# THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF PSYCHOSPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION IN ATHLETIC RETIREMENT AND EVERYDAY NARCISSISM IN FORMER ATHLETES

## MCMILLAN WILKOWICH

B. A., Mount Royal University, 2014

A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
of the University of Lethbridge
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

## MASTER OF EDUCATION
## (COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY)

## FACULTY OF EDUCATION
LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA

February 2016

**THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF PSYCHOSPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION IN ATHLETIC RETIREMENT AND EVERYDAY NARCISSISM IN FORMER ATHLETES**

**MCMILLAN WILKOWICH**

Date of Defence: March 8th, 2016

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Dr. Gary Tzu<br>Thesis Supervisor | Associate Professor | Ph.D |
| Dr. Rebecca Hudson Breen<br>Thesis Committee Member | Assistant Professor | Ph.D |
| Dr. James Sanders<br>Thesis Committee Member | Assistant Professor | Ph.D |
| Dr. Kenneth Hart<br>External Examiner<br>University of Windsor<br>Ontario, Canada | Associate Professor | Ph.D |
| Dr. Trent Leighton<br>Chair, Thesis Oral Examination<br>Committee | Assistant Professor | Ph.D |

**Abstract**

The present research investigates the phenomenological experience of athletic retirement, while also considering narcissism's role within the transition process. Six participants with an elite sport background were recruited and interviewed. The analysis was conducted using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The emerging themes were interpreted from a Transpersonal perspective through reference to Almaas's (2001) Transformation of Narcissism. The identified themes unfolded within four phases: The Athletic Dream, A Leap into Athletic Mortality, The Painful Journey of an Ex-Athlete, and Transformational Healing Through Awareness. Central to the research, a prominent theme involving athletic retirement as an opportunity of healing emerged from the data. The findings from the study provide valuable implications for future studies. Further examination into the transformative process of athletic retirement is encouraged.

*Keywords:* athletic retirement, narcissism, transpersonal, transformative

**Table of Contents**

# Chapter One: Introduction

Athletic retirement is an inevitable component of professional and competitive sport. The retirement process can yield different struggles depending on various factors such as sport type or age of typical retirement (Warriner & Lavalle, 2008). For competitive gymnasts, their retirement usually occurs much earlier and is marked with struggles associated with physiological changes and identity foreclosure (Warriner & Lavalle, 2008). For professional basketball players, they have a later onset to retirement and will subsequently experience different barriers in sport transition characterized by identity shifts, occupational challenges, and social adjustment (Beamon, 2012).

Brownrigg, Burr, Locke and Bridger (2012) claim that athletic career transition is a rapidly growing area of research in the field of sport psychology. Research has produced conflicting findings on whether career retirement does in fact lead to dysfunction and breakdowns in self-identity (Stier, 2007). According to Stier (2007) this transition is like any other life change where the individual's identity is rocked for a limited time, followed by a period of adjustment. However, there is sufficient evidence arguing the opposite, that retirement from sport can have negative effects on individuals' well being (Erpic, Wylleman & Zupancic, 2004; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013). For instance, in one particular case elite female gymnasts took as long as five years to adjust, confronting feelings such as disorientation, loss of control, and identity confusion (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Martin, Fogarty and Albion (2014) claim that sport termination is unique and unlike general retirement, thus needs to be reconsidered within a sporting context. Instead of leaving the workforce permanently, retirement from sport often occurs at young age forcing individuals to transition into another career. For some athletes, they feel their preoccupation

with sport during their adolescent and adult years has left them with minimal skills beyond their sport expertise (Beamon, 2012; Brownrigg et al., 2012). Therefore, termination from sport cannot be assumed to follow the typical retirement process and instead needs to be re-examined separately (Martin et al., 2014).

Considering elite athletes dedicate the majority of their life towards sport, it is understandable when they report feeling a sense of emptiness in their retirement (Vickers, 2014). Some athletes struggle with their new non-athletic identity and are left questioning who they are without their sport. Recently, more ex-athletes have been bringing their experiences with depression and other forms of mental illness to the public (Vickers, 2014). This is true in the case of Elizabeth Manley, an Olympic Silver Medalist who speaks openly about her battle with depression and an eating disorder. Manley is now a spokesperson for mental health issues (Baines, 2012). Ian Thorpe, a five time Olympic swimming champion, has also presented with mental health issues, which has captured a great deal of media attention over the years (Harris, 2014). A quote from Thorpe's long time sport psychologist addresses the difficulties of athletic retirement, "Making the transition from being a high performance athlete can be incredibly difficult for some people and in some cases that sense of loss is comparable to a death" (Harris, 2014, para. 7).

Up to this point research has identified various factors predicting athletes' quality of adjustment in retirement, including: athletic identity saliency, athletic identity foreclosure, and voluntariness of retirement (Cosh, Crabb, & LeCouteur, 2013; Erpic et al., 2004; Beamon, 2012; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Warriner & Lavalle, 2008). Studies exploring athletic retirement have identified potential consequences

during transition such as vulnerability, to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, as well as experiences of low self-worth and low self- esteem (Cosh et al., 2013; Surujlal & Zyl, 2014). Interestingly, a detailed literature review revealed a reoccurring theme, which was that elite athletes possess a glorified identity associated with their athletic status (Beamon, 2012; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003). Athletes have described retirement as a transition into 'mainstream' life accompanied by a loss of status in their new non-athlete identity (Beamon, 2012; Surujlal & Zyl, 2014). This notion of a glorified identity aroused an interest, motivating further exploration into the relationship between narcissism and elite athletes.

As suspected, research investigating narcissism in competitive sport is in its preliminary stages. Pre-existing studies revealed a connection between celebrity status and elite athletes (Kurzman et al., 2007) as well as a relationship between hyper competitiveness and increased levels of narcissism (Luchner, Houston, Walker & Houston, 2011). In addition, a study conducted by Luchner et al. (2011) revealed that overt narcissistic athletes enjoyed competing and would seek out competitive social environments. According to Wallace and Baumeister (2002) this was especially true when narcissistic athletes were presented with an opportunity for glory, which often led to an enhancement in sport performance. Considering the attention and competitive energy involved in elite sporting atmospheres, it is reasonable why individuals with increased narcissistic tendencies would be drawn towards them.

While research has steadily increased in athletic career termination, there is a lack of adequate research exploring narcissism in athletes and it's influence on the retirement process. Until now, research had yet to extend beyond identifying the variables predicting

quality of adjustment and the negative consequences associated with athletic retirement. In addition, there had been no research investigating sport termination from a transpersonal approach. The current study references Almaas's (2001) work on transformative narcissism and relies on this framework for understanding the transition process for former athletes. Within this model, narcissism is perceived as an inherent aspect of human nature as a result of inappropriate or inadequate mirroring during one's development. The application of Almaas's (2001) work provides a new perspective into sport psychology through an appreciation of self-other relations. The lack of depth within existing literature led to stagnate results that have yet to capture the true essence of athletes' experiences. Subsequently, an adequate solution or framework has not been available to retired athletes. The present study's intensive exploration provides counsellors, sport organizations, coaches and those involved in the sporting environment, with a more proficient method in supporting career termination among elite athletes.

**Statement of Problem and Purpose of Study**

While sport psychology research has been able to identify factors influencing the quality of retirement, there remains a lack of understanding into the phenomenological experience of sport termination. There is still plenty that researchers do not know about this unique experience and the relationship between an athlete and one's sport. Further knowledge into athletes' lived experience provides a useful framework to facilitate and support ex-athletes through their transition. The present study answers the following questions: 1) What are former elite athletes' experiences in career retirement? 2) How does narcissism influence athletes' retirement process?

The purpose of this research was to provide new understandings into athletic

retirement  by exploring elite athletes' lived experience, while also considering the role of narcissism. The study's purpose was motivated by self-interest due to my own fascination with sport termination and the meaning it holds for athletes. As a former competitive athlete myself, I found the retirement process incredibly challenging. Adjusting to life without sport was difficult and I noticed my well-being spiral downwards as I engaged in dysfunctional behaviors to cope with feelings of loss and shame. After years of separation from sport and undergoing intensive in-depth reflections, I began to identify my own narcissistic tendencies and how this has influenced my athletic retirement. The present study provides a deeper understanding into the retirement process using intimate reflective interviews with former elite athletes and the application of a transpersonal perspective.

As previously mentioned, retirement from sport is an inevitable outcome for all professional athletes. Despite the increasing interest in athletic retirement research, the majority of literature centers on identifying factors predicting positive and negative transitions. Resultantly, a great deal of territory remains untouched. The following section provides an in-depth review of the existing literature on sport termination, the predictive factors associated with quality of transition, the presence of glorified athletic identities, and narcissism in elite athletes. Finally, an overview of transpersonal psychology will be discussed, including both Wilber's (1986) developmental model of consciousness and Almaas's (2001) work on transformational narcissism.

## Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

### Athletic Retirement at an Elite Level

Research exploring athletic career termination has increasingly grown over the last 20 years (Brownrigg et al., 2012; Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). Studies have

primarily looked at the effects of retirement on former athletes' well-being and the predicting factors influencing the quality of transition. Athletic retirement can lead to shifts occupationally, socially, financially, and emotionally (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013). Sport becomes the focal point of an elite athlete's life due to the endless hours devoted towards training, mental preparation, competition, diet, and travel. As a result, termination of sport can lead to substantial shifts in one's lifestyle.

Furthermore, research has revealed that athletes retiring from sport are particularly more prone to experiencing depression, anxiety, substance abuse, identity crisis, low self-esteem, and low self-worth (Cosh et al., 2013; Stephan et al., 2003; Surujlal & Zyl, 2014). A study conducted by Stephan et al. (2003) compared levels of self-esteem and physical self-worth between active athletes and former Olympians transitioning out of sport. In addition, the researchers were concerned with the subjective well-being of former athletes, as well as the optimal times and types of interventions assisting their quality of adjustment. The study recruited 32 athletes (16 active; 16 retired) and compared the two groups at four different times in a one-year period. Using a mixed methods design, the researchers measure participants' subjective well-being using the 12-Item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12). To standardize the interviews across participants, the researcher followed a semi-structured guide. The findings from the study demonstrate that athletes transitioning into retirement present with lower self-esteem and physical self-worth than active athletes. The study also revealed optimum periods in retirement when interventions seem to be most effective in facilitating career termination. For instance, during the first five months of retirement former athletes used avoidance strategies to cope with feelings of emptiness. Between

five and eight months participants increased their adjustment and well-being using training and exercising regimes. The researchers claim that ex-athletes experience the majority of difficulty in the first month and a half of retirement.

A particular strength of Stephan et al. (2003) study was the trustworthiness of the findings, which was ensured through transparency, member checking, and triangulation. In addition, a sport psychologist, familiar with qualitative research, was used as an outside source to verify and review the coding process. While this study provides insight into the difficulties experienced in athletic retirement, it only accounts for athletes' first year of transition. This is a limitation since it ignores participants' subjective well-being beyond 12 months of retirement, assuming former athletes' adjustment levels only vary within this period of time. However, the study does provide empirical evidence to suggest athletic career termination has negative effects on former athletes' self- esteem, while also identifying positive coping methods to facilitate the retirement process.

**Mixed findings in athletic retirement – Is it really that bad?** Research into athletic career termination does not exist without mixed findings or controversy. For instance, researchers have argued over the severity of sport retirement, specifically whether it is a negative and traumatic experience for athletes (Lally, 2007; Stier, 2007). According to Lally (2007), athletic retirement can be an opportunity for psychological growth or psychological deterioration. Lally's (2007) study used a longitudinal approach to re-examine identity issues related to athletic retirement. More specifically, the aim of the study was to explore whether disruptive identities are an inevitable outcome of athletic retirement. Six athletes were recruited from a Canadian university. The sample included three females and three males competing at an intercollegiate level, from various sport types. Each

participant was interviewed at different points in their retirement process: outset of last season, one month after retirement, and one year after retirement. At the beginning of each interview the researcher invited the participants to talk about their experience with sports. A structured interview guide was not used due to the researchers belief that it is overly rigid and fails to capture accurate experiences. (Dale, 1996; Lally, 2007). However, elaboration techniques and clarification probes were used to focus in on identity issues. To ensure the quality of the data, a detailed content analysis was done separately for each set of interviews. The findings from the study revealed that participants with salient athletic identities anticipated disrupted identities in their future retirement. Subsequently, athletes engaged in coping strategies prior to retirement as a way of diminishing their athletic identity and protecting against identity dysfunction. Lally (2007) claims that athletic retirement is no more detrimental than any other transformative life event.

Nevertheless, it is important to note the limitations threatening the credibility of the findings. According to Lally (2007), the participants became aware of their salient athletic identities during the first interview. This awareness motivated them to engage in behaviours that would protect themselves against identity dysfunction. It is possible that researcher's use of probes and elaboration techniques encouraged participants' use of coping methods to decrease their athletic identity saliency. Considering the lack of transparency within the conduction of interviews, the findings from the study should be taken with skepticism. Consequently, the reader is left wondering whether the data collection was more of a counselling type session, than an objective interview. With this information, it is possible that the study did not explore their original objective, but rather looked at the effectiveness of reducing athletic identity saliency prior to retirement. Nonetheless, this

study highlights areas of research that remain unclear and require further exploration.

In addition, a study by Stier (2007) adds to the mixed findings by providing supporting evidence to suggest athletic career termination coincides with other life transitions. The aim of the study was to explore career retirement, identity issues, and role exit in former elite athletes. Eight retired tennis players were recruited for the study. Each participant had spent several years on the professional tour. According to the researchers, the participants held highly salient social roles within society. A qualitative interview design was used to investigate former athletes' transition process in relation to psychological and social adaptation. The findings from the study support the belief that athletic retirement is a "gradual transitional process", influencing both social and psychological domains (p. 108). Athletes who were initially reluctant to give up their athletic identity slowly began to dissociate from their former role as an athlete, finding acceptance over their new self-concept. The majority of former athletes were content with their current life situation, including their previous career accomplishments. The findings from the study illustrate that while the retirement process is challenging for athletes, it may not be as dramatic as previous literature suggests.

Granted Stier's (2007) conclusions, the study does not exist without limitations. Despite the optimistic overview of athletic retirement, the researchers do not specify how long these former athletes had been retired for, nor do they quantitatively define "gradual transition" (p. 108). After careful review, disclosures from participants suggest that experiencing a role exit from elite sport contributed to a decrease in self-esteem, uncertainty in future employment, and a substantial shift in income. Stier's (2007) findings may provide evidence to support that athletic retirement does gradually lead to contentment, however,

overlooking the process to obtain contentment risks minimizing the challenges former athletes experience. Furthermore, a lack of transparency and detailing in the procedure was an existing limitation within the study. For instance, there was no mention of the recruitment process or how interviews were conducted – structure, probes etc.

After reviewing the literature, it is apparent a lack of consensus exists involving sport termination. Both Stier (2007) and Lally (2007) provide evidence suggesting athletic retirement is not a uniquely dysfunctional life transition. The presence of mixed findings provides a rationale and justification for further exploration into athletic career termination.

**Does athletic retirement parallel death?** A review of the literature has revealed that an assortment of theories and perspectives, including gerontology and thanatology, have been applied to sport retirement to further understand the transition process (Chaney, 2009). Before exploring the application of these theories, it is necessary to define what each of them is. Alkema and Alley (2006) define gerontology as the study of ageing, while thanatology has been referred to as, "the study of life with death left in" (Kastenbaum, 1993, p. 75). There have been disagreements and criticisms in the literature regarding efforts to apply gerontology and thanatology to sport retirement. Chaney (2009) argues that athletic retirement is generalizable to all career retirements, thus does not require application of dramatic perspectives (Chaney, 2009). However, McKnight et al. (2009) claims athletic retirement is distinct and cannot be compared to general occupation retirement. Their reasoning includes that unlike general retirement, elite athletes retire from sport at a time where their peers have typically already begun their non-sporting careers and are focusing on marriage and starting a family. Resultantly, this

leaves retired athletes in a unique and disparate situation. Secondly, athletic retirement is known to disrupt an individual's identity in a manner that has not been observed in general retirement (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Considering the unique nature of sport termination, it is believed that athletes who retire before the age of 35 will experience this transition period much differently than the general population (Baillie & Danish, 1992). As a result, Chaney (2009) argues that athletic retirement should be investigated from a gerontological lens.

Comparisons between athletic retirement and death occurred early on in the development of sport withdrawal research (Chaney, 2009). An interest in this field of research was sparked after popular media presented a first and third account from Jim Bouton, a famous American baseball player, and notable sports author Roger Kahn (Chaney, 2009; Rosenberg, 1984). Both accounts described retirement in similar manners, using descriptive death related language to portray the downward spiral following the release of their baseball careers (Chaney, 2009). The retired athletes conveyed their transition as a long and painful experience, simulating an ostracized death. From here, Kubler-Ross's (1969) 5 Stages of Grief were compared and parallels were drawn between athletic retirement and thanatology. According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005), the five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – are reactions to loss that individuals may experience. In his text, Kubler-Ross (1969) asserts that these stages do not suggest linearity or a typical path of grieving exists, especially since every loss is unique. Crook and Robertson (1991) draw a similar conclusion about athletic retirement, which is that athletes' ability to adjust to life after sport varies across individuals.

An article by Baillie and Danish (1992) explored the parallels between athletic retirement and death. For an athlete, retirement means the end of a career and the discontinuation of a livelihood. It can also mark the expiration of one's sport-related physical skills. For athletes who derive the majority of their self-esteem from their sport performance, these losses can resemble the intensity of a terminal illness or disability (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Lerch, 1984; Rosenberg, 1984). Further research has been conducted to explore sport withdrawal in relation to death using stage theories, particularly the notable five stages of grief outlined by Kubler-Ross (1969). A study conducted by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) interviewed seven former gymnasts and found comparable themes to support Kubler-Ross's model as an appropriate framework for understanding athletic retirement. The findings from the analysis revealed five of the seven ex-athletes experienced parallel feelings to that which is experienced in the grieving process – frustration, disorientation, and the presence of a void. Lerch (1984) and Rosenberg (1984) have also investigated athletic retirement using a stage model developed by Glasser and Strauss (1963). This particular model was referred to as The Awareness Model, which focuses on the relationship between the dying patient and caregiver. This relationship is characterized by four states of awareness: closed, suspicious, mutual pretense, and open. Using this model Rosenberg (1984) claims that the type of death an athlete will experience can vary in length and intensity. For instance, sport can resemble a slow social death for athletes with higher profiles. This usually occurs because athletes with this degree of status tend to remain on sport teams for a longer duration, despite one's decreasing ability and inconsistency in performance. According to Rosenberg (1984), this is a more desirable way to leave sport, since it gives

athletes time to adjust and prepare for life afterwards. However, athletes who are ejected out of their sport spontaneously are likely to experience a more traumatic retirement, similar to an impromptu death.

Conversely, stage models have been critiqued for their tendency to pigeonhole human experiences. Considering the complexity of human nature, a stage model may be too orderly and rigid, neglecting the potential for simultaneous or fluid experiences (Dennis, 2009). Models with less rigidity, such as Schlossberg's (1981) transitional model, have been applied to athletic retirement (Hopson; 1981; Swain, 1991). This model assumes that adults are continuously experiencing transitions throughout their lives in a non-sequential and non-identical manner (Schlossberg, 1981). Much like athletic retirement, transitions are an inevitable part of life, however, how we react and adapt to these transitions can vary (Schlossberg, 1981). Using the transitional model, Swain (1991) investigated withdrawal from sport. Three in-depth interviews were conducted with former athletes who had voluntarily left sport. Those who had involuntarily retired were not accessible. The results from the study revealed that athletic retirement was more of a process than a specific life event. Thus, providing evidence to support the use of non-linear models, as they are more apt to capture the fluidity and complexity of human experience.

Applying a gerontological and thanatological lens to athletic retirement has been heavily critiqued for painting a negative perspective on athletic retirement (Baillie and Danish, 1992; Chaney, 2009; Coakley, 1983). Subsequently, Coakley (1983) took a lighter approach and compared sport retirement to a "rebirth" versus a termination point (p.1). In the article, Coakley (1983) insists that research in this field needs to consider the

structural context of ex-athletes. Retirement on it's own is not necessarily the causal factor of identity issues, adjustment problems, and stress. External factors can also contribute to adjustment concerns such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Coakley's (1983) article was an attempt to integrate a lighter and more comprehensive perspective into athletic retirement research. This shift away from a thanatological lens continued as research began focusing primarily on athletic identity development. While identity is a significant component in sport withdrawal, I agree with Chaney (2009) that ex-athletes descriptions of denial, depression, and anger in retirement correspond with grief processes. Consequently, thanatology and gerontology should not be discarded or ignored from athletic retirement research.

  **Factors influencing the quality of athletic retirement.** There is empirical evidence to suggest that athletic retirement is a profoundly influential transition marked with struggle and difficulty (Beamon, 2012; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). A systematic review conducted by Park et al. (2013) identified 15 variables associated with the quality of transition for elite athletes leaving their sporting career. For example, athletes' degree of control over their retirement process appears to be a strong predictor in the quality of adjustment (Cosh et al., 2013; Erpic et al., 2004; Park et al., 2013). Athletes with more control seem to experience less difficulty in their adjustment (Erpic et al., 2004). Involuntary retirements, such as career-ending injuries, are an example of having less control over the withdrawal process (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013). The importance of feeling in control over one's retirement is evident in the case of Kenny McKinley, a professional football player who committed suicide when he was unable to play due to a knee injury (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013). This  extreme example illustrates the

central role of sport in elite athletes' lives, as well as the predictive strength of voluntary versus involuntary retirements on quality of adjustment.

In addition, the physical changes athletes experience in retirement can influence the transition process (Park et al., 2013; Surujlal & Zyl, 2014; Warriner & Lavalle, 2008). Some experience a sense of loss over their physical efficiency due to less intensive training regimes (Surujlal & Zyl, 2014). In a study conducted by Warriner & Lavalle (2008), they discovered this was particularly true for gymnasts. In gymnastics, athletes tend to reach their peak performance before puberty and experience an earlier retirement than most sports. Subsequently, the participants in the study underwent substantial physical changes after leaving sport, which seemed to intensify their retirement process. The physical changes experienced were connected to issues of profound identity loss and identity confusion (Warriner & Lavalle, 2008).

An extensive review of the literature provided a broad understanding into the various factors predicting the quality of adjustment in athletic retirement. The following section intends to explore this deeper by looking specifically at athletic identity.

**Athletic Identity**

Athletic identity is defined as the degree to which an individual identifies themselves as an athlete (Martin et al., 2013). It has also been referred to as an individual's self-identity within the sporting domain (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). Warriner and Lavalle (2008) claim "the degree to which an athlete's identity is immersed in sport was perhaps the most important individual determinant of adjustment" (p. 313). A study conducted by Grove, Lavallee, and Gordon (1997) looked at athletic identity's relationship with distressful reactions to athletic career

termination. The study recruited 48 retired athletes (28 females; 20 males). A mixed methods design was used to explore athletic identity as well as financial, occupational, emotional, and social adjustment in former athletes. From these findings, participants who experienced the highest degree of distress associated with their retirement created a subsample of 18 participants. From here, the subsample wrote autobiographical accounts portraying their transitioning experience. Using this narrative methodology, the researchers were able to capture rich descriptive micro-narratives from distressed ex-athletes. Athletes with strong athletic identities appeared to experience more distress in life after sport. The findings support previous research that suggests athletic identity is a strong determinant for quality of adjustment in athletic retirement. The mentioned limitations involve the use of micro narratives, specifically participants' verbal fluency and selective attention. Grove et al. (1997) study demonstrates the central role of athletic identity in sport retirement, as well as provides a unique methodology for capturing athletes' raw experience. The following section will dive further into the literature by exploring three components of athletic identity: saliency, foreclosure, and glorified.

