

Retiring from Intercollegiate Athletics: A Phenomenological Investigation

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ABSTRACT

The major objective of this research was to explore the experience of retiring from sport following a career in college athletics. The phenomenological method was used to interview five retired athletes and gather data. A clearer understanding of the experience of the participant is established by the unstructured interview style inherent within the phenomenological method, allowing the participant to control the interview and be the expert of his or her own experience. Following these interviews, a research group analyzed the transcripts looking for themes that existed for all five participants. Four main themes with sub-themes emerged from this analysis, including **Identity**, with the sub-themes of **Void**, **Emotion**, and **Life Shift/Redirection**; **The Game**, with the sub-themes of **Stories of Past History**, **Difference between Levels of Sport**, **Contentment in Reminiscing**, and **Retirement as a Process**; **Body**, with the sub-themes of **Fitness/Being in Shape**, **Injury**, and **Speed**; and **Others**, with the sub-themes of **The Team (Coaches/Teammates)** and **The Community (Family/Friends)**. It is the hope of the author that this research will provide a clearer understanding of the experience of retiring from sport so that coaches, parents, counselors, and the athletes themselves can take steps toward having a successful and constructive retirement.

INTRODUCTION

Retirement in society today can be considered from several different perspectives, with the most common of these perspectives being the employee who ends his or her work career. This paper will address another type of retirement that affects large numbers of individuals every year: retirement from sport. The distress experienced by athletes retiring and leaving a sport for the first time is a significant issue in sports today (Abbot, Weinmann, Bailey, & Laguna, 1999). Obviously, retirement from sport can take place at any level from elementary school, to college, to the professional ranks. Few athletic careers extend beyond college, with only 1% of all student athletes continuing their sport careers in professional athletics (Stankovich, Meeker, & Henderson, 2001). This fact implies that 99% of college athletes retire at or before the end of their college careers.

Academic advisement for students participating in intercollegiate athletics is an important and growing area in student personnel services in higher education (Gabbard & Halischak, 1993). Academic performance and athletic performance often have a bi-directional influence for many athletes. It is therefore incumbent on the academic advisors to have an appreciation and understanding of the experience of the

student athlete. All intercollegiate athletes retire at some point, with the overwhelming statistical majority doing so after college. Reasons for retirement include injury, loss of motivation, deselection, graduation, or leaving college. The better the academic advisor understands the individual athlete's reasons for and experience of retirement, the better he or she will be able to help the student athlete get through this potentially difficult period. An overview of the research methodology used in the study as well as a literature review of past research on phenomenology, retirement, and sport-retirement will be provided.

BACKGROUND

Little research has been done to investigate the negative stress experienced by the specific population of ex-athletes (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Stankovich et al., 2001). According to Baillie and Danish (1992), this lack of research is for three reasons. First, studies on career transitions have been generally focused on older adult or geriatric populations. Second, the percentage of individuals from the general population participating in sport may not be significant enough to warrant the effort that a research study demands. And third, there is a lack of applicable models involving athletic retirement to facilitate the research process.

Research Models Used for Sport Retirement

Drahota and Eitzen (1998) took the third factor discussed by Baillie and Danish (1992) into account and attempted to apply Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory to the retirement process of an athlete. In this study, Drahota and Eitzen (1998) successfully applied the four stages of Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory—*doubts, seeking alternatives, the turning point, and creating the ex-role*—to the experience of an athlete retiring. They did this by holding 27 face-to-face interviews with ex-athletes from a variety of sports, collecting data qualitatively and relating it to the four stages of role exit (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998).

Along these same lines, Grove, Lavelle, Gordon, and Harvey (1998) attempted to use the account-making model of Harvey, Weber, and Orbuch (1990) as an outline for understanding the psychological distress that results from the retirement process of an athlete. In their account-making model, Harvey et al. (1990) describe the account as the formation of a narrative about the traumatic event experienced and saw the ability of the individual to develop this narrative as the essential element in their therapeutic process. In their application of the account-making model, Grove et al. (1998) viewed retiring from sport as a traumatic event in the lives of the retired athletes. They collected data qualitatively through structured interviews over the areas of *Traumatic Event and Outcry, Denial and Intrusion, Working Through, and Completion and Identity Change*. Upon analyzing the interview transcripts, Grove et al. (1998) concluded that the model by Harvey, Weber, and Orbuch (1990) was applicable to the retirement process of athletes.

However, these studies were unique due to the fact that the researchers collected data qualitatively, contrasting with the majority of research done in the field that uses quantitative approaches and Likert-type scales. This quantification of data and use of Likert-type scales has left the field of sport psychology with a lack of

qualitative research on the topic of athletic retirement. Examples of recent studies that are quantitative include those done by Blinde and Stratta (1992) and by Abbot, Weinmann, Bailey, and Laguna (1999). Furthermore, Hayslip et al., (1997) used a Likert-type measure to study the traditional form of retirement from work, using the Retirement Anxiety Scale to assess the anxiety that academicians had towards the retirement process.

