“I AM AN ATHLETE”:
A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF DIVISION I FEMALE ATHLETES’ POST-SPORT TRANSITIONS AND INFLUENCES ON ATHLETIC IDENTITY

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
December, 2020

“I AM AN ATHLETE”:
A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF DIVISION I FEMALE ATHLETES’ POST-SPORT TRANSITIONS AND INFLUENCES ON ATHLETIC IDENTITY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“It is not the critic who counts; not the [wo]man who points out how the strong [wo]man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the [wo]man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms; the great devotions; who spends [her]self in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if [s]he fails, at least fails while DARING GREATLY, so that [her] place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

– Theodore Roosevelt

It has been a long journey, to say the least. To the people in my corner, the ones willing to get in the arena with me, those willing to clean me up when I was down, those willing to always see the best in me even when I was at my worst, those who refused to let me quit when it got hard, those who grew inside of me and were nurtured by me during this process, and those who continue to stand by me every day, this is for you.

To my husband, Nick, this would have never been possible without you. You stepped in to help with so many things around the house to enable me time to pursue my dream. You worked hard every day as a partner to help financially support my goals. You have always been my greatest teammate, even when life has been hard. You never quit on me, and you never quit on our family. Thank you for sitting patiently and listening to every word in this document and providing your feedback. For always reminding me who I really am and what I am capable of. For choosing me. I love you with all my heart.

To my firstborn, Jack, you are better than my wildest dreams. Being your mommy is the best thing in the entire world. I remember finding out I was pregnant with you about a year into this program. I carried you inside of me to my classes, often late into the evenings. You were there kicking around when I studied and wrote papers. And you were born a month before finals week, which was more than stressful to say the very least. I have photos of you next to me while hooked up to a pump with books in my lap. You were there through some of the most challenging moments, refusing to drink your bottles, but smiling at me and softening my heart. What I did not realize was how much you would change me, for the better. Your sweet spirit, loving and tender approach, and dogged determination is everything God knew I needed. You encouraged me to get back out on the soccer field so you could watch me play. You saw me score a goal and cheered for me on the sidelines. I look forward to continuing to help you find your own path to greatness, the one specifically designed for you by the Lord. Your first name means God is gracious and your middle name symbolizes faithfulness, beauty and dignity; an offer of peace. God has been so gracious to us with you, my love. May you always pursue your dreams with all of your heart. Our prayer over your life is that you would know and walk in the grace, faithfulness, and peace of God all the days of your life. (Psalm 84:11-12)

To the littlest Miller, Luca, my baby. You were the perfect addition to our family. Son, you are relentless. Watching you refuse to give up and continue to press makes me laugh; you are so much like your mommy. It is hard to be upset with you when you look at me with your beautiful blue eyes and big smile. You were born about a week before the start of my proposal writing class. You never stopped moving for a second while you were inside of me, propelling me to finish my qualifying exam and my dissertation proposal. I nursed you while on Zoom attending classes and took you to class with me. My little sidekick. Your first name means light (the Word of God) and your middle name means strong and powerful. Our prayer over your life is that you would be a bringer of the light of Jesus to all you encounter, and that God would give you the strength to be unwavering and unapologetic in your love, passion, and pursuit of Jesus and in leading others to the power that comes through life in Christ. (Acts 26:15-18; Joshua 1:9)

To my parents. You have always been there. You have prayed for me, encouraged me, stood by me, and loved me for my whole life. “Oh my gosh 😱🙌 PTL – that is so awesome, honey. Congratulations so excited for you! Wow 🙌✝️🙌” (Mom). “My Favorite #1 Daughter. You make me proud, always. I love you soooooooooo much” (Dad). I am who I am because you were faithful to raising me the way that God led you to; a strong, independent woman who loves Jesus with her entire heart, soul, mind, and strength. There is no way I would be here if it were not for you and the starring role you have played in my life. Thank you for encouraging me in the direction of my dreams, my strengths, and my giftings. I love you with all of my heart.

To my brother. I remember praying for you and I was so excited to learn that I would be a big sister. As your big sister, I knew how important it was to set a good example for you. I am not sure that you will ever know how much it meant to me to receive your gift of a paper you wrote about your hero when you were a little boy: me. It reminded me just how much you were watching me and made me want to be even better for you. To the day that I die, I hope to always continue to be an example for you and to be there for you whenever you need me. As a professional athlete, you are still on your journey. This research is for you, whenever the time comes for you to transition to life after sport. I pray that you have a long and prosperous career as a professional hockey player, and wherever your heart takes you afterwards. Know that I will always be here to support you along the way, now and into the future. I am so proud of you and I love you so much.

To my family who prayed, encouraged, and supported me along the way, thank you. I love you with all my heart and I am so blessed to call you my family. A special shout out to my Grandma Suzanne, my prayer warrior. I love you more than words can express.

To Dr. Clinton, your relentless support of me throughout the years as a supervisor, mentor, and friend has been a gift. Thank you for always seeing the best in me.

To my original cohort family – Zeak, Leslie, Michael, and Brent – the rest of the gang who joined us a semester later – Michael, Janelle, Ray, Scott, and Sam – and our official inductee, Will (my buddy), you all are clutch. I thoroughly enjoyed our time together. Through thick and thin, you all made the journey fun. To Leslie and Zeak, who were there at the right time when I was ready to call it quits. Thanks for driving the distance.

A special shout-out to Zeak. As a fellow athlete and cohort mate, thanks for "getting it," kicking my butt, telling me what I needed to hear, checking in on me, encouraging me, commiserating with me, and walking with me every step of the journey. Your words kept me going: "You got it!! Try not to be hard on yourself and let baby Jesus take the wheel for a few weeks." "Take a deep beath, you will be fine. Baby Jesus will set the time, not you. You are doing awesome! Remember, you cannot be full-time in four areas at once. Take care of yourself so that you can be successful and there for your family during this time." "You will always compare because it's who we are. Embrace it and realize in the end, it makes you better and to be honest, you cannot turn it off. Just don't waste too much energy on it. Look and keep moving." "I'll be at yours [defense] with an air horn."

To Lisa Will, thank you for answering the phone and calming me down when I first began this program. Your words of encouragement kept me going in the initial semesters.

To Dr. Gordon and Dr. Volberding, thank you for the role you played in getting me to this point. I appreciate you taking the time to pour into my dissertation journey.

To Dr. Wilson and Dr. Corwin, thank you for writing recommendation letters for me to get into this program. You saw my potential, and I am truly grateful for your support.

To my other colleagues and friends who encouraged me along the way and took interest in my journey (#theroadtodrmiller), thank you. Your support kept me going.

To the participants in my study, I could never thank you enough for going on this journey with me. Thanks for "getting it." Your kindness will never be forgotten, my friends.

To my committee, Dr. Kearney, Dr. Wanger, Dr. Bailey, and Dr. Miller. I am so grateful for your time, your feedback, and all of your support. Thank you for your commitment, your willingness to go on this journey with me, and for always believing in me.

To Dr. Wanger, thank you for helping me to become a better writer. I will always check my papers against the papers you edited for me for all of the "Wanger-isms." I loved your classes and thoroughly enjoyed my time getting to know you and your sweet wife.

To Dr. Miller, thank you for being on my team. You stepped up at just the right time and were such an encourager throughout this process. Your support is so appreciated.

To Dr. Bailey, my unicorn, I will never know how you do all the things you do. I fell in love with qualitative research because of you. You have always been in my corner, supporting me along the way in more ways than one. Thank you for all of the articles, feedback, brownies, and words of encouragement. I love you dearly.

To Dr. Kearney, my rock. Words could never express the appreciation I have for you. I think you know me inside and out, at this point. You watched me go through this process for the last almost seven years. You have seen me at my best, and at my worst, and you have never lost faith in me. You knew that this process was more than just a dissertation for me; it was a part of my own personal journey, and honestly, my healing. Thanks for allowing and trusting me to do it my unique way, and for always being there to guide me every step of the way. I am so grateful for your encouragement and support of me as an athlete, worker, mother, wife, and woman. You helped me to see the things I could not see, pushed me to go deeper, and cheered me on like the greatest cheerleader there ever was. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. Thank you for believing in me. I would not have finished this journey without you by my side the entire time.

Finally, to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Thank you for creating me to be an athlete and for calling me to this work. I knew in my heart that I was supposed to pursue my Ph.D., and I will always be grateful to you, Jesus, for listening to my every thought, ministering words of encouragement and peace, calming my anxious spirit, giving me a second wind (a million times), reminding me of Your calling on my life, ushering in a snow day when I felt overwhelmed and so behind, and equipping me to do the work you set before me. I love you with every fiber of my being and I will honor and serve you all the days of my life. May You be glorified in this work, now and forevermore.

"I can do everything through Christ, Who gives me strength." (New Living Translation [NLT], 2015, Philippians 4:13)

"Each time He said, 'My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.' So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me." (NLT, 2015, 2 Corinthians 12:9)

"'For I know the plans I have for you,' says the Lord. 'They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.'" (NLT, 2015, Jeremiah 29:11)

"Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am Your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand." (NLT, 2015, Isaiah 41:10)

"So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised." (New International Version [NIV], 2011, Hebrews 10:35-36)

Acknowledgements reflect the views of the author and are not endorsed by committee members or Oklahoma State University.

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Date of Degree: DECEMBER, 2020

Title of Study: "I AM AN ATHLETE": A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF DIVISION I FEMALE ATHLETES' POST-SPORT TRANSITIONS AND INFLUENCES ON ATHLETIC IDENTITY

Major Field: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how transitioning out of collegiate soccer influenced the athletic identities of Division I female collegiate athletes who were no longer pursuing competitive athletics. Because fewer than 2% of Division I student-athletes go on to a professional career in athletics (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2018a), the expiration of eligibility often signals the end to an athletic self the student-athlete may have identified with since youth (NCAA, 2016). This multiple case study focused on four female athletes' narrated experiences of their journeys 8-16 years after they exited their collegiate athlete roles. Each participants' experiences were examined through three in-depth interviews with artifact collection.

This study applied *a posteriori* theories to the data collected. Four main findings and two sub-findings emerged from the data analysis. First, the initial operationalization of athletic identity was influenced by each individual's attributes, personality, preferences, opportunities, and life experiences. Second, athletes physically transitioned out of competitive sport but not out of their identities as athletes. The concept of "athletic identity" was too unidimensional to capture women's multidimensional experiences of exiting collegiate soccer, and new motherhood required reassessing identity, including recalibration of athletic identity. Third, the women's level of anticipation and preparation for the transition out of collegiate sport contributed to the ease of the transition experience participants described. Finally, each athlete's transition experience remained unique and did not align with an overall model or expectation. To better understand how transitioning out of collegiate athletics may influence female athletic identities, these findings have significant implications for the NCAA, athletic departments, and personnel who work with current and former student-athletes, particularly at Division I institutions.

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– R. S. Grey

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"Obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it."

– Michael Jordan

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"I got to bed every night thinking about all the ways that I can succeed."

– Ronda Rousey

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Understanding sport and the attraction and commitment that some individuals develop toward it is essential if we are to grasp the essence of the individual.”

– Danish et al., 1993, p. 356

For many student-athletes, sport has been the cornerstone of their lives since their youth (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2016). While they have been students *and* athletes throughout the majority of their lives, due to the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) eligibility requirements and student-athletes’ transitions into adulthood (Jordan & Denson, 1990), the collegiate environment intensifies the balancing act of managing their dual roles. Caught in the middle between the academic and athletic missions of their universities (Navarro, 2014), student-athletes often experience role conflicts as “the demands of one role are incompatible with the requirements of another” (Chartrand & Lent, 1987, p. 164). These role conflicts can lead to many *extended* personal versus athletic identity challenges for the student-athlete, especially due to the culture of Division I athletic programs (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Fuller, 2014; Hill et al., 2001; Murphy et al., 1996; Navarro, 2014; Parham, 1993).

In the 1990s, the NCAA tried to assist student-athletes by limiting the time spent on college athletics (their athletic roles) to provide them with more time for academics and other college activities (their academic/personal roles). The outcome was the 20/8-Hour Rule, which limited the number of hours student-athletes were permitted to spend on “countable athletically related activities” per day/week while in season and out of season (i.e., no more than four hours per day/20-hours per week in season, and eight hours per week out of season) (NCAA, 2009). Coaches quickly found ways around the 20/8-Hour Rule by how they defined non-mandatory and mandatory activities (Harrison et al., 2011). Thus, the NCAA intent was circumvented, and student-athletes continued to experience significantly imbalanced demands between their athletic and academic/personal roles.

In 1991, the NCAA, under the leadership of former NCAA President Dr. Myles Brand, created Bylaw 16.3.1.1 that required that member institutions make “general academic counseling and tutoring services available to all student-athletes” and that “an institution, conference or the NCAA may finance other academic support, career counseling or personal development services that support the success of student-athletes” (NCAA, 2015). This bylaw was one in a series of NCAA initiatives to create institutional environments that provide academic support and guidance to student-athletes, in addition to focusing on improving progress-toward-degree, graduation, and retention rates (Le Crom et al., 2009). According to Meyer (2005), the bylaw has grown over the past few years to include additional services (i.e., career and eating disorder counseling) in an effort to holistically tend to the student-athlete.