**Athletic identity saliency.** Athletic identity saliency refers to defining one's core identity based on the athletic role they presume (Heird & Steinfeltd, 2013). In most cases, the salient part of an individual's self-concept will become the focal point, usually at the expense of other dimensions of self. A thorough review of the literature reveals that athletic identity saliency is a predictive factor in the quality of adjustment, specifically involving psychosocial functioning (Beamon, 2012; Heird & Steinfieldt, 2013; Tyrance, Harris, & Post, 2013). Individuals who possess stronger athletic identities tend to

experience more difficulties during transition (Beamon, 2012; Cosh et al., 2013; Erpic et al., 2013; Heird & Steinfieldt, 2013). For instance, these athletes experience inhibited decision-making skills in retirement (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). A systematic review conducted by Park et al. (2013) identified 35 independent studies revealing correlations between salient athletic identities and quality of career transition. The review also evaluated correlates of athletes' career transition adjustment, as well as sampling methods and research designs used from 1968 until 2010. The results revealed 34 studies indicating a decrease in quality of retirement for those identifying with exclusive athletic identities. Interestingly, a study by Martin et al. (2013) provided evidence to suggest that prevalent athletic identities are connected to positive effects on sport performance, thus making it a desirable trait to possess during one's athletic career. However, when it comes to life after sport, athletic identity saliency is considered a major factor in predicting negative adjustments during the transition process (Brewer et al., 1993; Erpic et al., 2004).

Moreover, a study by Erpic et al. (2004) adds to the empirical evidence supporting the predictive strength of athletic identity saliency on sport retirement. The researchers' objective was to explore the role of both athletic and non-athletic factors in the quality of transition. Athletic factors include: prevalence of an athletic identity, the voluntariness of sport career termination, and the subjective evaluation of athletic achievements. The sample size involved 85 former athletes who had retired from sport within four years of the study being conducted. Each participant had competed at either an international or national level in sport. The Non-Athletic Transition Questionnaire (NATQ) and the Sport Career Termination Questionnaire (SCTQ) were used to measure athletic and non-athletic factors. Among the many findings, the study provided empirical evidence to

support that those with stronger athletic identities experienced more intense and frequent problems in retirement (Erpic et al., 2004).

The instruments that were used to measure athletic and non-athletic factors were limitations of the study. Both the NATQ and SCTQ were created by one of the leading researchers, consequently introducing concerns for researcher bias. Furthermore, there was no mention of whether the questionnaires had undergone reliability or validity testing. Despite these limitations, the study does provide useful knowledge into the prevalence of dysfunction in athletic retirement and the need for effective interventions.

**Athletic identity foreclosure.** Sport psychology research has also investigated identity foreclosure in relation to athletic retirement (Beamon, 2012; Park et al., 2013; Warriner & Lavalle, 2008). According to Warriner and Lavalle (2008) identity foreclosure refers to the act of confirming one's identity before fully exploring who they are. Generally, athletic identity foreclosure is more prominent in sports where peak performance occurs in early adolescence. This is often due to intensive training regimes and the time consuming nature of elite sport, which means less time for self-exploration during adolescent years (Warriner & Lavalle, 2008). According to Petitpas and Champagne (1988) both athletic identity foreclosure and saliency can stall the identity formation process, resulting in dysfunctional adjustments.

Using seven former elite gymnasts, Warriner and Lavalle (2008) looked specifically at athletic identity foreclosure in relation to sport retirement. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, with an eligibility criterion requiring female gymnasts who had competed at an international level. Researchers gathered their data using retrospective semi-structured interviews. Transcriptions were analyzed using an interpretative

phenomenological analysis. Participants provided rich descriptions about their retirement, specifically in relation to experiencing identity loss during their transition. For example, a gymnast states, "There was nothing else to me as a person but gymnastics, so you take away the gym and there is nothing… I felt like nothing" (Warriner & Lavalle, 2008, p. 307).

A predetermined interview guide traced former athletes experiences from a temporal perspective. The questions targeted the participants' experiences both during and post sporting career. The findings revealed that the majority of participants experienced dysfunction, loss, and turmoil throughout the career transition. Of the seven participants interviewed, six of them described their retirement process as "profoundly traumatic" (p. 306). Gymnasts appear to be especially vulnerable to identity foreclosure considering the early involvement at a young age. These athletes are encouraged to maximize on their abilities while their bodies are still young. The narrowed window of peak performance is attributable to basic physiology, where the demands of gymnastics are easier to perform prior to puberty. According to Warriner and Lavalle (2008), both identity saliency and foreclosure appear to intensify the challenges experienced in retirement.

A limitation of the study was the sample used, which was exclusively female. Thus, limiting the transferability of the findings. Additionally, researchers were primarily concerned with retrospection and failed to consider athletes' current well-being. There was also no mention of how long their sample had been retired for, which again is valuable information when it comes to interpreting the results. Nonetheless, the findings support the belief that athletic career termination can be challenging for elite athletes, especially when individuals are susceptible to athletic identity foreclosure.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Beamon (2012) explored the relationship between African American basketball players and athletic identity foreclosure. The findings revealed their sample was also at risk for athletic identity foreclosure. However, unlike gymnasts, Beamon (2012) attributes this largely to socialization factors. From a young age African American males are encouraged to invest their time in sports, with the hope that one day they will make it professionally. Interestingly, Caucasian male basketball players do not experience the same degree of social pressure in relation to sports. For instance, according to Harrison and Lawrence (2003) African American males are perceived solely for their athleticism. Considering only one percent of collegiate athletes successfully make it to the professional level, this amount of social pressure is incredibly overwhelming for youth (Beamon, 2012). Participants disclosed that from an early age there has always been an overemphasis on sports. While this study primarily looked at the relationship between race and athletic retirement, it does provide useful information into athletic identity foreclosure and how this process develops at a young age.

Considering the powerful influence athletic identity has on the retirement process, the researcher for the present study felt it was necessary to explore this phenomenon in-depth. After reviewing the literature, it is evident that several factors have been identified as contributing to the quality of transition. The following section intends to explore athletic identity further by focusing on the glorification that comes with elite athlete territory.

**Glorified athletic identity.** A surprising theme unfolded while reviewing the literature, illuminating a shift in status following a retired athletes withdrawal from sport (Cosh et al., 2013; Lally, 2007; Stephan et al., 2003). As of yet, there has been no

research explicitly investigating glorified identities in elite athletes. However, it is interesting that within the literature athletes tend to use similar language delineating a loss of prestige during this transition. Some athletes describe retirement as going from global sport icon to simply 'exes' of their sport (Stier, 2007). An athlete from Werthner and Orlick's (1986) study disclosed that after sport he felt as though he became an ordinary citizen, thus hinting towards a shift in status.

Beamon's (2012) study found a similar theme in that ex-professional basketball players often associated less value with their new retired identity. One participant from the study stated, " I don't know how to be a regular dude, how to not be a basketball player, what that means even" (p. 204). Throughout the article, the players continued to use language such as "regular" and "normal" when describing retirement. Adler and Adler (1991) claim that this notion of a glorified self dominated the identities of high school basketball players. Without their basketball identity and the glorified status that came with it, they were just regular students. Adler and Adler's (1991) study was conducted just as momentum into athletic retirement research was increasing, suggesting that glorified identities in sport has been a passive theme from the beginning. In fact historically, the Greeks believed those who won the Olympics possessed immortal characteristics (Milner, 2010). These perceptions were often depicted through texts and statues. Contemporary society has also used similar manners to glorify elite athletes, for instance both Michael Jordan and Babe Ruth have statues honoring their accomplishments in sport (Milner, 2010). Over the years the media has played a major role in athletes' glorification, thus contributing to professional athletes celebrity status (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011).

In a study by Cosh et al. (2013) the researchers collected newspaper articles reporting the retirements of high-profiled athletes. Being that athletes' retirements are considered newspaper worthy speaks to the importance of this transition within pop culture. Within these newspaper articles researchers examined athletes' reasoning and motivation for withdrawal, which included: age, injury, and actively chosen. According to the findings, there is an appropriate time and manner in which athletes should retire, which was interpreted through the language and tone used in the newspaper articles. Athletes who did not retire in an "appropriate" manner, based on the three reasons above, were more susceptible to negative media attention. For instance, retiring due to age was a much more acceptable reason than athletes who chose retirement without injury. Findings from the study demonstrate media's role in athletic retirement, as well as the glorified positions held by elite athletes.

Recently, a study by Surujlal and Zyl (2014) explored athletic retirement from the perspective of former Olympic athletes. Using a qualitative approach, interviews traced athletes' experiences before sport, during sport, and after sport. The findings revealed that athletes more accustomed to the limelight found retirement less pleasant than those unaccustomed. The results from the study provide evidence to suggest that a connection exists between the degree of attention during one's athletic career and the quality of adjustment in retirement. Furthermore, participants described the retirement process as a transition into mainstream life. This is consistent with the notion of a shift in status found within the literature (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon, 2012; Stier, 2007).

Further exploration is required due to the minimal investigation thus far and the potential implications on future athletes retiring from elite sport. The research presented

illustrates that professional athletes have an elite status in society and as a result are

deeply interconnected within the social realm (Cosh et al., 2013; Surujlal & Zyl, 2014).

The above information provides a platform and justification to extend beyond the notion

of a glorified athletic identity and begin exploring narcissism in elite athletes. The

following section will review the existing literature on narcissism.

**Narcissism**

Defining narcissism has been a difficult task due to a lack of consensus and

empirical inquiry (Bender, 2012). Among many descriptions, Pincus and Lukowitzksy

(2010) describe narcissism as individuals who use their social environment to regulate

their self-esteem and manage their needs for validation and enhancement. The article

also highlights criterion issues among the literature that fail to distinguish between

pathological narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). The researchers

looked at various fields of psychology including clinical psychology, social/personality

psychology, and psychiatric diagnosis. The objective was to clarify the nature of

normal and pathological narcissism by looking at narcissistic grandiosity and

narcissistic vulnerability factors. Narcissism is believed to have two forms of

expressions, normal and pathological. The existence of an everyday narcissism is

consistent with Kohut (2009) who claims that all people possess normal narcissistic

needs and motives. Depending on the individual and the severity of one's narcissistic

tendencies, he/she may fall somewhere on a continuum between normal and

pathological (Pincus & Lukowitzky, 2010). Inconsistent criterions contribute to issues

involving underrepresentation of NPD and higher rates of pathological narcissism

diagnosed by practitioners. Pincus and Lukowitzky's (2010) review of the literature

revealed that researchers are acknowledging discrepancy concerns and are beginning to address this problem.

Subclinical, or otherwise referred to as normal narcissism, has been referred to as one of the members belonging to the dark triad of personality, accompanying machiavellianism and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). A study by Paulhus and Williams (2002) revealed there is a considerable degree of overlap between the three personality constructs. For instance, while self-enhancement is associated with both psychopathy and narcissism, there seems to be a stronger association with narcissism. Other characteristics include: arrogance, feelings of grandiosity, and entitlement (Pincus & Lukowitzky, 2010; Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2009). Whether narcissistic individuals are also insecure and emotionally brittle has been a controversial debate among resarchers (Maxwell, Donnellan, Hopwood, & Ackerman, 2011).

In addition, a study conducted by Holtzman, Vazire, and Mehl (2010) examined behavioral manifestations of narcissism using naturalistic behavioral observation methods. An Electronically Activated Recorder (Mehl, Pennebaker, Crow, Dabbs, & Price, 2001) allows snippets of ambient sounds to be captured from people's daily lives. The data collected by EAR is supposedly an accurate representation of the participants' real world, in terms of behaviors and social situations. The findings from the study revealed that narcissism is associated with behavior that is more extraverted, disagreeable, and sexual in nature. Characteristics of narcissism such as exploitativeness and entitlement also correlated with academic disagreement (skipping class). For instance, narcissistic individuals with an inflated self-importance were more

likely to ignore academic obligations. Interestingly though, narcissistic participants exhibiting extraverted behavior were more likely to make better first impressions due to their tendency to socialize and talk to friends. However, these individuals were less likely to maintain favorable reputations over a prolonged period of time. Overall, the results provide evidence to support that both negative and positive traits characterize narcissism (Holtzmann, Vazire, & Mehl, 2010).

In terms of etiology, Kohut and Wolf (1978) claim that a weakened or defective self is at the core of narcissism. This notion can be traced back to psychoanalytic theory where underlibidinization conceptualized a weakened self. In fact, according to Kohut and Wolf (1978) intense aggressive displays of self-enhancement are nothing more than responses triggered by a vulnerable self. Thus, they believe NPD is characterized by a specific vulnerability to an increased sensitivity to self-esteem issues. It is also perceived as a disturbance of self, which can be the result of faulty interactions during childhood between self and self-objects. For example, deficient mirroring from one's caregiver can lead to a fragmented self. Despite Kohut and Wolf's (1978) article being outdated, it is effective in describing the development of narcissism with self at the core. This provides a foundation for introducing Almaas's (2001) work on transformative narcissism, which will be outlined in a later section.

In summary, research has provided evidence to support that narcissism has two forms of expression, pathological and non-pathological. The two can be appreciated on a continuum between severity and dysfunction (Pincus & Lukowitzky, 2010). According to the research presented above narcissism is

characterized by grandiosity, arrogance, self-enhancement, extraversion, and entitlement (Holtzman et al., 2010; Pincus & Lukowitzky, 2010; Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2009). For the purpose of this study, the focus will be concerned solely with everyday narcissism and it's influence on athletic retirement. The following section will review the existing literature on narcissism in elite athletes.

**Narcissism in elite athletes.** There is a lack of research exploring the relationship between narcissism and elite athletes. Using a quantitative research design, a study conducted by Tazegul and Soykan (2013) investigated levels of narcissism in male athletes. The sample included 310 participants from the following sports: boxing, wrestling, weightlifting, and kickboxing. Using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979) levels of narcissism were measured among participants. The findings from the study revealed varying levels of narcissism between sport types and age. For example, weight lifters' level of narcissism varied between ages 16 and 18. The results also provided evidence to suggest that narcissism may have positive effects on sport performance. Tazegul and Soykan (2013) claim that competition gives narcissistic athletes an opportunity to feel valuable and demonstrate their superiority. Subsequently, this may contribute to an increase in their quality of sport performance.

The limitations of the study involve the sampling group, potential language barriers, and methodology. Looking first at the sample, the researchers recruited all males for the study thus limiting the transferability of the findings. There was no mention of whether this was done purposefully or due to convenience. Secondly, considering the article was originally written in Turkish and then translated into English, there are evident language concerns effecting the clarity and fluency of the writing. This made it challenging to

understand the analysis and interpretation of the results. Lastly, the NPI only assesses for level of narcissism and fails to account for the lived experience of athletes. While standardized instruments are effective in providing objective information, they lack the depth and richness acquired from using other methods, such as interviews. For the purpose of the present study, a qualitative approach will be used in order to achieve what a quantitative approach cannot – an in-depth examination into individuals' lived experience.

A following study conducted by Roberts, Woodman, Hardy, Davis, and Wallace (2013) looked at  the relationship between competitiveness and narcissism in ice skaters. On two different occasions the participants completed three measurement scales, one before practice and one before competition. The NPI (Raskin & Hall, 1979) measured levels of narcissism, Test of Performance-2 (TOPS-2) measured psychological skills, and Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2) assessed levels of anxiety. The purpose of the study was to examine the interaction between narcissism and psychological skills on performance. The findings from the study indicated that narcissism is a significant moderator of psychological skills on athletic performance. It also provided evidence suggesting that hypercompetitiveness is associated with narcissism and low levels of self-esteem. While the current study does not intend to explore hypercompetitiveness or the moderating effects of narcissism, Roberts et al. (2013) study does provide empirical evidence to support narcissisms presence within the athletic domain.

As mentioned above, research is just beginning to explore the relationship between elite athletes and narcissism. Further examination is required since there still remains a lack of understanding and depth into this area. After reviewing the literature, it

appears that the majority of studies have used quantitative research designs to assess

narcissism in athletes. Resultantly, there is a need for qualitative research to look at this

phenomenon and hopefully provide a more complete understanding.

**An Existential Lens into Sport Retirement**

When it comes to athletic retirement research, cognitive and trait psychology have

been the primary focus (Nesti, Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank, & Richardson, 2012).

This dominant trend is partly the result of researchers attempt to stick close to scientific

paradigms and ignore those that possess less empirical values. As a result, theories

involving psychoanalysis, humanism, and existentialism have been markedly

unacknowledged in the sporting literature. However, according to Nesti (2007) sport

psychology research would benefit from adopting a holistic perspective, as it would

provide an alternative view into the transitional experience of athletic retirement. The

following section aims to briefly define existentialism and discuss pre-existing literature

that has applied existential concerns to athletics.

Existentialism explores human existence from an interdisciplinary approach,

pulling from various frameworks including philosophy, sociology, drama, literature, and

psychology (Fox, 2009). According to Fox (2009) defining existentialism can be

challenging, considering the rich and multidimensional influences assisting in its

development. The existential movement originated from rivalries and discord as the

pioneers of existential thought held diverging views on human existence. Given the

purpose of this paper only a brief summary outlining the development of existential

thought will be discussed.

Existential concepts trace back to Greek philosophy, particularly beginning with

Socrate's belief that the human condition is predominantly ignorant – a defect that

philosophy attempts to dispatch (Fox, 2009). While existentialism developed in the 19th

and 20th century, it continues to be an influential movement and has been referred to as

the "philosophy of freedom" (Fox, 2009, p. 256). A philosopher by the name of Blaise

Pascal, sparked the investigation of human existence and what he believed to be the

human predicament. According to Pascal, the predicament meant being in the middle of

an infinite universe without knowing anything other than that there is no means of escape

(as cited in Fox, 2009). Soren Kierkegaard's work stemmed from Pascal's as he related to

the essential paradox and absurdity of human existence. Kierkegaard, considered to be

the founder of existentialism, was a Christian philosopher concerned with the expression

of individuality and existence (Cox, 2012). He believed in "spheres of existence" which

refer to the aesthetic, ethical, and religious. All three are characterized by different

principles and limitations. For instance, the aesthetic sphere signifies pleasure seeking

and short term objectives, while the ethical sphere is less impulsive, considers good and

bad actions, as well as socially-endorsed values (Fox, 2009). Both paths stem from

Kierkegaard's infamous question, "What ought I to do?" Where humans are faced with

the fundamental choice to choose between an aesthetic or ethical life (Fox, 2009; Stack,

1974). Kierkegaard also adhered to the belief that life is both subjective and ambiguous,

and that the unexplainable should be embraced.

     While Kierkegaard is known as the Christian philosopher, Nietzsche is known as

the anti-Christ philosopher and the father of nihilism. Nietzsche's notorious phrase, "God

is dead", contributed to his bad boy reputation in philosophy (as cited in Deleuze, 2006).

He believed there is no ultimate meaning in life and that freedom is characterized by the

acceptance of life and ones sense of self. Nietzsche also understood personal power to be

necessary and that individuals should live life aggressively, considering it is only lived

once. Another remarkable thinker contributing to the development of existentialism is

Jean Paul Sartre, considered to be a Marxist philosopher who integrated ethical and

political concerns into his work (Fox, 2009). He believed that with freedom comes

responsibility and it is essential that we take responsibility for our actions and not blame

others. In simplistic terms, we must act and then accept the consequences. Sartre

emphasized the individual's experience and was predominantly concerned with

expressions of radical freedom. While there maybe limits to our freedom, such as our

situational experience, he firmly believed that we could choose how we react to

situational factors and the attitude we assume.

It is important to note that while the philosophers mentioned above played an

influential role in the development of existentialism, this is by no means a complete

representation of the remarkable thinkers that have contributed to the existential

movement. However, for the purpose of this study only a brief summary was required to

provide a basic introduction to the central concerns of existentialism.

According to Cox (2012), authenticity is the "holy grail" of existentialism (p. 5).

From an existential perspective authenticity means to accept our freedom and the

responsibility that comes with it wholeheartedly, as well as acknowledge that we are not

fixed entities. Authenticity is not something that can be done, but rather something that is

continuously occurring and maintained across various situations. Cox (2012) compares an

inauthentic existence to performing, where the actor becomes absorbed in the

performance without self-reflection or self-awareness. Authenticity is considered

antithetical to what existentialists term bad faith, which refers to the relinquishing of one's responsibility and blaming others for their situation. Bad faith can also involve self-deception and self-distraction, where an individual chooses to ignore what is and instead opts for an idealized alternative reality (Cox, 2012). Thirdly, existentialists are concerned with freedom and choice and believe that we have freedom whether we accept it or not. We are continuously moving towards the future and thus are anything but a fixed entity. Existentialists also believe that regardless of one's circumstance, they have the freedom to choose the meaning of their situation and their reaction to it. Sartre captures this point when he states, "I choose to be a cripple (Sartre, 1953, p. 352).

Lastly, existentialism is concerned with anxiety associated with both mortality and one's sense of freedom (Cox, 2012). According to Cox (2012) existentialists differentiate fear from anxiety, since fear is believed to be triggered by an outside force, while anxiety manifests inwardly. Existential anxiety can be related to athletic retirement since an athlete's decision to retire is a critical moment, often characterized by distress and uncertainty. Considering the degree of sacrifice and dedication required of an elite athlete, it is plausible that anxiety exists in relation to whether retirement is the "right" or "sensible" path. In addition, existentialists believe that we cannot escape the awareness of our own mortality. It would be interesting to investigate if this awareness transcends to athletic mortality and the inevitability of retirement. For instance, exploring whether existential anxiety relates to the awareness of one's impending death in sport. The following portion intends to provide an overview of the existing literature on existentialism and sport psychology, which as of yet is minimal due to an overemphasis on scientific, reductionist, and positivistic paradigms (Nesti et al., 2012).

When it comes to investigating pain in athletes, research has focused predominantly on physical pain, such as sport related injuries (Nesti, 2007). Subsequently, there has been a lack of research acknowledging the emotional and spiritual realms of an athlete. Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Kierkegaard (1980), both precursors to existentialism, believed that humans are spiritual beings (as cited in Ronkainen, Harrison, & Ryba, 2014). Interestingly, sport environments often reference existential concepts, such as 'courage' and 'spirit'. According to Nesti (2007) the word 'spirit' is one of the most commonly used words in sport, typically used in the context of 'team spirit' or when describing positive attributes of an athlete.

The marginal literature in this area has explored spirituality in two discrete paths – altered states of athletic performance and the formation of value and purpose in athletes (Ronkainen et al., 2014). Due to the nature of the presenting study, the latter will be discussed and applied to athletic retirement. Watson and Nesti (2005) suggest that during critical moments in sport – such as transitions, retirement, or injuries – athletes are more likely to self-reflect and question the deeper meaning of sport. Moreover, Yalom (1999) provides further support by pointing out that athletes are also more likely to experience anxiety and doubt during boundary situations – moments of significant changes or shifts in responsibilities. This is congruent with the dominant themes found in sport psychology literature, since retiring from sport can often effect one's identity, social sphere, and financial status (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013).

In addition, generally the research in sport holds a negative view of anxiety, something that could potentially hinder athletic performance or reduce the quality of retirement (Nesti, 2007). However, Nesti (2004) suggests that the perception of anxiety

needs to be re-evaluated because not all anxiety is negative. While anxiety may be perceived as uncomfortable and painful at times, from an existential perspective it is inevitable during the process of change. Thus, athletes who refuse to accept responsibility for any actions and feelings during retirement – such as remorse, guilt, or failurehood – are simply denying their authenticity and living in what existentialists term bad faith. Furthermore, athletes who blame their retirement on politics, injuries, judges, or any other situational factor, would be rejecting their responsibility of freedom. From an existential perspective, this notion of bad faith could be contributing to the suffering retired athletes experience.

While existentialism has been criticized for it's gloomy view on human nature (Fox, 2009), it would be foolish to ignore the parallels drawn between the literature on ex-athletes and existential concerns. Considering the complexity of athletic retirement, a holistic approach could provide a more complete and accurate understanding into the phenomenological experience of retirement, through integrating both light and dark elements of sport termination. Given this discussion, applying an existential lens could foster a more philosophical approach to understanding the experience of athletic retirement.