Nevertheless, to thoroughly study and understand the topic of retirement, and in particular, retirement from sport, knowledge of the actual experience of individuals who have lived through retiring from sport is necessary. Leong and Ponterotto (2003) advocate a research paradigm shift to constructionist methodologies, such as qualitative phenomenology, stating that these are the only methodologies suited to give marginalized and under-studied populations a voice. Hopefully, the broad range of reactions to and causes of the retirement of athletes can be revealed and examined.

Impact of Retirement on the Athlete

Every year, thousands of athletes become ex-athletes, enduring the process and the effects of retirement from sport. As noted by Isaksson and Johansson (2000), retirement brings about a number of stressors in the life of the ex-worker. However, the stress experience is compounded for the athlete during retirement. This transition period holds more stress-related significance to the athlete due to the lifelong process of socialization into sport that athletes experience and grow accustomed to in our culture (Baillie & Danish, 1992). As noted by Baillie and Danish (1992), this socialization begins as early as elementary school, with children being reinforced for participation in sports by family, friends, and teachers. Over the years of development, this socialization, combined with success in sports by the athlete, leads to feelings of prestige and ultimately, an ego-driven creation of self-identity/image centered upon the role of athlete. An unfortunate consequence of this socialization and athlete-centered identity is that many athletes focus on developing their physical skills and undergo what Baillie and Danish (1992) describe as role foreclosure. In this process, athletes focus so much energy on sports that little is left for other aspects of their personal development, causing their education/academics to suffer and their self-esteem to hinge upon their athletic performance (Baillie & Danish, 1992). Given a self-identity concentrated on athleticism that is built up through the socialization process that the athlete experiences, along with the lack of development of other roles by the athlete, the stage is set for a stress reaction in retirement when the role of athlete is no longer available. This issue has been emphasized by Drahotka and Eitzen (1998), who point out that retirement is a particularly difficult time for ex-athletes leaving a career in sport because they lose what had been the focus of their being and identity for the majority of their lives. Once they have left sport, the retired athlete is then forced to re-associate his/her personal identity (Stankovich et al., 2001). Other possible losses for the retired athlete include the camaraderie with teammates, physical prowess, adoration of fans and peers, and the intense rush and highs of competition (Drahotka & Eitzen, 1998).

Finally, as Drahotka and Eitzen (1998) assert, athletes retiring from sport are doing so at a very young age (typically 18 through 23). This young age comes into play when retired athletes have to start a new life and career differing from the sport-role identity that they have had all their lives. As Drahotka and Eitzen (1998) report, over-focusing time and effort on this sport-role identity has left college athletes without the

skills of many college students, leaving these young, retired athletes with fewer of the skills needed to survive financially (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998). This skill deprivation found in college athletes is further emphasized by Stankovich et al., (2001), who assert that college athletes risk being deficient in career-related developmental tasks normally accomplished by their peers in the university community. Finally, Blann (1985) described these college athletes as being less capable of forming educational and career goals than other college students. Thus, these young ex-athletes have the majority of their lives ahead of them after sport to attempt to overcome the educational, economic, and self-developmental obstacles that sport has created.

Research by Hayslip et al. (1997) investigated control in making the final decisions regarding if and when to retire from a career in academia as a prediction of psychological stress. In their study, Hayslip et al. (1997) found that those who had control in making the final decision of when to retire were happier and more satisfied in retirement than those who were forced or told when they had to retire. The relevance of this finding to the retirement of an athlete is strengthened by the fact that many athletes end their careers because they are no longer wanted due to injury, lack of ability, or diminishing physical skills. Thus, the majority of athletes leaving sport would fall into the Hayslip et al. (1997) category of being forced out of their job. They would experience less satisfaction in retirement than those who had control over their decision to retire.

Potts (2001) reiterates these numerous stressors faced by athletes leaving sport and describes the phenomenon as post-athlete syndrome, stating that it affects most athletes at the end of their careers. Stankovich et al. (2001) include "loss of appetite, weight fluctuation, skipped menstrual cycles, insomnia, mood changes, a sense of being out of control, sadness about the loss of teammates, decline in motivation, and a lack of trust in others," (p. 82) as common effects of retirement from sport on college male and female athletes.

Further research on the psychological effects during the retirement process of ex-athletes is needed. Such research should improve helping professionals' understanding of the retirement experience and possibly enable them to assist athletes in developing better coping strategies for the retirement experience.

Phenomenology and Sport

A substantial amount of research has been done in the field of athletics using the existential-phenomenological/hermeneutic approach to describe the experiences of athletes in a wide variety of sports. The athletic experiences of playing soccer, playing women's basketball, being coached, and having a peak performance experience have been described.

Hughson and Inglis (2002) phenomenologically described the experience of playing soccer in the three major themes of *Player-Body-Subject*, *Practical knowledge and actions*, and *Form of soccer field space*. Johnson (1998) used the existential-phenomenological method to portray an athlete's experience of being coached, finding the three themes of *There for me/Not there for me*, *Knowing and being known personally*, and *Authority/Power*. D'Anniballe (1996) used the approach to depict elite female college basketball players' experiences, finding the three themes of *Relationships*, *"I" in team*, and *Play*. These three themes took on meaning in the context, or ground, of *Team*. Finally, Privette (1981) used phenomenology to find that the experience of peak

performance has the six themes of *Prior interest*, *Involvement*, *Clear focus*, *Intention*, *Spontaneity*, and *Peak experience*.

