and the occasional get-together if they are in the same area. None of the women were thrilled with the change but felt it was a part of life. Kara stated:

It's hard. I don't talk to them near as much. We are not as close, but there are a couple of girls on the team that I still talk to about once a week. But most of the...I mean the whole team was my best friends and now you can't really be. Our lives are so different and the logistics don't really work.

The loss of the close team relationships was a negative aspect of retirement. For seven of the eight women, the team was what they missed about being an athlete. Jessica summarized it well: "I miss hanging out with them and having a connection with twenty-four girls. Going through the same thing that they are going through, just that we can be there and support each other. And the emotions of winning and losing the game." The other participants felt similarly. They missed the connection, working out together, and sharing emotion. It was evident in this interview that team relationships were a very important to these women as athletes and as former athletes.

As previously stated, in athletic retirement the loss of team relationships can add to the hardship experienced in the process (Miller & Kerr, 2003; Lally, 2007). For these women the loss of the team was a primary concern. Although it was mentioned in other studies, it is a part of the retirement experience that deserves more in-depth research.

Coping with Retirement

The final interview gave the participants a chance to discuss how they coped through the transition, what worked for them and what did not, and what advice they

would give to women water polo players approaching retirement. Six of the eight women shared that the transition for them was very difficult. Sally described her feeling on her transition:

Overall I would say it was really difficult and I, I for a while I couldn't figure out if it was beginning work and that was the transition from student to being a 60 hour a week job or if it was the end of competitive athletics which has been a constant in my life for the last fifteen year? I think it was the latter.

All the athletes in this study faced the loss of competitive athletics. When asked what was the most challenging aspect of the transition, the consensus was a loss of sport being the center of life. This included side effects such as learning to workout alone and loss of team support. Kara described the loss as "taking away a six hour work out every day and six hours with your teammates everyday and having the competition every day and then just all the sudden it's gone and that was just really difficult."

Unlike the majority, two participants felt the transition was fairly smooth. Both attributed their success to moving away and jumping into a new life that they were excited about. Joan commented about her transition: "I am fine with it. I loved that part of my life and I would not go back and change it at all. You know, I put in my time and I am ok with it. I like to know how they (her former team) are doing but it doesn't consume my life." All of the participants had advice for athletes who will be experiencing retirement in the future.

The women in this study felt social support, exercise, and a new vision were critical to a successful transition out of life as a college athlete. Social support included friends, family, and coaches. Having someone to listen, be compassionate, and act as a distraction was beneficial to the women. Exercise was another important aid to the

women in the transition. As Carrie mentioned earlier, when she began exercising again, she felt much better. Finally, finding a new vision was found to be useful to the participants. Joan and Jessica attribute smooth transitions to beginning a new job in a new city. They felt it was a key component to avoiding a severe crisis following retirement.

New Self

In our conversation it was important to discuss how they identified themselves now and if they had reached acceptance of their retired status. In their current self-definition, four of the eight still mentioned being a college athlete. The other four shared comments about work and other things in their lives, and a few of them made a point to say they would not bring up water polo. In our initial interviews all of the participants claimed the label of college athlete, occasionally followed by other interests. A change was evident when the women defined themselves in the final interview. Four women did not even mention athletic life, and for the women who did it was not the first identifier. A few acknowledged they felt they should not mention it at all. Kelly went as far to describe herself as a fraud: "I know I feel like a fraud. Like I used to play water polo but who cares. I mean they don't understand!" Since we had met a year earlier, dramatic transformation had occurred in their personal view of what identifies them, although it was not clear they had reached full acceptance.

Six of the eight participants interviewed in the final round shared feelings of contentment with retirement. Carrie shared how she was moving on and it felt good: "It is interesting because you caught me on an upswing now from my whole transition

period. It is nice to actually verbally say, things are much better now.” Six of the participants shared Carrie’s feeling. They felt they were moving toward acceptance. Mallory shared her experience: “Its different before it was really hard accepting my role of not being part of it, but now it’s a lot easier. I feel, as I don’t know it is different but I am ok with it now. Before it was hard to get through but I am happy now.”

Despite these positive comments it was unclear if any of them had reached a point of acceptance. When asked if they would choose to play another season, all of the participants said “yes.” Even with their new life paths and new sense of identity, these women were eager to return to life as an athlete. Sarah was excited: “I would have another year to play! I don’t think I would stop before they kicked me off!” Carrie was more pensive but wanted another chance too: “With my water polo career setback with the surgeries, and always being close to winning the national championship and never winning it in my four years, and just going back to the games, even thinking about training I don’t cringe. You know, I wouldn’t mind going back to that.” Although the women seemed to still be in the process to acceptance, most had established new lives outside of athletics, which they enjoyed.