**Athletic Transformational Retirement from a Transpersonal Approach**

Despite the growing interest in athletic career termination, research has yet to explore athletic retirement from a transpersonal approach. As mentioned above, the literature has successfully identified central factors predicting the quality of athletes' retirement process. While this proves to be beneficial in some regards, the literature has yet to capture the depth required to understand athletes' transformational journey in

retirement. The following section will discuss transpersonal psychology in relation to elite athletes, which will be outlined and described using Wilber's transpersonal model of development (Wilber, 1986).

According to Lajoie and Shapiro (1992), transpersonal psychology is concerned with transcendent states of consciousness that are unitive and spiritual, encompassing humanities highest potential. This unique approach transcends conventional psychology by combining spiritual traditions with modern psychology (Cortright, 1997). Transpersonal psychology is interested in finding sacredness in the ordinary. For instance, how spirituality is expressed in daily life. The basic assumptions include: humans' essential nature is spiritual, consciousness is multidimensional, and humans have an inherent drive for spiritual seeking (Cortright, 1997). Abraham Maslow, the founder of humanistic psychology, contributed to the birth of transpersonal psychology in the late 1960's. Maslow initially looked at individuals' peak experiences and believed these moments occurred spontaneously, creating unitive states of consciousness (as cited in Cortright, 1997). With transpersonal psychology, the self extends beyond the person and is interconnected with all mankind. During these transcendent states of consciousness true healing can occur.

The basic structures of Wilber's transpersonal model include three levels of ego development: pre-personal, personal, and transpersonal. Within these levels are 10 fulcrums outlining the development of the self. Wilber's spectrum of development is a comprehensive model that illustrates the dynamic and fluid transitions between pre-egoic and transcendental egoic stages. This model can be used to understand the etiology

of mental disturbances or individual barriers to personal growth. For those stuck at certain fulcrum levels, the model can also be used as a suggestion guide for appropriate interventions (Nixon, 2012; Wilber, 1986). In regards to athletic termination, sport psychology research has unintentionally explored the first five fulcrums of Wilber's model. However, research has yet to extend beyond fulcrum five, which would map out athletes' experiences with egoic and transpersonal egoic states (fulcrums six through ten). The following section will outline how sport psychology research has addressed the first five fulcrums in Wilber's transpersonal model of development.

**Pre-personal level.** The first stage in Wilber's transpersonal model of development is the sensoriphysical level, emphasizing the physicality of an individual (Nixon, 2012; Wilber, 1986). Diet and exercise are typical forms of intervention at this level since they target the physical domain. Detox could also be a suggested strategy for individuals stuck at fulcrum one presenting with substance use disorders. According to Park et al. (2013) the physical condition of an athlete is one of the most pressing concerns predicting the quality of life in retirement. A systematic review by Smith and McManus (2008) investigated interventions that were most likely to facilitate positive transitions in retirement. Using articles from the 1990's, the literature was grouped into three different sections: characteristics of the transition, characteristics of the individual, and characteristics of pre and post environment. The findings from the study revealed that physical activity during retirement can act as a protective factor against negative effects on career termination. The study associated negative effects with depression, stress, risky behaviour, and drug use. Among other interventions, Smith and McManus (2008) claim that physical activity can have positive effects on the retirement process. The findings

from the study add further support to Wilber's developmental model, which adheres to the use of somatic interventions for individuals stuck at fulcrum one.

Furthermore, a study by Stephan et al. (2003) explored subjective well-being among athletes who retired following the Olympic games in Sydney. The results from the study identified that participants used exercise and training methods as a form of coping between five and eight months post retirement. The findings from the study also revealed a stable increase in subjective well-being among participants who exercised and trained. This evidence aligns with Wilber's sensoriphysical stage since it illustrates the use of somatic-type interventions for those in early retirement.

The second fulcrum in Wilber's model of development is the phantasmic-emotional level (Nixon, 2012; Wilber, 2000). This is where individuals begin the development of a self-other orientation, which usually occurs as the result of early experiences with one's caretaker. According to Wilber (1986) these early experiences are characterized by the realization that one is separate from the other. A person stuck at this fulcrum can experience an overwhelming demand and need to be taken care of (Nixon, 2012). Professional athletes struggling with retirement can sometimes behave in manners simulating a regression to this level. For instance, Smith and McManus (2008) claim that retired athletes often engage in risky behaviours, such as drug use, to manage their challenges in retirement.

In addition, false core drivers can also exist at the phantasmic-emotional level. These are erroneous beliefs and conclusions that a person draws about oneself (Wolinsky, 1999). False core drivers organize ones thoughts, associations, and behaviours and are often outside the scope of one's awareness. Wolinsky (1999) claims

false cores originate in early infancy, specifically when an infant realizes they are a separate entity from their caregiver. A person's false core beliefs are maintained through one's false compensatory system, which attempts to hide or manage false cores drivers. Glick and Horsfall (2005) claim that athletes who present with narcissistic qualities often use denial as a defense. They provide an example of a high paid male athlete who behaves as a "macho adult" in public, but in reality is developmentally immature with a childlike personality (p. 776). This example illustrates the false core compensatory system attempting to manage a false core belief (Wolinsky, 1999). For instance, perhaps the professional male athlete has a deep-rooted belief that he is not good enough. This belief signals his false compensatory system, which may respond in the following manner, "Maybe if I present myself as superior I can overcome these feelings of inadequacy". As a result, the individual carries out his macho-like behaviour to avoid accepting his own feelings of deficiency.

False core drivers can be identified within in a qualitative study conducted by Beamon (2012) that examined athletic identity foreclosure in male basketball players. Using in-depth ethnographic interviews the researcher explored the effects of identity foreclosure on athletes transitioning out of sport. False core drivers can be pinpointed within the participants' personal reflections. For instance, some former basketball players divulged that they were reluctant to redefine a new identity because all they had ever known was basketball. The participants felt a lack of motivation to look for non-athletic careers in retirement since they did not see themselves possessing any marketable work skills. Applying Wolinsky's (1999) notions about false core beliefs suggests that perhaps the participants are actually experiencing the presence of false core drivers. For instance,

their lack of motivation to apply for non-athletic careers may be tied to the following false core driver, "All I am good for is playing basketball." If this is true, then participants would be placed at fulcrum two, the phantasmic-emotional level on Wilber's developmental spectrum.

The final fulcrum in Wilber's prepersonal level is the representational-mind characterized by intra-psychic representations of the self (Wilber, 1986). There is often intra-psychic conflict at this stage, which in the case of Freudian theory refers to the battle between the ID, ego, and superego (Nixon, 2012). At this fulcrum individuals can experience splits in consciousness, where the self becomes separated from its essence. After reviewing the literature on athletic career retirement, this notion of splits in consciousness fits naturally into the difficulties experienced in career adjustment. More specifically, splits can be applied to former athletes who experience identity confusion, crisis, and pathologies in their retirement (Baille & Danish, 1992; Warriner & Lavalle, 2008).

Warriner and Lavalle's (2008) study with former elite gymnasts, adequately describes individuals stuck at fulcrum three in their retirement process. According to the findings, the majority of elite gymnasts reported that their retirement process was profoundly traumatic. Participants expressed feeling confused in their identity and uncertain about who they were without gymnastics. For instance, participants over identified with their sport and viewed themselves as gymnasts, versus someone who simply did gymnastics. This confusion was intensified by their physiological changes and the lack of structure they experienced in retirement. Some described their newfound independence challenging to manage since it was completely different from their overly structured life

in gymnastics.

From a transpersonal perspective, these former athletes experienced splits in consciousness, where a separation exists between their former athletic self and their new retired self (Wilber, 1986). Splits and intra-psychic conflicts are evident in their attempts to live in retirement whilst holding onto an identity that is no longer accurate. According to Wilber, until the two selves are resolved – former gymnast and retiree – the individual will remain stuck at fulcrum three.

**Personal level.** The following three fulcrums characterize the personal level: rule/role mind, normal-reflexive, and vision-logic (Wilber, 2000). The rule/role mind emphasizes the need to belong. At this fulcrum individuals follow certain rules and roles to achieve acceptance. Subsequently, this behaviour can result in a lack of authenticity. Issues at this level are primarily socio-centric, where the individual is fearful of losing face and as a result embodies roles that are more likely to be accepted. When caught between one's authentic and inauthentic self this creates extreme problems and discomfort. In an article by Stier (2007) participants felt they had lost their 'athlete role' in the retirement process. Through applying Wilber's rule/role mind stage, retirement may threaten athletes' sense of belonging, which could influence the dysfunction of transition. The following study by Brownrigg et al. (2012) will outline the athletic retirement process for those stuck at fulcrum four in Wilber's transpersonal model.

Brownrigg et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study on eight professional football players experiencing career transition out of sport. The objective was to understand the participants lived experience during the retirement process. The researcher used an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which is a qualitative

strategy for attending to the world of the participant interpreted by the researcher. The following factors were of interest: perception of control, support, and retirement preparation. The findings from the study revealed that athletes who did not feel they received adequate support during their transition experienced an increased level of anxiety, as well as fear and uncertainty about future careers. The former athletes described feeling an unexpected sense of rejection in terms of employability. According to Smith and McManus (2008) this is a common theme among athletes who have sustained longer careers in sport. Brownrigg et al. (2012) results add to the empirical evidence suggesting a lack of education and transferable occupation skills affects the quality of athletic retirement (Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008). The following quote is an illustration of an ex-athlete's regression to fulcrum four:

> I am just finding now how harsh it is really is I think during the
>
> week when you're playing and everything, your everyone's best
>
> mate and now when you're coming to the end of your career…they
>
> are all chucking you in the bin because of your age or injuries or
>
> whatever they're not really that interested… (Brownrigg et al.,
>
> 2012, p. 15).

This quote exemplifies how former athletes' sense of belonging is threatened during the retirement process. According to Blinde and Stratta (1992) the majority of athletes' social lives are intertwined with their sport, which may explain why athletes sometimes describe their retirement as a social death. From a transpersonal perspective athletes fulfill their fulcrum four needs through their sport. However, retirement can threaten one's need for acceptance since they are no longer enmeshed in sport culture,

subsequently forcing them to find a sense of belonging elsewhere. Resultantly, retired athletes can become stuck at the rule/role mind stage if they do not work through inauthentic roles they have adopted to achieve belonging and approval.

The fifth fulcrum in Wilber's spectrum of consciousness is the formal-reflexive stage involving metacognition (Wilber, 1986) and the development of the mature ego (Nixon, 2012). At this particular level individuals can experience identity neurosis or feelings of victimization (Nixon, 2012; Wilber, 2000). Cortright (1997) claims this is similar to Erickson's notion of an identity crisis, but disagreed that it was an event limited to adolescence. Consistent with Wilber's claims, Cortright (1997) believed identity neurosis can occur at any time during development. Regression to fulcrum five can be applied to athletic retirement when looking at former athletes difficulty in redefining new identities outside of sport. As mentioned above, there is empirical evidence to support that retired athletes can experience identity confusion and identity crisis during their transition (Warriner & Lavalle, 2008). In Lally's (2007) study, former gymnasts reported a sense of identity confusion that lasted up to five years following their decision to retire. For some of these participants, their confusion was connected to physiological changes and the degree of control over their retirement. For instance, those who experienced involuntary retirements due to injury described feeling victimized and betrayed by their body. Applying a transpersonal perspective could provide a more holistic understanding into the inevitable shift in identity following sport termination.

**Transpersonal level.** As outlined above, Wilber's first five stages can be applied to pre-existing research on athletic retirement. However, as of yet no studies have explored the

remaining five fulcrums in Wilber's model. This includes vision-logic and the four stages encompassing the transpersonal egoic level characterized by eastern and western contemplative development. According to Wilber (2000) there are structural parts in the human psyche that remain unconscious, which he refers to as the psychic, subtle, causal, and non-dual levels. At these levels, there is a shift from emotional healing and personal growth to an embracement of wholeness and non-dual being. At the transcendence level the primary focus is to resolve the separate self and the other. It is possible that elite athletes have experienced wholeness during peak moments in sport. However, these moments of bliss may be less accessible in retirement. As a result, former athletes may seek wholeness using more destructive means, such as substance use or risky behaviour. This remains an area of sport psychology research that has yet to be explored. While research has investigated predicting factors for the quality of adjustment, there is a lack of depth among the literature focusing on the individual's journey out of sport. The following section will outline Almaas's (2001) work on transformation of narcissism and it's application towards elite athletes.

**Transformation of Narcissism**

According to Almaas (2001), a central feature of narcissism is the loss of contact with one's essential self. In the text *The Point of Existence* he states, "The self of the average individual is deeply and fundamentally narcissistic," (p. 46). Almaas differentiates between two types of narcissism, pathological and non-pathological. The latter type is used interchangeably with narcissistic character disorder while the pathological type manifests in severe disturbances, such as with paranoid disorder. For the purpose of the study, I will use the term narcissism synonymously with everyday

narcissism.

Narcissism develops throughout various stages of development, beginning with early infancy (Almaas, 2001). Individuals experience a complete state of wholeness as infants, however, this begins to change as they gradually start to perceive themselves as separate entities. This point of development is characterized by the identification of a 'self' and an 'other'. Almaas stresses the relationship between the caregiver and the infant, believing that these early years are influential in the development of narcissism. More specifically, whether the infant feels that the caregiver has met all of his/her needs.

Almaas outlines four different forms of narcissism: oral, central, individuation, and oedipal. The current study intends to focus primarily on central narcissism. This particular type is considered the most ordinary of all the forms and involves a high functioning level, grandiosity, intense need to feel special or unique, and a desire to be constantly mirrored. Depending on a persons overall history, an individual will experience and portray central narcissistic characteristics differently, in varying degrees of intensity and severity. The specific manifestations of central narcissism include: low self-esteem, narcissistic vulnerability, need for mirroring, grandiosity, narcissistic rage, and depression.

As mentioned above, some elite athletes transitioning out of sport can experience negative effects at psychological level, specifically in relation to low self-esteem and self-worth (Surujlal & Zyl, 2014). A study by Stier (2007) investigated role exit and identity issues in eight former professional tennis players. Using a qualitative interview design, the researchers also examined the implications on the retirement process. The findings from the study revealed that the majority of

participants based their self-worth on former accomplishments. Furthermore, they relied on their previous accomplishments in tennis to maintain both social and self-identities, rather than developing new roles in retirement. Stier (2007) refers to this behaviour as living in one's shadow identity. In relation to central narcissism, former athletes may be reluctant to let go of their shadow identity because their new role in retirement is less glamorous or validating in comparison.

Secondly, central narcissists experience a sense of vulnerability, which manifests as a tendency to feel overly sensitive to hurt, being slighted, or humiliated. They are quick to pick up on any indication that they are no longer admired, valued, or receiving recognition. In the case of former athletes, those with this vulnerability may realize that in retirement they no longer receive the same attention or adoration that they once did in their athletic career, which could leave them feeling slighted or hurt. For some retired athletes, their narcissistic vulnerability may be too overwhelming and as result they may return back to sport. According to Lynch (2011) the only way athletes know how to receive adoration, recognition, and attention is through their performance in sport. She believes this lack of validation is one of the primary reasons athletes return back to sport.

For instance, Michael Phelps a 22-time Olympic medalist retired from swimming in 2012, only to return again in April of 2014. Phelps has experienced many difficulties during and after his sporting career and was recently charged with his second DUI in March. Due to Phelps's behaviour, USA swimming has banned him for six months making him no longer a candidate for the world championships in 2015. This particular case illustrates the potential negative effects of retirement on former athletes' well-being. It is also an example of a highly adored athlete who was unable to commit to retirement for

reasons unknown. Why Phelps's made the decision to come back to sport was not mentioned (Harris, 2014), however, from Almaas's (2001) perspective it would appear Phelps is suffering from narcissistic vulnerability. This would make him overly sensitive to experiencing a lack of adoration and recognition in his new ex-athlete identity. This reduced attention may have motivated Phelps to return back to athletics – an environment that he knows will inevitably lead to validation.

In addition, narcissistic individuals have a strong demand for constant mirroring, which refers to the need to be seen or appreciated (Almaas, 2001). They yearn for others to view them in the same way they perceive themselves, with positivity and grandiosity. Therefore, a central narcissist demands mirroring to not only be accurate but also positive. The closer an individual is to the pathological side of the spectrum, the more desperately they will grasp and demand to be mirrored in an idealized manner. Luckily, for narcissistic athletes the professional sporting environment creates many opportunities for mirroring through attention and recognition. This is evident in the case of Terrel Owens, a professional football player who is famous for the phrase, "I love me some me" (Garrett, 2010). Owens is also known for hosting press conferences on his driveway while exercising shirtless.

As well, it appears mirroring tends to play a more active and prominent role in aesthetic sports where athletes are subjectively judged. For instance, in gymnastics or figure skating, mirroring may be more inherent since the athletes are judged based on how aesthetically pleasing a jump or movement is executed. For these retired athletes, their narcissistic need to be mirrored may center predominantly on their body. This was true in the case of former elite gymnasts from Warriner and Lavalle's (2008) study, since the

majority became fixated on their body in retirement.

Furthermore, according to Almaas (2001) a central feature of narcissism is rage triggered by inadequate mirroring, where the individual perceives that the 'other' has failed them. This can occur when a person no longer feels seen, validated, or recognized. This process is referred to as 'breaking down the mirror' and can resultantly lead to an overwhelming sense of emptiness. Athletes transitioning out of their career in sport are especially vulnerable to narcissistic rage since they are no longer receiving the intense validation that they once did. Those who experienced great fame in their athletic career may find that their sense of emptiness is amplified in retirement. This feeling of emptiness and worthlessness may motivate destructive behaviours in attempts to regain peak moments of wholeness.

**Great betrayal.** In addition to the central features of everyday narcissism, Almaas (2001) believes that at one point in time individuals were their true selves, or in other words their essence. However, over time they start to believe that their true self is unsafe. As a result, they become someone who they believe is more desirable. Almaas (2001) sums this point up effectively when he states, "We chose their company and approval over Essence" (p. 319). This notion can be applied to former athletes who became so overly concerned with seeking external approval that they lost their own authenticity in the process. How self-betrayal can occur even before one is an elite athlete is captured in the following example. After scoring his first goal in hockey, a young boy finally receives the approval he has been craving from his father. From this experience he immediately identifies that his father values his hockey self over his natural self. Whether he enjoys hockey or not, the boy learns that an identity in sport grants him validation and

approval. Naturally, a split in his identity forms and he continues to sell his essence out for shallow recognition. Until the boy is able to integrate both his essence and hockey identity, he will not experience wholeness. This process can become amplified for those who have built an entire athletic career at the expense of their true self. According to Almaas (2001) the great betrayal arises when individuals discover that they have sold themselves out for validation. For some athletes their great betrayal may not be acknowledged until retirement, where they realize that their professional sport identity has been merely a 'gig' and a vehicle for validation. This truth may be revealed when the other (fans, coaches, family) stops providing their cheers of approval.

Consider Lance Armstrong, a professional American cyclist and testicular survivor, whose notorious drug scandal accurately portrays an elite athlete who betrayed the world and also himself ("Lance Armstrong Biography," 2015). As a result of drug allegations, Armstrong was stripped of his seven Tour de France titles in 2012. He adamantly denied the rumors, however, in 2013 finally admitted to taking performance-enhancing drugs due to his "relentless desire to win" (p.1).

According to Armstrong's teammates, Lance would often use bribery, intimidation, and threats to protect his hero image and cover up his drug use (Burgo, 2012). Prior to the truth being revealed Armstrong was perceived as a courageous cancer survivor and humanitarian – an identity that any narcissist would aspire for. Armstrong's split-self is captured in Burgo's (2012) article titled, "Lance Armstrong: the Hero as Narcissist" (p.1). Understandably, a philanthropist identity is far more attractive than a fame hungry athlete who will go to any length to win. This statement parallels Almaas's (2001) belief that central narcissists have a fundamental need to be seen in a positive

light. This desire can provoke an intense demand for mirroring, thus reflecting an alienation from essence. However for narcissists, being adored and validated can come at a high price, as it requires one's essence in return. In Armstrong's case, his high profiled lifestyle may have accentuated his narcissistic traits. From a transpersonal perspective it appears Armstrong's drug scandal and philanthropist identity is an illustration of everyday narcissism and the great betrayal of personal truth.

      **The great chasm.** Following the narcissistic wound, rage, and great betrayal, Almaas (2001) outlines "the great chasm" (p. 329). The chasm is a felt expansion where boundless energy exists and a sense of being plugged into the universe is experienced. In regards to sport, athletes have unknowingly tapped into this great chasm during their peak experiences. Sport psychology research has referred to this phenomenon as "flow" or "in the zone". According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990) flow occurs when athletes become completely immersed in their performance, so much so that their movements become spontaneous and they lose sense of their surroundings. In flow states, athletes achieve their optimum performance as they "stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing" (p. 53). Evidence for these types of transcendent moments are captured in athletes' responses. For instance, after Michael Jordan made his sixth consecutive three-pointer he responded, "It's beyond me, it's just happening by itself." Another NBA player Kobe Bryant described this experience as, "Everything becomes one noise. You don't think about your surroundings." These moments of flow mirror Almaas's description of the great chasm as both illustrate tapping into a state of mind, or being, that extends beyond their body and ability. In a study conducted by Hefferon and Ollis (2006), they investigated flow-like states in professional dancers. Of the nine

participants, all described flow experiences as a loss of consciousness and a distortion in time. One dancer reported:

> It's a big empty. Whatever happened during the day, whatever is
>
> happening before is GONE. It's totally the music, the steps,
>
> myself…. You are in your totally secure world of
>
> freedom…totally free…when it's right, your guts are spilling
>
> out…all the jitters and the worries…everything is there…but it's
>
> good… (Hefferon & Ollis, 2006, p. 150).

This quote depicts an experience of boundlessness, where the task at hand creates a feeling of expansion and fullness. This experience parallels the Great Chasm, however unlike 'Flow', the Great Chasm is readily available. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) believes that flow on the other hand is dependant on conditions such as striking a balance between skills and degree of challenge.

Upon retirement, some athletes experience a loss over the fact that they will no longer attain these "chasm", "flow", or "in the zone type moments" through their sport. However, according to Almaas (2001) this holistic experience is also accessible through ordinariness of being – something most former athletes have yet to realize. For instance, the method in which athletes' typically connect to the great chasm appears provisional due to the inevitableness of retirement. To plunge into this state of being, athletes would need to stop grasping onto means of validation and relax into their complete ordinariness. Paradoxically, this experience of nothingness creates a feeling of fullnesss and oneness, which is available whether executing challenging performances or experiencing utter ordinariness. It is here where athletes realize that they are like everyone else, simply

another person caught up in a striving game with the belief that they are somehow unique in their specialness.

Research into athletic career retirement and narcissism is underdeveloped and lacks qualitative research designs. A further exploration into central narcissism and former athletes would provide a deeper and more holistic understanding into the transformational journey of athletic retirement. The following section will explore previous methodologies that have been used to investigate the phenomenon of interest.

**Review of Methodology**

According to Park et al. (2013) since the 1990's there has been a steady increase in sport psychology research looking at athletic career termination. A systematic review investigated 126 studies from 1968 to 2010. It focused on correlates of athletes' quality of adjustment into career transition and the various research designs that have been used to explore retirement. The findings from the study revealed a relatively balanced use of qualitative and quantitative research designs with each accounting for 44% of the sample. Mixed method designs made up the remaining 12% of the sample. Since 2010, studies in this field have continued to use a balance of qualitative and quantitative research designs to measure and explore athletic career termination.