While researchers in the four studies above used the phenomenological method to study topics associated with sport, others have discussed the appropriateness of the use of phenomenology to explore sport-related issues. Fahlberg, Fahlberg, and Gates examined the use of the existential-phenomenological method to describe the experience of exercise, concluding that phenomenology's focus on "how...exercise is experienced rather than on variations in how it can be observed" (1992, p. 182) is essential in order to improve research on exercise behavior. Dale (1996) advocated the effectiveness of using phenomenology to describe the athlete's experience in sport psychology. Despite the many phenomenological studies of sport and the appropriateness of phenomenology as a method used to study sport, no research has been done using existential phenomenology/hermeneutics to describe the experience of retirement from intercollegiate athletics.

Phenomenology and Retirement

Research has been carried out using phenomenology to describe retirement but without focusing on sport as the career being terminated, or athletes as the population retiring. Schafler (1996) used the ontological hermeneutic model to obtain an understanding of the retirement experience of senior citizens, focusing on those senior citizens who used computers regularly in their daily lives. Themes identified in this research included the retiree's *Need to be useful*, *Desire for artistic expression*, and *Desire for relationships* (Schafler, 1996). Fudge (1998) used phenomenology to learn about the retirement experience of non-professional men. Her research yielded four themes, in which retirement was viewed as an *Anticipated life stage*, a *Time of freedom*, *A time of activity, especially as practical support to others*, and a *Time to consolidate relationships*.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of retirement from intercollegiate athletics. The descriptions are by former intercollegiate athletes who had the experience of retiring from their sport. Extensive descriptions enabled the researchers to understand the experience from the perspective of the student-athlete.

METHODOLOGY

This section will illustrate the course taken to investigate the effects of retirement from sport on athletes. Included in this methodology are descriptions of the phenomenological interview style, the bracketing interview used as a validity measure, the retired athletes participating in the study, and the procedure followed, including the interview method.

Phenomenological Interview

As indicated by Polkinghorne (1989) and Romanyshyn and Whalen (1989), expanding psychological research to incorporate a phenomenological method increases the span of understanding available to the psychologist by allowing for the examination of the total human experience from the perspective of the participant. This phenomenological examination enables the researcher to comprehend more fully the experiences of the individual than would be possible using other qualitative or quantitative methods, given the limitations inherent in questionnaires or the standard interview guide.

These methods can restrict the participant's responses (Markson & Gognalons-Caillard, 1971). Phenomenological research is conducted through the phenomenological interview, in which participants are asked an open-ended question and, in responding, have the freedom to explore, be spontaneous, and have total control of their response (e.g. D'Anniballe, 1996, & Johnson, 1998). This freedom enables the researcher to gain a better understanding of the participant's experiences than other methodologies such as questionnaires or structured interviews (Markson & Gognalons-Caillard, 1971).

Bracketing Interview

In the bracketing interview, the researcher is interviewed using the same question that he/she will ask the study's participants in order to help the researcher become aware of his/her thoughts, biases, and hypotheses concerning the research question (Rosenbaum, 2000). Pollio, Henley, and Thomson (1997) suggested that a bracketing interview:

is done to provide the researcher with some feel for what it is like to be interviewed on the present topic and to provide a thematic description of his or her present understanding of the phenomenon...The intention is...to have (the researcher) become more attuned to (his/her) presuppositions about the nature and meaning of the present phenomenon and thereby (sensitize him/her) to any potential demands (he/she) may impose on (the) co-participants either during the interview or in its subsequent interpretation. (p. 48)

Thus, the bracketing interview allows the researcher to gain knowledge of his/her opinions on the research topic before he/she interviews participants in the study. This knowledge makes it possible for the researcher to make a conscious effort to remain unbiased and impartial while conducting the interview process.

Participants

According to Dale (1994), participants in phenomenological research are selected based on their ability to describe their own unique experience with a certain incident, thus providing the researcher with a better understanding of that occurrence. Following this logic, participants in this study were selected based on the following criteria: 1) the participant had retired from a sport following participation at the collegiate level, and 2) was willing to discuss retirement. In phenomenological studies, the primary consideration for including a research participant is whether or not the individual has had the experience. This study is focused on the intercollegiate athlete who has retired from his or her sport. If the research participant has had the experience of interest, then he or she is considered to be an authority on his or her own experience. Factors such as gender, type of sport, and level of sport are not primary considerations.

It is also important to understand that the five research participants in this study do not constitute a sample that is meant to be representative of a population. The goal is to obtain a non-quantitative description of the experience of retiring from intercollegiate athletics.

The participants in the study were three male retired athletes and two female retired athletes, ranging from NCAA Division I to NAIA level competitors. The participants had each played different college sports, listed in the table below (See Table 1). The participants were also assigned pseudonyms to maintain anonymity throughout the study. Participants chose their own pseudonyms. Some pseudonyms chosen by the participants were changed to better protect their anonymity.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Sport	Level
Julie	Female	25	Softball	NCAA Division II
Kevin	Male	24	Wrestling	NAIA
Jennifer	Female	26	Soccer	NCAA Division I
Bob	Male	52	Football	NCAA Division I
Freddy	Male	28	Basketball	NCAA Division I

Data Collection Procedures

Upon receiving approval to conduct the study from the University of Tennessee's Office of Institutional Research, email solicitation via the snowball method was used to find participants for research on retired athletes. The snowball method consists of a two-phase process (Huck, 2000). First, participants are gathered who are easily accessible to the researcher, and who have had the experience being studied. Second, the participants gathered are then asked if they know anyone else who has had the experience being studied if they would like to participate.