The holistic view of the student-athlete was further extended in 2014 when the NCAA held a presidential forum for the 32 Division I conferences (Hosick, 2017). Out of the forum came greater clarity on the desired student-athlete experience, which now includes concern for student-athletes' pre-college experiences, their time in college, *and* their post-college experiences (Hosick, 2017). For many student-athletes, exiting their athletic roles may signal the end to dreams and lifestyles they have known and pursued since their youths. The *extended* emphasis on the post-college experience is the space to which the current study makes the greatest contribution.

Problem Statement

An inevitable transition point awaits student-athletes who have "played out" their collegiate athletic eligibility, the college-to-post-college transition. Because fewer than 2% of Division I student-athletes go on to a professional career in athletics (NCAA, 2018a), the expiration of eligibility often signals the end to an athletic self the student-athlete may have identified with since youth (NCAA, 2016). Research supports that athletes who identify strongly and exclusively with their athletic roles often experience greater challenges transitioning and adjusting to life after sport if they do not take the time to disengage from their sporting role and develop mature career plans (Fuller, 2014; Hill et al., 2001; Murphy et al., 1996; Navarro, 2014; Parham, 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). However, those who pursue meaningful opportunities to develop interests outside of athletics and cultivate their personal identities aside from their athletic identities are often better equipped to adapt to the lifestyle changes (Baillie, 1992; Fuller, 2014; Lally, 2007; Menke & Germany, 2019; Swain, 1991).

Sport is inextricably interwoven into the fabric of American culture, and it is no secret that intercollegiate athletics is a multibillion-dollar, big business operation at American Division I institutions, specifically due to the commercialization of college athletics (Hill et al., 2001; Mitten et al., 2009; Renick, 1974; Smith, 2000). As winning became the primary objective for many revenue-producing sports, coaches and administrators felt the pressure to prioritize and value athletics over academics, which appears to impede student-athletes' abilities to construct identities outside of athletics and prepare for meaningful careers after graduation (Fountain & Finley, 2009, 2011; Hill et al., 2001; Murphy et al., 1996; Navarro, 2014; Renick, 1974). This practice stands in stark contrast to some of the primary purposes of higher education institutions to develop productive, ethical, and engaged citizens and leaders, and to prepare students for the workforce after graduation (Navarro & McCormick, 2017; Sutton, 2016).

As we consider the concept of higher education for the public good (Kezar et al., 2005), coupled with the NCAA's call for a more holistic understanding of student-athletes (M. Miller, personal communication, September 5, 2018), the importance of the student-athlete's voice (Quaye, 2005) is vital to understanding the unique challenges they face, including how they view themselves in their post-athletic lives. The responsibility of institutions to ensure that student-athletes are prepared to transition to healthy and productive lives after sport requires an increased understanding of their transition experiences and the influences on their athletic identities in life after collegiate athletics.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how transitioning out of collegiate soccer influenced the athletic identities of Division I female collegiate athletes who were no longer pursuing competitive athletics. This multiple case study focused on four female athletes' narrated experiences of their journeys 8-16 years after they exited their collegiate athlete roles.

Research Question

How do Division I female athletes describe their experiences with transitioning to life after collegiate athletics?

Definitions of Key Terms

To better assist the reader with understanding the study and all of its components, key terms are defined as follows.

- *Athlete*: A person who sees her/himself as naturally athletic, with the ability to pick up and/or play just about any sport well; “a person who is trained or skilled in exercises, sports, or games requiring physical strength, agility, or stamina” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a.).
- *Student-athlete*: “[A] student whose enrollment was solicited by a member of the athletics staff or other representative of athletics interests with a view toward the student’s ultimate participation in the intercollegiate athletics program. Any other student becomes a student-athlete only when the student reports for an intercollegiate squad that is under the jurisdiction of the athletics department, as specified in Constitution 3.2.4.5. A student is not deemed a student-athlete solely on the basis of prior high school athletics participation” (NCAA, 2018, p. 62).
- *Amateur athlete*: A student-athlete competing in an NCAA collegiate sport whose compensation may only come through an athletic scholarship, provided the student-athlete is an active member of the team, remains enrolled, and maintains academic eligibility (US Legal, 2016).
- *Professional athlete*: An athlete who earns their living by playing a sport for a profit-making professional league team (i.e., Major League Baseball, National

Basketball Association, National Football League, National Hockey League, Major League Soccer, etc.) (Gale, 2007).

- *Elite athlete*: “A person who is currently or has previously competed as a [collegiate] varsity player (individual or team), a professional player or a national or international level player” (Segen’s Medical Dictionary, 2011).
- *Athletic identity*: “The degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role” (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). “Athletic identity is the way you perceive and feel about your sporting role, which comprises your goals, values, thoughts and sensations related to your sport” (International Olympic Committee, n.d., p. 1).
- *Academic identity*: “Those who identify themselves as students, or who see ‘student’ as a role they perform in their daily lives” (Bell, 2009, p. 23).
- *Personal identity*: “A phenomenological sense of oneself as a separate individual being with a distinctive personality and a ‘true self’ persisting over time; a self image” (Oxford Reference, 2019).
- *Athlete mentality*: A mentality portrayed by the following beliefs, foci, and/or behaviors of elite athletes: “Winners are not born – they are made;” “Eye on the prize;” “Build a strong team around you;” “Learn from the best;” “Find some calm within the chaos;” and “Celebrate your victories but learn from your failures” (Devadason, 2017).
- *Intercollegiate athletics*: “A sport played at the collegiate level for which eligibility requirements for participation by a student athlete are established by a national association for the promotion or regulation of collegiate athletics” (ORS § 702.005, 2007).

- *Division I*: “Division I is the highest level of intercollegiate athletics overseen by the [United States] NCAA. Division I schools comprise the major athletic powers in the college ranks and have larger budgets, more advanced facilities, and more athletic scholarships than Divisions II and III or smaller schools, even those that are competitive in athletics” (Burrell, 2019, para. 3).
- *Change*: “Change is situational” (Bridges, 1991, p. 3). “Change is something that happens to people, even if they don’t agree with it” (Mind Tools, n.d., para. 5).
- *Transition*: “The psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation” (Bridges, 1991, p. 3). “Transition . . . is internal: It’s what happens in people’s minds as they go through change” (Mind Tools, n.d., para. 5).
- *Translate*: “[To] convert something to be converted into (another form or medium); move from one place or condition to another” (Oxford Lexico, 2020).
- *Anchor*: An identity, “a person or thing that can be relied on for support, stability, or security; mainstay” (Dictionary.com, 2020).
- *Touchstone*: “A basis for comparison; a reference point against which other things can be evaluated” (Vocabulary.com, n.d.).
- *Soccer*: “A game played on a field between two teams of 11 players each with the object to propel a round ball into the opponent’s goal by kicking or by hitting it with any part of the body except the hands and arms – called also association football [or fútbol in Spanish countries]” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b.).

Significance of the Study

The outcomes from my study contribute significance in the three major areas of research, theory, and practice.

Research

This research study focused on how Division I female athletes described their transitions out of collegiate athletics and the associated influences on their athletic identities. Thus, the outcomes of this study contribute to existing research on Division I female athletes' lives after sport and encourage further related research and discourse. In addition, outcomes identify additional areas of needed collegiate athlete research.

Theory

Flowing from an emergent design (Patton, 2015), the findings of this study highlighted the need for theory about the experiences of former female athletes' transitions out of collegiate athletics and the associated influences on their athletic identities. However, the *extended* time period in my study unleashed new nuances to our understanding of post-sport transitions wherein the theoretical concept of athletic identity should be considered a touchstone rather than a model or framework for transition.

Practice

This study provides practical guidance about the post-college transition experiences of former collegiate female athletes. With increased pressure on college presidents and universities to account for how the university is preparing students for life and careers after graduation, colleges across America are putting more money and energy into resources (i.e., human capital, funding, etc.) for preparing all students for success (M. Miller, personal communication, September 5, 2018). Questions about how student-athletes adjust to life after collegiate sport have prompted several universities to develop programs, looking to the NCAA for support with the holistic aspect of the student-athlete's development (M. Miller, personal communication, September 5, 2018). The findings of this study provide additional guidance to the NCAA and have significant implications for athletic departments and the personnel who work with current and former student-athletes, particularly at Division I institutions.

Researcher's Positionality Statement

In this qualitative study, I, as the researcher, was an instrument of design, data collection, and meaning making; thus, my varied positionalities relative to the study could be both resources and potential obstacles for meaning making.

It is important for the reader to know that I left Division I collegiate soccer 13 years ago and semi-professional soccer 12 years ago. In addition, I am White, American, married, a mother of two boys, and 34 years old. In this study, I deliberately focused on former Division I *female* athletes due to the lack of attention in the literature about their post-collegiate sport transition experiences. I did not, however, intend that all participants would be former soccer players, although this was perhaps foreseeably influenced by my personal contacts. While my study was deliberately focused on female athletes, gender in sports is a significant topic of research that I consider to be beyond the scope of my study, particularly as this study encompasses an *extended* period of time during which gender and athletics experienced significant change.

Likewise, as a female athlete, I am a competitor and prefer to compete based upon skill. I do not and have not ever viewed sport through the lens of my gender. I spent much of my life competing against male athletes who were often stronger, faster, and more skilled as a way to better our team and the quality of our play. I am grateful to those male athletes who did not back down from a tackle because I was a girl; they showed me respect as an athlete and contributed to my development as a player. I have a deep respect for male and female athletes alike and consider our experiences unique beyond any knowledge that might be gleaned from comparison. Because of my own experience with collegiate sport and its undeniable position relative to this study, Chapter IV presents my journey and personal experiences with athletics in much greater detail.

As a native of the Division I female athlete population and a participant researcher, I came to this study with assumptions, experiences, and biases that entered into the study. While all Division I female athletes have experienced sport and sport culture, I discovered it was naïve for me to assume that we experienced it in the same way and had the same reactions. My experiences were my own, just as each case represents the unique experiences of each participant. As such, it was my responsibility to recognize my biases, even as they emerged in my work. It was important to unpack how my experiences might contribute to deeper meaning *or* serve as a barrier to fully seeing the data before me. I found it to be particularly important that I was not promoting my own personal agenda by representing data through my own perspective (Creswell, 2014). To maintain the trustworthiness of the data, I utilized member checking (Creswell, 2014) and maintained an open dialogue with my adviser and members of my doctoral committee and cohort to ensure that I represented the data with integrity.

Study Design

Chapter III of this study provides the specific details surrounding the design of the study and choices of methodology; however, a brief introduction to the study's design is relevant here. Qualitative research was selected as the appropriate approach for this study. This study is grounded in the epistemological worldview of constructivism. Aligned with my epistemological stance of constructivism, my theoretical perspective is interpretivism. I also used *a posteriori* theories, which allowed the data collected to guide the choice of theory that helped me best understand my data. Flowing from my interpretivist stance, I selected multiple case study design because the aim of this study was understanding, which is one of the key reasons to use case study as a methodology, particularly in social science research (Stake, 1978).

Because of my own history as a Division I soccer player, I intentionally intertwined my own data and reflections from my experiences transitioning to life after competitive athletics throughout the participants' data in the individual case reports, specifically identified as mine in non-bolded *italics*. Additionally, I included related snapshots in time from my personal journals and conversations during my post-collegiate sport transition to support the cross-case findings via non-bolded *italicized* inserts at the opening of each cross-case finding.

Boundaries or Delimitations of the Study

This study focused on the stories and experiences of four Division I female athletes who transitioned out of collegiate athletics. While the study's original design did not designate the specific sport of soccer, by happenstance, the participants from the study all played collegiate soccer at two South Central research (Division I) institutions in the same state. Participants met the following criteria:

1. Were former student-athletes according to the NCAA's definition.
2. Had the dream and/or potential to play professional sport at the time they entered college.
3. Recruited out of high school by the universities they attended for full, primarily athletic-based scholarships (some academic scholarship money was acceptable).

4. Played all years of athletic eligibility in women's soccer at a single, Division I NCAA member institution while on scholarship.
5. Played college sports at some point between the years of 1999 and 2012 at the institution they attended and graduated from.
6. No longer pursuing or intending to pursue professional athlete status.

Individual case records were constructed for each participant after a Recruitment Questionnaire, Pre-Interview Questionnaire, three in-depth interviews with fieldnotes, and artifact collection. Chapter III provides further detailed information on research sites, research participants, recruiting, and sampling method.

Data Collection

The data for this multiple case study were made up of stories and experiences from the journeys of my participants, as well as stories from my experiences as a Division I female athlete who transitioned to life after sport. Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I collected data from my peers via a Recruitment Questionnaire, Pre-Interview Questionnaire, three one-on-one interviews (each) with fieldnotes, and artifacts. Chapter III provides detailed information on each of the data collection methods.

Data Analysis

Analysis began with the Recruitment Questionnaire, the Pre-Interview Questionnaire, and while transcribing and considering the data obtained from each participant's three interviews. First, I read through all the transcripts and annotated about shared experiences, self-reflection, and, where appropriate, made additional notes as I looked for the emic nature of members' meanings through terms and descriptions, definitions, explanations and theories, stories, formulations, questions, and/or indigenous contrasts (Emerson et al., 2011). Second, where appropriate to contribute to the development of themes and findings, I coded the data using in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016) and created a word cloud to represent the participants' data as it best addressed the research question. Third, I began to identify themes and findings that emerged from the data as I clustered the data into like concepts and themes that I used as an inductive coding process (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). Finally, for the purpose of providing interpretive commentary about the themes and findings that emerged, I prepared analytic memos to connect the pieces of data together (Emerson et al., 2011) and added the participants' quotes to support the themes and findings that emerged. As a part of the data analysis process, I considered existing theory or models that helped me to bring greater meaning to the understanding of my data. Chapter III provides detailed information on each of the data analysis processes.