The researchers also identified that over the last two decades there has been an increase in longitudinal studies. For example, Martin et al. (2013) used a longitudinal study to explore athletic retirement by tracking any changes in athletic identity and life satisfaction over a five year period. Participants who were in different stages of their athletic career were recruited. In addition, the intentions for retiring were also

considered. The drop out rate increased slightly from 2003 (31.5%) to 2007 (34.8%). While longitudinal studies provide useful information, they are not without limitations as they require a considerable amount of resources and are vulnerable to drop out rates. For the purpose of the presenting study, a longitudinal design was not warranted since the researcher was more interested in understanding the lived experience of athletic retirement through narration.

In relation to data collection, questionnaires and interviews are the most common instruments used in studies exploring athletic retirement (Park et al., 2013). The scales generally used are the AIMS to assess athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993), and the NPI (Raskin & Hall, 1979), which is the most popular measure of narcissism in social/personality psychology (Cain, Pincus & Ansell, 2008). The original version of the NPI contained 223 items and was developed based on the anticipated DSM-III description of NPD (Ackerman et al., 2010; DSM-III; American Psychiatric Association, 1980). The NPI assesses normal narcissism using a forced response format where participants have to choose between two alternatives, narcissistic or non-narcissistic (Ackerman et al., 2010). According to Wallace and Baumeister (2002) total scores from the NPI show more consistency in predictive ability than any other subscale (as cited in Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). The original NPI was later refined into a 40-item scale, which has become the most widely used measure of narcissism by non-clinical researchers (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Over the years there have been disputes concerning the nomological network of the NPI, since it appears to produce paradoxical results illustrating two constructs associated with narcissism, both positive and negative attributes (Ackerman et al., 2010). Due to the discrepancy in the factor structure of the NPI, Ackerman et al. (2010)

conducted a study with the aim of clarifying what exactly the NPI measures. The results from the study revealed three robust constructs embedded in the NPI: Leadership/Authority, Grandiose Exhibitionism, and Entitlement/ Exploitativeness. Leadership/authority accounts for a considerable amount of variance in the NPI, which could explain why it also seems to measure positive outcomes linked to psychological health and adjustment. By distinguishing the Leadership/Authority dimension from both the Grandiose Exhibitionism and Entitlement/Exploitativeness dimensions, a salient difference between social/personality psychologists and clinical conceptions of narcissism is highlighted. Subsequently, Ames, Rose, and Anderson (2006) drew from the NPI-40 to create a shorter unidimensional measure of narcissism containing only 16 items (NPI-16).

The NPI-16 was developed with the purpose to facilitate research by making a more practical measurement for respondents with limited time and attention spans. The researchers also assessed for predictive ability, as well as reliability using test-retest. In short, the results from the study revealed that the NPI-16 produced parallel results to that of the NPI-40, suggesting that reducing the number of items did not threaten the validity of the measure. Lastly, researchers concluded that the NPI-16 attains high predictive, internal, discriminate and face validity (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). A study by Gentile et al. (2013) provides further support for the convergent and divergent validity of NPI-16 and argues that less items on self-report measures does not necessarily lead to invalidity. In fact, the results from the study produced almost identical patterned scores to those manifested from the NPI-40. The NPI-16 also illustrated strong correlations with symptoms of NPD accessed from interviews and self-reports, and as well with narcissism-related traits such as grandiosity and entitlement. In summary, Gentile et al. (2013) claims that the NPI-16 is a promising brief measure of

grandiose narcissism and is comparable to the NPI-40 in terms of overall reliability and validity.

While standardized scales are useful in identifying and measuring variables that predict the quality of athletic retirement, self-report measures alone do not capture the phenomenological experience of elite athletes. Sport psychology research has also used interviews as a method for collecting athletes' experiences in sport. In Warriner and Lavalle's (2008) study, researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect data and performed an analysis using a phenomenological hermeneutic approach. This particular design generated subjective accounts of participants' experiences, providing a deeper understanding into athletic retirement. In addition, tailored probes and standardized open-ended questions encouraged thoughtful responses that were rich in description.

In summary, the previous section explored the existing literature on athletic retirement and the predictive variables contributing to negative transitions out of sport. Mixed findings were also discussed to provide a complete overview of the literature, as well as identify areas that require further exploration and clarification. After an extensive review, athletic identity appears to be a prominent factor influencing athletes' quality of transition. Empirical evidence exists to support the presence of narcissistic traits among athletes, however, there is minimal literature in this area extending beyond identification. Furthermore, Wilber's transpersonal model and Almaas's paradigm on transformative narcissism was discussed. The following portion will outline the present study's methodology by describing a qualitative approach, phenomenological-hermeneutic research, a rationale for including NPI-16 as an additional assessment, and the process inquiry for selecting and analyzing the collected

data. Lastly, the final section will discuss how the researcher ensured the validity of the data.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

**Introduction**

This chapter outlines and explains the method used to explore the transformational journey of elite athletes retiring from sport. A rational for using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological hermeneutic design will be provided. Lastly, descriptions detailing the process of inquiry and the steps taken to ensure the quality of data will be discussed.

**Qualitative Approach**

The present study used a qualitative approach due to the nature of the research questions previously stated above and the central phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2013). It was important to use a research design that would emphasize the participants' experience. A qualitative approach seemed appropriate considering the concern for depth, rather than trends. According to Merriam (2002) a qualitative approach supports the belief that, "meaning is socially constructed by the individuals interaction with the world" (p. 3). This quote denotes that an individual's experience is unique to one's context and social interactions, suggesting each perspective derives different meanings despite similar experiences. While a quantitative approach contributes broad generalizations, this was not congruent with the central aim of the study – to understand subjective experiences through rich descriptions. Qualitative research achieves this by adopting an inductive approach where the phenomenological experiences are presented through rich quotations and then supported by existing literature (Creswell, 2013). More qualitative research into

athletic retirement is needed since research has yet to adequately explain or capture the transformational journey of athletic retirement.

**Phenomenological research.** Phenomenology is essentially a philosophical discipline that has become an influential component in professional human sciences (Van Manen, 2014). Used in research, phenomenology is a type of qualitative method described by Van Manen (1990) as, "the study of lived experience" or " the study of essences" (pp. 9-10). Phenomenology is considered an umbrella term as it embodies both philosophical elements and several research approaches (Kafle, 2013). Scholars from various disciplines have adopted a phenomenological approach, including fields such as psychology, nursing, medicine, and education (Van Manen, 2014). This form of research generally begins with a sense of wonder about a particular phenomenon. The objective is deeply philosophical and the analysis typically involves insightful descriptions about the meaning of an experience (Van Manen, 2014). According to Kafle (2013), "Phenomenology has the potential to penetrate deep into the human experience and trace the essence of a phenomenon and explicate it in its original form as experienced by the individuals" (p. 3). In contrast to other approaches, phenomenological research is concerned with the meaning of both ordinary and extraordinary experiences (Van Manen, 2014). This method intends to examine the normally unquestioned everyday moments that are seemingly taken-for granted (Finlay, 2012).

Edmund Husserl was the founder of phenomenological philosophy whose main focus was to analyze a particular phenomenon as it appeared through consciousness. He believed the most effective way to access human knowledge is by understanding consciousness (Van Manen, 1990). According to Osborne (1990), this appeared obvious

to Husserl since he believed consciousness is our original view of the world. Prior to his interest in phenomenology, Husserl's initial work was in mathematics where his dissertation investigated calculus variations (Laverty, 2003). Over time, Husserl's attention shifted from science to phenomenology, which he claimed were both similar in objectivity and subjectivity. He also believed it was limiting and unsubstantial to apply natural sciences to human issues since this method is highly artificial, ignores context, and is unable to capture relevant variables (Laverty, 2003).

Phenomenological research attempts to get as close to the meaning of human experience as possible, while focusing on the present using immediacy (Osborne, 1990; Van Manen, 1990). While the true nature of consciousness cannot be directly analyzed, descriptions of individuals' experiences with consciousness can be used to draw inferences (Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological research is seen as retrospective rather than introspective. Subsequently, accuracy of recall is a limitation of retrospective research, however, for the present study this is less problematic since the researcher was primarily concerned with reflection of meaning versus reflection of content. Moreover, Husserl proposed bracketing to be an essential component of phenomenological research (Laverty, 2003). He believed individual beliefs, bias, and judgments could interfere with the ability to achieve contact with essences. Consequently, Husserl stressed the importance of separating personal preconceptions of the phenomenon to avoid the inclusion of emotionally challenging material in the data analysis (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Multiple methods of phenomenology exist, including: ethical phenomenology, sociological phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, interpretative

phenomenological analysis, and critical phenomenology (Van Manen, 2014). The following portion will explore hermeneutic phenomenology and the how this approach relates to the present study.

**Hermeneutic research.** Hermeneutics refers to the interpretation of individuals' experiences (Van Manen, 1990). The development of hermeneutic phenomenology was based off the writings of Martin Heidegger, a former disciple of Husserl. However, Heidegger did not agree with Husserl's claim that personal opinions had to be suspended in order to connect with a phenomenon's essence (Kafle, 2013). Instead, Heidegger suggests that it is neither possible nor desirable to understand the lived experience of a phenomenon without interpretation. As a result, Heidegger rejected the plausibility of reductionism and introduced interpretive narration into phenomenology. Gadamer (1976) supported Heidegger and suggested that understanding and interpretation are connected to one another, thus bracketing the two is impossible (Laverty, 2003).

Due to the nature of distortion with interpretation, conflicting beliefs exist on whether descriptive phenomenology is "more pure" than hermeneutic phenomenology. Husserl believed hermeneutics fell outside the realm of phenomenological research and claimed only descriptive phenomenology truly studied human experience (as cited in Van Manen, 1990). However, Husserl's claim has been met with resistance as opposing arguments claim that even immediate descriptive research is inherently interpretative and inevitable due to the influential nature of researchers' perspectives. Heidegger points out that every encounter involves an individual's background and history (Laverty, 2003). Kvale (1996) adds further support to the argument suggesting that interpretation allows researchers to find intended or expressed meaning in lived experiences.

The present study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to transform ex-athletes' lived experiences into readable expressions. A phenomenological hermeneutic design was suitable since the aim of the study was to achieve an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences with athletic retirement. Using this approach allowed for rich descriptions and provided an opportunity for immediate reflections into athletic termination. The hermeneutic process has been referred to as the "co-creation between the researcher and participant", which intends to bring life to already lived experiences (Laverty, 2003, p. 30). The restrictive nature of human language presents as a limitation to accurately describe and interpret the subjective experience of another. Granted the limitation, a future section will outline the procedures used to ensure the quality of data.

**Narrative within a hermeneutic phenomenological approach.** The current study used narratives as a source of data to capture participants' authentic experiences transitioning out of sport. Human beings are natural storytellers and organize their personal and social lives via stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). It is part of human nature to use narratives as a means of expression and as a way of giving meaning and form to our lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1991). Stories are also a representation of a constructed reality, thus providing an intimate view into one's world (Stiles, 1993). Resultantly, narratives have become an increasing focus in research, as well as a method for collecting rich sources of data (Pavlenko, 2002). A narrative approach allows researchers to explore and understand experiences from the perspective of the autobiographer. Bruner (2004) describes narrative study as a way of describing "lived time" (p. 692). In addition, narratives embrace a holistic quality that is essential

for understanding phenomenological experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). For

instance, athletes each have a story detailing their journey of elite sport, characterized

by highs and lows. Narratives are typically organized temporally, thus it was important

for the researcher to look at retired athletes experiences prior to sport, during sport, and

life after sport. This strategy is referred to as emplotment, where various events or

sequences are tied together to produce a unified story or theme (Polkinghorne, 1991).

Participants were encouraged to start from the beginning and describe their experiences

with sport, including moments of conflict, distress, or euphoria. This strategy allowed

the researcher to investigate ex-athletes' life stories, with a specific focus on athletic

career and retirement transition. Following participants' journey in and out of sport

allowed for unique and integrated insights into athletes' reality. Narrative inquiry is

collaborative, where both the researcher and participant work together and mutuality is

central to the relationship (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). According to Stiles (1993)

narrative study is about observing personal experiences empathically, where individuals

invite the researcher into their world.

**NPI – Additional Assessment**

The present study used the NPI-16 to measure non-pathological narcissism and

provide additional demographic information (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006).

Considering the small sample size, the data collected from the NPI-16 was not used to

assess trends or generalize findings to a population. The purpose for including the NPI-

16 was purely to provide additional information for the researcher, using a reliable self-

report inventory (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). This measure was chosen due to its

practical length (only 16-items), high reliability and strong predictive validity. Since the

present study explored non-pathological narcissism's influence on athletic retirement, it was imperative the self-report inventory measure everyday narcissism and not clinical narcissism. The scores from the NPI-16 were included in the demographic section. In the end, the results from the NPI-16 played a marginal role in the findings as the researcher relied primarily on the interviews to uncover the experience of everyday narcissism in elite athletes.

## Process of Inquiry

The following segment outlines the research process for exploring individual accounts of athletic retirement using a phenomenological-hermeneutic design. A detailed description of the recruitment process, methods used to collect and analyze the data, and actions taken to secure the quality of data will be provided.

**Selection of participants and interview protocol.** Snowball sampling, a type of non-probability sampling, was used in the present study to recruit participants (Creswell, 2013). It is an informant selection tool for recruiting and studying hard to reach populations (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Snowball sampling relies on referral, where selected participants refer the researcher onto other potential recipients. This 'chain referral' technique has various advantages, the first being locating elite populations. The other advantages include cost effectiveness, efficiency, and an increased level of trust between participant and researcher since they are contacted via their peers versus formal methods (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Selection bias is a limitation of snowball sampling, however, considering the phenomenon of interest it was necessary that a targeted sample be recruited.

The present study selected a homogenous sample with the following

characteristics: 1) has been a member of a particular national or professional sport team for two years and 2) has retired from sport without intentions of returning. The sample included a total of six participants, four males and two females. The sample size was determined by the degree of saturation in the data and selected based on location convenience. Saturation refers to the level at which new themes and information stop unfolding from the data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Qualitative researchers rely on the degree of saturation when determining an estimate sample size. There was no overlap between sport types: hockey, figure skating, swimming, downhill skiing, rowing, and speed skating. As commonplace in qualitative research, the interviewer was the instrument measuring the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Initial contacts were mainly sought based on previous relationships that had been established prior to the study. From here, referrals were made to former athletes currently in retirement. To ensure voluntary participation, participants were not approached until initial contacts received verbal consent from referrals. Participants were contacted by email or phone to request their participation in the study. In addition, one individual was recruited after reading a blog entry he had written on social media directed towards athletic retirement. If the individuals agreed to participate, a brief pre-interview was given describing the nature of the study and confirming the eligibility of the participant. In most cases, pre-interviews occurred over the phone, skype, or email due to location convenience. The researcher scheduled an interview time with the participant at a site where he/she felt most comfortable, either in a quiet coffee shop or at their place of residence. Participants completed the NPI-16 prior to the interview with other demographic related information. The interviews took approximately 60-120 minutes in length and

used a semi-structured style with open-ended questions to encourage detailed descriptions. An interview protocol (Appendix A) was used to provide structure to the interview and allow for note taking. Meaningful non-verbal behaviour was also observed and included on the interview protocol. Each one-on-one interview was digitally recorded to ensure accurate transcription. Some interviews were conducted over skype due to geographical limitations – audiotapes were still used in these cases.

**Data analysis**. A hand analysis was conducted after the interview data was collected, organized, and transcribed (Creswell, 2013). A preliminary exploratory analysis was done to obtain a general sense and understanding of the transcriptions. The data was then coded into a large number of broad themes, which was later collapsed into 12 distinct themes. From here, the researcher analyzed the data using descriptive and thematic development. Given the application of Transpersonal perspective and Transformational Narcissism (Almaas, 2001), an interconnected thematic analysis was done linking themes and applying them to specified frameworks. Using dialogues and quotations in rich detail, a narrative discussion was summarized. Lastly, the analysis used interpretation and personal reflections to provide a deeper meaning into participants' experiences with athletic retirement. A later section will attend to the implications of both existing and future research, as well as outline the limitations of the present study.

**Validate the quality of data.** Ensuring the quality of the data is essential to qualitative research since it provides credibility to the study, evaluative rigor to the findings, and enhances transferability (Kitto, Chesters, & Grbich, 2008). Trustworthiness and dependability can be assured by attaining procedural  veracity, which refers to the transparent process involving the description and detailing of how the study was

conducted. The present study utilized member checking to ensure the interpretative rigor of the findings (Creswell, 2013; Kitto et al., 2008). This strategy is also referred to as respondent validation, where interviewees are given the opportunity to review and modify their transcripts (Kitto et al., 2008). Member checking was done by email where the researcher emailed each participant their transcript and thematic outline, allowing sufficient time to check for thematic accuracy and provide comments on whether the interpretations were representative of their experience.

Lastly, to ensure evaluative rigor the researcher's entering assumptions were considered. The following shaped my attitudes and beliefs towards the research topic: 1) my history in competitive sport and retirement, 2) my belief in Almaas's (2001) work on Transformational narcissism and it's application to the athletic retirement process, and 3) my preference towards qualitative research over other research designs in exploring this particular phenomenon. Reflexivity was practiced to address entering assumptions and the potential influence on participants and the topic of study (Kitto et al., 2008). Consistent journaling throughout the research process prompted critical reflection and self-monitoring of personal beliefs and biases (Berger, 2015).

## Chapter 4: Exploration of Themes

## Introduction

The following chapter will review the demographics of the participants and provide a general description for each retired athlete who shared their experience in retirement. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the preliminary exploratory analysis revealed four distinct phases: The Athletic Dream, A Leap into Athletic Mortality, The Painful Journey of an Ex-Athlete, and Transformational Healing Through

Awareness. From here, an interconnected thematic analysis exposed twelve themes characterized within the four phases. Each theme will be presented individually and supported using depictive quotes from participants' transcripts.

**Demographics**

The interviews were completed between July 1st and August 10th, 2015. The majority of participants were recruited using snowball sampling technique, except for two individuals who were recruited via social media. Three of the participants were interviewed in person, while the other three interviews were conducted over skype due to geographic limitations. Of the six participants, one now resides in the United States while the remaining five live in Western Canada.

The sample included four Caucasian males and two Caucasian females. There was no overlap between sport types and each participant had varying degrees of success and duration of time in competitive sport. The age range was 25 to 44 years of age. Of the six participants, four competed at the Olympics, one participant was a Stanley Cup finalist, and the other was a two-time National Champion. The sport types included: Rowing, Speed Skating, Hockey, Figure Skating, Downhill Ski Racing, and Swimming. All but one athlete has remained retired from their athletic career. While the initial criteria specified that participants must have no intentions of returning to sport, the individual was included in the study since he presented no desire to retract his retirement at the time of recruitment. It was not until four weeks following the interview that he announced his return back to sport. The participants' jobs following athletic retirement varied. Three currently work in sport-related professions as a sport broadcaster, coach, or sport blogger/author. The other two participants have unrelated sporting careers – a registered

therapist and an employee at a recruiting firm. The separation time between active involvement in sport and retirement varied between 5 months to 23 years.

Finally, participants completed a questionnaire measuring everyday narcissism (NPI-16; Ames et al., 2006). The proportion of responses consistent with narcissism ranged between 2 and 5. The scores from the NPI-16 provide additional information on participants and suggest that overall the sample was relatively low in narcissistic traits.

**Introduction to the Themes**

Intensive interviews involving self-reflective techniques and a thematic analysis unfolded four phases depicting the unique journey of an athletic career in elite sport. This process identified the natural evolvement of an athletic career shared among six individual experiences. These phases include: The Athletic Dream, A Leap into Athletic Mortality, The Painful Journey of an Ex-Athlete, and Transformational Healing Through Awareness. Based on the transcripts each participant encountered the primary phase, The Athletic Dream, in the midst of their athletic vocation. Within this phase athletes experienced an intense desire to be validated through their athletic performance, underwent moments where they denied their true essence, and were also introduced to the commodity culture consuming the world of competitive sport. In the second phase, A Leap into Athletic Mortality, athletes' descriptions revealed a theme of surrender followed by a felt sense of relief. In the third phase, The Painful Journey of an Ex-Athlete, participants were confronted with the reality of their athletic mortality based on the 'expired athlete' messages they received. In addition, participants revealed a sense of woundedness around sport, a depreciation in value surrounding their retired-athletic identity, their attempts to grasp validation elsewhere, and the allure of returning back to

the safety of sport. In the final phase, Transformational Healing Through Awareness, participants' personal growth becomes evident as they discard previous dysfunctional beliefs, integrate acceptance into painful experiences, and work towards wholeness. The identified themes were uncovered from the transcripts with the purpose of answering the following questions: What is the phenomenological experience of athletic retirement and how does everyday narcissism influence the journey of an ex-athlete?

**The Athletic Dream**

In the first phase, The Athletic Dream, three themes were exposed beginning with Validate the Positive, where athletes sought out affirming attention from others to validate their worth, specialness, and performance. The following theme, Denial of Essence, became appreciable based on the salient moments in athletes' careers where they denied their truth for reasons involving pride and performance. Lastly, in the third theme, Commodity Before Athlete, participants were confronted with the harsh reality that they were only as valuable as their performance. The cessation of the first phase occurs when athletes approach their decision to retire from sport.

**Validate the positive: Specialness and approval.** In working with the premise that everyday narcissism is an inherent part of human nature, athletes alike have the same internal desire to be mirrored in a manner that supports their sense of identity (Almaas, 2001). Naturally, this may manifest in a way where athletes continuously seek the approval of their peers, coaches or officials.

> The need to be seen and admired, which is a characteristic of
> narcissism in general, becomes more specifically the need to
> be seen as special and precious. It is accompanied by the

need to be seen and recognized not only as special, but as

unique. He wants his uniqueness to be seen and applauded,

whether or not this uniqueness is specifically in relation to his

qualities and existential traits. (Almaas, 2001, p. 287).

Every participant experienced a need to be seen and appreciated throughout his or her

athletic career and most depended on their sport to validate various aspects of their being,

such as self-worth or specialness. Some participants shared their earlier experiences with

recognition in sport, recalling these moments with great fondness and hints of euphoria.

This particular attention fueled their motivation to train and provided a justification for

getting into sport in the first place. For most, seeking attention was a consistent theme

throughout their sporting career, beginning as early as admission into sport and carrying

through till their decision to retire.

For certain participants, validation played a primary role in directing their

decision for choosing a particular sport. For instance, initially Ray was involved in three

sports; baseball, hockey and swimming, however, it was not too long before he noticed

that it was his performance in swimming that garnered him the most attention and

encouragement:

Swimming was like the one thing I could always go back to

and like it was the one thing that I got a lot of encouragement

from… I think from my mom who always just built me up

and said I was going to be good.

For others, validation was also a guiding force for choosing a particular position

in sport. Ben disclosed a particular moment of praise that persuaded his decision to

become a goaltender:

> I chose goal simply because when I was having this
>
> conversation with one of my friends about what position I
>
> should try we were playing ball hockey. His dad was around
>
> us and he said Ben, I don't want to interrupt you or guide you
>
> in anyway if I'm mistaken but when I watch you guys play
>
> ball hockey you stop the ball more than every other kid. So I
>
> thought great, I'll try goal. So I did.

Furthermore, certain participants recognized the value of winning by noting the degree of attention and validation they received when they won versus when they lost. The acknowledgement and approval following a win satisfied their need to be seen and reassured their sense of identity. John quickly learnt winning was better than losing based on the attention he received from others:

> What I figured out at a young age was that when I won you
>
> know people took notice right? And when you lost not so
>
> much. And so as a young kid it's not too hard to put two and
>
> two together and realize that our society celebrates winning
>
> more than we do losing. And it's not like my parents
>
> punished me when I lost a game but I mean just your
>
> teachers, your coaches, you could just feel the difference in
>
> the locker room – you just notice it. So as a young kid you
>
> grow up thinking well if I want people to take notice I have
>
> to win.