Contact was obtained with participants through an email solicitation. Once contact was made, the retired athletes were informed of the specific expectations of the study and requested that they sign the informed consent documents. After receiving the signed consent forms from each participant, a time and place were established to conduct individual interviews with each participant where the researcher began each session by asking the question: "Describe for me in as much detail as possible your experience of retiring from sport."

Each interview session was recorded using an audiocassette. The cassette tape was then listened to by the researchers and transcribed. Each interview transcription was then read and reread by the researcher, with the researcher and a research group of graduate students and professors using phenomenological/hermeneutic analysis to find qualitative themes of the participants' experiences of retiring from sport (Pollio et al., 1997).

Interview Method

The phenomenological interviews were conducted using the approach prescribed by Dale (1996). Steps were taken to ensure that the interviewee was the person in control of the interview and fully able to express expertise on the subject.

The first step used to achieve this interview setting was by beginning each interview by asking the same, open-ended question, which allowed the participant to determine the course taken in the interview. This open-ended approach thus gave the participant control over the interview. The question asked in this study was: Describe for me in as much detail as possible your experience of retiring from sport. Periodically, the interviewer, would ask participants questions, such as, "Could you tell me more about that?" in order to gain more specific details to aid in explaining their answers.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of all the interviews and their transcription, the primary investigator first read and re-read the interview transcripts to ensure that they were accurate. Once the accuracy of the interview transcripts had been confirmed, the primary investigator met with phenomenology and sport psychology research groups to begin identifying common themes and to verify those themes. After thematization had been finalized, participants were asked to read them and verify that the themes were accurate descriptions of their experiences.

RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological investigation was to explore the experience of retiring from sport for individuals who ended their athletic careers following their participation in intercollegiate athletics. In phenomenological research, analysis of "three to five interview transcripts" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 51) is generally sufficient in obtaining the range of conditions needed to thematize. Thomas and Pollio (2002) also submit that further interviews are not needed once the researcher observes redundancy in the transcripts. The primary investigator in this study followed the model of participant selection outlined by Pollio et al. (1997) and Thomas and Pollio (2002), interviewing participants until a duplicative pattern about the experience of retiring from sport became evident in their narratives. This section reflects the themitization done by analyzing the five phenomenological interviews that were conducted. Each of the five participants involved in the aforementioned interviews will be described using pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes. The following thematic structure was the result of this thematic analysis.

Thematic Structure

Upon analysis of the participants' interview transcripts, four major themes with sub-themes emerged. The first theme was **Identity**, which included the sub-themes of **Void**, **Emotion**, and **Life Shift/Redirection**. Appearing as the second theme of the study was **The Game**, which included the sub-themes of the retiree telling **Stories of Past History**, **Differences between Levels of Sport**, **Contentment in Reminiscing** on one's playing career, and **Retirement as a Process**. The third theme was **Body**, which included the sub-themes of **Fitness/Being in Shape**, **Injury**, and **Speed**. Finally, the fourth theme of the investigation was **Others**, which included the sub-themes of the **Team** consisting of **Coaches** and **Teammates**, and the **Community** consisting of **Family** and **Friends**.

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Theme I. | Identity <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. VoidB. EmotionC. Life Shift/Redirection |
| Theme II. | The Game <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. Stories of Past HistoryB. Difference between Levels of SportC. Contentment in ReminiscingD. Retirement as a Process |
| Theme III. | Body <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. Fitness/Being in ShapeB. InjuryC. Speed |
| Theme IV. | Others <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. The Team<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Coaches2. TeammatesB. The Community<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Family2. Friends |

THEME I. IDENTITY

Researchers such as Baillie and Danish (1992), Drahota and Eitzen (1998), and Stankovich et al. (2001) have exhibited the impact that sport and retiring from sport can have on the identity of the individual. This impact of **Identity** was witnessed in the interviews of the participants in this study, as each athlete described sport as being an active piece of their own personal identity construction. The effect of retiring from sport on the identity of the participants is illustrated below in the sub-themes of **Void**, **Emotion**, and **Life Shift/Redirection**. Below are quotes of the participants describing each of the sub-themes. The pseudonym of the participant speaking will follow each quote.

Void

As stated above, each retired athlete participating in this study emphasized sport as the major segment of their identity. Once this sport segment was gone, these athletes experienced a void in their lives, causing them to feel lost and uncertain of their place in the world.

Here, Kevin described the void that retiring from wrestling caused in his life. This description of void included the feelings of emptiness and limbo brought on by not being able to do the thing that he had done and loved for so long.