Presentation of Findings

The results from this multiple case study are presented via individual case reports in Chapters V – VIII and as a cross-case analysis in Chapter IX.

Conclusion

This introductory chapter began with the background of the research study. The problem statement, purpose of the study, and research question were discussed, along with the definitions of key terms. The significance of the study and researcher's positionality were highlighted. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the study's design, including the research methods, data collection, data analysis processes, and presentation of findings.

The Roadmap

Chapter I provided an introduction and overview to the study. Chapter II highlights the literature related to the present study: the culture of Division I athletics, the student-athlete, identity development, and human transition. Chapter III addresses the methodology and methods I selected for this multiple case study. Chapter IV contributes my personal story as a competitive athlete, including how I came to be interested in the topic of transitioning out of collegiate athletics and the influences on athletic identity. In Chapters V – VIII, I present the individual case study findings and themes that emerged from constructing and co-constructing meaning with the research participants. Finally, in Chapter IX, I discuss the cross-case findings with their implications and provide recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair."

– Nelson Mandela

In American culture, we place a high value on sports and tend to idolize those with the athletic prowess to participate and display mastery in their chosen sport (Watt & Moore III, 2001). The popularity of sport in our society is best explained by the words of Sage (1984), which still apply today:

> Sport is such a pervasive activity in contemporary America that to ignore it is to overlook one of the most significant aspects of this society. It is a social phenomenon which extends into education, politics, economics, art, the mass media, and even international diplomatic relations. Involvement in sport, either as a participant or in more indirect ways, is almost considered a public duty by many Americans. (p. 9)

The social prominence of sport in our society today is displayed by the millions of enthusiastic fans who gather each week around televisions and in large stadiums and arenas to cheer on their favorite teams to victory, daily media sports stories and print articles, the billions of dollars spent on sports games and paraphernalia, and the countless amount of recreational activities available nationwide (Sage & Eitzen, 2016). Sport has become so popularized worldwide that for many, it is not just a game; sport is a way of life.

In 2015, $498.4 billion in revenue could be attributed to the United States sporting industry, $1.5 trillion in spending in the global industry, and $34.9 billion in annual company spending for sports advertising (Plunkett Research, Ltd., 2019). According to The Aspen Institute Project Play's (2019) latest report, 71.8% of children aged 6-12 played a team or individual sport at least one day during the year in 2018. In addition, parents spent an average of $693 on one child (ages 1-18) from costs associated with registration, equipment, travel, lessons, and camps, and at elite levels, some families spent more than $20,000 per year (The Aspen Institute Project Play, 2019). When it comes to the intercollegiate level, the NCAA (2020a, 2020b) reports that in their association alone, nearly half a million student-athletes participate in sports across three divisions, with a student-athlete represented in one out of every 23 students at a Division I institution.

As emphasized in the literature, participation in sports contributes to the development of the student-athlete's athletic identity (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Danish et al., 1993; Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1991; Menke & Germany, 2019). Within the context of the termination of the athlete's competitive sporting role, this study highlights the stories and experiences surrounding *female* athletes' transitions out of collegiate sport and the influences on their athletic identities. The reader will find throughout this review, however, that the literature does not always agree with itself in discussing the state of athletes' experiences with transitioning to life after sport. For some athletes, the transition goes smoothly (Lally, 2007; Menke & Germany, 2019), while others experience more acute feelings such as anxiety and depression (Beamon & Bell, 2011).

While new studies on post-athletic transitions have come out in the last couple of years, much of the foundational literature addressing the topics of athletic identity and transition are 10-20 years old. I understand that college athletics and society have changed, sometimes dramatically, in the last two decades. However, because of this study's criteria that the participants exited their collegiate athlete roles and graduated between the years of 1999 and 2012, participants would have been student-athletes during the time that much of the literature was first published. This study brings many of these articles full circle. In addition, much of the research regarding transitions for athletes upon the completion of competitive athletics centers on the retirement of professional or elite athletes, rather than collegiate athletes. The shortage of literature on the college athlete's *extended* transition after sport reflects the lack of knowledge in this area. When appropriate, I referenced and identified studies on professional or elite athletes to contribute some knowledge to certain gaps.

For researchers like me who are studying post-athletic transitions, the more we come to understand the student-athlete experience as a whole—the time and effort spent by athletes to develop their craft and the discipline and determination it takes for athletes to succeed at the highest levels—the better opportunity we have to gain an understanding of who the athlete is and how her experiences with sports may have shaped who she is, how she thinks, and how she sees, processes, and understands the world around her

(Kissinger & Miller, 2009). Furthermore, we can continue exploring the role of higher education in helping collegiate athletes transition out of their competitive sporting roles to lead successful lives upon graduation. Based upon the purpose of this study to explore female athletes' transitions out of collegiate sport and the influences on their athletic identities, the literature highlighted in this chapter includes topics addressing the culture of Division I athletics, the student-athlete, identity development, and human transition. The chapter concludes with my critique and reflection on the literature, and a chapter summary.

The Culture of Division I Athletics

The macro level tensions produced by the competing missions of academic departments and Division I athletic departments are a critical issue within higher education. According to the NCAA's Principle of Student-Athlete Well-Being, "Intercollegiate athletics programs shall be conducted in a manner designed to protect and enhance the physical and educational well-being of athletes" (NCAA, 2018, p. 3). However, the literature indicates that student-athletes are often the ones to suffer academically, psychosocially, and developmentally due to the demands and expectations placed on them to exist in the academic *and* athletic domains (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987; Gaston Gayles & Hu, 2009; Murphy et al., 1996).

Although the culture and practice of intercollegiate sports has been considered the training ground for unique life and career skills (Chen et al., 2010; Danish, 1983; Shulman & Bowen, 2001), participation in athletics can lead to *extended* challenges with transitioning and adjusting to life after sport (Fuller, 2014; Murphy et al., 1996; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). These challenges are often due to the student-athlete's enhanced athletic identity brought on by their sporting role (Hill et al., 2001; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Although most student-athletes enter college with enthusiasm and anticipation of playing their sport while earning their degree, a significant number are unprepared to navigate complex university systems and handle the demands and tradeoffs of the Division I lifestyle, which can have an effect on their overall welfare, personal identity, and career development processes (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987; Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015; Navarro, 2014). This section explores the literature regarding the role of the NCAA, the commercialization and business of college athletics, recruiting and the pressure to win, and the prioritization of athletics over academics.

The Role of the NCAA

In the 1850s, students introduced the concept of intercollegiate athletics to college campuses as an attempt to lighten the pressure imposed by the liberal arts curriculum (Goodchild, 2007). As college football grew in popularity on college campuses, so did the media attention surrounding the dangerous aggression of the game, with instances of student-athlete fatalities from playing the sport, the commercialization of college athletics, and cases of cheating (Carter, 2006; Smith, 2000). In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt intervened, calling for a conference at the White House to discuss football rules (Smith, 2000). As the officials from the major football programs met with the president, they determined a need for some type of regulatory agency that would set forth rules and guidelines for athletic participation on college campuses (Smith, 2000). The Intercollegiate Athletic Association (IAA), later renamed the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), was birthed in 1905 as a result of their efforts to reform college football (Carter, 2006; Oriard, 2012; Smith, 2000).

As a leader for intercollegiate athletics, the NCAA plays a key role by closely regulating and monitoring the academic and athletic integrity of student-athletes and university employees for employees and student-athletes at member institutions. The NCAA exists to support and protect student-athletes on and off the field through various rules and regulations for eligibility and progress-toward-degree, opportunities for leadership growth and development, and academic support services. In addition to its numerous regulatory and supervisory functions, the NCAA negotiates television rights for broadcasting college athletics, organizes championship tournaments, and manages the licensing and marketing of its brand and insignia (Goldman, 1990; NCAA, n.d.a.).

With 1,098 colleges and universities and 102 athletic conferences, "nearly half a million college athletes make up the 19,886 teams that send more than 57,661 participants to compete each year in the NCAA's 90 championships in 24 sports across 3 divisions" (NCAA, 2020b). In terms of college athletics, the NCAA's objective is to create a clear separation between an amateur athlete (i.e., an unpaid student-athlete whose compensation can only come from an athletic scholarship) (US Legal, 2016) and a professional athlete (i.e., an athlete who makes his or her living playing a sport for a profit-making professional league team) (Gale, 2007). To that end, the NCAA provides guidelines regarding ethical conduct, amateurism, financial aid, academic standards, other regulations concerning eligibility, outside competition, and recruitment (NCAA, 2018b).

Although the NCAA's bylaws and guidelines are meant to protect student-athlete welfare, they come with their own set of challenges. For example, the NCAA's (2018, 2018b) progress-toward-degree requirements state that student-athletes must declare a major by their fifth semester. Additionally, student-athletes must have at least 40 percent of the course requirements in their degree completed prior to the third year of enrollment, 60 percent prior to the fourth year of enrollment, and 80 percent prior to the fifth year of enrollment. To certify coursework for compliance and eligibility, all credits used must go toward the designated degree. Student-athletes who want to change their majors may encounter challenges with the progress-toward-degree requirements if their remaining credit hours do not meet the annual or percentage-of-degree requirements in their desired degree program. As such, they face the choice to risk losing eligibility or remain in their current major, even if it no longer fits their goals. In comparison, non-athletes are not required to meet these rigorous requirements and have greater flexibility to explore majors and change career pathways (Beamon & Bell, 2011). Due to the expectations and pressures for student-athletes to maintain eligibility (Bell, 2009; Le Crom et al., 2009), many scholars assert that the NCAA and athletic departments set up student-athletes to major in eligibility rather than selecting a major that would lead to a career field of interest (Fountain & Finley, 2009, 2011; Mondello & Abernethy, 2000; Navarro, 2014; Oriard, 2012; Renick, 1974).

The Commercialization and Business of College Athletics

The commercialization of college athletics has led to huge sums of money for the NCAA, as well as its member institutions, particularly the Division I schools. In their consolidated statement of activities for the year ended August 31, 2019, the NCAA earned $1,118,495,545 in total revenues, of which, $867,527,070 came from television and marketing rights fees; $177,872,026 from championship and National Invitation Tournaments (NIT); $55,395,739 from sales, services, and other; and $3,314,709 from contributions – facilities (NCAA, 2019a). The NCAA's distribution to Division I members alone—exclusive of "Division I championships, programs, and NIT tournaments; Division II championships, distribution, and programs; Division III championships and programs; association-wide programs; and management and general expenses"—was $610,911,851 (NCAA, 2019a, p. 4). To say that college athletics is big business would be an understatement. Described as a "classic cartel" in some of the literature (Branch, 2011; Goldman, 1990), the NCAA has faced and is currently facing multiple lawsuits from student-athletes involving claims of antitrust violations under § 1 of the Sherman Act (*Agnew v. NCAA*, 2012; *Jenkins v. NCAA*, 2015; *Keller v. NCAA*, 2015; *McCormack v. NCAA*, 1988; *O'Bannon v. NCAA*, 2015; *White v. NCAA*, 2006). These claims are based on utilizing their talents for financial gain, while refusing to compensate them based on their status as amateurs.

During the time of this study, Governor Gavin Newsom signed the Fair Pay to Play Act (SB 206) on September 30, 2019, making California the first state to permit student-athletes to earn compensation generated by the institution from their athletic accomplishments. Governor Newsom stated, "Colleges and universities reap billions from these student athletes' sacrifices and success but block them from earning a single dollar. That's a bankrupt model – one that puts institutions ahead of the students they are supposed to serve" (CA.gov, 2019, para. 3). The governor's bold move led to a unanimous vote one month later by the NCAA's Board of Governors "to permit students participating in athletics the opportunity to benefit from the use of their name, image and likeness in a manner consistent with the collegiate model" (NCAA, 2019, para. 1). Efforts by the NCAA to modernize bylaws and policies to ensure fairness and equality for all student-athletes will no doubt usher in a new era for collegiate athletics.

As college athletics has grown into a commercial entity, ensuing pressures to have the best facilities, the most talented student-athletes, and the winningest teams may be threatening the educational mission of American higher education (Hill et al., 2001; Oriard, 2012). As stated by Goldman (1990):

> The rejection of regulations prohibiting freshmen eligibility, lengthy basketball and football seasons, exorbitant salaries of coaches relative to professors, retention of winning coaches regardless of their athletes' academic performance, and late night starts to increase television exposure all represent commercial concerns prevailing over educational interests. (p. 241)

The big business model employed by the NCAA and Division I athletic departments often affords athletic leaders an atypical amount of power on campus due to their abilities to control scarce resources (i.e., money), boundaries, and decision-making processes (Morgan, 2006). The distance created between athletic departments and the academic units of the university allows athletic leaders to govern decision-making within the organizational culture they develop, often isolated and independent from the university (Comeaux, 2010; Morgan, 2006; Schroeder, 2010). As Division I institutions and teams compete for highly-coveted television spotlights and top rankings in their conferences, coaches and administrators may feel pressure to prioritize and value athletics over academics, which can be detrimental to the career and identity construction processes of student-athletes trying to exist in the academic *and* athletic domains (Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015; Murphy et al., 1996; Navarro, 2014).