Reaching a point of acceptance with the end of an athletic career is the completion of the transitional process. According to Grove, Lavalley, Gordon, and Harvey (1998), failure to reach acceptance can result in prolonged grief. They argue, “Successful completion, on the other hand, enables the individual to ‘file away’ the event, achieve a sense of closure, and plan for a meaningful future” (p. 61). Additional research, which drew a comparison between retirement from sport and the stages of grief, emphasized

acceptance as well (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Wolfe & Lester, 1989). They determined as athletes transition out of sport they follow the stages of grief, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. According to their theory, reaching a point of acceptance was the culmination of the process. The research on athletic retirement process is in agreement that if the athletes do not reach a point of closure or acceptance they will be stuck in a depressed or grieving state.

As discussed in coping, establishing a new career or interest was important to the athletes in the process of moving on. At the end of the interview, the women shared what their new life involves and visions for the future. They were still forging their paths, but they were beginning to see where they were headed and the future looked exciting. One participant had recently quit her job and was feeling in limbo. Others shared about exciting careers, goals of more education, and new sport interests. One common factor to their sense of well-being in their new lives was exercise. Some had found new sports such as skiing, running, triathlons, and others a regular exercise routine, but for all the participants they felt it was a critical aspect of their new life.

Overall, the women made tremendous progress over the final four months. In the final interview they seemed the best adjusted. Although they were still dealing with some of their issues of retirement, they felt the worst was behind them.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

From this study, rich data regarding the retirement experiences of highly identified female water polo players was gathered. The longitudinal nature of this study provided a unique, and necessary look at the retirement process as it occurred over a 10-month period. Unlike the majority of research on athletic retirement that is retrospective, this study offered a current glimpse of how the athletes felt throughout the process. As expected, the retirement experiences for these highly identified athletes were challenging. Seven of the nine participants discussed that being forced to retire from collegiate sport was a very traumatic life experience. Two of the participants felt their transition out of sport went fairly smoothly.

Although it was established that all the women were highly identified athletes at the time of retirement, Joan and Jessica were able to exit their role as athlete and establish new identities rather quickly. Both of the women moved out of state for a new career. They both felt moving away from their environment helped them let go of water polo and begin to distance themselves from their strong athletic identities. Joan specifically felt if she remained in California she would still be playing and possibly struggling more with the retirement process. Despite feeling the transition went well, they acknowledged it was a major life change and shared some of the same concerns about post-athlete life as the other women.

Several of the challenges experienced by the women athletes were predicted in earlier research. Forced retirement, feeling excluded, loss of status, loss of athletic body,

and loss of identity were all major issues for the athletes in this study. As predicted, the high athletic identity was a debilitating factor in the retirement process for these athletes. More specifically, the longer the athletes held on to their athletic identity the more trauma they experienced. This finding, in particular, is important for coaches and sport psychology professionals to understand, so that they can help athletes move themselves, perhaps physically, away from the elite competitive environment.

Two of the findings in this study were in contrast to the previous research on athletic retirement. Lally (2007) argued that college retirement is predictable. She contends giving athletes' time to prepare and let go of their athletic identities prior to retirement is important. In her study, the athletes who let go of their athletic identities prior to retirement had very smooth transitions out of collegiate sport. Although the athletes in the present study were retiring from collegiate sport, they often did not relinquish their athletic identities until after retirement. It was possible their inability to release their athletic identity prior to retirement may have added to the trauma they experienced in the retirement process.

Another theme in this study that did not align with previous research was pre-retirement planning. Previous research stated that athletes who engage in pre-retirement planning have easier, quicker transitions out of sport (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Stambulova, Stephan, & Japhag, 2007). In this study, all the participants had plans for the future. Five of them were moving on to new careers and four were returning to a university to complete their degrees. Despite their big plans for the future, seven of the participants described their retirement

experience as very challenging. These discrepancies require more research to determine the true role of athletic identity minimization and career planning prior to retirement on the athletic retirement experience. In other words, simply having an exit plan, so to speak, did not ensure a smooth transition out of sport. Further research into personality type, and coaching styles, might be helpful in better understanding the factors that mediate retirement experiences of high-level, female water polo players.

The women in this study used multiple coping strategies as they navigated the sport retirement transition. Social support, continued exercise, and finding a new focus were sighted as very helpful to the moving on process. In addition, a few women shared that the interviews were helpful as well. They felt they benefited from having an outlet to share their feelings throughout the process. This correlates with research by Parker (1994) who found athletes have a lot to say and often feel as though no one listens to them.