But just that same feeling that there wasn't practice to go back to on Monday, there wasn't going to be a competition the next week. I mean it was over...that's all she wrote for that. I just really felt like I was out there in limbo because I was the only senior on the team that year, and everybody else that was on the team, we had three national placers that year, and everybody on the team that was at nationals was coming back next year. So just this sinking feeling of emptiness that you know I was there with the team but my match was over, it was almost like I wasn't part of this team anymore. And like I said, it was something that I loved to do for so long that, to lose something that close to you, you can almost compare it to, and I've never lost anybody close to me or anything like that, but when you lose something in your life that much, it creates this huge void. You miss it so dearly that to me if I could have fathomed, it was almost like losing a friend or something like that. Kevin

Bob echoed this sentiment of retirement from football as a state of void and limbo described by Kevin, adding to it with the use of the metaphors of being a man without a country and floating through space.

You're like a man without a country or a man without a team now. You don't belong anywhere. It almost...when you walk away from a team sport like that, it's almost like you're an astronaut who's in a space walk and instead of being attached to that space ship, all of a sudden the chord snaps. You know... And you're floating. It isn't that you're dead, I mean your athletic career is dead. Bob

Emotion

The participants experience strong emotions when they retired from their sport.

Jennifer recalled the strong emotion that she felt while making her decision to retire from her sport, and enduring the disappointment and other emotions that came with not reaching her goals. Eight years after her retirement, Jennifer admitted that she still struggles with these emotions today.

It's very emotional...I think it goes back a lot to disappointment. Not having the dream become reality and also seeing, being such a competitive person my whole life, seeing people that I had either been on an equal playing field with or much better than succeed. To have to tell people I failed at something. I don't know that's kind of tough. It's sad. Umm...I don't know, it's painful. I think the biggest word to sum it up would be disappointment. And I've been kind of working through that for the past...I guess eight years. I think the wounds, the emotional wounds have been healed through getting back in a different way...But I think retirement for me was summed up by disappointment and fear, depression. Jennifer

Life Shift/Redirection

The major hurdle revolving around the theme of **Identity** that these athletes had to overcome was the realization that their identity would have to change upon retirement from sport. For the participants in this study, sport had been the focus of their lives for so long that their identity hinged upon their athletic endeavors. Now that sport was gone, these participants had to shift their identity to something other than “athlete.” Kevin described his process of finding an identity outside of athletics with goals that weren’t in the sport arena.

It was something that I grew up with, it was who I was. And it was just incredibly difficult to know that it was over. If somebody would have asked me in college, or probably even high school, who am I? I would have said “a wrestler, or, “an athlete.” I doubt I would have said anything like I’m a citizen, or I’m a human being, or I’m a white person, or I’m a male, or anything like that. I was an athlete. I was a wrestler. It’s a life redirection. So although my career was over, I mean it came to a stop after I lost my last match my senior year, but at the same time I guess I see it as a process because you have to find places to like I said, “channel your energy, find other goals to move towards and accomplish.” Kevin

The overwhelming emphasis of Freddy’s description of his experience of retirement from sport was the importance of starting law school immediately following the end of his collegiate athletic career, giving him an outlet that he could shift his energy toward.

Just like basketball was with all the hours you put in, law school was very similar to that... So retirement wasn’t too bad for me like I said I guess because of the law school experience so much... the ease of retiring, it has really been a lot easier with law school. Freddy

THEME II. THE GAME

The Game arose as a theme due to the fact that each college game, or sport, played by the participants in this study was described at one point or another in their interviews. As is illustrated in the section below, the participants described **The Game** through the sub-themes of **Stories of Past History**, **Difference between Levels of Sport**, **Contentment in Reminiscing**, and **Retirement as a Process**.

Stories of Past History

The participants included descriptions of their playing careers, rather than discussing their experiences of retirement, in their answer to the original phenomenological research question. These accounts included the number of years that the participants played their sport, as well as some descriptions of events that took place during their careers of playing the game.

Bob mentioned his age when he stopped playing, and then he described a specific event while playing the game of football.

I was about 19 when I stopped playing. Bob

I keep replaying games in my head. I do it when I'm down, when people are treating me like shit. I think of this ninety-nine yard touchdown run I had against (name of team). Two guys had me pinned in the endzone on the sideline and I thought they were going to tackle me for a safety. I made a quick move and made them both miss me and look really bad. After I got by them nobody could catch me down the sideline. Ninety-nine yards. Touchdown. So when people are treating me like shit I think of that run and put their faces on those guys who missed me. Pretty sick, huh? (ha ha). Bob

Difference between Levels of Sport

The participants discussed the impact that the change of the game and its environment had on them as athletes. Julie emphasized the loss of fun from high school to college, and described how she was not prepared for that difference. This difference in the game between high school and college played a part in the decision to retire from sport.

But, it was just so much different at the collegiate level than playing in high school and it was so forced.... And it (high school) was just so much fun, it was so relaxed and it was just a bunch of girls getting together to play and I guess I knew it wouldn't be like that at the college level but I wasn't prepared for how different it was going to be. Julie

Another role in which the game impacted the experience of retirement from sport for these participants was the structure that intercollegiate athletics demand and impose on its participants. The daily schedule of college athletes is full from morning until night with classes, practice, meeting with coaches, study tables, and weight lifting. There is little time for anything else. This allotment of time was both resented and missed by the retirees participating in this study.