Recruiting and the Pressure to Win

While the pressure on student-athletes may be tremendous, athletic departments also face pressures, particularly from their external environment (i.e., NCAA, media, governing bodies, sponsors, professional leagues) (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). In their quests to win, the pressure felt by coaches and their staff can lead them to bend and break rules (Hewitt, 2009). As seen in the popular media, the pressure to have winning teams, with their associated benefits, can make it challenging for athletic administrators and coaches to see beyond the bottom line as winning becomes the primary focus, searing itself into the organizational culture and affecting the decisions made by those in power. With the campus-wide devastation caused by some of their poor decisions (e.g., Penn State and Sandusky, Title IX and Baylor University) (Freeh Sporkin & Sullivan, LLP, 2012; Pepper Hamilton LLP, 2016), it is unethical and irresponsible for university presidents to allow athletic departments to roam free.

With jobs, salaries, and bonuses for coaches tied to athletic outcomes rather than graduation rates (Goldman, 1990), questionable practices in recruiting student-athletes have surfaced (Sanders et al., 2009). Many coaches target academically underprepared student-athletes during the recruiting process because of their athletic abilities (Miller & Nadler, 2009). Student-athletes in revenue-producing sports often suffer the most from these practices (Fountain & Finley, 2009, 2011). Competition for top athletes brought about the modification of admissions standards and procedures (Sanders et al., 2009) that open the door for student-athletes, who are unprepared to handle the demands and rigor that a college education requires, to enter universities (Mondello & Abernethy, 2000; Oriard, 2012). Due to the lack of academic preparedness in arriving student-athletes, universities and athletic departments deal with varying levels of challenges with maintaining eligibility (despite poor academic performance) throughout the athletes' playing years. The impact of controversial recruiting practices is that "far too many [student-athletes] complete four years of college eligibility degreeless and unprepared to function in a society that does not reward former athletes who lack formal skills" (Sanders et al., 2009, p. 25). In essence, to recruit student-athletes to college based on athletic ability alone opens the door for the university to fail them in the long game of life.

Prioritization of Athletics Over Academics

There have been countless debates about the term, 'student-athlete,' and whether or not institutions place as much emphasis on 'student' as they do on 'athlete' (Branch, 2015; Monmouth University, 2015; Oriard, 2012). In a national poll conducted by Monmouth University (2015) with 1,008 American adults over the age of 18, only 24% of respondents said they believed that major competitive collegiate athletic programs maintained the right healthy balance between athletics and academics. Of the Americans and college graduates surveyed, on average, 68.5% said they believed that universities spent too much time promoting athletics rather than education. However, when the NCAA conducted a similar survey as the Monmouth poll with student-athletes on the term they identified with most—student or athlete—the majority reported an even balance between 'student' and 'athlete' (NCAA, 2013).

There is evidence to suggest that student-athletes are often the ones to suffer due to the overall systemic issues in Division I athletic programs, which can lead to the unhealthy prioritization of athletics over academics (Kissinger & Miller, 2000). At the beginning of their academic journeys, student-athletes may pre-select a major that leads to a career of interest (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987). However, when eligibility becomes the focus—combined with the demands on student-athletes' schedules with practices, games, and travel—academic advisors may "cluster" student-athletes into majors known to be less rigorous and more manageable for maintaining eligibility (Fountain & Finley, 2009, 2011; Oriard, 2012). Thus, eligibility becomes the primary focus over helping student-athletes focus on educational and purposeful career development strategies in preparation for life after sport (Oriard, 2012).

The NCAA (2016) reports a different story about student-athlete experiences in their most recent GOALS study, however. Although Division I student-athletes reported participation in sports prevented them from taking desired classes (31%) and majoring in what they wanted (22%), they did not have regrets. Over 75% reported they would choose their current major even if they did not participate in sports. However, the study required student-athletes to take the survey in person, so it is unclear if they felt pressure to respond a certain way. Furthermore, since the survey was taken prior to graduation, the student-athletes may have differing opinions after entering the workforce.

The divide between athletics and academics opens campus environments to bias and stereotypical perceptions about student-athletes as a population, which produces silos and creates barriers to change (Harmon, 2010). In a study on student perceptions toward student-athletes, results indicated that non-athletes had negative attitudes toward student-athletes, primarily when student-athletes earned high grades in class (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991). Comeaux (2011) found similar results with faculty perceptions toward student-athletes in the areas of race, gender, and college affiliation.

For student-athletes who dream of playing professionally in their sports, the pressure to succeed athletically may overshadow their interests in the classroom (Lally & Kerr, 2005). Opportunities for personal identity growth and development become incompatible within the Division I system “that promotes conformity and requires a continuing commitment of large amounts of physical and psychological energy and attention” (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990, p. 8). While not within the scope of this study, this dichotomy is important in terms of the potential for the culture of the Division I athletic system to facilitate the production of athletes with singular athletic identities rather than begetting athletes who also know themselves and their value aside from their athletic identities.

The literature in this section discussed the culture of Division I athletics. As evidenced in the research, the culture of American athletics, combined with the Division I celebrity brand image, may lead to short-term payoffs rather than long-term dividends when winning and earnings are prioritized over learning and the holistic development of student-athletes. The next section introduces the reader to the student-athlete and the unique issues surrounding their roles at the university.

The Student-Athlete

Throughout their athletic careers, collegiate student-athletes had to balance their roles as students *and* athletes. However, the stage of newly acquired adult independence, coupled with the demands of the Division I lifestyle, make the transition to college a particularly critical life event (Jordan & Denson, 1990). According to Kissinger and Miller (2009), student-athletes often lack the awareness needed to navigate the normal developmental processes that college students experience due to the unique demands they encounter as student-athletes. While all college students experience developmental issues and crises, Parham (1993) described six challenges unique to student-athletes: balancing academic and athletic pursuits, social isolation, managing success, physical health and injuries, satisfying multiple relationships, and terminating their athletic careers. This section focuses on three of the six challenges that are particularly pertinent to the focus of this study: balancing academics and athletics, social isolation, and terminating the student-athlete's athletic career.

Balancing Academics and Athletics

The NCAA created the term 'student-athlete' in the 1950s when they began to award athletic scholarships to college athletes (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). With the awarding of scholarship money, the NCAA became concerned that college athletes would be considered employees of the university and subject to comparable benefits and rights, such as workers' compensation (Branch, 2015; Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). In an effort to protect itself from ongoing litigation, the NCAA came up with the term, 'student-athlete,' to make it clear that the college athlete was a student first and an athlete second, reiterating that college athletes were amateurs and not professionals (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). Despite the linguistic emphasis on *student* (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005), Division I college athletics' metamorphosis into a multibillion-dollar big business operation over the last several decades (Goldman, 1990) means that student-athletes experience increasing challenges with balancing their roles as students *and* athletes (Navarro, 2014).

Although the term student-athlete was strategically crafted to indicate that academics should take priority over athletics, it is often the reverse. Given the number of hours dedicated to practices, games, strength training, viewing film, memorizing plays, travel, and the like (Oriard, 2012), the demands of their athletic role often collide with the requirements of their academic role; thus, student-athletes may experience role conflict (Chartrand & Lent, 1987). For many student-athletes, challenges abound when they feel pressure to perform both in the classroom and their sport. Due to the seemingly impossible demands and constant battle for their time and energy, some scholars have suggested that the amount of time necessary for athletes to excel in their sport poses a threat to their ability to explore opportunities outside of athletics, which are essential for their personal and career identity development (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Murphy et al., 1996; Navarro, 2014; Parham, 1993). Although some student-athletes enter the university with hopes of earning a degree in addition to playing a sport they love, they are quickly dealt a reality check by the priority that athletics takes over academics and the tradeoffs they may be forced to make (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987).

Contrary to social beliefs about the “dumb jock” stereotype (Comeaux, 2011; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Wininger & White, 2015), student-athletes may not intentionally plan to emphasize ‘athlete’ over ‘student.’ A seminal, longitudinal study with a Division I men’s basketball team revealed that many student-athletes enter the university excited to play their sport in addition to earning their degree (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987). However, as the demands from the sport manipulate their time and energy, many student-athletes succumb to the pressure to shift their focus from academics to athletics, which often leads to poor grades and eligibility issues due to academic non-compliance (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002). James Bates (2003) offered a further explanation of the reality experienced by student-athletes:

> Athletic teams aspire to be national champions, while their affiliate academic institutions seek national rankings. However, the means by which coaches and faculty achieve national reputations can create conflict for student athletes attempting to exist in both environments. Although both aspire to excel, the different measures of excellence for academics and athletics necessitates compromise by those who are placed in both settings. (para. 5)

Oftentimes, for many student-athletes, these compromises come in the form of focusing more on their athletic role to maintain eligibility standards and scholarship monies. Scholars have proposed that, due to student-athletes' enhanced athletic identities, they may face *extended* challenges in transitioning and adjusting to life and careers after sport (Fuller, 2014; Murphy et al., 1996; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

Although student-athletes may be forced to choose between athletics and academics when the role set collides (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987), their choices may not necessarily reflect a preference of one role over the other. A study by Brown et al. (2000) about athletic identity, career decision-making self-efficacy, locus of control, and identity foreclosure suggested that there could be equal salience between the student-athlete's athletic and academic identities. The researchers supposed that a strong commitment to the athletic identity did not preclude student-athletes from also having a strong commitment to their academic identity, which suggests that "living a well-balanced academic, social, and athletic life can possibly be achievable ideology" (Chen et al., 2010, p. 179).

In Lally and Kerr's (2005) qualitative interview study with student-athletes on career planning, athletic identity, and student role identity, the researchers found that student-athletes' aspirations of pursuing professional athlete status changed over the course of their time in college. Prior to their arrival at the university, the athletes had plans to pursue professional careers. By their senior years, every participant with the exception of one had relinquished their professional aspirations. Once they accepted that becoming a professional athlete was an unlikely career path, they began to invest more of their time and energy into their academics. In line with Chen et al. (2010), Lally and Kerr's (2005) findings proposed that student-athletes did not need to abandon their athletic roles to invest more in their academic roles. However, the findings also suggested that some student-athletes may struggle to commit to their academic roles until they realize that a professional athletic career may not be achievable. According to the researchers, for student-athletes to be successful, career development conversations between student-athletes and administrative professionals are critical.

Social Isolation

The literature demonstrates that the daily life of a student-athlete is unique due to the pressure to manage both their academic and athletic responsibilities (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987; Navarro, 2014; Parham, 1993). Academically, student-athletes are required to meet a specific GPA for eligibility purposes in addition to the requirements of their major, maintain full-time enrollment, and abide by the progress-toward-degree requirements for degree progress and completion (NCAA, 2018, 2018b). Athletically, the primary responsibilities of a student-athletes are to attend practices, strength and conditioning sessions, and competitive events. What those unfamiliar with the world of Division I athletics often miss are the additives to a student-athlete's schedule. These additives come in various forms for student-athletes, and include activities such as attending study hall, viewing film, memorizing plays, serving as representatives on Faculty Athletics Committees and/or the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), media interviews, booster club events, community service events, signing autographs, mandatory team meals, injury treatment, and travel (Adler & Adler, 1985). Oftentimes, in season travel takes athletes away from classes during the week, so they must plan ahead or make up coursework missed (Johnson, 2012). With all the above-mentioned components of their roles, student-athletes often must sacrifice their ability to participate in non-sport social and leisure opportunities (Parham, 1993).

Student-athletes from Division I institutions reported spending an average of 34 hours per week on athletics while in season, and 38.5 hours per week on academic responsibilities (NCAA, 2016). To fulfill all of their responsibilities, the daily schedule of a student-athlete tends to be nonstop from early morning to late night, which makes interacting with others outside of athletics even more challenging (Jordan & Denson, 1990). Due to the mental and physical constraints on their time and energy, Parham (1993) noted, “student-athletes often report feeling estranged, left out, and not in touch with campus life” (p. 413). The social isolation experienced by student-athletes is further exacerbated when they live together in athletic dorms, have a mandatory curfew, are grouped into like majors with other student-athletes, and spend the majority of their time with teammates and other student-athletes rather than engaging with others outside of athletics (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987).

Athletic Career Termination

At some point in their collegiate careers, it is inevitable that student-athletes will encounter the college-to-post-college transition. Some athletes may experience the transition earlier than normal because of a career ending injury, others may have been cut from the team (or failed to make it to the next level), and some may have aged out because of professional careers before college. When athletes withdraw from sport, they have varied reactions, emotions, and feelings. For some, retiring from their sport feels like a "social death" because they are no longer a part of the team (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Rosenberg, 1982). Athletic retirement was even compared to losing a limb or a family member by participants in Beamon (2012) and Beamon and Bell's (2011) qualitative study with former African American collegiate athletes. Regarding athletic retirement, one participant in the study made a comment that "athletes die twice" (Beamon & Bell, 2011, p. 37).

In Menke and Germany's (2019) phenomenological study on the process of retirement from sport, some of the student-athletes discussed feelings of loneliness and used phrases like, "my dream was dashed in a split second;" "it ended up in depression;" "there's a void;" "all of sudden you're just an average Joe;" "I couldn't even watch football;" "I had to change my life and that's depressing" (pp. 22-23). The athletes' emotional connections to their sports contributed to their overall sense of loss of their athletic identity and struggles to cope and transition, even when they had promising opportunities waiting for them in the future. Many athletes in the study wished that someone had talked to them about the "emotional aftermath of such a transition" (p. 23). The study also emphasized that an athlete's competitive drive does not simply end with the completion of their sporting role. The athletes were confronted with learning how to harness their competitive drive within the context of their family and work life when they no longer had sport as a channel to express their identity.