In a way, John learnt early on how to succeed in competitive sport. Those who win are more likely to receive recognition and admiration than those who lose. It was this particular philosophy that influenced John's combative attitude towards his opponents later on.

Several participants experienced a connection between their self-worth and the validation received from their athletic performance. According to Almaas (2001) the need to be seen intensifies, becoming even more demanding in its quest for positive mirroring. For instance, individuals desperately yearn to be seen as special or unique – insisting that only their positive attributes be mirrored. As athletes make these demands they become sensitive to their peers, officials, or coaches' validation. Kayla acknowledged that during her figure skating career she struggled with self-esteem:

> This fear I think started to take over of what other people
>
> thought, you know what the judges would think, what Skate
>
> Canada would think about if I was going to get an
>
> international assignment and if they thought I was worthy or
>
> good enough. Because… You know now that I think about it
>
> I didn't think I was good enough so I kept needing this
>
> outside validation from them to tell me that I was.

Similarly, John's self-worth was based on getting redemption after his disappointing finish at the Olympics. As a result, he trained with the purpose of proving to others that he was good enough, "So the training became then about fixing and proving that I was worthy… and proving that I was worthy of a gold medal and trying to prove to myself and prove to others".

For the majority of participants, their wins and successes in sport validated their experience and enhanced feelings of specialness. Kayla explains what she felt after winning Nationals:

> There's that feeling of that's what you do this for. That's the
>
> point. Because you don't really matter, you're just like
>
> everybody else if you don't do stuff like this (win
>
> Nationals).… And now I was like this special person to all
>
> my friends, I was special where I trained and… I remember
>
> walking around with this like… sort of attitude. Like not rude
>
> or acting like um people were less than me but this attitude of
>
> people are probably going to know who I am now.

Without overtly stating that these experiences led them to feel special, other participants also shared comparable moments when their athletic performance and the resulting attention validated their sense of importance. Following the Olympics Dylan noticed he attracted a great deal of attention that went beyond his athletic abilities:

> I was on the 'Top Hottest' list and I was getting a shit ton of
>
> attention, like girls thought I was special, like it wasn't hard
>
> for me with women at that point in my life.
>
> *Interviewer: Did it feel good?*
>
> Yea of course, that's the goal (laughs).

In a sense, this type of attention was validating for Dylan as it provided him with a sense of specialness both on and off the ice. Most participants spoke of their validating moments with ease, referring to them as peak moments in sport.

The narratives involving the spotlight facilitated a feeling of importance or a sense of specialness within participants. For Ben in particular, his NHL career garnered him substantive attention, noting that as his hockey career progressed so did the spotlight:

> The recognition factor… it's ridiculous all the things that
>
> you're asked to do, the ways that you're asked to help out,
>
> different charities, great causes that people have, the things
>
> that you're invited too. Everywhere you go, in my case
>
> anyways, every single place I go people come up to me and
>
> talk to me and recognize me.

Some participants described receiving celebrity-like treatment within their sport, which naturally fostered a feeling of accomplishment and specialness. Based on the quotes, it is apparent that athletes sought validation in one form or another during their athletic career. Participants experienced a need to be seen at varying degrees and relied considerably on their sport performance for approval and admiration.

**Denial of essence: Disconnect from self.** A prominent theme found within the interviews was that most participants rejected their authentic selves at varying points throughout their athletic career. Certain participants conveyed moments of suffering where they identified a lack of passion and bitterness towards sport, yet would endure these feeling while continuing to compete. Bednar (2014) claims elite sport is a source of authenticity, but at the same time is an environment cultivating inauthenticity. This duality presents itself when athletes either allow their authentic being to come through their performance or choose to comply with the voice of an anonymous other. Kayla shares an experience where she surrendered to the commands of an 'other' as she

reluctantly moved her training to Vancouver:

> I don't even know if I really wanted to go to Vancouver, but I
>
> thought I had to like I should. Not because my parents said I
>
> should, this sort of powerful skating Goddess told me this is
>
> what I have to do. So I went there and it was horrible, I was
>
> so depressed and anxious.

According to Taylor (1992) a central feature of authenticity is the ability to have an

intimate connection with oneself. Based on the quotes, it appears some participants

disabled their connection to being, which may have been a survival response to manage

the unpleasant aspects of sport. Ray shares what his elite training process was like:

> It's very very difficult to do sports at an elite level, especially
>
> I think sports that cause that much pain. Like swimming is
>
> not, it's not fun. Swimming is not fun at all. Um, what's fun
>
> about swimming is winning.

Later on, Ray describes a powerful moment where he questions his involvement in sport.

He came to the realization that he was demanding his body and mind to do something that

his spirit was no longer connected too:

> I went down to Barbados for this training camp and I
>
> remember like, I haven't really told anybody this ever but I
>
> remember seriously in my goggles I was crying cause I
>
> needed to get the hell out of there, I couldn't do this anymore.
>
> I was like what am I doing here? Why am I still training? ... It
>
> was just like trying to force yourself to do something that you

knew you'd gotten over in your head. That was the difficult

part. Especially because I think and this is the kind of thesis

of it I would say is I didn't believe that I could be as great as

I wanted to be anymore.

This experience was not uncommon among participants as several expressed a desire to

retire while pursuing their athletic career. Dylan shared his experience of competing at an

elite level while simultaneously grieving speed skating:

I felt like last year I didn't want to do it anymore because the

organization made it not fun for me. I wasn't in love with the

sport anymore. So I spent that year kind of grieving the sport

while trying to compete and it wasn't – obviously it's not a

good situation, not conducive to results. So I kinda just rode

out that year waiting to retire.

Similarly, Karen revealed that she too competed in downhill skiing whilst

acknowledging an eagerness to retire, however, for her this underlying sense of

incongruence was present throughout the majority of her athletic career:

The whole time I was an athlete I was always ready to retire.

I know that's the weirdest thing to say and like when I was in

something I was totally in it you know what I mean? But I'm

not sure I was ever meant to be a down hill skier, I honestly

don't… And so like I really buried it, like I never would have

said all these things when I was an athlete cause I buried it,

managed it, I knew how to control it, but it was there.

While Karen denied her essence in regards to her chosen career, downhill ski racing may have provided Karen with authentic transitory moments through near death experiences (Bednar, 2013). According to Slusher (1967) we become increasingly aware of our authentic existence when confronted with our own sense of mortality. Due to the inherent risk involved in downhill ski racing, it is plausible that Karen experienced her essence during moments of extraordinary risk.

After reviewing the transcripts, there is an evident theme involving the betrayal of one's essence. This occurred at various points throughout participants' careers, manifesting in different ways. For some, the betrayal meant hiding their suffering while training relentlessly despite an extreme yearning for retirement. In short, most participants' had comparable experiences of betrayal where they ignored their authentic selves through the rejection of essence.

**Commodity before athlete.** As participants divulged their intimate experiences, a theme involving the cold reality of athletic commoditization in sport presented itself. Most participants described instances where they felt their value and merit hinged solely on their athletic performance. Put simply, they were perceived as athletes first and people second. The pressure to perform led to intense feelings of vulnerability and a growing awareness of being unsafe. The pressure to be great can be explained by Hammond, Gialloreto, Kubas, and Davis IV (2013):

> Today's elite athletes are faced with immense physical,
>
> social, and psychological pressures. Constant challenges such
>
> as demanding schedules, pressures to perform, media
>
> scrutiny, and failure on the world stage would undoubtedly

take their toll and may manifest in a form of psychopathology

(p. 276).

Several athletes spoke of experiences where the value of their performance was determined by external forces – sport organizations, judges, and politics. Their perception had considerable influence over the direction of the participants' athletic career. These experiences left some feeling rejected and powerless. Ben describes his experience in the National Hockey League after being traded:

It was the lowest point in my professional career no question

about it. It came out of the blue. There weren't any rumors…

It's unbelievable how hurt you feel because somebody has

decided that they don't want you anymore and they're

moving you to a different city. So that really stings… There

are moments also where you, you look back and you go jeez

if I would have played a little bit better in this stretch this

never would have happened.

Similarly, Kayla experienced the coldness of sport culture as she became undeniably clear that her performance was the sole source of her value. After all, the organization had little concern for the individual behind the performance:

Now that I'm sitting here thinking about it so much of my

pain then was … ugh… I never – and not that it was peoples

job to do this – but I felt like all of a sudden they liked me,

they wanted to pay attention to me, and would acknowledge

me at a competition, but none of them knew me. It didn't

matter… it was irrelevant. All that was relevant was how I

performed and what the judges said about my performances.

Not only was Kayla concerned with her performances on the ice, but she was also

cognizant of her behavior and appearance off the ice:

I have to impress them and I have to be on my best behavior

and I should look nice because they get to decide if I get an

international competition... And they don't really care to

know me, like no one was wanting to sit down and talk about

my life or talk about what I was studying in school.

As some athletes move up in sport, their successes and losses can go beyond the

individual, as fans and those involved in the athlete's life become invested in their career.

While this can be enjoyable after a win, it can also be incredibly painful after a loss.

Some participants attracted attention from the media throughout various points of their

athletic career. For John in particular, he experienced the unsympathetic nature of the

media after returning home from the Olympics to see his crew on the front page of the

newspaper:

It said, "Canadians Bomb Out in Seoul" at the bottom and the

article wrote about the loss and talked about us in a way that I

was struck with you know? Like wow, did this guy think that

we weren't going to read this article? … I can still see myself

sitting on the couch there and you know the night we got

home and just disbelief. You know it was like we were just a

commodity. You know there was no understanding of what

had happened or what had gone into it, or who the people

were behind it. It was just like these guys lost the medal for

Canada. It was such a public shaming I just couldn't believe

it.

John reflects on his athletic experience and shares the destructive messages elite athletes

are receiving:

We are single mindedly driven to bring medals home so we

can you know show case it at the end of the night… You're

an athlete first, but you also have to win to be valued and

celebrated. That's the only good athlete, is the one that

medals.

Consequently, messages alike are influencing athletes as several participants shared

parallel experiences in sport where they felt fearful and vulnerable. For instance John

states, "So much of my sporting career you know I didn't feel safe right." As a result,

John now makes safety a central focus in his coaching. Karen also disclosed feeling

exposed in her athletic career, "You feel like you're naked in front of a crowd because

there's not many things in life where your life's work is then put on a stage to be judged."

The majority of participants experienced the shallow and commodity-like culture

of elite sport, where athletes are subject to appraisal and harsh critique. Based on the

quotes, it is apparent athletes are valued solely for their performance outcomes, with a

tendency to disregard the individual as a whole. Participants also experienced the cold

nature of elite sport as they underwent rejection, disposability, and the pressure to

establish athletic worth. Understandably, several participants felt their athletic career was

characterized by a sense of vulnerability and an awareness of being unsafe.

This concludes the first phase, Life as an Elite Athlete, of participants' experiences in competitive sport. The introductory theme began by capturing athletes tendency to seek out affirming attention for validation. Next, participants revealed a betrayal of authenticity where at various points in their athletic career they denied their essence. Lastly, the narratives portrayed themes depicting sport cultures favoritism for medals and neglect for athletes' wholeness. Having completed the first phase the following section, A Leap into Athletic Mortality, will analyze participants' experiences terminating their athletic career.

**A Leap into Athletic Mortality**

The second phase, A Leap into Athletic Mortality, examines the act of retiring from elite sport, including the decision making process and immediate aftermath. The initial theme, I Surrender: Momentary Release, is one in which participants willingly and gently relinquish their athletic career into retirement. Traces of existentialism are found within this phase as participants confront their athletic mortality and temporary existence in sport. The next theme, Exiting Sport: Overwhelming Relief, depicts the immediate sense of ease following the decision to retire.

**I surrender: Momentary release.** Interestingly, no participants expressed a sense of reluctance or hesitancy during the termination process, rather the moment was characterized by an openness and willingness. The intrinsic reprieve found within the narratives appeared to be a fundamental moment where athletes willingly released the responsibilities and strain of elite sport. Surrender can be best explained by Gallant-Churko (2014), "surrendering can be viewed as an ongoing process in which letting go

serves as a transitional stage" (p. 12).

Most participants spoke of their decision to retire as if they were absolving a drawn out battle. After returning home from an international competition, Kayla shares her experience of quitting:

> I noticed I was feeling the exact same way I had felt after I
> had won Junior. It was all just coming back again. It was like
> I can't do this again, like I can't go there again. I don't really
> have any recollection of like retiring or actually leaving sport
> in a way that felt dignified. I felt like I was just feeling like I
> was suffering again in my mental state and was just like I
> give up. I can't fight this fight anymore.

In a way, Kayla's "fight" with figure skating was one she had endured throughout her vocation in elite sport, as she had on more than one occasion quit. Her decision to retire on both instances, was motivated by the discomfort and suffering she attributes to an inner conflict and an "emotional hangover" following peak experiences.

Similarly, Ray revealed a moment of intense awareness where he acknowledged the end of his athletic career:

> You know it was like I'm done. You know, I don't have it in
> me anymore, I just don't care. You know it's not worth me
> putting this much of my life into this. And to the pros, like
> doing kind of the pros and cons of it, it was driving me a little
> bit insane. Like just doing that everyday it's very hard… I
> was at peace with being done with swimming.

Other participants were not granted the luxury of retiring on their own accord, as career ending injuries played a significant role in dictating the conclusion of their athletic career. For instance, Karen suffered a crash on the hill, which left her severely injured and unable to compete at her second Olympics. Karen shared what she experienced moments after the accident:

> I was oddly at peace with it very quickly, it was so bad and I
>
> knew [the Olympics] wasn't going to happen for me. I have a
>
> memory of being loaded into the ambulance on the side of
>
> the hill and I looked up and you know when it's really cold
>
> and the sky air is kind of sparkling? It was like that when I
>
> was loaded in. I couldn't see anybody, I could just see the sky
>
> and it looked like it was sparkling and I was like alright it's
>
> just a knee. I became at peace with it right then.

Karen's reaction is characterized by a sense of surrender, evident in her immediate acceptance over the unfortunate event. The use of imagery to describe this experience suggests a calming serenity, where Karen embraces the uncertainty and impermanency of her skiing existence. John also shared a moment of exoneration as he allowed himself to acknowledge the urgency for his retirement:

> So the morning it ended, the day I retired was the day when I
>
> got, you know I almost got hit by a car walking down to
>
> practice. And as I got my boat and took it out on the dock it
>
> was sorta like 'Oh, you know it's too bad you didn't get hit
>
> because then you wouldn't have to row today.' I was like

John did you just hear what you just almost negotiated there?

And I just stopped getting my boat ready and I laid back on

the dock and I just laid there for half an hour… (Pause) and

then that was it. That was it. So I put my boat away and never

rowed again.

John's experience depicts an intimate moment and surrender to truth, where he acknowledged his readiness to retire. John's narrative reveals traces of existentialism since the near death experience depicts a foreshadowing of his soon to be athletic mortality. Parallel to existential perspective, athletes are consciously and unconsciously influenced by the inevitability of their finite careers. This awareness of temporary existence is captured by Becker (1973), "To have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self expression— and with all this yet to die (p. 87).

**Exiting sport: Overwhelming relief.** After the decision to retire was made, the majority of participants felt an overwhelming sense of relief. Evocative language was used to describe the emotional release associated with the announcement of retirement. This intrinsic felt sense typically occurred after participants shared with another individual – usually a coach or parent – their decision to leave sport. For Ben, it was a sincere conversation with his coach that prompted his decision to retire. During this discussion, Ben's coach expressed concern around Ben's performance, mentioning that he appeared fearful on the ice. Ben agreed with his coach's observation and a decision was made to have another player fill in for Ben:

It was like a weight was taken off my shoulders cause I think

he was right, I was scared to play and I was more than happy

when the coach said the other guy was going to play and I sat

on the bench.

This experience marked the beginning of Ben's retirement process. Relief was a shared theme among the participants as the majority revealed descriptions of reprieve following the decision to retire. John shared his reaction after he disclosed to his coach that he was going to retire from rowing:

I remember phoning [my coach] and telling him that I was

quitting. I was so afraid of making that phone call because of

judgment, but he was so acknowledging actually. In the end

just said you know what it's time and he got it… I remember

hanging up and then just, I, you know I cried harder than I'd

ever cried in my life. It was just such a relief to be finally

letting this chapter go and I slept incredibly well that night.

Those who experienced relief related it to the psychological and physical stress involved with sport. Participants used descriptive words and phrases, such as "suffering", "getting kicked in the teeth", and "torture" to convey low experiences in their athletic career. These particular feelings propelled their decision to retire, as well as provided a justification for their relief afterwards. For instance, Karen's eagerness and appeasement towards retirement involved both her physical and psychological well-being:

When I retired and said I'm done it was a huge relief cause I

was just like I don't have to face the pain everyday of trying

to make my knee do something it didn't want to do. And I

didn't have to throw myself down a mountain and face my

fears everyday.

Likewise, Kayla experienced a sense of relief following an ankle injury during dry-land training. For her, the injury meant a reprieve from the emotional and psychological strain of sport:

I did this one last jump off the ice and I came down

awkwardly and like really tore apart my ankle and at first I

was like oh my I'm so disappointed because I'm now not

keeping up with what I'm supposed to keep up with. I shortly

thereafter, maybe right away, I don't know, there was this

relief. Like I can't skate now, you know now I can't go

torture myself.

In a certain way, Kayla's injury provided her with an opportunity to leave a sport she no longer loved or enjoyed. This moment was characterized by a sense of relief and an expanding awareness, since Kayla could finally acknowledge her unhappiness.

This concludes the second phase, A Leap into Athletic Mortality, where participants made the decision to retire from their athletic career. Within this phase a theme of surrender was identified as athletes honored their discomfort in sport and desire to quit. Next, participants revealed a feeling of relief following their decision, which for most meant freedom from darker aspects of their athletic career. The third phase, Journey of an Ex-Athlete, is a continuation from participants' decision to retire as it examines their lived experience beyond sport.

**The Painful Journey of an Ex-Athlete**

The third phase, Journey of an Ex-Athlete, examines participants' experiences in life after sport. This phase unfolds into four themes beginning with Fend for Yourself: Loss of Worth, where participants note the shift in value as they leave their athletic-hood and enter into retirement. During this time, some realize the world of sport moves on as quickly as the retired leave, while others confront difficulties obtaining employment. The second theme, A Retired Wound, depicts participants' pain and hurt surrounding their past with sport. Feelings of shame, failurehood, and hopelessness are explored further. From here, participants disclosed various ways in which they sought out validation in athletic retirement, which is presented in the third theme, Grasping at Approval Over Essence. In the final theme, Getting Called Back to the Allure of Sport, one of the participants returns back to his athletic career despite sincere intentions of moving into a life beyond sport.

**Fend for yourself: Loss of worth.** A prominent theme found within the narratives was a devaluing of one's position or status immediately after the announcement of retirement. As it turns out, the majority of participants did not carry their legendary sport star status into retirement. Ben shared the unfortunate truth of sport culture:

> I think that one of the things that is a real harsh reality is that
>
> when you leave the game you are forgotten by a lot of people
>
> and it saddens me when I see that happening to my friends.

Unique to Ben, he has remained closely connected to the world of professional sport due to his current employment as a broadcaster for the NHL. As a result, Ben has witnessed

former team members and opponents struggle in their retirement as they are quickly forgotten upon their departure from sport.

Similarly, Kayla disclosed a paralleled experience with Skate Canada after injuring her ankle, "As soon as I called and said I was injured and I wouldn't be competing I never heard from anybody again." The messages athletes receive during this time reinforce the belief that they were only valued for their athleticism and performance. After reviewing the transcripts, not one participant mentioned the involvement of an athletic body facilitating their transition process.

In early retirement, several participants reported that they experienced daily realizations reminding them of their once-an-athlete identity and status. For some, these experiences were humbling since there was no resemblance between their current and previous lifestyle as a professional athlete. Ray had a realization one evening while working at a brewery, "I would think to myself like, man I went to the Olympics and now I'm cleaning toilets in a brewery. Like why? Like what the hell happened?" Ray's quote depicts a common trend among retired athletes as they experience notable shifts in their environment and lifestyle. A central difference between pre and post retirement involves the degree of validation and appreciation.

Early retirement was also marked with employment challenges, since some participants struggled to find jobs, especially in roles they were interested in. Their intensive training regime during their athletic career was a contributing factor, which left them with little time and energy to pursue anything beyond sport, including an education. Subsequently, this influenced potential job opportunities since their resumes reflected solely their athletic experience. Dylan's early retirement was characterized by frustration

as he investigated potential employment:

> At that time I didn't spend anytime focusing on a career in
> the future, which I think is obviously foolish, but I didn't
> really have anybody pushing me to do so… It is annoying at
> times to be like why isn't it easier to get a job when it takes
> me two seconds or you know a couple minutes and I get a
> free something from a sponsor if I wanted. Like email him
> like 'hey I'm an Olympian you should give me a free t-shirt.'
> But uh like getting a job isn't the same. You know like I
> email someone and their like, 'Meh you don't really have any
> work experience' and I'm like, 'Yea but that's because I'm
> an Olympian.' And their like, 'Well that's great but that
> doesn't help me.' So it really was a bit of a wake up call.

Furthermore, Dylan realized that his experience in the workforce post athletic retirement
was markedly different than his former career in sport. The discrepancy between the two
involved a lack of positive mirroring and admiration:

> I mean in reality nobody really gives a shit. People think it's
> cool but nobody really cares that much. You'll meet the odd
> person that like you know is very respectful of [going to the
> Olympics] and that's fine. I think it's similar to somebody
> going out getting a Masters degree. It's cool, but not
> everybody cares about it. A colleague will respect you but
> somebody else who's been working landscaping and busting

their balls are gonna be like, 'Oh good for you, here's a

shovel.'

Several participants who struggled to find employment were disheartened by the

reality of beginning a new career in their retirement. For most, this meant starting from

scratch all over again. This is the unfortunate truth for many athletes who have

dedicated their lives to a sport that will inevitably lead to retirement at a younger age

than most careers. The majority of retired athletes are forced to begin new jobs or

education programs at a time when their peers have already established their careers and

potential families (McKnight et al., 2009). While Ray looked for employment, he felt

discouraged that his successful career in swimming was barely acknowledged or

considered in the hiring process:

When you go into the situation that we're in here, like you

retire when you're 28 years old, like even though you were

really good at something and you worked really hard it

doesn't feel that way... I was applying for jobs that I didn't

have the experience to apply for. I was like maybe my

Olympic experience will translate into these jobs. I was just

being stupid and ignorant an um didn't want to have to start

at the bottom again really… I was trying to talk myself into

these sweet gigs and awesome jobs of um not really having to

work from the bottom to get there.

Ray's experience is an accurate portrayal of the hardships former athletes face as they

transition into life without sport. During this disclosure, it is evident Ray has tapped into

transformative ordinariness – an area that will be explored further in Phase Four. In addition, Ray also uses a beautiful analogy to illustrate the challenges faced in athletic retirement:

> The problem is that everyone starts at the bottom of a
>
> mountain right? You pick the mountains that you want to
>
> climb in your life and the Olympics and sports are a
>
> mountain to climb. And it's a beautiful view from the top, it
>
> really is, but you gotta come down. And if you want to do
>
> something else with your life you not only have to come
>
> down the but you have to start climbing another mountain. So
>
> if you're at the top of your mountain and you're 32 years old
>
> and your friends have just been climbing that other mountain
>
> for the last ten years of their life and they're half way up and
>
> they get to start having some nice views and you realize that
>
> you have to all the way down and climb up another mountain.
>
> It's not very encouraging you know? You know how much of
>
> a journey you have ahead of you and it's very difficult to go
>
> through that lull.

These experiences are supported by pre-existing literature, which found that occupational opportunities was a common challenge among former athletes, due to a lack of education and professional knowledge (Erpic et al., 2004).

Conversely, a few participants managed to transition into new careers with minimal difficulty by using the knowledge and experience they acquired from sport.