Julie described the time demands and structured environment as main reasons for her final decision to leave the softball team.

I wasn't prepared for lifting weights for two hours every morning and then practicing for two hours every afternoon. (I) was so much extra time. And then on top of that apparently there were people on the team that had trouble keeping their grades up, so they did a mandatory study time four nights a week for two hours and everybody on the team had to get together and that was our team study table. I couldn't handle that. I never had anything like that imposed on me. Julie

Contentment in Reminiscing

In the analysis of the interview transcripts, a common coping strategy that appeared for the athletes to deal with their retiring from sport included looking back at their careers of playing the game with the ability to be satisfied and content with it.

Here, Kevin described his satisfaction in looking back at his career and knowing that he did his best and lived up to his potential.

When I'm fifty years old, when I think about it hard, I'm able to take myself back to those feelings of really being able to understand, ok, I lived and breathed this from the moment I got up in the morning until the moment I went to bed at night. I did the things I needed to be doing in this sport and out of this sport to get the most out of my potential in the sport. So fifty years from now I'll be able to look back on that and have a smile on my face knowing that I did what I could. Kevin

Retirement as a Process

Another way that the athletes were able to cope with retiring from the game was to treat retirement as a process. In this process, the athlete would take steps away from playing the game to make their retirement easier to handle.

Kevin described the steps he took in his process of retirement while also asserting doubt that one can ever truly retire from sport. For Kevin, these steps included continuing to be physically active, playing other sports, wrestling in intramural competitions, and coaching. In the following quote, Kevin described how difficult it would be for him to retire from sport without having a process, while bringing in some of the sport identity and emotion themes as well.

I guess my process of retiring from sport, and I still kind of see it as a continual process because I don't know how I would have ever been able to handle completely retiring from physical activity or sport in general like that. The biggest thing I guess in looking at this as a process is that I never wanted to give up sport completely. Growing up so long in the sport environment, it becomes who you are. You live and think it for so long and for so many years. Especially in season, it consumes you. And to have abrupt stop like that, just rips the soul out from you. So I guess it really gives you a sense of, I wanted to stay focused and stay...close to sport, even if it's not wrestling. Kevin

THEME III. BODY

The third major theme that emerged from the interviews with athletes who had retired from sport was that each participant's dialogue emphasized the role of the "Body" in their experience of retirement. Three sub-themes that surfaced in each participant's description of **Body** in their experience of retirement from sport were **Fitness/Being in Shape, Injury, and Speed**. Below are some segments of the participants' quotes that exemplify these three sub-themes.

Fitness/Being in Shape

Kevin described his feelings of falling from a high level of fitness which he had while he was a wrestler, to a lower level in his retirement.

And I guess that to me is the hardest part of the whole retirement process, is that I really enjoy working hard at anything and everything that I do and that right now I can't work out or do things as far as physical activity that I would really like to do. And I go to the gym, I run, I still try to stay in good shape, but I really miss being in great shape and I don't know if I'll ever get that back. Kevin

Freddy expressed similar feelings to Kevin, describing his weight gain and becoming out of shape following his retirement from sport.

I gained ten to fifteen pounds you know (ha ha)... That was, now that was a little bit different. I could see my body transforming. And ahh, my brother used to laugh at me all the time (ha ha). But I learned with that that ahh my body was so used to that kind of basketball pace with physical exertion every day for at least five or six times a week, now I may take a day off every now and again, but you were usually doing something physical every day and when I was not doing that in the spring I would get tired. Physically tired. And it clicked, "I'm so tired because I'm not exercising like I used to." Freddy

Injury

Within this theme of **Body** is another sub-theme that seemed to be a significant factor in the loss of the sport identity and decision to retire from sport. This critical sub-theme was that of experiencing a sport related injury. Jennifer described how nagging injuries were present for her throughout her athletic career, and ultimately influenced her decision to retire. Jennifer also described how many of these nagging injuries, which many athletes in the sport culture endure, still affect her today.

...and then went into preseason in college and ended up injuring myself and the injuries never healed and it just kind of puts a damper on things... I mean the scary thing is that its ten years later and I still feel the impact of some of those injuries. I have chronic back pain, my ankles are terrible because I've torn my ligaments so many times, I have bad knees. Like I'm just, I'm a lame horse (ha ha). But in the moment for me, I had torn my hamstring twice in the two years that I played. And that was because of my back problems that I was going to the orthopedic to have x-rays taken because they couldn't figure out what was going on and why I had back pain and why I was tearing my hamstrings. So I was, I lived in the training room. I had more treatment than I can even imagine now. So that was a big part of my experience playing, was dealing with pain. And I'm not the only one, that's for sure. We would have little team social hours in the training room because we were all constantly using the heat packs to warm up our muscles before we played and then going in there and sitting in the ice tubs after we played. It was just this constant process of getting prepared and then coming down from it so...for me I never really had that career ending injury so its hard to imagine that now I still have those same problems that I had when I was playing. Jennifer

Speed

Julie depicts how the injury that she suffered changed the way she played the game, causing her to lose her speed and again providing her with another reason to retire from sport. This loss of speed for Julie illustrates the relationship between **Identity** and **Body** for an athlete. Once the body can not perform, the identity is lost.