Although trauma may accompany an athlete's experiences with athletic retirement, it does not characterize every athlete's experience (Menke & Germany, 2019; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Swain 1991). As supported by various studies, athletes may also experience feelings of relief and excitement for the opportunity to reinvent themselves, return to normal life, pursue other interests, and try something new (Baillie, 1992; Lally, 2007; Menke & Germany, 2019; Swain, 1991). Professional hockey players in Swain's (1991) qualitative study felt thankful that they were able to retire with their dignity still intact rather than being forced to retire because they could no longer perform at the required level. Other athletes in Menke and Germany's (2019) study expressed excitement about the opportunity to apply themselves to a new pursuit using the same work ethic they developed and applied through athletics. The retirement event initiated what Coakley (1983) described as a transitional process, which I will detail further in the section on human transition and the student-athlete.

The literature in this section discussed the challenges unique to student-athletes within the context of this study. As seen in the research, and previously discussed, student-athletes must balance their roles as students *and* athletes. Due to the unique set of challenges their dual roles bring, many scholars identify student-athletes as a distinct subpopulation of college students in need of additional support (Brown et al., 2000; Kissinger & Miller, 2009; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Their particular journeys through the college years require additional considerations of identity issues explored in the next section.

Identity Development of Student-Athletes

With the majority of student-athletes specializing in their sport as early as 9 to 12 years old, it is evident that, for many, athletics have played a key role in their lives since their youth (NCAA, 2016). When considering identity development, these student-athletes form what the literature refers to as an athletic identity, "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role" (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). According to the International Olympic Committee (n.d.), "athletic identity is the way you perceive and feel about your sporting role, which comprises your goals, values, thoughts and sensations related to your sport" (p. 1). What may be less apparent is that, in the process of developing their identities, the individual *is* the athlete. In other words, "athlete" becomes so much a part of the individual's identity that, for many, it is difficult to separate their activities as athletes from who they are.

This section goes into detail about the athletic identity development of student-athletes and the issues surrounding an enhanced athletic identity. While there are several theories and approaches to studying the topic of identity, the seminal work of Erik Erikson strongly influenced many of these theories, which is why I selected Erikson's theoretical work to serve as the guide for understanding athletic identity for this study.

Identity Theory

Our understanding of theories regarding identity development traces back to the early work of Erikson (1956, 1963). Erikson (1956) defined identity as follows:

> The term identity points to an individual's link with the unique values, fostered by a unique history, of his [*sic*] people. Yet, it also relates to the cornerstone of this individual's unique development. . . . It is this identity of something in the

> individual's core with an essential aspect of a group's inner coherence which is under consideration . . . for the young individual must learn to be most himself [*sic*] where he [*sic*] means most to others—those others, to be sure, who have come to mean most to him [*sic*]. The term identity expresses such a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (self-sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others. (p. 57)

The interplay of nature and nurture in the individual's identity development is evident in Erikson's definition. Identity is constructed both consciously and unconsciously, within the individual, as well as through the influence of environmental forces, biology, and society at large. Erikson's Theory of Personality Development, which he refers to as the Eight Ages of Man, is a lifespan theory that includes eight stages of development prior to and after individuals experience an identity crisis: "Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust," "Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt," "Initiative vs. Guilt," "Industry vs. Inferiority," "Identity vs. Role Confusion," "Intimacy vs. Isolation," "Generativity vs. Stagnation," and "Ego Integrity vs. Despair" (Erikson, 1963, pp. 247-268).

With respect to adolescents, there comes a time where they must transition from childhood into adulthood. According to Erikson (1956),

> While the end of adolescence thus is the stage of an overt identity *crisis*, identity *formation* neither begins nor ends with adolescence: it is a *lifelong development* [emphasis added] largely unconscious to the individual and to his [*sic*] society. Its roots go back all the way to the first self-recognition: in the baby's earliest

> exchange of smiles there is something of a *self-realization coupled with a mutual recognition*. (p. 69)

The timing of the child-to-adult transition is unique to each individual. It is only complete when the individual is able to move past their childhood identity, taking on a new identity that they will move forward with into adulthood. At this point, the individual is forced to begin making commitments that will define their identity and their life. The intensity and duration of this process varies for each individual and may be different based on the society in which the individual lives.

The beginning of the adolescent's college years follows a stage Erikson (1956, 1963) called identity versus role confusion, or identity diffusion, where the individual often asks, "Who am I?" and "What path will I choose for myself?" Erikson (1956) refers to a "latency period" he called *psychosocial moratoria* where the individual is able to delay the full transition into adulthood by first "go[ing] to school" and preparing for life as an adult rather than being thrust into it following high school graduation (p. 66). As stated by Erikson (1963),

> In most instances . . . it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity which disturbs individual young people. To keep themselves together they temporarily overidentify, to the point of apparent complete loss of identity, with the heroes of cliques and crowds. (p. 262)

At this point in their psychological and physiological development, with adult tasks and responsibilities encroaching on them, adolescents begin to wonder if they measure up and have what it takes and how their thoughts about themselves compare to how they are viewed by others. It is during this process that the adolescent searches for a sense of stability as their final identity evolves, often having to revisit past challenges to move forward into adulthood and the occupation of their choosing.

There is a nexus of concern for the student-athlete when considering Erikson's theory and the Division I athletic culture's emphasis on athletic identity over personal identity. As the young athlete enters the institution, primed to play their sport and secure a position on the team, what the coach thinks about them may feel like everything because that is what determines their playtime (Rotella & Newburg, 1989). Perform and play; fail to perform and sit on the bench. Both results contribute to the student-athlete's sense of self and identity development. Those who make the cut and earn the playtime appreciate the emotional satisfaction the achievement brings; it fuels their sense of self-worth and belonging (Parham, 1993). For the benchwarmers, however, failure to perform up to standards can communicate to them that *they* are a failure. Because of this, players who sit on the bench often battle with confidence or identity issues as their sense of self-worth and feelings of belonging are often tied to their status on the team (Rotella & Newburg, 1989).

Athletic Identity

Research has demonstrated that the culture of athletics inhibits student-athletes' abilities to construct appropriate identities outside of their sporting roles due to the primary value placed on their identities as athletes, and the time required to perfect their crafts (Baillie, 1993; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Fuller, 2014; Harrison et al., 2011). The more time the athlete spends on their sport, the more it becomes a part of who they are, which explains the mentality of many athletes who choose a university for their sport, with the bachelor's degree as a bonus item they get along the way—provided that the demands of their majors fit within the scope of their athletic responsibilities (Hewitt, 2009; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Challenges abound with this type of thinking, however, once the athlete is no longer able or willing to play competitively. If a student-athlete's sense of value and self-worth is wrapped up in their athletic identity, once she ceases to play the sport at the same level or intensity, questions surrounding her beliefs about herself are called to question. As she walks away from one of the longest standing commitments in her life, she is forced to answer the question, who am I without the sport?

A seminal study by Adler and Adler (1985, 1987) with a Division I men's basketball team demonstrated how players' identities can be shaped and transformed by the athletic culture in which they are embedded, starting at the initial recruiting process. To recruit the top players, coaches created feelings of idealism in the recruits by stressing the importance of academics in preparing for their future career. The players began college with a vision of graduating with their chosen degrees while playing their sport. Within two semesters, and as academics took a backseat to their athletic obligations, they realized the picture initially portrayed was contrary to their experiences. Coaches enrolled them into courses without consulting them, chose more "manageable" majors for them, and contacted their professors for them. The players quickly lost motivation for academics, and those who earned high grades were often ridiculed by teammates because that was contrary to the subculture created within a team that lived in social isolation in the athletic dorms away from their peers. Within the context of this study, the players quickly learned that if they wanted a starting position in the lineup, they needed to commit wholeheartedly to their sporting role, which further strengthened the development of their athletic identity.

Although much of the literature supports challenges for student-athletes in terms of preparing, adjusting, and transitioning to the workplace (Baillie, 1993; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Fuller, 2014; Murphy et al., 1996), other scholars suggest the literature overemphasizes the distress to a student-athlete upon the closure of competitive athletics (Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2003). Athletes in various studies described a sense of excitement and anticipation for the opportunity to reinvent themselves, return to normalcy, and pursue other goals they were unable to due to prior athletic commitments (Lally, 2007; Menke & Germany, 2019; Swain, 1991). Along the same lines, empirical evidence from Webb et al. (1998) and Martin et al.'s (2014) studies revealed that while athletic identity was related to retirement difficulties, it did not necessarily impact overall life satisfaction. The findings from Webb et al. and Martin et al.'s studies suggest that athletes can experience positive adjustment to life after sport. Furthermore, Lally (2007) and Miller and Kerr (2002, 2003) found that the majority of athletes in their studies began to detach from their athletic roles the closer they got to their senior season, which made for a smoother transition upon graduation.

When it comes to the topic of identity, self-identity has been shown to be a predictor of academic success for student-athletes while in college (NCAA, 2013). The NCAA's (2013) findings suggest that one of the reasons graduation rates are higher for female student-athletes is because they tend to identify more with their academic identity, while male student-athletes traditionally identify more with their athletic identity. Likewise, research also suggests that a strong athletic identity can be advantageous to athletes in their sports (Harrison et al., 2011; Horton & Mack, 2000). For example, high levels of athletic identity were "associated with greater experience of positive psychological consequences of training such as enhanced body image, increased self-confidence, and decreased anxiety" (Horton & Mack, 2000, p. 113). Thus, the conflict between academics and athletics continues when considered through the lens of identity. A strong athletic identity can inhibit collegiate student-athletes from discovering other avenues of identity development due to isolation from non-athletes and social opportunities, time restraints, injuries sustained that keep athletes out of the game temporarily or permanently, anxiety, depression, and psychiatric distress (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Giannone et al., 2017; Jewett et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 1996; Parham, 1993; Swain, 1991). Seventy-five percent of participants in Beamon and Bell's (2011) study experienced symptoms of depression after their athletic career ended.

Stevenson (2002) used Prus' interactionist model in a qualitative study with masters swimmers to theorize the journey an athlete takes to solidifying the athletic role through a process of conversion, entanglement, commitments and obligations, and reputations and identities:

> Early in the involvement, the athlete becomes 'converted' to the worldview of the sporting subculture . . . and becomes 'entangled' relatively quickly in a subtle but ever-increasing series of 'commitments and obligations.' The further the athlete moves along the career path, the more commitments and obligations s/he has to make and meet, and the more entangled s/he also becomes in relationships with others in the sport. Finally, to the extent that 'reputations and identities' are built and are seen as desirable, then the athlete becomes increasingly committed and tied to his/her athletic career. (p. 132)

The ties form a bond between the athlete and the sport, whereby the student-athlete's personal identity often originates from their athletic identity (Weigand et al., 2013). I will consider additional challenges with student-athletes' over-commitments to their sporting roles through the concepts of the "glorified" self and athletic identity foreclosure.

"Glorified" Self

As student-athletes become known and valued players in their sports, receiving praise and adoration from fans, their athletic identity begins to shape their personal identity (Lally, 2007; Weigand et al., 2013). The more the athlete is celebrated and idolized, the more they may begin to take on an athletic identity called the "glorified" self (Beamon & Bell, 2011). According to Adler and Adler (1989), "the 'glorified' self . . . arises when individuals become the focus of intense interpersonal and media attention, leading to their achieving celebrity" and is "caused in part by the treatment of individuals' selves as objects by others" (p. 299). The athlete's athletic identity is further strengthened through the sense of belonging they experience as a member of the team, in addition to the adrenalin and highs of competition. The praise and approval from coaches and fans further strengthens the "glorified" self and how student-athletes view themselves in relation to others, adding to their overall sense of self (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Lally, 2007).

Bell (2009) used Stryker and Serpe's (1982) concept, identity salience, to discuss how the student-athlete's athletic identity evolves as their commitment to their role as an athlete increases. In a qualitative study with Canadian student-athletes, one athlete mentioned that he was driven "to show people I was a better . . . athlete. I wanted to show people . . . that I could be faster and that [I] had an overwhelming power on me" (Miller

& Kerr, 2002, p. 353). As student-athletes walk around campus, their peers know them as athletes, which also begins to shape their identity and how they view themselves in relation to others (Lally, 2007; Weigand et al., 2013). A staple piece of their childhood and development, their chosen sport has been “the primary source of their identities . . . the adulation bordering on worship from others . . . the camaraderie with teammates, and the intense ‘highs’ of competition” (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998, p. 263).

The more that others reinforce the “glorified” self, the harder it is for student-athletes to discover or take on an identity outside of their athletic identity. Social status bestows benefits, and there is a lure of the celebrity (Adler & Adler, 1989; Beamon & Bell, 2011; Hill et al., 2001). Due to the fact that 98% of Division I student-athletes will never play professionally (NCAA, 2018a), those deeply committed to their athletic identity and dream of playing professionally are often at a greater risk for psychological and emotional disturbances upon athletic retirement (Brewer et al., 1993).