From the rich interview data gleaned in this study, some suggestions arose. These suggestions are for people who work with athletes on how to prepare for athletic retirement and be successful. First, close attention should be paid to athletes with high exclusive athletic identities who are facing retirement from sport. Coaches, for example, should provide a place for open communication regarding retirement and their feelings throughout the process. In addition, coaches and sport psychology professionals should encourage athletes to seek social support from family, friends, or outside counseling if necessary. If possible, coaches, and perhaps the college athletic departments, should help athletes to find post-career exercise programs. Finally, coaches and sport psychology

professionals should discuss with athletes their vision for the future. For this study, mere pre-retirement planning was not enough; the women needed to find a new vision. Ideally, with proper guidance, the transition out of sport does not need to be as painful and challenging for future athletes.

This study gave an in-depth look at the retirement experiences of women water polo players. The longitudinal, qualitative approach gave unique insight to the journey of these women as they exited collegiate sport. Although much was learned from this study, future research is needed in the area of sport retirement.

Future Research

Future research in the area of sport retirement should include longitudinal studies that follow participants through the entire process of retirement. This study was completed nine months following retirement, and it did not appear the women had successfully reached a point of acceptance with retirement. Long range studies would offer more insight to how the athletes reach a point of closure in the process. Further, the role of gender in the retirement process is still unclear. If male athletes' athletic identities are bound to their notions of masculinity, there is a possibility that their retirement experiences would be more difficult.

In conclusion, this study exposed areas of trauma that have not been given much attention in the research on athletic retirement. For the women in this study, loss of team and teammate relationships was a hardship in the transition. In future research, particular attention should be paid to the emotional effect of loss of team and teammate relationships in the sport retirement process. In addition, experiences of the physical

body, including decreased exercise and physical changes in retirement, warrant further investigation. For the women in this study the loss of exercise and change in their bodies post-retirement was a reoccurring issue through the process.

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Appendix A
Contact Information

Name: _____

Sport: _____

Institution: _____

Best way to contact you: (circle one)

Email Telephone

Phone number: _____

Email: _____

Address at School: _____

Estimated Date of Graduation: _____

Are you a member of the U.S. National team programs: YES NO

Are you planning to play semi-professional water polo: YES NO

Appendix B

Sample Interview Guides

Interview #1

1. So, tell me about how you got into playing water polo?
 - a. What attracted you to it?
 - b. What feedback do you get about your playing, from friends, family?
2. Talk about your current experiences playing water polo?
 - a. Your role on the team
 - b. How important is it to you?
 - c. What were your best/worst experiences in your career?
3. So, your water polo career is almost over...what do you think about that?
 - a. What do you think you will miss most?
 - b. How do you think you will deal without playing anymore?

Interview #2

1. So, your season just ended a few weeks ago how was that for you?
 - a. senior day
 - b. final game
 - c. Did you meet your expectations?
2. Have you played since your last game?
 - a. Do you plan to keep playing?
 - b. What do you do with your extra time?
 - a. Do you see your teammates, are you still friends?
3. What are your plans for the summer and next year?

Interview #3

1. It has been 9 months since your water polo college career ended, how has that been for you?
 - a. What do you do now?
 - b. Do you still involve yourself with water polo?
 - c. Do you have any regrets

2. How are your relationships with your former teammates?
 - a. Are you still close?
 - b. Do you feel that they are still a support system
3. When you meet someone new what do you tell them about yourself?

Interview #4

1. It's been about 9 months since you completed your athletic career how do you feel your transition overall has been?
2. Are you currently involved with water polo now?
 - a. Are you currently exercising?
 - b. When you think back about water polo what kind of emotions does it bring up?
3. So your team started playing games again recently how do you feel about that?
 - a. Have you been to see them play?
 - b. If yes, can you take me through the first time you went to see them play?
 - c. Do you follow their progress?
 - d. Do you know when their next game is?
4. If you were given the opportunity to play this season would you choose to do that? And why?

What is your relationship like with your former teammates?

- a. The ones you graduated with?
 - b. The younger ones?
 - c. How do you feel the relationship has changed?
5. Can you name a few things that you feel define you now?
 6. If you had to rate this transition on a scale of 1-10 and 10 being very difficult, what would you say, and why?
 7. Was there anything that helped you cope with the transition?
 - a. If you had to take something that you felt helped you the most through the transition can you think of anything?
 - b. If you could give advice to the players that are seniors now what advice would you give them about the transition out of college athletics?
 - c. Do you feel there is anything else that you want to add about your experience and your journey through this process?