I was injured practicing in the gym, ball coming off the floor hitting my foot. I couldn't...I could walk on it, I could run on it, but I knew I wasn't going full speed or playing at my full potential, and it was my right foot so batting right handed and pushing off with that right foot, that was always...I fell way behind in my batting practice. But I also lost a lot of my speed. That was kind of my thing. I was a bunter. I was a slap bunter, and I was fast. And I lost that and that was kind of my edge where I excelled above other people. So when I lost that, and then got injured on top of it, it really, it wasn't my game anymore. It wasn't the way that I had always played it. I knew I was never going to be a home run hitter. It just wasn't my thing. And so when I lost my speed, the rest of my game kind of fell apart I guess. Julie

Bob reiterated Julie's comments, describing how injury limited his aggressive play and altered his game.

Like in my mind I always, I kind of told myself, well, I'll rehab that knee and I'll get strong and I'll you know try to get some of that back a little bit. And I was able to play basketball and do some little things. I was never able to do that with that reckless abandon. When you are young and perfectly healthy and an athlete, you play with a reckless abandon physically that, the older you get becomes more and more of a memory. You just, there's really no way to do it. So you alter your game, you play differently. Bob

Bob also took the opposite side of the spectrum from Julie, acknowledging that even though his physical skills were gone, he would always feel in his heart and think in his head that his body is still capable of performing and providing him with his sport identity.

In my mind even though my legs are shot, and my lungs don't have any capacity, in my mind I still think I can walk out onto the football field and be the fastest person. I know, my brain is telling me that it's not possible. But in my heart maybe, I still think I can. Bob

THEME IV. OTHERS

The fourth and final theme to emerge from analysis of the participants' transcripts was **Others**. In this theme, the participants used the sub-themes of **The Team (Coaches/Teammates)**, and **The Community (Family/Friends)** to describe the affect that other people had on them with regards to their retiring from sport. Below are quotes from the participants displaying these sub-themes.

The Team (Coaches)

For many athletes, the relationship between a player and a coach is a crucial ingredient in that athlete's success. Julie describes a conflict in the hierarchical relationship that exists between a player and a coach, with the coach being in power over the athlete. Here, Julie tells us about her coaches judging her performance, a judgment which she felt was incorrect and too much for her to overcome to continue to play her sport.

They knew I wasn't really happy on the team. That was kind of a side issue of the coaches and I. We just weren't clicking. And then I felt after I got into kind of that role of, you know I didn't practice for a few weeks after that happened, you know I had a few bad practices in a row, and I thought everything was judged on those first few bad practices, and although I knew I could do better I felt like I couldn't overcome that. Once their judgment was made of what level player that I was that I couldn't...kind of come out of that. Julie

The Team (Teammates)

In the culture of sport, the team environment is the hegemonic norm. Jennifer described the hardship that she encountered following her retirement when she was no longer part of the team, severing the bond that she once had with her former teammates. This separation between her and her teammates caused Jennifer to feel like she no longer belonged around them.

...it just comes to the point where if I'm not playing, am I supposed to be hanging out with these people? Or do I go to a game because I'm an "ex-player" and I think that's really hard. It's hard to be seen at the scene of the crime almost. And um it took me a while, I don't think I went to a game after I quit. I was in this little kind of sorority/fraternity with these people, and now I wasn't officially a part of it, but I couldn't get away from it. And that was really hard...I just didn't want to face all the parents. You know, "oh how have you been? We haven't seen you." "Well, yeah no crap you haven't seen me." (ha ha). It was even hard to hang out. Like ahh go to the soccer parties. You know the guys and the girls always hung out together. It was hard to go to those because again I wasn't officially part of the team. Jennifer

The Community (Family/ Friends)

Finally, the participants described the impact that their communities had on them and their decisions. In the following quote, Julie described her anxiety in not wanting to disappoint her community and her parents with her decision to quit and retire from sport.

And in my town, it's a big thing. It's a small town and when you go off to college you put in the newspaper you know where you're going to school and what you're majoring in and if you're playing a sport at that college and you know that's something that I guess was respected by the town. And so I knew that going back you know they were going to ask me, oh how's softball going, and I'd have to say I wasn't playing anymore, and that was kind of tough...I felt pressure from mom and dad, they loved to watch me play. Even though I didn't play much in college they'd come up and watch the games and were really involved with the team and stuff like that. So that was hard...to let them know that I wasn't happy doing this. They really wanted that for me. Julie

Jennifer explained how her parents played a major role in her decision to retire from sport. At first, Jennifer recalled being worried that her parents would be disappointed in her for leaving the game. But then, Jennifer went to her parents for advice and support on her decision.