Athletic Identity Foreclosure

As their celebrity status is reinforced, considering an identity outside of their sporting role becomes a challenge, particularly for student-athletes who aspire to play professionally (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Lally, 2007; Watt & Moore III, 2001). According to an NCAA (2016) survey, student-athletes agreed or strongly agreed that the following factors contributed to their decision to attend the college they selected: athletics (86%), athletic facilities (47%), and presence of coach (45%). An overall average of 47% of male and 17% of female student-athletes believed they would achieve professional and/or Olympic athlete (i.e., elite) status in their sport. For student-athletes unprepared to deal with the harsh reality of athletic retirement, transitioning to a life after college athletics can be a challenge, particularly if their identity is primarily defined by athletics (Baillie, 1993; Beamon & Bell, 2011; Fuller, 2014; Lally, 2007; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Menke & Germany, 2019). These student-athletes may experience what the literature calls identity foreclosure. According to the seminal work of Petitpas (1978), identity foreclosure:

> Occurs when individuals prematurely make a firm commitment to an occupation or ideology. These individuals have not allowed for an exploration of their internal needs and values; instead, they have conceded to the demands of their environment and adopted a socially accepted role identity. (p. 558)

Foreclosed individuals express commitment before a crisis ever ensues (Marcia, 1966). They are often unwilling to explore other alternatives due to the commitment they have already made. Often primed toward a particular occupation since childhood, these individuals tend to struggle with any ideology outside of the box they exist.

Student-athletes who identify primarily with the athletic role are at risk of identity foreclosure if they do not take the time to examine their internal needs and values in an effort to explore, discover, and develop other facets of their self-identity in preparation for their likely transition out of collegiate athletics (Beamon, 2012). Transitioning to the workforce after graduation tends to be an even greater challenge for student-athletes who identify strongly with their athletic role if they do not take the time to diminish their athletic identity, cultivate their personal identity, and develop mature career plans (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Lally, 2007; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Murphy et al., 1996).

This section discussed the athletic identity development of student-athletes and the issues surrounding an enhanced athletic identity. The next section explores the human transition literature as it relates to student-athletes and their transition out of collegiate athletics.

Human Transition and the Student-Athlete

A critical life event occurs when a life situation brings about change for the individual (Danish et al., 1993). With respect to the literature on human adaptation to critical life events, each person experiences, reacts, and adapts to change in a different manner (Schlossberg, 1981). For example, the end of collegiate athletics could mean freedom and the ability to pursue new life aspirations for one athlete, while another may enter into a state of depression and hopelessness (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Jewett et al., 2018; Menke & Germany, 2019; Swain, 1991). Aside from the natural critical life events that individuals may encounter throughout life outside of athletics, athletes experience additional critical life events throughout their participation in sport, such as transitioning from high school to college athletics, coaching changes, being cut from a team, voluntary or involuntary departure from sport participation, etc. (Danish et al., 1993). Regardless of the type of transition experienced, each is unique to the individual, varies in duration, and carries different degrees of consequences depending on how the individual adapts to the changes (George, 1993).

The initial approach to sport career transition research concentrated on a single, one-time life event at the time the athlete retired from competitive athletics (Wylleman et al., 2004). The issue with concentrating on a single life event was that it assumed that all else happening in the athlete's life was held constant to account for the career termination and that the life transition occurred in a finite and fixed period of time (Coakley, 1983; Douglas & Carless, 2009). When it comes to life transitions, the literature spans an array of topics concerning life span development, occupations, education, social support, aging, retirement, and dying (Coakley, 1983; Cummings & Henry, 1961; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Erikson, 1956, 1963; Hopson & Adams, 1977; Kubler-Ross, 1969; McPherson, 1980; Newman et al., 2000; Schlossberg, 1981; Wylleman et al., 2004).

With respect to human transition and student-athletes, the literature evolved in a way that assumes there is an end to athletics for the athlete, and it uses variations of words like retirement (Baillie, 1993; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Coakley, 1983; Danish et al., 1993; Lally, 2007), [social] death (Beamon, 2012; Beamon & Bell, 2011; Rosenberg, 1982), and rebirth (Curtis & Ennis, 1988; Swain, 1991). However, the current study does not assume an artificial or clear ending to the experience and the influence of sports; rather, it acknowledges that individual athletes may experience transition differently and that may extend for an unknown period of time. The following sections use specific aspects of Schlossberg's (1981) seminal Model of Human Adaptation to Transition as a lens to better understand human transitions and how student-athletes may transition to life after competitive athletics.

Schlossberg's (1981) Model of Human Adaptation to Transition

According to Schlossberg (1981), "A transition can be said to occur if an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). The result of change and transition brings about "new networks of relationships, new behaviors, and new self-perceptions," with each person experiencing, reacting, and adapting to change differently (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 2). "Adaptation to transition is a process during which an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with the transition to integrating the transition into his or her life" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 7).

According to the model, there are three factors that play into the individual's ability to adapt to an impending transition: "the characteristics of the particular transition (role change, affect, source, timing, onset, duration, degree of stress), the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments (internal support systems, institutional supports, physical setting), and the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition (psychosocial competence, sex and sex-role identification, age and life stage, state of health, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, value orientation, previous experience with a transition of a similar nature)" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5).

Perception of the Particular Transition

Change and transitions are inevitable as individuals move through the lifespan, though the transition is uniquely defined by the person's experience and their *perception* of the change. In considering the timing of an event, we determine whether the event happened 'on-time' (normative; expected) or 'off-time' (non-normative; unexpected), based on societal norms and expectations (Neugarten, 1968). Since the majority of transitions are considered normative, individuals can anticipate and plan for when they will occur, which should lower the level of stress associated with the transition (Cummins & Boyle, 2015; George, 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Therefore, when individuals can predict and prepare for an upcoming transition before it occurs, practice and rehearse their responses to the transition, and are able to lean on their support networks, the chances are significantly greater that the transition will be smoother and less disruptive to their lives and social structure (Danish et al., 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). When the event is ‘off-time,’ however, individuals often have a more challenging time adapting to and coping with the transition. Baillie & Danish (1992) found that athletes who willingly chose to retire were able to adjust better emotionally than those who were forced into retirement from an injury or being cut from a team.

In addition to timing, every life event varies in duration; some events are temporary, while others are permanent or uncertain (Schlossberg, 1981). Each outcome can also be classified as positive, negative, or mixed (Schlossberg, 1981). An individual’s reaction or response to a particular event is contingent on how the event is perceived by the individual, and the value they place on it (Danish et al., 1993). For example, an athlete who experiences a career ending injury is likely to react differently than an athlete who has an injury that keeps her out of competition for a couple of weeks, or an athlete with chronic back spasms who is uncertain if she will ever be able to play again. Similarly, athletes injured at the beginning of a season may react differently if they can pull a medical redshirt (gain an additional year of eligibility) than an athlete injured in the middle of her season when she no longer qualifies for the extra year of eligibility.

Student-athletes who are unable or unwilling to take the time to prepare for the departure from competitive athletics often encounter struggles with the transition (Baillie & Danish, 1992). The way athletes perceive the conclusion of their athletic career also plays a factor in their transition process. For example, according to Baillie (1993),

> For those who perceive retirement as a complete barrier to their goals (a reaction that is more common among athletes who are forced to retire because of injury or managerial decisions), denial (“I can still play”), anger (“What a stupid coaching

> decision!”), bargaining (“Give me one more chance to play”), or depression (“I can’t do anything anymore”) become the more prevalent responses. (p. 404)

Regardless of a student-athlete’s ability to anticipate the end of their eligibility, which should make the departure and adjustment process easier, many are still unprepared to find a new dream when the time comes (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Menke & Germany, 2019). While the end of eligibility would be considered an ‘on-time’ event socially, psychologically, emotionally, and socially they may experience an ‘off-time’ event when they realize their collegiate career is over and life, as they have known it, changes dramatically.

Applying Schlossberg’s model to post-athletic career transitions, Swain’s (1991) qualitative study with 10 former professional male athletes about their experiences leaving professional sport found that athletes’ experiences were different in how each perceived the career transition. For some, the event seemed to come at the right time and helped to eliminate the stress associated with waiting for their sport career to come to an end. For others, the event turned out to be a non-event as they were able to transition naturally to the next chapter of their lives. What emerged as important from the study was the context of the experience and the impact of the experience on the former athletes’ daily life routines. Each former athlete viewed the transition through a different lens based on their particular setting, which impacted how they reacted and adapted to the transition. “The impact differed for these athletes as the termination of their career led to new life routines as well as changes in their various personal assumptions, roles, and relationships” (Swain, 1991, p. 157).

Characteristics of Pre-Transition and Post-Transition Environments

In line with Schlossberg, Cummins and O'Boyle (2015) discussed four psychosocial factors associated with a successful transition from college-to-career among male Division I basketball players: "balanced college experience, openness to alternatives, positive social support, and pretransition planning" (p. 39). Student-athletes who took time to diminish their athletic identity by exploring relationships and activities outside of athletics while in college expressed the benefits on their overall college experience (Lally, 2007; Lally & Kerr, 2005). In a visual elicitation study with 26 African American athletes at a Division IIA institution by Harrison and Lawrence (2003), one participant commented:

> This is an example of a good student athlete. He was a hard worker on the field and in the classroom. He, like I, feel that it is important to maintain good academic standards and to participate in clubs and organizations. It is vital to success in our future after graduation that we [student-athletes] lead a well-rounded life. (p. 382)

Additional efforts student-athletes made to withdraw from their athletic role prior to the transition included talking with former teammates who had already made the transition, devoting more time to academics and career interests, and training for alternative athletic events (e.g., marathons, triathlons) to channel their competitive instincts (Lally, 2007).

Social support proved to be an issue for the former athletes in Swain's (1991) study, however, due to the alienation and isolation they often felt between themselves and non-athletes, other athletes, and significant others. The former athletes rarely reached out to others for support or advice with the transition, which opened them up to greater challenges earlier on in the process. In their systematic review of the literature on athletes' career transitions out of sport, however, Park et al. (2013) reported that athletes in 93% of the 29 studies they reviewed said that having psychosocial support was a key element in their ability to adjust to the transition easier. Consistent with Schlossberg's research, Cummins and O'Boyle (2015) and Pearson and Petitpas (1990) stressed the importance of support relationships in assisting individuals with emotional, material, and social support during the transition process. When the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environment were discussed early on with athletes, the transition process tended to be smoother, especially if the athlete received support from the institution.

A commonly held belief among student-athletes from five Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions in Bell's (2009) study was that all they needed was a degree, rather than selecting a major in line with their career interests. Of the 41 participants, over 80% aspired to pursue a professional career in the National Football League (NFL). To that end, the NCAA allows member institutions to support student-athletes and prepare them for life after athletics by "financ[ing] other academic support, career counseling or personal development services" (NCAA, 2015, para. 1). Through academic advising services, professional advisors can help student-athletes to choose a major in a career field of interest in preparation for life after college athletics that, for most, will not include professional sports. Many participants in Bell's (2009) study mentioned the influence their academic advisors had on them, in addition to the roles of fellow student-athletes, coaches, non-athletes, and faculty members.

Relationships with faculty members also proved beneficial to student-athletes while in college and helped them develop their academic identity and commitment to academics (Bell, 2009). Other student-athletes found programs and resources offered by their universities, such as the Positive Transitions Sport Retirement Model, beneficial to their retirement process (Stankovich et al., 2001). While not offered by all universities, the Positive Transitions Sport Retirement Model is “a research-based, systematic framework . . . [that] uses athletic transferable skills as a teaching tool (e.g., goal setting, communicating effectively with teammates) to assist student athletes in building confidence in their skills and abilities beyond sports” (Stankovich et al., 2001, p. 82).

Characteristics of the Individual

Many research studies have suggested that retired athletes are more susceptible to depression due to the lack of social support, loss of athletic identity, and changes to their active lifestyle (Baillie, 1993; Beamon & Bell, 2011; Jewett et al., 2018; Swain, 1991; Weigand et al., 2013). Athletes who retire have been known to struggle with loneliness; self-image; anger and resentment; denial; a lack of confidence, doubt, and insecurity in their non-athletic abilities; depression; anxiety; and fear of devoting any time to activities that would detract from their goals of making it to elite levels in their sport (Baillie, 1993; Beamon & Bell, 2011; Jewett et al., 2018; Menke & Germany, 2019; Petitpas et al., 1992; Swain, 1991). Some athletes experience more acute reactions upon athletic career termination such as drug abuse, alcoholism, and suicidal thoughts (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Menke & Germany, 2019; Swain, 1991). A study conducted by Weigand et al. (2013) with recently graduated college athletes and current college athletes, however, found that among the 280 athletes surveyed, depression levels were actually higher in current college athletes than in retired college athletes. While depression was not found to be statistically significant in recently graduated college athletes in Weigand et al.’s (2013) study, effects of athletic retirement may still be challenging and even traumatic for some athletes (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Menke & Germany, 2019; Swain, 1991).

The research also points to an inner struggle and conflict between “what the [athlete] is” and “what he/she ought to be or wants to be” (Stambulova, 2000, p. 589). For example, as athletes cease to compete at high levels of competition, they often scale back the amount of time spent in the gym as they are no longer training to compete. As their bodies change, they may experience the inner conflict between what they see in the mirror and what they were accustomed to seeing when they were training as elite athletes. Evidence of the struggle also tends to manifest itself as athletes adjust to new lifestyles void of their athletic identity. Kuettel et al. (2017) found that emotional and social adaptation were the most challenging for athletes, with the process taking an average of nine months. Kadlcik and Flemr (2008) found the career transition period to range from two months to two-or-three years for former elite athletes.