Ben's retirement was particularly unique in that prior to announcing his retirement he was offered a position as a sports broadcaster. Based on the narratives above, Ben's experience does not reflect the majority of the athletes' transition, since many left their athletic career without guarantee or security of future employment. Ben's distinct transition process is evident when he states, "[Retirement] was fairly easy for me. I understand that for the most part players rarely ever get to do it on their own terms. For the most part I did." Here, Ben acknowledges that his experience in early retirement deviated from the norm. The following quote provides additional support:

> I did get some inquiries from a couple teams to see if I had any
>
> interest in playing and I turned them down and at some point
>
> in July I think I made my announcement public. We had an
>
> August long weekend retirement party where we invited a lot
>
> of friends and family, we did it up right and made it official.
>
> Then I was very lucky and I did know it at the time because I
>
> had something really great to sink my teeth into because I do
>
> wonder what would have happened had I not had a second job
>
> or where life was taking me. So I didn't have time to have
>
> worries or regrets or anything. I was just fully locked into my
>
> new job and how can I start this career.

Ben's experience depicts a unique narrative of athletic retirement and contrasts the majority of participants who underwent adversity in terms of obtaining employment. It also accurately portrays athletic retirement as an individual process with potential for diverse experiences. In short, most participants felt behind their peers, both educationally

and professionally, since their success in sport did not automatically translate into occupational opportunity. The following section explores the deep hurt of ex-athletes surrounding their journey in sport.

      **A retired wound: Painful memories and failurehood.** Several participants described a raw sense of pain surrounding their experience in elite sport. These wounds manifested in various ways as some replayed instances of failurehood or missed opportunities, while others felt intense anger and shame over their athletic career. A few participants became emotional as they reflected on these moments, taking their time and pausing when it was too difficult to speak. These experiences can be explained by Masters (2013) who states, "More often than not grief is as messy as it is healing; in it there are not only deep felt tears, but also wild mood swings, times of disorientation, sudden spiritual openings, and intense flurries of anger."

      A pinnacle moment in John's early retirement was when the Canadian rowing team won gold at the following Olympics. Hearing the success of the teams' victory triggered shame:

> If I could have punched the shit out of me I would have
>
> punched the shit out of me. So it was a moment of anger… I
>
> was so pissed off at them. I was so mad that Canada won… It
>
> was a selfish experience right. And I just remember hearing it
>
> and I felt like I was going to throw up.

This news brought up a personal wound from John's own Olympic experience – a painful reminder of self-blame, self-hate, and failurehood. After this incident John doubted his decision to quit, "Yea… it was yuck. Oh my God… Because it just brought up the

quitting. Why did I quit? Just more stuff to beat myself up for."

John's Olympic experience preoccupied a great deal of his time and energy, to the extent that even when he slept he was not guaranteed a reprieve:

> I continued to dream about the race a lot right. At least once a
>
> week or twice a week and every time the place is different it's
>
> just you know bizarre circumstances. Um, racing in swamps,
>
> just very very strange dreams, but always around rowing and
>
> the race.

For other participants, they felt wounded by their sport and as a result wanted nothing to do with it – including talk or hear about fellow competitors who were still training. In Kayla's early years of retirement she felt angry towards figure skating and responded aversively whenever it was brought up:

> I never really declared I'm quitting I just sort of stopped going
>
> to the rink. It was like so much shame around how I was
>
> leaving the sport and yet I hated everything about skating. And
>
> I felt like I hated what it had done to me and I hated my life,
>
> hated my – I blamed skating for everything. I remember
>
> feeling that I couldn't talk about it, I wouldn't watch it on tv, if
>
> anyone brought it up I wanted to change the subject. Like… It
>
> was very shameful for me.

Masters (2013) defines shame as a painfully exposing and self-conscious experience that involves one's inner critic in the form of public condemnation. Kayla's experience in sport left her feeling exposed and vulnerable to her inner critic. Subsequently, this inner

voice advocated a sense of shame and disempowerment (Masters, 2013). Later on, Kayla

identifies a deep sadness while reflecting on her figure skating career:

> I felt like [the positive] left a long time ago. I felt like that left
>
> when I was little… I don't recall many positives when I reflect
>
> back on my skating. Like I feel like it was a lot of struggle, so
>
> when you ask me that it's sort of hard… it's like it's sad to
>
> remember that. I struggled so much to find happiness and I see
>
> that as because I was so tied up in my worth being connected
>
> to my performance.

For some participants, their wound was associated with a sense of

meaninglessness and uncertainty that emerged in retirement. After all, their athletic

careers provided a feeling of purpose and achievement, which felt impossible to replicate

without sport. For instance, Ray has yet to find something that will provide him with the

same feeling swimming once did:

> Yea it has just been extremely difficult because there's no
>
> hope. I've lived my life based on this idea of hope and for a lot
>
> of the while these last couple years I've had no hope. Like I
>
> don't know where to get it. I don't know what to do next you
>
> know? Because you know the feeling you get when you've
>
> done something great. You just don't know where else to go
>
> get that feeling.

In a certain way, Ray's hopelessness and emptiness has become more uncomfortable and

desperate as he becomes increasingly aware of its presence. According to Almaas (2001)

an awareness of meaningless arises when we have come to the end of our ideals and ambitions, to which we have lived by, only to become aware of an emptiness that has existed all along. This belief would assume that Ray's emptiness was present long before his retirement, however, as his awareness increased Ray could begin to see the fallacy behind his attempts to seek wholeness through gigs, including swimming.

Several participants mentioned that they have chosen to not put their kids in the sport they competed in due to their own personal experiences as elite athletes. For instance, John has strong feelings towards this, "Our daughter will never step in a rowing boat as far as I'm concerned." Based on the quotes provided, it is apparent that the majority of participants were deeply wounded by their involvement in elite sport. While each experienced different pains, the common theme of woundedness persisted throughout most narratives.

**Grasping at approval over essence.** At one point in retirement, all participants found ways to replace the validation they once received in their athletic career. The manner in which it was sought varied amongst the majority. Some connected their grasping back to the loss of their athletic identity. Subsequently, this lack of identity triggered an aggressive search, seeking admiration and recognition to facilitate the development of a new self. According to Almaas (2001) an individual's sense of identity fundamentally depends on the need for mirroring.

After Kayla retired from figure skating she experienced a sense of urgency to find a new gig:

> You know so it's sort of like we all try to replace [sport]. This
>
> panicky feeling of like I can't be a nobody or I can't be

nothing because my value depreciates. And so do I have to tell

people I'm no longer skating? I remember thinking there

needed to be almost like a reason, like don't worry I know I'm

not an athlete anymore but now I'm a this! Like I gotta replace

it quickly.

Similarly, Dylan mentioned feeling desperate as he researched potential careers that

would hopefully lead to the same value and respect he had achieved in his speed skating

career:

I spend 2-3 hours on my computer every night just like

searching how do I, what I do, how do I get this job, what's

the fastest course, do I have to move, how do I… You know? I

think I've got into such hard overdrive to try and figure out

how I can excel my career or become you know maybe

something equivalent to speed skating, something that I can

gain respect in a field.

It is evident that underlying fears and uncertainty motivated Dylan's need to find a

potential career path. With transparency Dylan stated, "Maybe I prematurely retired from

speed skating cause I was in a fairly safe place at the time. I had an income and I didn't

have to work that hard." This quote foreshadows Dylan's return to sport, which will be

reviewed in Theme Five.

While some participants grasped recognition and validation through new gigs,

others sought it through unhealthy eating behaviours and excessive exercise. Particularly

in aesthetic sports, former athletes tend to preoccupy themselves with body image, food,

and exercise (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Kayla forged an identity around weight loss as a

way of managing her pain:

> I was just like now I'm no longer the skater so I was just like
>
> who am I? What's happening? I'm having this identity crisis
>
> and the eating disorder – so I had this little 'that will save you'
>
> you know kinda like, 'do this, have an identity with eating
>
> nothing, losing weight, and exercising.' I think maybe I was
>
> channeling like all my pain around not being an athlete into
>
> ugh like I just exercised like so crazy – see? Look how fast I
>
> can run, how strong I am.

The loss of one's physical efficiency is a prominent factor influencing the quality of

athletic retirement (Surujlal & Zyl, 2014). This was true for Kayla as she became fixated

on her body weight and maintaining her athletic physique. The compliments that came

with her weight loss were forms of validation and approval, similar to the one's she

received in her figure skating career. Kayla stated, "I guess [my eating disorder] was a

good distraction from everything that was going on maybe. It made me feel in control and

I had value if I was losing weight." This form of grasping was also evident in John's

narrative, as he too slipped into compulsive exercise following his termination from

sport. For instance, John took up long distance running in retirement, which became

incredibly dangerous as he was also restricting his food intake at the time. John states, "I

would get home from runs and I would have blood in my urine. It was just really bad."

During this time, John noticed that his weight loss garnered him attention and

recognition:

> So the whole idea was that as I was losing weight people were
>
> recognizing it. And I saw it as attention. And I saw it as
>
> affirming attention that I was actually accomplishing
>
> something that people were noticing and so it made me want
>
> to lose more weight.

While the behavior was unhealthy and dangerous, it was something that helped John

manage his transition process. John's narrative illustrates the common trend involving

former athletes grasping for validation through various means, usually at the expense of

one's essence

Other ways participants sought validation was through their employment after

sport. For instance, two participants became sport broadcasters in their athletic retirement,

which inevitably led to a career involving cameras, attention, and performance. Karen

states, "The broadcasting side had that element of performance that I had gotten to really

enjoy. Like I was more of a race horse than a training person and so I liked that aspect."

Similarly, Ben's career also involved media, however, unlike the majority of participants

his popularity seemed to increase after retiring from sport. For Ben, he replaced his

professional hockey status, with a position that accumulated even more recognition and

attention. He describes a life of consistent mirroring:

> It's enjoyable in the sense that I get to do many things because
>
> of I guess the popularity that I seem to have that I would have
>
> never been invited to before. The Royal Canadian Airforce
>
> took me up in a CF-18 a few years ago and recently I've just
>
> been named as an honorary colonel.

While Ben was humble in his articulation, it is evident that his career as a broadcaster has

been a source of validation for him. Based on the quotes provided it is apparent that

value, recognition, and attention was sought throughout various points in athletic

retirement. Some participants used severe methods to grasp validation, while others

consciously chose environments that were fundamentally validating.

**Getting called back to the allure of sport.** Considering the myriad of challenges

ex-athletes encounter in early retirement, it is understandable why some return back to the

familiarity of their athletic career.  Of six participants, only one decided to revoke his

retirement and come back to sport. Dylan's athletic termination was short-lived after he

announced his "un-retirement" on social media a few weeks following the interview.

Dylan returned to speed skating despite disclosing that he "wasn't in love with the sport

anymore" and that he "needed to move on". Dylan confronted several barriers within the

six months he was retired, one of which was getting into university:

> I just need to start right and I want to start, but I was a jack ass
>
> in grade twelve because I was doing all this stupid shit for
>
> Canada Winter Games and my marks are too low so I can't
>
> apply. And so I won't get in till next year, which means I'm
>
> starting when I'm 26 and finish when I'm whatever 30. It
>
> doesn't matter, but it's frustrating not being able to start right
>
> away.

In addition, Dylan experienced financial concerns in early retirement. Walking away

from speed skating also meant losing his funding. He mentions financial preparation

being a particular obstacle when he states, "Money is not abundant right now so I mean I

wasn't really prepared for retirement. I just, I wanted to move on but I didn't do it very smart." Unfortunately, some athletes return back to their athletic career for reasons other than their love of sport. In Dylan's case, his decision was provoked due to finance concerns, circumstance, and convenience:

> If they gave me funding I would go back probably and then
>
> ride that year out and try to get my life sorted for next year.
>
> Like I mean I've missed the entry acceptance dates for
>
> universities at this point I think so I basically have a year in
>
> limbo.

It is evident that Dylan's return was propelled by fear and the knowledge that skating would provide him with the assurance he was seeking. However, returning to sport also meant temporarily discarding Dylan's dreams of moving on and exploring his potential in non-athletic environments, such as psychology. In a way, Dylan's narrative demonstrates a betrayal of the self as he returns to speed skating albeit his lack of aspiration and love for his sport. Almaas (2001) eloquently describes a parallel experience, "At this point he felt hurt and realized that it was the pain of having betrayed himself by not fully being himself, because of his concern with safety and security" (p. 320).

The third phase, The Journey of an Ex-Athlete, depicts participants' transition from elite athlete to retiree. During this phase participants confront their ex-athlete identity, as they acknowledge lifestyle shifts and the challenges consuming early retirement. Participants are reminded of painful wounds from sport and subsequently seek validation elsewhere as a way of managing esteem and worth. At this phase,

overwhelming challenges can make the allure of sport difficult to resist consequently resulting in one participant returning back to sport.

**Transformational Healing Through Awareness**

The final phase, Transformational Healing Through Awareness, explores participants' pathways of healing as result of working through painful experiences. Several participants noted opportunities of growth where they were able to experience shifts in awareness, resolve inner conflict from past performances, or embrace wholeness through reintegration of beingness. For the purpose of this research, healing refers to the expansion of one's consciousness and the integration of all domains: social, psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual (Cortright, 1997). Individuals experience a sense of wholeness as they begin to increase their awareness and identify their ordinariness.

**Discarding dysfunctional beliefs.** The majority of participants experienced transformational shifts in consciousness as they progressed through their retirement and began to acknowledge dysfunctional thoughts or beliefs. For John, the foundation of his rowing career was built on a machismo-style attitude. From a young age he received the following combative messages about sport and competition, "Winning was right, losing was wrong" and "These are your competitors, you're supposed to kill them." It was not until John retired from rowing and began coaching that he started to understand the flaws in this particular style of training. Through observing his wife, a three time Olympian, he was introduced to a new philosophy that completely transformed his perspective on competition:

People understand that you don't have to be an archaic asshole

in order to garner high performance. You know I use the word

love. You can create a culture of love. I gave a presentation

yesterday for a graduating class in business where I talked

about love. I don't care anymore. I'm 50 years old and I use

that word freely and if people think I'm weird I don't care

cause I've seen it work so many times.

Evidence to support John's transformative experience was further demonstrated through

his shift in attitude towards losing:

You know now as a coach the mindset I would take is losing is

an opportunity. It's an opportunity to find new information to

effect your training going forward right? I didn't see it that

way when I was rowing. So losing was not an opportunity it

meant I was a loser period.

From a transpersonal perspective, the healing element in John's experience is his ability

to experience loss without judgment. This shift allows John to accept experiences as

opportunities of growth, encouraging authentic risk taking since he can enjoy the

intensity of competition without scrutinizing the outcome.

For other participants, personal growth involved redefining the meaning of

"success" and exploring what this looked like in retirement. Instead of trying to control

result, athletes began to relax into the uncertainty of life. During this time some

participants sought outside resources for additional support. Ray for instance began

working with a life coach, a former Olympian, to facilitate his transition process. Having

established a therapeutic relationship, Ray worked on discarding an outcome-based

mentality through becoming mindful of his efforts in the moment:

> Like I'd always when things got hard I'd put my head down
> and I'd work harder but it doesn't really work that way very
> often in life. Even in swimming it didn't work and is probably
> why I struggled near the end of my career… So right now I'm
> working on trying to track my effort everyday so I have
> something to be happy about and not necessarily always about
> the results.

The healing here refers to Ray's expansion of awareness as he begins challenging dysfunctional messages he received in sport. The relationship between Ray and his life coach has been central to his growth and has provided him with a safe space to explore past experiences in sport, while also working through present challenges in retirement.

Parallel to the above narratives, Kayla identified that during her athletic career she experienced life through a different lens. Looking back she perceived herself as "never good enough", resulting in a tireless exchange between performance and validation. Thankfully, years later Kayla was able to identify her distorted thinking:

> When I look back to how I was seeing life then, it was a false
> perception of reality. So I feel more grounded now in reality. I
> think – and I don't know if that's being married and having
> kids and having ups and downs as a parent and as a partner or
> learning so much about myself, with the changes that have
> happened in my life in the last few years.

**Revisiting painful wounds with acceptance.** Several participants

revealed intense healing characterized by shifts in awareness. Each participant disclosed their darkest moments in their athletic career, including times where they doubted their abilities, performed less than desired, or were thwarted by an injury. For many these experiences were opportunities of growth as they were able to revisit painful moments with acceptance and non-judgment. For instance, John has a specific memory he used to "agonize" about – his disappointing finish at the Olympics. However, he now describes this experience as an opportunity:

> I see [the Olympics] now as being you know the greatest gift
>
> of my life, because it just, it just knocked me to the floor and I
>
> had to find a new way to live right? So when I had that
>
> moment of realization it was like oh fuck does that feel nice.

Similarly, intense healing occurred for Karen when she embraced painful memories of an abusive relationship between herself and her coach. Karen describes this individual as someone who was, "absolutely one hundred percent an abusive coach, no question about it." For a long time Karen experienced a sense of confusion, "It's one of those weird relationships where it's really abusive and yet it was very loving." Karen spoke of the various ways her coach used his authority to manipulate her into doing what he wanted, as well as disconnecting her from her family. The healing within Karen's narrative was her ability to take this experience and use it as an opportunity for self-growth:

> It definitely had some negative impacts on me and some stuff
>
> that came out later in life for sure that I had to learn more

lessons before I was able to come to where I am now… You

know I have some understanding now. I have empathy for

him… [Sport] is a very raw feeling and very challenging and

very often emotionally isolating… I think you learn a lot in

those moments.

Other participants' healing involved broadening their awareness by confronting

aspects of their athletic journey they had been avoiding. During interviews, several

participants noted new discoveries and realizations about their athletic career. For

instance Kayla states, "That's interesting I've never thought of this before – my parents

were not conscious of themselves and I think because they weren't able to help

themselves then they weren't able to help me." Kayla's transparency and willingness

facilitated in-the-moment healing during the interview. Now when Kayla reflects on

painful experiences in sport, she does it with a sense of acceptance and understanding:

I guess I believe so much in that things happen when they need

to happen, exactly as their supposed to in order to evolve

you… As much as I look back and see that I was suffering so

much there's a reason how it's all happened when it's

happened - the changes, my realizations, or my self-

acceptance.

**Accepting ordinariness and a chance for wholeness.** Another prominent theme

unfolding from the narratives was that participants experienced an identity collapse as

they broke down their athletic gig and identified their ordinariness. Some participants

mentioned an athletic ego, believing that while it may have served a purpose during their

career, it was detrimental in their retirement. Ray's healing involved a transition from

grandiose self to ordinariness and truth:

There's little moments that happen throughout the course of

the last three years of my life that have helped change me…

Like it's a complete shifting of your mindset. Because in order

to be that good – and I don't know what everyone else is like I

only know myself – in order to be that good at something I had

to build myself up better than that in my mind right? Like I

had to build the reasons like where I wanted to be. I always

had to be greater than where I was and that's kinda like what

I'd always done with my ego right? So you start coming back

from that and you realize that's not who you are… You know

and that's what it is.  Basically coming back to reality and

breaking down, breaking down this built up self that you've

created. So like cleaning toilets definitely helps break down

that built up self (laughs).

Ray's transformational growth in retirement was characterized by an authentic

connection with his essence. This involved breaking down his ego and returning to

ordinariness. From a transpersonal perspective, wholeness occurs through reintegration

of beingness via an expansion of awareness (Cortright, 1997).

Some participants also experienced healing opportunities through detaching from

their achievements and losses in sport. Subsequently this process encouraged wholeness

as unconscious elements became reintegrated into one's being. For instance, Kayla's

worth was no longer an extension of her performance in sport. Kayla's personal transformation unfolded through introspection and openness, "Untangle the self, like who you really are from the accomplishments and the performances that you did. That's not why you matter, that's not why you're enough in this life." Similarly, Karen acknowledged that her identity extended beyond her athleticism. After her athletic career ended she was finally able to delve into other passions of hers:

> I looked forward to [retirement]. Like I love art, I love
>
> painting, I love drawing, I love photography, I love being a bit
>
> of a homebody, I love cooking. Like all these things that when
>
> I was travelling to be a skier you don't have time to really
>
> do… You're one person, being an athlete is part of you, being
>
> a brother, a sister, a daughter, a granddaughter, all these
>
> things, you're one person. There is no parceling out different
>
> parts of your life.

Fundamental to personal growth is the ability to integrate all aspects of self through a broadening of consciousness, including shadow areas (Wilber, 2000). Karen was finally able to reclaim facets of her psyche, particularly her artistic self, that she had largely ignored during her athletic career.

The majority of participants' healing and growth was evident in their successful transition out of an athletic career they no longer connected too or felt passionate towards. Given the challenges, their commitment to retirement demonstrates authenticity and courage. There is ample amount of research to that support transitioning out of elite sport is a challenging process, with several factors associated to the quality of adjustment

(Cosh et al., 2013; Erpic et al., 2004; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013). Despite frequent

difficulties, Ray continues to pursue life after sport and remain retired:

> It's been the hardest thing I've ever had to go through and like
>
> I mean even last week I'm talking to Melinda, my life coach
>
> about just how much I hate what I'm doing sometimes. I think
>
> it's funny because it's also given me the most confidence that
>
> I've ever had in my life just because I'm actually doing
>
> something and building myself up from scratch and having to
>
> see that process as I'm older.

Considering Ray's evident lack of ambition and passion towards swimming, his

pursuance in retirement given the challenges illustrates an authentic portrayal of truth.

Each participant acknowledged that athletic termination involves hardship. No one was

exempt from experiencing challenges or fears during the transition process. Ray sums up

retirement in transparent fashion when he plainly and humorously states, "Your life's

going to suck for a bit…. If you're depressed call me." While athletic retirement presents

certain challenges, the majority of participants managed to grow through these

experiences, often undergoing intense healing along the way.

    This concludes the final phase, Transformational Healing Through Awareness,

where participants healed painful experiences in sport through an expansion of

awareness. Within this phase participants transformed dysfunctional beliefs into ideals

and values that were more congruent with their sense of self. From here, participants

jumped into their woundedness by confronting distressing experiences in sport with

acceptance and embracement. Lastly, participants began to identify their ordinariness and

achieve wholeness in retirement as they integrated unconscious elements into their consciousness. Healing also occurred through the dismantlement of one's grandiose self and the pursuance in retirement despite prominent struggles.

**Summary**

Chapter Four provided an overview of the participants, including the various sport types, competitive status, and duration of retirement. An in-depth thematic analysis was conducted uncovering distinct phases and themes within the athletic journey. Each theme was examined thoroughly in order to provide an intimate portrayal of the participants' lived experience. The following chapter will discuss the findings from the present study as well as outline implications for future research. Next, a further discussion will highlight the particular meaning these findings have on current athletes and counsellors in the field. Finally, an overview of the limitations and implications on the researcher conducting the study will be reviewed.

**Chapter Five: Discussion**

**Introduction**

The present study explored the phenomenological experience of athletic retirement. Each participant discussed their athletic journey in detail, beginning with their entry into sport. The study also investigated central narcissisms role in ex-athletes, looking specifically at how participants have adjusted to life without sport. For the most part, the participants' experience in athletic retirement mirrored the existing literature discussed in Chapter Two. Further exploration and clarification was achieved through rich transcripts and themes delineating the lived experience of athletic termination. The following section begins with an overview of the themes presented in Chapter Four. An

analysis of each will be discussed in respect to existing findings. Implications for research and suggestions for prospective studies in the future will be reviewed. Next, implications for athletes and counsellors will be provided, detailing how the findings translate into working with athletes undergoing retirement. Lastly, a final portion will outline any limitations in the study, as well as acknowledge the implicated researcher.

**Summary of Themes**

The study investigated the lived experience of athletic retirement among six participants. An in-depth thematic analysis of the transcripts revealed twelve themes encapsulated within four over-arching phases. The emerging themes are an accurate and detailed portrayal of the phenomenological experience of athletic retirement. Of the twelve themes, the most prominent involved the transformational experience of ex-athletes. The majority of experiences align with the existing literature on athletic retirement.