That was the biggest thing I kept thinking my parents are going to be upset with me...And of course you don't want to disappoint mom and dad and make them unhappy, not that my parents would care if I didn't score or anything like that, but...It's all or nothing. And...to make that decision I spoke with my family because I'm very close to my parents and they've meant a lot in my career. My mom was my assistant coach all through my traveling years, my club years. So I talked to her a lot. Jennifer

DISCUSSION

Bracketing Interview

In the Bracketing Interview, the researcher is interviewed using the same question that he/she will ask the study's participants in order to help the researcher become aware of his/her thoughts, biases, and hypotheses concerning the research question (Rosenbaum, 2000). Four themes emerged upon completion of the bracketing interview: Identity (with sub-themes of Body, Shift, Passion, and Comparison and Worth), Others (with sub-themes of Community, Family, Team/Coach, and Recognition and Attention), Culture (with sub-themes of Time and History), and Forced Decision. The themes of "Culture," "Forced Decision," "Recognition and Attention," and "Comparison and Worth" which arose in the bracketing interview did not appear in the thematization of the participants' interviews. Themes that were common to both the bracketing interview and the participants' were "Identity," "Body," "Shift," "Passion," "Others," "Community," "Family," "Team/Coach" and "History."

Verification of Themes

In phenomenological research, reliability has to do with the consistency of themes that emerged for all the participants. In the present study, the main themes appeared in the descriptions of each of the five participants. Validity in phenomenological studies is related to how well the described experiences are representative of the actual experiences that were had by the research participants. The best way to verify the results of a phenomenological study is to present the overall thematic structure to the research participants. Participants in this study read and reviewed the thematic outline following its completion to verify its accuracy. Upon this reading, the participants concurred with the thematization performed by the researcher and research group. Below is a formal verification of the accuracy of the thematization in the form of quotes from each participant.

The themes of your research indicate to me that you really understood my experience. I can relate to each theme and they capture the experience I had of retiring from sport. Julie

Overall, I'd say that the four major themes described my experience (of retiring from sport). Those were exactly the topics I talked about in my interview. Kevin

I feel that these themes and sub-themes truly reflect my experience, especially the themes of **Identity**, **The Game**, and **Others**. Jennifer

I think you have all the categories that are appropriate. When you retire from college sport, you do go through a period when you see yourself differently. You realize that others maybe like "the athlete" in you more than "the person." I think you got it. It seems accurate and all-encompassing. Bob

Your themes look good to me. I think you hit all the major aspects of retiring from sport. Freddy

CONCLUSION

The preliminary results of this phenomenological investigation on the experience of retirement from sport following a career in college athletics yielded several results that coincide with the findings presented in the review of previous literature on athletes retiring from sport. The initial similarity comes from Drahota and Eitzen's (1998) application of Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory to athletes' retirement process. In this work, Drahota and Eitzen (1998) point out that athletes who retire go through a process of seeking alternatives to sport and creating the ex-role, all of which were witnessed in the interviews of participants in the current investigation. First, Drahota and Eitzen (1998) refer to the experience of **Retirement as a Process**, which was found as a sub-theme under the main theme **The Game** in the data collection. Also, the sub-theme of **Life Shift/Redirection** under the main theme of **Identity** reiterates Drahota and Eitzen's (1998) finding that the athlete will seek alternatives to sport while attempting to create a new identity role following his or her retirement. **Life Shift/Redirection** also reiterates the assertion by Grove et al. (1998) that retired athletes re-channel the time and energy formerly spent in their sport by acquiring new interests. Stankovich, Meeker, and Henderson (2001) and Drahota and Eitzen (1998) also mirrored the sub-theme of **Life Shift/Redirection** and the main theme of **Identity** through their conclusion that athletes who retire lose what had been their life-focus for many years, and with this loss, are forced to re-associate their personal identity.

Support for **Identity** as a theme of the experience of retiring from sport continued in Grove, Lavelle, Gordon, and Harvey's (1998) application of Harvey, Weber, and Orbach's (1990) model on retirement. They concluded that individuals retiring from sport undergo an identity change. Furthermore, the sub-theme of **Emotion** under the theme **Identity** is verified by Grove et al.'s (1998) depiction of retirement from sport as characterizing a traumatic event and outcry.

The sub-theme of the retired athletes' tendency to **Tell Stories of Past History** under the main theme of **The Game** reflected the work of Baillie and Danish (1992), who established that sport provides a life-long socialization for the athlete. In the present study, stories of socialization told by the retired athletes also influenced the identity of the individuals. Baillie and Danish (1992) noted this influence on identity, asserting that sport socialization leads to the individual's self-identity being centered upon the role of athlete. Thus, Baillie and Danish's (1992) work substantiates the themes of **Identity** and **The Game** found in the present study.

Finally, the main theme of **Body**, as well as the main theme **The Others** and its sub-themes of **The Team**, and **The Community**, were confirmed by Drahota and Eitzen's (1998) research that states that athletes who retire lose physical prowess, camaraderie with teammates, and adoration of fans and peers. Further interviews and analysis is required to establish additional links to previous literature.

Themes discovered by this study that were not found in past research on retirement from sport can be used by athletes, advisors, counselors, coaches, and those working in other areas related to sport or helping professions, to better understand the experience of a retired athlete. With this greater understanding, interventions can be designed to support the individual through the difficulties and adjustment of retirement. Future research on retiring from sport should focus on effective measures in teaching coping strategies to athletes dealing with the loss of identity, camaraderie, and physicality that is inherent in retiring from sport. With this and future research, we can help make the experience of retirement more constructive and successful for athletes in the years to come.

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