In another study about adjusting to athletic retirement, Baillie (1992) surveyed 260 retired elite and professional athletes and found that the adjustment process for each athlete averaged two years, though some reported difficulty coping up to 10 years post-retirement. The study indicated that younger athletes had a tougher time dealing with the emotional aspects of the transition process than older athletes, and Olympic and college student-athletes encountered less challenges transitioning to careers than professional athletes. According to the research, life stage tends to be more helpful than chronological age when considering how a person adapts to a transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

Throughout the literature, a common theme emerges—student-athletes who take the time to explore other identities outside of their athletic identity (i.e. academics, social activities, career preparation) and prepare mentally and emotionally for their exit from competitive sport often have an easier transition experience (Lally, 2007; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Menke & Germany, 2019). Rather than focusing exclusively on their athletic identity, student-athletes in Lally's (2007) study who chose to develop other facets of their identity and self-concept outside of athletics were able to avoid an identity crisis. Additionally, those who took the time to pursue other interests outside of athletics and suppress their athletic identity prior to retirement reported a smoother transition from the conclusion of their athletic career into their professional career. The timing of when student-athletes began to detach from their athletic identity was also a factor in the ease of the transition. Those who pursued opportunities outside of athletics in advance of their retirement rather than at the time of retirement fared better through the transition.

Researcher Critique and Reflection on the Literature

As mentioned in the introduction, several of the articles and books used in this review were published two decades ago, during a time when society and the nature of intercollegiate athletics was different than it is today. However, the former collegiate athletes in the current study were in their prime during the 2000s, the time that many of these studies were first published. As university presidents began to assume leadership for their universities and athletic programs in 1991, the NCAA's "Reform Convention" highlighted academic requirements for athletic participation as it related to time spent on sport (Oriard, 2012). This was the same year that the NCAA mandated that Division I institutions provide support services for student-athletes. I submit that these reforms were likely in response to some of the seminal studies that shined a light on the issues within the culture and structure of intercollegiate athletics, such as the work of Adler and Adler (1985, 1987, 1989). In an effort to continue to reform college athletics, in 2005 the NCAA began to apply calculations to determine the graduation rates of student-athletes, and individual and team eligibility and retention (Le Crom et al., 2009). The NCAA's efforts aligned with the U.S. Department of Education's (DOE) (2006) call for greater accountability in institutions due to the rising costs of higher education and questions concerning the qualifications of new graduates.

It has only been within the past decade that a focus on well-being became an increased public and societal concern. I believe that is why we are just now starting to see studies published on various aspects of student-athlete well-being, one being the transition and adaptation experiences after athletes "retire" from competitive sport. As one of the leading voices in intercollegiate athletics, the NCAA did not publicly begin broaching the subject of life after sport until 2014 (M. Miller, personal communication, September 5, 2018). Since the NCAA extended the holistic view of the student-athlete to include the athlete's post-college experience, more studies have started to look into the transition and adjustment process of student-athletes.

As seen in this review, much of the literature contradicts itself when discussing the outcome of athletes' transitions to life after competitive sport. Many of the studies with student-athletes were conducted with athletes in revenue-producing sports, likely due to the degree of emphasis on these athletes' desires to play professionally after college. The challenge, however, is that multiple other sports exist outside of the revenue-producing sports and, while athletes as a whole comprise a population, their experiences are not unidimensional. Athletes in non-revenue producing sports may be as much at risk of struggling with the transition out of collegiate athletics as an athlete in a revenue-producing sport. Accordingly, not all athletes in revenue-producing sports desire to play professionally, and many have invested in their studies and their identities outside of their sporting role that led to successful lives after college sports.

I believe the reason the literature reflects so many contradictions is the multilayered nature of intercollegiate athletics: revenue versus non-revenue producing sports, males versus females, scholarship athletes versus walk-ons, team versus individual sports, different NCAA divisions and conferences, different resources allocated to student support services, various demographic profiles and institutional diversity, etc. Though my study did not highlight the experiences and needs of all of the subpopulations in intercollegiate athletics, it aimed to explore post-sport transition for *female* athletes and prompt a conversation about how researchers can explore the topic in the future.

At this point in the review, it is necessary to define the difference between a change and a transition, because it is at the heart of the design of this study, which will be further detailed in Chapter III. According to Bridges (1991), "Change is situational. . . . Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation" (p. 3). To elaborate:

> Change is something that happens to people, even if they don't agree with it. Transition, on the other hand, is internal: It's what happens in people's minds as they go through change. Change can happen very quickly, while transition usually occurs more slowly. (Mind Tools, n.d., para. 5)

The majority of the transition studies with athletes appear to consider athletic departure as an *event*, rather than an actual *transition* that takes place over an *extended* period of time (Swain, 1991). For some student-athletes, the transition process extends several years past the time they officially decide to leave competitive sport and may even be an ongoing process a decade or more later. To date, I have found only one empirical study that focused on former student-athletes a decade or more after they left their competitive sporting role (Laure & Meline, 2018); however, as noted by the study authors, none of these former volleyball players reported past experiences of exclusive athletic identity. I did not find any studies that focus on the *extended* transitions of Division I athletes who were active in sports wherein they would be expected to report very strong athletic identities. This study was intentionally designed to fill that gap in the literature and contribute knowledge and empirical evidence about a group of former Division I *female* athletes' experiences with transitions and the influences on their athletic identities in their post-collegiate lives.

Conclusion

This chapter included available literature on the culture of athletics, the student-athlete, identity development, and human transition. The NCAA continues to advocate for a more holistic understanding of student-athletes (M. Miller, personal communication, September 5, 2018) and the unique challenges they face in higher education. The next chapter addresses the methodology and methods I selected for this multiple case study, which explored former Division I female athletes' journeys and experiences with transitioning, adapting, assimilating, and *translating* their athletic identity to life after collegiate athletics.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

"Honor the space between no longer and not yet."

– Nancy Levin

The college environment is a formative setting for identity development in traditionally aged students due to the diversity of experiences to which they are exposed in higher education (Waterman, 1982), and naturally-occurring human development associated with "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000). The identity tasks of college student-athletes are complicated by the need to balance their sometimes-incompatible dual roles as student *and* athlete (Brown et al., 2000; Chartrand & Lent, 1987). This tension may contribute to the *extended* challenges several scholars report in student-athletes' struggles with transitioning and adjusting to life after sport (Fuller, 2014; Hill et al., 2001; Murphy et al., 1996; Navarro, 2014; Parham, 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

This chapter outlines the methodology of the study. It begins with a statement of the problem, the purpose statement, and research question. It then provides an overview of the research type and reasoning behind the selection of a qualitative methodology. A presentation of the research methods employed follows to include the research sites, participants, data collection, and data analysis processes. The chapter concludes with an overall chapter summary.

Problem Statement

An inevitable transition point awaits student-athletes who have “played out” their collegiate athletic eligibility, the college-to-post-college transition. Because fewer than 2% of Division I student-athletes go on to a professional career in athletics (NCAA, 2018a), the expiration of eligibility often signals the end to an athletic self the student-athlete may have identified with since youth (NCAA, 2016). Research supports that athletes who identify strongly and exclusively with their athletic roles often experience greater challenges transitioning and adjusting to life after sport if they do not take the time to disengage from their sporting role and develop mature career plans (Fuller, 2014; Hill et al., 2001; Murphy et al., 1996; Navarro, 2014; Parham, 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). However, those who pursue meaningful opportunities to develop interests outside of athletics and cultivate their personal identity aside from their athletic identity are often better equipped to adapt to the lifestyle changes (Baillie, 1992; Fuller, 2014; Lally, 2007; Menke & Germany, 2019; Swain, 1991).

Because sport is so interwoven into the fabric of American culture, it is no secret that intercollegiate athletics is a multibillion-dollar, big business operation at American Division I institutions, specifically due to the commercialization of college athletics (Hill et al., 2001; Mitten et al., 2009; Renick, 1974; Smith 2000). The commercialization has been known to benefit institutions through revenue generation, increased visibility, the ability to recruit both students and qualified faculty, and alumni and donor support (Hill et al., 2001; Mitten et al., 2009). With the amount of revenue generated by top tier athletic programs, high profile athletes are highly sought after for their athletic prowess, particularly those in revenue-generating sports (Fountain & Finley, 2009, 2011). As winning becomes the primary objective, coaches and administrators may feel the pressure to prioritize and value athletics over academics, which appears to impede student-athletes' abilities to construct an identity outside of athletics and prepare for meaningful careers after graduation (Fountain & Finley, 2009, 2011; Hill et al., 2001; Murphy et al., 1996; Navarro, 2014; Renick, 1974). This practice stands in stark contrast to some of the primary purposes of higher education institutions, to develop productive, ethical, and engaged citizens and leaders, and to prepare students for the workforce after graduation (Navarro & McCormick, 2017; Sutton, 2016).

As we consider the concept of higher education for the public good (Kezar et al., 2005), coupled with the NCAA's call for a more holistic understanding of student-athletes (M. Miller, personal communication, September 5, 2018), the importance of the student-athlete's voice (Quaye, 2005) is vital to understanding the unique challenges student-athletes face, and the perceived influences of these challenges on how they view themselves in their post-athletic life. Furthermore, as many programs have been known to exploit student-athletes for their athletic ability while benefitting from their labor (Miller & Nadler, 2009), considering the welfare of student-athletes becomes a type of social justice issue. Due to the demands of their sport, many student-athletes encounter additional issues or hurdles to earning their college degrees (Parham, 1993). Therefore, institutions have a moral and ethical responsibility to ensure that student-athletes are prepared to transition to healthy and productive lives after sport. This responsibility requires an increased understanding of the athletic identity transitions that Division I athletes experience in transitioning, adapting, assimilating, and *translating* their athletic identity to life after collegiate athletics.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how transitioning out of collegiate soccer influenced the athletic identities of Division I female collegiate athletes who were no longer pursuing competitive athletics. This multiple case study focused on four female athletes' narrated experiences of their journeys 8-16 years after they exited their collegiate athlete roles.

Research Question

How do Division I female athletes describe their experiences with transitioning to life after collegiate athletics?

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study are specific to its participants, who were former Division I female student-athletes. This study was conducted in a specific region of the United States that may have differing demands, environments, demographic profiles, and institutional diversity for student-athletes than other regions. Readers of this study should consider the boundaries (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 2005) or delimitations of the study discussed in the methods section and analyze the characteristics of the participants and the descriptions of their circumstances and experiences to determine the applicability to other former student-athletes (Gay et al., 2011).

The individual and fluid nature of participants' transitions meant that the participants may not have fully processed their own transitions at the time of data collection, occasionally making it difficult for them to fully assess and share their experiences with me. Additionally, because this study required participants to recall past memories and experiences, the passage of time may have limited their ability to access particular details and feelings associated with their experiences. However, the passage of time may have also positively contributed to participants' ability to share insights about their multilayered, complex experiences that only time, distance, increased maturity, and life experiences can produce.

Overview of Study

This section includes an overview of the study. It is followed by a section on data collection methods.

Research Methodology

As a researcher, I sought to understand the journeys and experiences of Division I female athletes regarding their post-sport transitions and the influences on their athletic identities. While I honored my own voice about my personal experiences as a member of the population and as a participant researcher, the primary purpose of this study revolved around understanding the experiences of my four participants. This purpose included working with the participants to make meaning of sometimes messy and unprocessed stories and experiences.

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative studies focus on exploring and understanding phenomenon in depth rather than the breadth offered through quantitative research. While purposes vary, qualitative studies explore culture, experiences, opinions, feelings, and processes in context. They are characterized by emergent and flexible designs, inductive and deductive data analysis, reflexivity, and thick descriptive data. A key component of qualitative research is the personal nature of the interactions between the researcher and the participants. As such, qualitative research is often conducted in participants' natural settings to provide the researcher with context for their behavior and actions, to elicit feelings and responses, and to observe participants in their natural habitat. The qualitative researcher's role is to personally gather the data from multiple sources such as interviews, documents, observations, artifacts, etc., and look for common themes across the sources of data. Data collection from multiple sources allows for triangulation of the data to justify common themes that emerge, which adds validity to the study. For all of the reasons outlined in this section, the in-depth and emergent tool of qualitative research was selected as the research type for this study.

Epistemology

According to Crotty (1998), epistemology "is a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know" (p. 3). It is the theory of knowledge, and certain assumptions about knowledge inform every research study. This qualitative research study was grounded in the epistemological worldview of constructivism. Constructivism holds that meaning is not created or waiting to be discovered; meaning is constructed. Each researcher constructs her own understandings of the inquiry process and the data based on her interactions with the world and how she interprets and constructs meaning.

Constructivism is foundational to the meaning we construct through our interactions with other individuals, and the inductive development of "a theory or pattern of meaning" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). Based on my epistemological viewpoint, I hold that meaning is constructed differently by each individual, even if the phenomenon is the same (Crotty, 1998). As the researcher, I determined that the best way to explore the phenomenon and honor participants' experiences, including my own as a member of the population, was to approach my study as a partner with participants to construct meaning from our individual and collective experiences with the phenomenon (Crotty, 1998).