The first phase, The Athletic Dream, delves into the participants' experience in sport. Each individual began their narrative by describing their first involvement with their sport of choice. Participants spoke of what it was like to be an elite athlete, revealing both their highs and lows. Within the first phase, three themes emerged from the transcripts. In the first theme, Validate the Positive, participants used their sport to seek validation and approval. They learnt early on that the more successful they were, the more attention and positive mirroring they would receive. Their sport became an effective way of achieving their need to feel special, appreciated, and unique. For the majority of participants, their sense of worth and identity was entangled with their sport performance. The participants' experiences correspond with the existing literature on salient athletic

identities and narcissism in elite sport, as competition provides athletes with opportunities to feel valuable and superior (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Martin et al., 2013; Tazegul & Soykan, 2013).

In the second theme, Denial of Essence, participants suppressed their authentic selves by ignoring their truth. Some grieved the end of their athletic career while simultaneously competing. A disconnection from the self became evident when participants pursued their sport despite a sincere desire to retire. McKay, Niven, Lavallee, and White's (2008) findings, were congruent with the participants' experience with stressors during their athletic career, particularly the fear of failure or pressure to perform. As of yet, research has yet to specifically examine how athletes deny their authentic selves.

In the third theme, Commodity Before Athlete, participants relied on their performance as a determinant of self-worth. Athletes also confronted the cold reality of sport culture – performance and athleticism precede the individual. Subsequently, this left some feeling unsafe and vulnerable. Participants' experiences are consistent with pre-existing literature which supports that elite athletes are perceived as commodities, valued for their athletic attributes and used for one's amusement (Macri, 2012).

The second phase, A Leap Into Athletic Mortality, describes the process of termination from sport. More specifically, it outlines what athletes experienced when they made the decision to retire. In the first theme, I Surrender: Momentary Release, participants described a felt sense of letting go, as if a white flag had been waved in their own personal battle. Most participants depicted an intimate moment where they gently and willingly surrendered their athletic career – acknowledging that it was time to let go.

While there is sufficient research investigating how athletes retire, voluntarily versus involuntarily, and the various effects on the quality of adjustment, there seems to be no research investigating the phenomenological moment of termination itself. Resultantly, the experience of surrender has yet to be mirrored in the literature.

The second theme, Exiting Sport: Overwhelming Relief, delineates the participants experience immediately following their decision or announcement of retirement. The majority described an overwhelming sense of relief moments after finalizing the conclusion of their athletic career. For some, exiting sport meant the alleviation of stressors. The narratives align with existing research to support that the actual experience of retirement is relieving, for reasons involving the inevitable pressures and tremendous time commitment required of elite sport (Blinde & Greedorfer, 1985; Coakley, 1983).

The subsequent phase, The Painful Journey of an Ex-Athlete, outlined the challenging process of athletic retirement. For the first time participants were exposed to a life without sport. Most experienced residual pain and loss from their athletic career. In the first theme, Fend for Yourself: Loss of Worth, the participants noted a substantial shift in lifestyle and identity, as the world of sport offered little preparation or attention for retirees. This experience left some feeling disposable and devalued in their identity. Others felt discouraged when their athletic career did not translate into job opportunities. According to Erpic et al. (2004) often retired athletes lack professional qualifications in terms of education and experience, resulting in occupational difficulties.

The second theme, A Retired Wound: Painful Memories and Failurehood, is where athletes experience the pains of their former athletic career. The majority of

participants carried memories of hurt and shame into their retirement, manifesting as agonizing memories or bitterness towards their experience in sport. In the third theme, Grasping at Approval Over Essence, participants adjust to no longer having sport as a source of mirroring. The need to be seen and admired is not satisfied to the degree it once was in one's athletic career; subsequently participants sought validation in other means. For some, this was achieved through unhealthy eating behaviors or compulsive exercise. A preoccupation with weight in athletic retirement has appeared in previous literature, primarily with aesthetic type sports (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008).

The closing theme in phase three, Getting Called Back to the Allure of Sport, explores a participant's experience of returning back to his athletic career. He describes elements of early retirement that made it increasingly difficult to move on from sport, particularly a lack of education and employment opportunities. Based on the transcripts, the decision to return is motivated by the familiarity of sport culture and the overwhelming unpreparedness he experienced in early retirement. Existing literature is saturated with the investigation of athletes return to sport following an injury (Cohen, Sheridan, & Ciccotti, 2011), however, there is minimal research examining the return to sport due to transition difficulties.

The final phase, Transformational Healing Through Awareness, captures participants' intimate experiences with healing as they pursue retirement. So far pre-existing literature has simply acknowledged that athletic retirement is an opportunity for psychological growth or destruction (Lally, 2007). However, in terms of healing capabilities, research has yet to venture into the transformational aspects of sport termination. In the first theme, Discarding Dysfunctional Beliefs, participants

acknowledged flawed belief systems that developed and were reinforced throughout their athletic career. Healing occurred when athletes were able to identify their dysfunctional beliefs and re-invent values based on their own truth. Some participants experienced radical shifts in perspectives. For instance, one athlete let go of his combative mentality towards competition and embraced a more compassionate approach.

In the second theme, Revisiting Painful Wounds with Acceptance, participants worked through hurtful experiences from their athletic career. Healing centered on the individuals' ability to take painful moments, such as an abusive relationship with a coach, devastating performances, or disconnections from self, and use these as opportunities to grow. Those who healed distressing events confronted their pain with acceptance and compassionate understanding.

The concluding theme, Accepting Ordinariness and a Chance for Wholeness, is a powerful transformational experience where participants break down their grandiose self and accept their athletic mortality. For some, their healing was related to the reintegration of non-athletic elements into their sense of self. They were able to embrace and explore aspects of being that had been neglected during their athletic career. Within this theme, was also the acknowledgement of intense healing by simply pursuing and remaining committed to the retirement process, despite the allures and temptations of returning to sport.

While each participant's journey in athletic retirement had unique variations, overall their experiences naturally unfolded into themes characterizing the phenomenological experience of athletic termination. The following section discusses the implications for research.

**Implications for Research**

The present study provides evidence supporting pre-existing literature in sport psychology, as well as introduces new areas of research. A brief discussion outlining literature in relation to the presenting narratives will be examined. Next, prominent themes found within the transcripts will be mentioned, along with the potential implications for the field of sport psychology research.

**Supporting existing literature.** As mentioned in Chapter One athletic retirement has become a rapidly growing area of research in sport psychology (Brownrigg et al., 2012). Due to a sufficient amount of evidence proposing challenges unique to sport termination, there has been an increasing interest to examine retirement within the sporting context (Erpic et al., 2004; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Martin et al., 2013). The participants' experiences provide further evidence to support that athletic termination does not follow a typical path of retirement, consequently demanding the need for individual investigation. The difference between regular retirement and athletic retirement is related to the discrepancy between their experience and their peers' experience – educationally, socially, and professionally. The participants' narratives are consistent with existing literature supporting that ex-athletes are vulnerable to experiencing occupational difficulties due to a lack of education and professional knowledge (Erpic et al., 2004; Murphy, Petitpas & Brewer, 1996).

In addition, athletic identity has become a well-researched topic in the field of sport psychology. There is ample evidence to suggest that athletic identity – particularly salient and foreclosed identities – are prominent predicting factors in the quality of

transition (Park et al., 2013). Several participants revealed issues surrounding their new non-athletic self, either in relation to identity confusion or a devaluation in status. Both experiences in retirement are mirrored in pre-existing literature as athletes' transition into their new role as retirees (Surujlal & Zyl, 2014; Warriner & Lavalle, 2008).

Lastly, athletic retirement research has produced mixed findings surrounding the severity of sport termination for athletes. For instance, there is evidence to support that athletic retirement is like any other transition, with merely a short-lived adjustment period (Lally, 2007; Stier, 2007). In contrast, there is also evidence to suggest that retired athletes are more prone to mental health issues and experience substantial shifts occupationally, emotionally, and socially (Cosh et al., 2013; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Stephan et al., 2003; Surujlal & Zyl, 2014). In the present study the majority of participants experienced challenges in their retirement involving self-esteem issues, preoccupation with past performances, identity concerns, and an increase in depressive-like symptoms (Cosh et al., 2013; Stephan et al., 2003). Subsequently, the narratives seem to support the latter, suggesting athletic retirement does present difficulties during the transition period. The following section will briefly discuss prominent themes that were uncovered within the transcripts, as well as implications for future research.

**Prominent themes: New areas to explore.** Interestingly, an important theme involving intense healing emerged from the participants' experiences. The majority depicted transformative moments in their retirement through an expansion of awareness. The healing process was captured within the transcripts and was comprised of the following themes: discarding dysfunctional beliefs, breaking down one's athletic identity into ordinariness, wholeness through reintegration of self, and revisiting painful

experiences with acceptance. After reviewing the narratives it was evident that for some, athletic retirement was an opportunity of growth. Considering the unique variations between athletes, not every participant experienced identical forms of healing. The point however, is that up until now research has yet to address athletic retirement as an opportunity for personal transormation.

The majority of research in this area has primarily focused on identifying factors influencing the quality of athletic retirement. While this has been useful in understanding the connection between athletes and quality of retirement, an overemphasis on factorial consequences limits the ability to gain a complete understanding for the process of sport termination. In addition, the possibility for healing potentials in retirement could provide athletes with hope and encouragement for an inevitable future without sport. The intent is not to minimize the importance of previous research, but to merely open up new understandings into athletic retirement.

In addition, a theme found within the narratives was a denial of essence. Chapter Four discussed several examples where participants denied their authentic selves for the sake of performance or perceived obligations. Existing literature has yet to examine the denial of authenticity within a sporting context. Future research could benefit from exploring athletic termination from an existential lens, paying particular attention to the prevalence of "Bad Faith" in sport culture (Cox, 2012; Fox, 2009).

A final theme uncovered from the transcripts was that the majority of participants relied on their athletic performance and the attention they received from sport-related-others for validation. For some the positive mirroring facilitated a feeling of worth, specialness, and uniqueness. The demand for validation continued into retirement, where

behaviors such as obsessive exercising or unhealthy eating habits became a form of approval seeking. According to Almaas (2001) central narcissism is characterized by an intense demand to be seen and mirrored. As of yet, research has overlooked athletes' tendency to seek validation through performance, judges, or officials. A further exploration into this area using a transpersonal perspective could provide a deeper understanding into athletic retirement, including retirees increased proneness to low self-esteem, depression, and other mental health concerns (Cosh et al., 2013; Park et al., 2013; Stephan et al., 2003).

Lastly, external validity could be possible in terms of generalizing inferences towards other populations with similar features. While the eligibility criterion was limited, there are other populations that share parallel characteristics to that of an elite athlete. For instance, models are also exposed to an environment characterized by the media and limelight and are often critiqued and validated for their physical appearance or performance. Typically, a model's career is relatively short due to age and trends in the fashion industry. Other professions such as movie stars, musicians, and high profiled lawyers, share similar environments to elite athletes in terms of consistent recognition and admiration. Based on the speculations, future research may be interested in exploring retirement within populations that coincide with features of elite athletes.

**Implications for Athletes**

The present study offers several implications for both athletes currently involved in sport and former athletes in retirement. Firstly, the thematic analysis revealed four transformational themes thus providing evidence to support that retirement is a fluid process open to healing. The majority of participants experienced a personal

transformation in retirement, where they healed previous wounds and moved beyond their athletic identity into wholeness. Moreover, this study offers athletes a different perspective into sport termination. Rather than fear retirement athletes can welcome the opportunities that come with it.

Secondly, the findings from the study suggest athletes nearing sport termination should be prepared to revisit painful experiences from sport. Part of the healing process in Chapter Four involved confronting and embracing hurtful wounds from the past. Individuals begin to heal as they sit in these experiences without judgment or any attempt to escape (Masters, 2013; Tzu, 2014). In this way, athletes are more apt to be pro-active in their retirement versus trying to avoid feelings through suppression or avoidance.

This preparation also extends to athletes willingness to break down their glorified athletic identity and embrace their ordinariness. Based on the study, it may be useful for retired athletes to begin disentangling their authentic self from their sport. A chance for wholeness is possible through dismantling one's athletic grandiosity, accepting athletic mortality, and reintegrating all elements of self. This form of healing looked different for the majority of participants. For some, wholeness was achieved as they pursued new passions in retirement. Others found healing through untangling who they are from their achievements in sport. Nonetheless, future retirees should be prepared to expand their awareness, through challenging their athletic identity and embracing the freedom that comes with ordinariness.

Lastly, it is essential that retired athletes open themselves up to opportunities of healing. This final implication is integral to the present study since willingness and openness are fundamental elements for growth and awareness. Vulnerability was

presented in varying degrees during the research process. For one participant in particular, her healing unfolded within the interview as she willingly revisited painful experiences she had neglected for years. A couple participants were more reserved in their disclosures, demonstrating subtle resistance when probed to explore further. A plausible assumption to understand this behavior is that for some elite athletes they have become accustomed to the interview process, resulting in primed responses that have been rehearsed over the years. This covert reluctance made it difficult at times to connect to vulnerability. This information is valuable in that it supports an important theme uncovered in Phase Two – the tendency to deny one's essence and opt for performance. Nonetheless, this reinforces the importance of willingness and openness in athletic retirement.

The present study offers several implications for athletes preparing for retirement or already involved in the transition. The participants' experiences highlight a unique theme unfamiliar to athletic retirement literature, which is that transition can also be a time of growth and transformation. It is necessary that athletes not only prepare for potential challenges in retirement, but also be informed of available healing opportunities. Athletes retiring from sport with concerns or a sense of ambivalence should seek outside resources to facilitate their transition process. The following section will outline implications for counsellors working with athletes.

**Implications for Counsellors**

The findings from the presenting study offer several implications for counsellors working with elite athletes approaching sport termination or for those already in retirement. Based on the participants' experiences early retirement presents an array of

obstacles. I believe in order to provide adequate services it is critical that counsellors working with this population be acquainted with the particular adversities unique to elite athletes. For instance, the majority of participants described residual pain from previous experiences in sport that carried over into retirement. Counselors should be prepared to explore instances from the past, which may be influencing the former athlete's present.

In addition, the themes revealed in Phase Four involving transformative healing in athletic retirement provide several implications for counsellors working with retired athletes. To begin, cognitive behavioral therapy is effective in examining and altering dysfunctional thought patterns (Corey, 2013). Some participants identified thoughts and beliefs that were counterproductive to one's healing process. These beliefs had been reinforced throughout their athletic career. For instance, John experienced a notable shift in perspective, as he went from a combative approach to a perspective grounded in love. Thus, by clients challenging destructive thought patterns they will begin to explore and identify values and beliefs that are more aligned with their authentic self.

The content from this study also offers evidence to support that counsellors should be prepared to help clients disentangle their athletic identity, characterized for some by grandiosity and an attachment to specialness. Counsellors should also encourage clients to revisit previous wounds with acceptance. Bringing painful experiences into one's awareness without judgment or analysis can shift how individuals relate to those experiences thereafter (Masters, 2013). As illustrated by participants in this study, athletes have the ability to heal distressing wounds and reshape their connection to previous events. In order to facilitate this process, counsellors need to have worked through their own splits in consciousness and everyday narcissism. Providing a space for

clients to explore consciousness and heal trauma is dependant upon the counsellor's awareness (Cortright, 1997). It is my belief that an integrative approach, merging transpersonal psychology and existentialism, with an emphasis on the therapeutic relationship, would be most effective for working with retired athletes undergoing transformation.

Lastly, counsellors working with retired athletes should be available to facilitate clients in locating employment or exploring potential education routes. Most participants expressed feeling unprepared and unsupported in their transition, specifically in relation to receiving guidance for future career options. Resultantly, I would encourage counsellors to explore clients' sport related strengths that could translate into employment opportunities. Elite athletes demonstrate a variety of admirable qualities suited for the work force, such as resiliency and discipline. Considering career counselling from a constructivist approach could be useful in supporting former athletes transition into meaningful careers. This type of approach would be better suited than a traditional trait-and-factor approach, which emphasizes the individual in isolation of their environment McMahon, Watson, Patton (2014). However, a constructivist approach is concerned with the entirety of the individual, including context, experience, and narratives. For instance systems theory, an informant of constructivism, abides on the premise that nothing exists in solitude since systems are in relation with external influences and environments (McMahon, Watson, & Patton, 2014). From a constructivist career-counselling framework, former athletes could collaboratively work towards a new career, with the acknowledgement of the inevitable influence of one's previous sporting context.

Moreover, guidance from this perspective could also embrace narrative career

counselling, which is a variant of constructivism with a focus on identity and meaning (Mcllveen & Patton, 2007). The counsellor's objective is to re-develop the former athletes narrative and provide support in connecting themes in a meaningful manner. A strength of narrative career counselling is that the story telling process acts as a reflexive strategy, which encourages a deeper self-awareness within the client (Reid & West, 2011). From here, former athletes are able to work towards a personal construction of meaning. This process is explorative, resulting in the production of idiographic details and a truthful story of one's life. In addition, Krumboltz's (2009) theory on "Planned Happenstance" could also be useful for former athletes transitioning out competitive sport and seeking employment. Planned Happenstance refers to the belief that luck is not always coincidence, rather, individuals need to be intentional in where they position themselves so good luck can occur. In other terms, career counsellors need to encourage retired athletes to embrace "opportunity awareness" so they can identify opportunities when they arise and place themselves accordingly (Heibert, 2011, p. 5).

**Limitations**

The study presents several limitations fundamental to qualitative research. Subsequently, it is imperative that a detailed overview of the limitations be articulated when considering the findings. Firstly, the presenting study used a limited sample size of six participants (Males = 4; Females = 2), thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Based on the purpose of the study a small sample with unique experiences was required. While the study may not generalize to a large population, the rich descriptions from the participants can allow for transferability. The primary purpose, as outlined in Chapter One, was to understand the lived experience of athletic retirement. Due to the

nature of the study, an emphasis was placed on capturing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, with minimal concern for breadth. Nonetheless, a lack of universality limits the practicality of implementing policies or regulations to broader populations.

Furthermore, the findings from the study are based on the researcher's interpretation of participants' perception of an event. As a result, the data could potentially be limited to mirroring momentary reflections of athletic retirement. The obvious limitation here is that the findings do not reflect the entirety of the phenomenon, but merely a narrowed scope of moment-to-moment interpretation. To partially mitigate this, the researcher could have interviewed participants more than once to see variations in responses. Using more than one interview could also allow for further exploration into areas of interest. Due to circumstance the interviews only ranged between 60 and 120 minutes. The limited time made it difficult to establish rapport and encourage vulnerable risk taking in a singular session, therefore, a follow up session could have enriched the results. In addition, the interviews explored the complete journey of an athletic career, including participants' first involvement in sport, decision to leave sport, and retirement. While this information was valuable for the study, more time could have been spent focusing on life after sport. This could have led to further exploration and the development of stronger themes unfolding the transformational healing in athletic retirement.

Admittedly, the presenting study had several limitations, however, the overall findings captured the phenomenological experience of athletic retirement. The identified themes provide a new perspective into this field of research, specifically in regards to healing opportunities that are available to former athletes in retirement. The next section

will address the implications on the researcher conducting the study.

**Implicated Researcher**

Throughout the research process I have reflected on my own experience as a former competitive figure skater, noting the degree of resonation between the participants' narratives and my own. While I was never an Olympian or a World Champion, I competed at an elite level for many years until abruptly leaving sport at age sixteen. After careful inspection, the majority of themes seem to align with my own personal experiences. During my athletic career, I underwent severe disconnect from my essence. I remember a distinct conversation with my sport psychiatrist as she mirrored my suffering and lack of passion towards figure skating. She expressed to me that I did not have to continue with sport and could retire at any time. I dismissed her invitation and explained that quitting was not an option. Looking back, I felt obligated and trapped in my sport. This particular experience illustrates a prominent theme expressed in the present study, a denial of essence and disconnect from self. I spent two or three years of my athletic career battling an urge to quit. Consequently, my performance in sport, as well as my overall well-being, rapidly declined.

Similar to the majority of narratives, my retirement was characterized by challenges and pain surrounding my experiences in sport. For a long time I cringed whenever the topic of figure skating was brought up in conversation, since it was a reminder of my non-athletic status, my past performances, and failurehoods. For the last eight years I have dreamt about figure skating, usually surrounding the notion of a 'come-back'. This degree of pre-occupation is paralleled in John's narrative when he describes persistent rumination over his performance at the Olympics. I also connected with some

of the participants' attempts to seek validation in retirement. I recall turning to compulsive exercise, restricted eating, and obsessive studying behaviors to validate my sense of worth. The attention I received from my body and grades mirrored my specialness in a way that sport used too. My extreme behavior was also self-punitive and reflected my pain and judgment surrounding my retirement.

In terms of transformational healing, I have also experienced shifts in awareness through introspection and reintegration. Similar to Ray, my grandiosity and athletic identity was broken down through a series of humbling events. This provided me with an opportunity to acknowledge my ordinariness and central narcissistic tendencies. During the interview process I was also able to engage in vicarious healing as participants' narratives mirrored my own experience. Naturally, unconscious elements involving my own athletic career began to emerge and for this I am extremely grateful.

Finally, this entire adventure of completing a thesis has acted as a mirror for my own journey in retirement. The participants' willingness and spontaneous risk-taking during the interviews was inspiring and has contributed to my own healing process. While it was my initial passion that drew me towards this population, it was the participants' transparency and rich disclosures that made it a gratifying experience and a valuable contribution to the field of research.

**Conclusion**

The presenting study's aim was to answer the following questions: 1) What are former elite athletes' experiences in career retirement? 2) How does narcissism affect athletes' retirement process? Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the participants' experiences were transformed into a readable expression. Based on the emerging

themes, the participants experienced both challenges and healing opportunities during their retirement. While existing literature supports the latter, minimal work has been done to explore the healing potentials open to retired athletes. Moreover, the majority of participants aligned with characteristics pivotal to central narcissism in accordance with Almaas (2001): seeking validation in the other and denial of one's essence. A few indirectly worked through their narcissism as they described breaking down a sense of grandiosity into ordinariness and untangling their sense of self from their accomplishments. This study offers an introduction into athletic retirement from a transpersonal perspective as it incorporates central narcissisms role in elite athletes, as well as identifies attainable healing throughout the transition process.

**References**

Ackerman, R. A., Witt, E. A., Donnellan, M. B., Trzesniewski, K. H., Robins, R. W., & Kashy, D. A. (2010). What does the Narcissistic Personality Inventory really measure? *Assessment*, 1-21. doi:1073191110382845.

Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. (1991). *Backboards and blackboards: college athletes and role engulfment.* New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Alkema, G. E., & Alley, D. E. (2006). Gerontology's future: An integrative model for disciplinary advancement. *The Gerontologist*, *46*(5), 574-582.

Almaas, A. H. (2001). *The point of existence: Transformations of narcissism in self-realization*. Boston: Shambhala.

Ames, D. R., Rose, P., & Anderson, C. P. (2006). The NPI-16 as a short measure of narcissism. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *40*(4), 440-450.

Atkinson, R., & Flint, J. (2001). Accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations: snowball research strategies. *Social research update*, *33*(1), 1-4.

Baillie, P. H., & Danish, S. J. (1992). Understanding the career transition of athletes. *The Sport Psychologist*, *6*(1), 77-98.

Baines, T. (2012, July 20). Journey through darkness. *Ottawa Sun.* Retrieved from http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/FigureSkating/2012/07/20/20010091.html

Beamon, K. (2012). "I'm a baller": Athletic identity foreclosure among African-American former student athletes. *Journal of African American Studies, 16*(2), 195-208. doi:10:1007/s1211-012-9211-8

Becker, E. (1973) The denial of death. New York: Free Press.

Bednář, M. (2014). Sport and authenticity. *Journal of Human Sport and Exercise, 9*(1), 201-209.

Bender, D. S. (2012). Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Reflecting on Narcissism. *Journal Of Clinical Psychology*, *68*, 877-885. doi:10.1002/jclp.21892

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, *15*(2), 219-234.

Blinde, E.M., & Greendorfer, S.L. (1985). A reconceptualization of the process of leaving the role of competitive athlete. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport, 20*(1/2), 87-94.

Blinde, E.M., & Stratta, T.M. (1992). The 'sport career death' of college athletes: Involuntary and unanticipated sports exits. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, *15*(1), 3-20.

Biography.com Editors. (2015, January 18). Lance Armstrong biography: Cyclist, philanthropist [Web log post]. Retrieved from http://www.biography.com/people/lance-armstrong-9188901.

Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., & Linder, D. E. (1993). Athletic identity: Hercules' muscles or Achilles heel?. *International Journal Of Sport Psychology*, *24*(2), 237-254.

Brownrigg, A., Burr, V., Locke, A., & Bridger, A. J. (2012). You don't know what's around the corner: A qualitative study of professional footballers in England facing career transition. *Qualitative Methods in Psychology Bulletin* (14). ISSN 2044-0820

Bruner, J. (2004). Life as narrative. *Social research*, *71*(3), 691-710.

Burgo, J. (2012). Lance Armstrong: The hero as narcissist. Retrieved January 18, 2015, from http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/shame/201210/lance-armstrong-the-hero-narcissist

Cain, N. M., Pincus, A. L., & Ansell, E. B. (2008). Narcissism at the crossroads: Phenotypic description of pathological narcissism across clinical theory, social/personality psychology, and psychiatric diagnosis. *Clinical Psychology Review,28*, 638–656.

Chaney, K. J. (2009). *Examining Retirement from Athletics Through a Gerontological Lens* (Doctoral dissertation, Miami University).

Coakley, J. J. (1983). Leaving competitive sport: Retirement or rebirth?. *Quest*, *35*, 1-11. doi:10.1080/00336297.1983.10483777

Cohen, S. B., Sheridan, S., & Ciccotti, M. G. (2011). Return to sports for professional baseball players after surgery of the shoulder or elbow. *Sports Health: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, *3*(1), 105-111.

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational researcher*, *19*(5), 2-14.

Corey, G. (2013). *Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy (9th ed.)*. Belmont, CA, US: Thomson Brooks/Cole Publishing Co.

Cortright, B. (1997). *Psychotherapy and spirit: Theory and practice in transpersonal psychotherapy*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Cosh, S., Crabb, S., & LeCouteur, A. (2013). Elite athletes and retirement: Identity, choice, and agency. *Australian Journal Of Psychology*, *65*(2), 89-97.

doi:10.1111/j.1742-9536.2012.00060.x

Cox, G. (2012). *The Existentialist's Guide to Death, the Universe and Nothingness*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.

Crook, J. M., & Robertson, S. E. (1991). Transition out of elite sport. *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 22*, 115-127.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Flow: The psychology of optimal performance. NY*:* Cambridge University Press.

Dale, G. A. (1996). Existential phenomenology: Emphasizing the experience of the athlete in sport psychology research. *The Sport Psychologist, 10*, 307–321.

Deleuze, G. (2006). *Nietzsche and philosophy*. Columbia University Press.

Dennis, D. (2009) *Living, dying, grieving.* Mississauga, ON: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, LLC.

Erpič, S. C., Wylleman, P., & Zupančič, M. (2004). The effect of athletic and non-athletic factors on the sports career termination process. *Psychology Of Sport And Exercise*, *5*(1), 45-59. doi:10.1016/S1469-0292(02)00046-8

Finlay, L. (2012). Unfolding the phenomenological research process: Iterative stages of "seeing afresh". *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 0022167812453877.

Fox, M. A. (2009). *The remarkable existentialists*. Humanity Books.

Gadamer, H.G. (1976). *Philosophical heremeneutics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gallant-Churko, J. (2014). *Surrender: a transitional force for psychological growth*

(Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from PQDTOPEN. (1528224)

Garrett, M. (2010). *Under His Helmet: A Football Devotional*. Tate Publishing.

Gentile, B., Miller, J. D., Hoffman, B. J., Reidy, D. E., Zeichner, A., & Campbell, W. K. (2013). A test of two brief measures of grandiose narcissism: The Narcissistic Personality Inventory–13 and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16. *Psychological assessment*, *25*, 1120-1136.

Glasser, B., & Strauss, A. (1963) *Awareness of Dying*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.

Glick, I. D., & Horsfall, J. L. (2005). Diagnosis and psychiatric treatment of athletes. *Clinics in sports medicine*, *24*, 771-781. doi:10.1016/j.csm.2005.03.007

Goldberg, D. P., & Williams, P. (1988). *A user's guide to the General Health Questionnaire*. Windsor, UK: NFER-Nelson.

Grove, J. R., Lavallee, D., & Gordon, S. (1997). Coping with retirement from sport: The influence of athletic identity. *Journal Of Applied Sport Psychology*, *9*(2), 191-203. doi:10.1080/10413209708406481

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field methods*, *18*(1), 59-82.

Hammond, T., Gialloreto, C., Kubas, H., & Davis IV, H. H. (2013). The prevalence of failure-based depression among elite athletes. *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine*, *23*(4), 273-277.

Harris, A. (2014, February 16). Ian thorpe did not look at his medals for 10 years. *The Sunday Telegraph.* Retrieved from http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/ian- thorpe-did-not-look-at-his-

olympic-medals-for-10-years/story-fni0cx12

1226821339130?nk=c63ec7a952cbcdbf461843a7781cacc6

Harrison, C., & Lawrence, S. (2003). African-American student-athletes' perception of

career transition in sport: a qualitative and visual elicitation. *Race, Ethnicity*

*and Education, 6*, 373–394.

Hefferon, K. M., & Ollis, S. (2006). 'Just clicks': An interpretive phenomenological

analysis of professional dancers' experience of flow. *Research in Dance*

*Education*, *7*(2), 141-159.

Heird, E. B., & Steinfeldt, J. A. (2013). An interpersonal psychotherapy approach to

counseling student athletes: Clinical implications of athletic identity. *Journal Of*

*College Counseling*, *16*(2), 143-157. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1882.2013.00033.x

Hiebert, B. (2011). Comprehensive guidance and counseling in the schools: Career-life

planning for all (Research Report). Retrieved from University of Calgary

homepages website: http://homepages.ucalgary.ca/~hiebert/research/files/Hiebert-

Portugal-2010-Paper.pdf

Holtzman, N. S., Vazire, S., & Mehl, M. R. (2010). Sounds like a narcissist: Behavioral

manifestations of narcissism in everyday life. *Journal of Research in Personality*,

*44*(4), 478-484.

Hopson, B. (1981). Response to the papers by Schlossberg, Brammer and Abrego.

Counseling Psychologist, 9(2), 36-39.

Kafle, N. P. (2013). Hermeneutic phenomenological research method simplified. *Bodhi:*

*An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *5*(1), 181-200.

Kastenbaum, R. (1993). Reconstructing death in postmodern society. *OMEGA-Journal of*

*Death and Dying, 27*(1), 75-89.

Kerr, G., & Dacyshyn, A. (2000). The retirement experiences of elite, female gymnasts. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 12,* 115-133. doi: 10.1080/10413200008404218

Kierkegaard, S. (1980). The Concept of Anxiety. *Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson, trans*.

Kitto, S. C., Chesters, J., & Grbich, C. (2008). Quality in qualitative research. *Medical Journal of Australia*, *188*(4), 243-245.

Kohut, H. (2009). *The restoration of the self*. University of Chicago Press.

Kohut, H., & Wolf, E. S. (1978). The disorders of the self and their treatment: An outline. *International journal of Psychoanalysis*, *59*(4), 413-425.

Krumboltz, J. D. (2009). The happenstance learning theory. *Journal of Career Assessment*, *17*(2), 135-154.

Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On Death and Dying*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Kübler-Ross, E., & Kessler, D. (2005). *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster

Kurzman, C., Anderson, C., Key, C., Lee, O. Y., Moloney, M., Silver, A., & Van Ryn, W. M. (2007). Celebrity status. *Sociological Theory, 25*(4), 347-367.

Kvale, S. (1996). Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lajoie, D. H., & Shapiro, S. I. (1992). Definitions of transpersonal psychology: The first twenty- three years. *Journal Of Transpersonal Psychology*, *24*(1), 79-98.

Lally, P. (2007). Identity and athletic retirement: A prospective study. *Psychology Of Sport And Exercise*, *8*(1), 85-99. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2006.03.003

Laverty, S. M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: A comparison of historical and methodological considerations. *International journal of qualitative methods*, *2*(3), 21-35.

Lerch, S. H. (1984). 'Athletic retirement as social death: An overview'. In N. Theberge and P. Donnelly (Eds.), *Sport and the sociological imagination: Refereed Proceedings of the 3rd annual conference of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport* (pp. 259-272). Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press.

Luchner, A. F., Houston, J. M., Walker, C., & Houston, M. A. (2011). Exploring the relationship between two forms of narcissism and competitiveness. *Personality And Individual Differences*, *51*(6), 779-782. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2011.06.033

Lynch, A. (2011). *Success beyond sport.* United States: Annette Lynch

Macri, K. J. (2012). Not Just a Game: Sport and Society in the United States. *Student Pulse*, *4*(08).

Martin, L. A., Fogarty, G. J., & Albion, M. J. (2014). Changes in athletic identity and life satisfaction of elite athletes as a function of retirement status. *Journal Of Applied Sport Psychology*, *26*, 96-110. doi:10.1080/10413200.2013.798371

Masters, A.R. (2013). *Emotional intimacy: a comprehensive guide for connecting with the power of your emotions.* Boulder, CO: Sounds True.

Maxwell, K., Donnellan, M. B., Hopwood, C. J., & Ackerman, R. A. (2011). The two faces of Narcissus? An empirical comparison of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and the Pathological Narcissism Inventory. *Personality and Individual*

*Differences*, *50*(5), 577 582.

McIlveen, P., & Patton, W. (2007). Narrative career counselling: Theory and exemplars of practice. *Australian Psychologist*, *42*(3), 226-235.

McKay, J., Niven, A. G., Lavallee, D., & White, A. (2008). Sources of strain among elite UK track athletes.

McKnight, K., Bernes, K., Gunn, T., Chorney, D., Orr, D., & Bardick, A. (2009). Life after sport: Athletic career transition and transferable skills. *Journal of Excellence*, *13*, 63-77.

McMahon, M., Watson, M., & Patton, W. (2014). Context-resonant systems perspectives in career theory. In *Handbook of Career Development* (pp. 29-41). Springer New York.

Mehl, M. R., Pennebaker, J. W., Crow, D. M., Dabbs, J., & Price, J. H. (2001). The Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR): A device for sampling naturalistic daily activities and conversations. *Behavior Research Methods Instruments & Computers, 33*, 517-523.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *The Phenomenology of Perception.* London: Routledge.

Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis.* In Merriam, S. B (Ed.). Introduction to qualitative research (3-17). San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Milner, M. (2010). Is celebrity a new kind of status system? *Society, 47*(5), 379-387. doi:10:1007/s12115-010-9347-x

Murphy, G. M., Petitpas, A. J., & Brewer, B. W. (1996). Identity foreclosure, athletic identity and career maturity in intercollegiate athletes. *The Sport Psychologist, 10,*

239–246.

Nesti, M. (2004). *Existential psychology and sport: Theory and application*. Routledge.

Nesti, M. (2007). Suffering, sacrifice, sport psychology and the spirit. *Sport and spirituality: An introduction*, 151-169.

Nesti, M., Littlewood, M., O'Halloran, L., Eubank, M., & Richardson, D. (2012). Critical moments in elite premiership football: Who do you think you are?. *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research*, *56*(1), 23-32.

Nixon, G. (2012). Transforming the addicted person's counterfeit quest for wholeness through three stages of recovery: A Wilber transpersonal spectrum of development clinical perspective. *International Journal Of Mental Health And Addiction*, *10*(3), 407-427. doi:10.1007/s11469-011-9365-y

Osborne, J. W. (1990). Some basic existential-phenomenological research methodology for counsellors. *Canadian Journal Of Counselling*, *24*(2), 79-91.

Park, S., Lavallee, D., & Tod, D. (2013). Athletes' career transition out of sport: A systematic review. *International Review Of Sport And Exercise Psychology*, *6*(1), 22-53. doi:10.1080/1750984X.2012.687053

Paulhus, D. L., & Williams, K. M. (2002). The dark triad of personality: Narcissism, machiavellianism, and psychopathy. *Journal of research in personality*, *36*(6), 556-563.

Pavlenko, A. (2002). Narrative study: Whose story is it, anyway?. *TESOL quarterly*, *36*(2), 213-218.

Pearson, R. E., & Petitpas, A. J. (1990). Transitions of athletes: Developmental and preventive perspectives. *Journal Of Counseling & Development*, *69*(1), 7-10.

doi:10.1002/j.1556-6676.1990.tb01445.x

Petitpas, A., & Champagne, D. E. (1988). Developmental programming for intercollegiate athletes. *Journal Of College Student Development*, *29*(5), 454-460.

Pincus, A. L., & Lukowitsky, M. R. (2010). Pathological narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder. *Annual Review Of Clinical Psychology*, *6*421-446. doi:10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.121208.131215

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1991). Narrative and self-concept. *Journal of narrative and life history*, *1*(2-3), 135-153.

Raskin, R., & Terry, H. (1988). A principal-components analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and further evidence of its construct validity. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *54*(5), 890.

Raskin, R. N., & Hall, C. S. (1979). A narcissistic personality inventory. *Psychological Reports, 45*, 590.

Reid, H., & West, L. (2011). "Telling tales": Using narrative in career guidance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *78*(2), 174-183.

Rhodewalt, F., & Peterson, B. (2009). Narcissism. In M. R. Leary & R. H. Hoyle (Eds.), *Handbook of individual differences in social behavior* (pp. 547–560). New York: The Guilford Press.

Roberts, R., Woodman, T., Hardy, L., Davis, L., & Wallace, H. M. (2013). Psychological skills do not always help performance: The moderating role of narcissism. *Journal Of Applied Sport Psychology*, *25*(3), 316-325. doi:10.1080/10413200.2012.731472

Ronkainen, N. J., Harrison, M. E., & Ryba, T. V. (2014). Running, being, and Beijing—

    An existential exploration of a runner identity. *Qualitative Research in*

    *Psychology*, *11*(2), 189-210.

Rosenberg, E. (1984). Athletic retirement as social death: Concepts and perspectives.

    *Sport and the sociological imagination*, 245-258.

Sanderson, J., & Kassing, J. W. (2011). *Sports media: transformation, integration,*

    *consumption.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Sartre, J. P. (1953). *Being and nothingness: an essay on phenomenological entology*.

    New York: Washington Square Press.

Schlossberg, N.K. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition.

    Counseling Psychologist, 9(2), 2-18.

Slusher, H. (1967). Man, sport and existence: A critical analysis. Philadelphia: Lea &

    Febiger.

Smith, J. L., & McManus, A. (2008). A review on transitional implications for retiring

    elite athletes: What happens when the spot light dims? *The Open Sports*

    *Sciences Journal, 1*, 45-49.

Stack, G. J. (1974). Aristotle and Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics. *Journal of the History*

    *of Philosophy*, *12*(1), 1-19.

Stephan, Y., Bilard, J., Ninot, G., & Delignières, D. (2003). Repercussions of transition

    out of elite sport on subjective well-being: A one-year study. *Journal Of Applied*

    *Sport Psychology*, *15*(4), 354-371. doi:10.1080/714044202

Stier, J. (2007). Game, name, and fame--Afterwards, will I still be the same? A social

    psychological study of career, role exit and identity. *International Review*

*For The Sociology Of Sport*, *42*(1), 99-111. doi:10.1177/1012690207081830

Stiles, W. B. (1993). Quality control in qualitative research. *Clinical psychology review*, *13*(6), 593-618.

Surujlal, J., & Zyl, V. (2014). Understanding the dynamics of sport-career transition of olympic athletes. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 5*(20), 477-484.

Swain, D. A. (1991). Withdrawal from sport and Schlossberg's model of transitions. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *8*(2), 152-160.

Taylor, C. (1992). The ethics of authenticity. Cambridge (Mass.) and London: Harvard University Press

Tazegul, Ü., & Soykan, A.(2013). The comparison of narcissism levels of the athletes at Individual sports according to their socio-demographic features. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research, 3*(7), 128-133.

Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2012). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, *11*(1), 80-96.

Tyrance, S. C., Harris, H. L., & Post, P. B. (2013). Predicting positive career planning a attitude among NCAA Division I College student-athletes. *Journal Of Clinical Sport Psychology*, *7*(1), 22-40.

Tzu, G. (2014). *Awakening in the paradox of darkness*. Victoria, BC: Friesen Press.

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London, ON: The Althouse Press.

Van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Vickers, E. (2014). Life after sport: Depression in retired athletes. *The Sport in Mind.*
  Retrieved from http://www.thesportinmind.com/articles/life-after-sport-
  depression-in-retired- athletes/

Wallace, H. M., & Baumeister, R. F. (2002). The performance of narcissists rises and
  falls with perceived opportunity for glory. *Journal Of Personality And Social
  Psychology*, *82*(5), 819-834. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.82.5.819

Warriner, K., & Lavalle, D. (2008). The retirement experiences of elite female gymnasts:
  Self identity and the physical self. *Journal Of Applied Sport Psychology*, *20*(3),
  301-317. doi:10.1080/10413200801998564

Watson, N. J., & Nesti, M. (2005). The role of spirituality in sport psychology consulting:
  An analysis and integrative review of literature. *Journal of Applied Sport
  Psychology*, *17*(3), 228-239.

Werthner, P., & Orlick, T. (1986). Retirement experiences of successful Olympic athletes.
  *International Journal Of Sport Psychology*, *17*(5), 337-363.

Wilber, K. (1986). *The spectrum of development.* In K. Wilber, J. Engler, & D. Brown
  (Eds.), *Transformations of Consciousness* (pp. 65-189). Boston: Shambhala.

Wilber, K. (2000). *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*.
  Boston, MA, US: Shambhala Publications.

Wolinsky, S. H. (1999). *The Way of the Human: The quantum psychology
  notebooks. Volume II–The False Core and the False Self*. Capitola, CA: Quantum
  Institute.

Yalom, I. (1999) *Momma and the Meaning of Life: Tales of Psychotherapy.* London:
  Piatkus.

University of
Lethbridge

Faculty of Education

**Appendix A:**

**Interview Protocol**

Project: Exploring athletic retirement

Time of Interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:

[Purpose of the study][[What will be done with the collected data][Approximate interview length]

1. To begin, can you please describe your retirement experience from sport?

2. What has life been like since your athletic retirement?

3. What was the most meaningful part of retirement for you?

4. What have been the implications, if any, of your retirement from sport?

[Thank them for their cooperation][Assure their responses will be kept confidential][Schedule if a follow up interview is needed]

# Appendix B:

# Participant Consent Form

**Phenomenological Hermeneutic Approach to Understanding the**

**Transformational Journey in Athletic Retirement and Everyday Narcissism**

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled Phenomenological Hermeneutic Approach to Understanding the Transformational Journey in Athletic Retirement and Everyday Narcissism that is being conducted by McMillan Wilkowich. McMillan is a Graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by email m.wilkowich@uleth.ca or by phone (403-607-2477).

As a Graduate student, I am encouraged to conduct research as part of the requirements for the degree in Masters of Education in Counselling Addiction and Mental Health. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Gary Tzu. You may contact my supervisor at (403-329-2644).

The purpose of this research project is to provide new understandings into athletic retirement by exploring elite athletes' lived experience, while also considering the role of narcissism in this process.

Sport psychology research has identified predicting variables and negative effects of athletic retirement on athletes, however, there is still a lack of in-depth research exploring an athlete's transformational journey retiring from sport. In addition, research has yet to focus on narcissism in former athletes and how this influences the transitional period in retirement. There is still plenty that researchers do not know about this unique experience between an athlete and sport termination. More knowledge into athletes' lived experience will provide a useful framework to facilitate and support ex-athletes through this transition.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you might fulfill the study requirements. The eligibility criteria of study participants is the following:

1) You have been a member of a particular national or professional sport team for two years

2) You have retired from sport without intentions of returning.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include individual interviews that will approximately be 60-120 minutes in length. Further information might be necessary in order to clarify the data and ensure the accuracy of the transcription. After the interviews, participants will be asked whether or not they agree to receive a follow up phone call.

The interview will include questions that pertain to participants lived experience of their athletic retirement by looking at life during sport and life after sport. The transcripts will be divided into manageable and meaningful cluster statements from which salient themes will be identified.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you including time and possible emotional disturbances from re-telling one's experience in sport retirement.

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include an increase in self-awareness and relief that can come from disclosing one's experience with athletic retirement. In relation to the benefits to society, the study will provide a deeper understanding into athletic retirement, which can provide a more accurate framework to help former athletes during this period of transition and minimize the negative outcomes associated with athletic career termination.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. At any point during the study you may withdraw from the study without any consequences or any explanation needed. At the time of withdrawal the participant will be provided with the option to either include their data in the study or have their data completely removed from the study.

To make sure that participants continue to consent to participate in this research, the researcher will use her own discretion to remind the participants of this right if he/she appears to be in any distress during the study.

In terms of protecting your anonymity you have the right to decide whether or not you would like to include your real name in the findings. If you decide to remain anonymous a pseudonym name will be used and any information that could threaten your anonymity will be left out.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Files will be stored on a digital audio

recorder and an USB external storage drive. Both will be password protected. The function 'secure delete' will be applied to ensure full destruction of the data. Electronic and hard copy data will be destroyed after 5 years. The only individuals with access to this information will be the researcher (McMillan Wilkowich) and her supervisor (Gary Tzu).

To ensure confidentiality, all interviews will be transcribed by the researcher. Confidentiality of the data will be protected through password protected storage.

Data will be reported in the form of thesis and may be presented in the form of a published article(s) and/or a conference presentations(s).

In addition to being able to contact the researcher at the above emails, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.


| *Name of Participant* | *Signature* | *Date* |

**A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.**

University of
Lethbridge

Faculty of Education

# Appendix C:

# Narcissistic Personality Inventory – 16 (NPI-16)

Read each pair of statements below and place an "X" by the one that comes closest to describing your feelings and beliefs about yourself. You may feel that neither statement describes you well, but pick the one that comes closest. **Please complete all pairs**.

1.　　___ I really like to be the center of attention

　　___ It makes me uncomfortable to be the center of attention

2.　　___ I am no better or nor worse than most people

　　___ I think I am a special person

3.　　___ Everybody likes to hear my stories

　　___ Sometimes I tell good stories

4.　　___ I usually get the respect that I deserve

　　___ I insist upon getting the respect that is due me

5.　　___ I don't mind following orders

　　___ I like having authority over people

6.　　___ I am going to be a great person

　　___ I hope I am going to be successful

8.    ___ I expect a great deal from other people

      ___ I like to do things for other people

9.    ___ I like to be the center of attention

      ___ I prefer to blend in with the crowd

10.    ___ I am much like everybody else

      ___ I am an extraordinary person

11.    ___ I always know what I am doing

      ___ Sometimes I am not sure of what I am doing

12.    ___ I don't like it when I find myself manipulating people

      ___ I find it easy to manipulate people

13.    ___ Being an authority doesn't mean that much to me

      ___ People always seem to recognize my authority

14.    ___ I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so

      ___ When people compliment me I sometimes get embarrassed

15.    ___ I try not to be a show off

      ___ I am apt to show off if I get the chance

16.     ___ I am more capable than other people

       ___ There is a lot that I can learn from other people


Ames, Daniel R., Rose, Paul, and Anderson, Cameron P. (2006). The NPI-16 as a short

    measure of narcissism. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40, 440-450.