Theoretical Perspective

A theoretical perspective influences how we view and make sense of the world in carrying out a research study; it is “the philosophical stance laying behind a methodology . . . [that] . . . provides a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and its criteria” (Crotty, 1998, p. 66). The theoretical perspective allowed me to pursue conceptual alignment in my research design through linking the worldview and logic proceeding from my epistemological stance with my methodology, including the choices I made in my research design, data analysis, and data interpretation.

Aligned with my epistemological stance of constructivism, the theoretical perspective for this study was interpretivism. Interpretivism “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Based on this rationale, an interpretivist stance guided my exploration of the experiences of former collegiate athletes whose perspectives were irrevocably influenced by the meaning of athletics and other phenomena shaping the time and space in which they occurred.

Theoretical Framework

Although the design of this study was initially influenced by Schlossberg’s (1981) Model of Human Adaptation to Transition and Erikson’s (1956, 1963) Theory of Personality Development, no individual theory served as an *a priori* theoretical framework. While I made a practical or theoretical assumption that transition occurred, I intentionally designed the study to be emergent. With an emergent design, I hoped to lessen the risk of silencing participants' unique experiences. After data collection, *a posteriori* theories were used to deepen my understanding, consider additional meanings, and consider extensions and contrasts with current literature.

Methodology

Flowing from my interpretivist stance and choice of qualitative research, I selected multiple case study research as my methodological approach. The primary aim of this study was understanding, which is one of the key reasons to use case study as a methodology, particularly in social science research (Stake, 1978). For this study, it was not purely my experience that powered the understanding of former collegiate athletes' journeys, but the shared experiences of additional members of the population and the meanings we co-constructed (Rapley, 2018) together, and in which we also found important differences. As such, I approached the data gathering process as a co-construction activity with the participants, which allowed me to dialogue with the participants and read the data for the interactions and deeper meanings, rather than just for the words the participants said.

According to Stake (1995), "We enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how [participants] function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn" (p. 1). Furthermore, Simons (2009) noted, "The primary purpose for undertaking a case study is to explore the particularity, the uniqueness, of the single case" (p. 3). In line with this purpose, case study, and in particular, multiple case study research, best allowed me to understand how and when the cases were unique and where they shared common themes (Stake, 1995). In addition, case study research assisted me in gaining an understanding of the experiences of the women I studied, those who participated in collegiate athletics, a role that I too shared.

Determining the unit of analysis is the foundation for case study research (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Patton, 2015). The researcher must know what the case is and what it is not (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1978). This consideration led to a multiple case study where each case was an empirical unit that represented a single individual (Patton, 2015; Stake, 2005) with her unique experience that was not muted through immediately interweaving it with others' experiences through, for example, a single case study design. The multiple case study approach allowed me as the researcher to "go [deep] beyond the case" (Stake, 2005, p. 8) by utilizing multiple sources of data to analyze each case independently, as well as look across cases to see what they shared in common and where they were distinctive (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2014; Stake, 1995). For the purpose of this study and to delineate the case, I chose to analyze individual former female Division I athletes with each participant as one case represented in their own chapters (Chapters V – VIII). The participants lived in the South Central region of the United States.

Stake (2014) refers to the "object or phenomenon or condition to be studied" (p. 6) in a multiple case study as the quintain, or target of the study. Likened to an umbrella, the quintain is the phenomenon that the individual cases underneath help to explain. In this study, I sought to understand Division I female athletes' transitions and the influences on their athletic identities after leaving collegiate athletics, which was the target or quintain of the case. According to Stake (2014), "We study what is similar and different about the cases in order to understand the quintain better" (p. 6). As such, each case in this study was unique to the individual athlete represented, but taken all together, and in addition to my own experiences, the cases helped me to better understand the quintain.

To determine what the case was not, I created boundaries (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 2005), or delimitations. This study was not bound to a specific event or point in time, such as graduation or the completion of Division I eligibility; rather, it was focused on the unique journeys and experiences of former Division I female athletes and the influences on their athletic identities as they experienced post-college transitions as a process across time (i.e., *extended* transitions). While not limited to any specific point in time, I narrowed participation to former Division I female athletes who exited their collegiate athlete roles 8-16 years ago, which created a window of time wherein their specific experiences occurred. To further clarify, the athletes exited their collegiate athlete roles and graduated between the years of 1999 and 2012. They may have been playing their sport or serving in a coaching capacity within the sport, though they were only interacting with the sport in a supporting role and/or for recreational purposes, rather than for the purpose of trying to obtain professional status. I will detail additional criteria for participation in this study in the section on research participants.

Lastly, I was interested in the notion of naturalistic generalization, which Stake (1978) noted could be "arrived at by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural covariations of happenings" (p. 6). While the purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize about a population, case study research allowed me as the researcher to contribute knowledge with which readers may be able to identify, which provided an opportunity for naturalistic generalization as readers connect and identify with the individual cases and cross-case analysis based on their own experiences (Stake, 1978).

Methods

This section includes information about the methods I employed to recruit participants and collect data. It is followed by a section on data analysis.

Research Sites and Participant Elicitation Methods

To elicit emotion, engage their senses, and attempt to bring participants back to the memories they had of their playing days, the first round of interviews took place in person at the university the participant attended, and specifically at the field at which she played. The second and third follow-up interviews took place at the location(s) of the participant's choosing. For Adriana, the second interview occurred at her business and the third interview was in her home. Julie and I had our second interview in a library and our third interview in a coffee shop. Roxie's second and third interviews were at her home, with the second in a detached office and the third in a detached pool room and surrounded by markers of her athletic accomplishments. Mya and I met in a library for our second interview and at her workplace for our third interview.

Researcher Personal Elicitation Methods

Visiting the participants' fields elicited emotion and memory for me because I had played on each of them in college. Throughout the research study, I exposed myself to various athletic experiences to evoke my own emotions and engage my senses to bring me back to my days as a competitive athlete. I joined an outdoor co-ed adult soccer league during the winter to play soccer for the first time in about six years; in all of the games that I played, I was the only female on the field. I watched several ESPN and

Netflix sports series while working out at the gym, including *30 for 30 Lance*, *Last Chance U*, *The Last Dance*, *All American*, *QB1: Beyond the Lights*, and *Cheer*. Finally, I began working out at a greater intensity for overall health and wellness, including re-introducing weightlifting into my regimen. During the latter half of the study, I lost about 15 pounds and began to feel more like myself.

Research Participants

Because much of the literature, attention, and resources in college athletics generally center on men's sports, particularly football and basketball, my focus in this study was on former Division I *female* student-athletes who played a team sport. Due to the social nature of team sports, which the literature highlights as a key contributor to identity formation, development, and support for many athletes (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987; Bell, 2009; Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2002), I chose to include only participants in team sports. Participants in this study exited their collegiate athlete roles 8-16 years ago. This range of years was selected to enable the former athlete to complete graduate school, if applicable, and become established in her career and life as a post-collegiate athlete.

While there is no specific rule for selecting a sample size in case study research, Creswell (2014) noted that case studies often include four to five cases. Because each case record I constructed went into considerable depth with each individual participant through three in-depth interviews with artifact collection, I used four participants in my study. The actual number of participants was driven by the point at which I achieved a depth of understanding of the phenomenon of interest. I wove in my experiences with my own transitions from the sport throughout the research, specifically identified as mine in non-bolded *italics* in the case reports and cross-case analysis.

This study focused on the stories and experiences of four Division I female athletes who transitioned out of collegiate athletics. While the study's original design did not designate the specific sport of soccer, by happenstance, the participants from the study all played collegiate soccer at two South Central research (Division I) institutions in the same state. Participants met the following criteria:

1. Were former student-athletes according to the NCAA's definition.
2. Had the dream and/or potential to play professional sport at the time they entered college.
3. Recruited out of high school by the universities they attended for full, primarily athletic-based scholarships (some academic scholarship money was acceptable).
4. Played all years of athletic eligibility in women's soccer at a single, Division I NCAA member institution while on scholarship.
5. Played college sports at some point between the years of 1999 and 2012 at the institution they attended and graduated from.
6. No longer pursuing or intending to pursue professional athlete status.

Participant criteria were influenced by my experience as a former Division I student-athlete. Because not all collegiate sports qualify for NCAA status (i.e., intramurals), I wanted to ensure that all participants met the NCAA's definition of a former student-athlete. Anecdotal observation and immersion in the literature led me to believe that athletic identity was further solidified when athletes had a desire to play professionally. The unmet desire to play professionally suggests a dream deferred and a transition point from what could have been or what was, compared to what is now. Through asking the participants if they had the dream and/or potential to play professionally in their sport at the time they entered college, I filtered for this criterion through the Recruitment Questionnaire. Similarly, I selected criterion three because, in my experience, female athletes who were heavily recruited out of high school by a Division I institution signaled that they were more likely to be a hopeful—someone who could come in and compete for a starting position on the team and potentially go on to play beyond college.

Athletes come to universities through various avenues. There are also many life lessons to learn throughout the collegiate journey, and a considerable number of growth opportunities for athletes as they fight for a spot on the team and mature through the seasons to their senior years when they "rule the roost." To ensure that the athletic experience was consistent from the participant's freshman to senior year at an institution of choice, I chose to omit transfer students and require that the athlete started and finished (e.g., completed her eligibility) at the same Division I institution.

Criterion five set in motion the transition period from college-to-career between the years of 1999 and 2012. Finally, since professional athletes are likely to encounter an entirely different set of identity influences and transition experiences, the criterion that the former athlete was no longer pursuing or intending to pursue professional status was also important.

Recruiting and Sampling Method

This study utilized snowball and purposeful sampling. I began by reaching out to my network of contacts to build a list of potential candidates who met the qualifications to be a part of the study. I used purposive sampling to identify a set of female participants who represented a mix of the various team sports (i.e., soccer, softball, or basketball). I contacted each potential participant via phone, email, and/or Facebook Messenger to introduce myself and provide a brief introduction to the study. I shared an approved IRB consent form to signal the expected time, demands of participation, and the participant criteria. Those who were interested in participating and who believed they met the study criteria were asked to complete the Recruitment Questionnaire through Qualtrics. In addition to collecting data for demographic items such as age, marital status, race/ethnicity, citizenship, and current job/career, the questionnaire served as a filter for the participant criteria. The questionnaire also included an open response question about why the former athletes were interested in participating in the research study (see Appendix A for the Recruitment Questionnaire).

By happenstance, all of the responses to the Recruitment Questionnaire were from former soccer players. Once I reviewed all of the responses and was confident they met the criteria, I qualified them for the study. I maintained equal representation from each of the universities attended by the participants. As each participant was selected, I reached out to her via phone, email, and/or Facebook Messenger to ensure she still wanted to participate and was willing to commit to the time requirements of the study. Candidates who were not selected for the study due to proximity from the university (required for the first interview) or a delayed response were informed via Facebook Messenger and thanked for their willingness to be a part of the study.

Data Collection

This multiple case study relied on data from Division I female athletes whose athletic identities were influenced from their transitions out of collegiate soccer. Upon IRB approval, I collected data from each participant via the previously mentioned Recruitment Questionnaire, Pre-Interview Questionnaire, three one-on-one interviews with fieldnotes, and artifacts. I used multiple sources of data collection to dig deeply into the participants' experiences and enhance the credibility of my data through the use of triangulation (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Patton, 2015). According to Stake (2006), "Triangulation is mostly a process of repetitious data gathering and critical review of what is being said" (p. 34). I triangulated the qualitative sources to explore the phenomenon in its layers and at a depth (Patton, 2015).

Although this study was not of an autoethnographic design, I am a member of the population that I studied (e.g., an insider); thus, the words of Ellis et al. (2010) about autoethnography resonated in many ways with my intent. Ellis et al. (2010) said, "describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience" (para. 1). My hope was that this study would help the participants, as well as myself, to better understand ourselves and our experiences both individually and collectively.

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

After scouting the literature to find a scale that would meet the needs of this research study, I discovered that the primary existing scales on the topic of athletic identity were aimed at *current* student-athletes rather than *former* student-athletes (see, for example, Athletic Identity Measurement Scale [AIMS], Brewer et al., 1993; Baller

Identity Measurement Scale [BIMS], Harrison et al., 2014; Life After Sport Scale [LASS], Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). Therefore, I created a Pre-Interview Questionnaire to gather information about former student-athletes' transition experiences and influences on their athletic identities after collegiate sport in three life domains: pre-college sport, during college sport, and post-college sport. The questionnaire was administered to participants through Qualtrics. It was comprised of 26 questions, 13 of which were open response and 13 were on a five-point Likert-scale. Three questions pertained to the participants' pre-college sport experiences, six questions to their during college sport experiences, and 17 questions to their post-college sport experience.

Participants in the study were given the Pre-Interview Questionnaire after they consented to the study and completed the Recruitment Questionnaire, but prior to one-on-one interviews and artifact collection. This positioning allowed me to collect initial data from the participants' three life domains—pre-college, during college, and post-college—and I used their responses to guide conversation and reflection in the one-on-one interviews. Additionally, the Pre-Interview Questionnaire prompted the participants to begin thinking about the research topic prior to the first one-on-one interview, which may have helped with memory recall.

For the purposes of this study, the data collected from the Pre-Interview Questionnaire was not meant for statistical analysis. Rather, the participants' responses to the Pre-Interview Questionnaire helped me to frame the direction of questions in the one-on-one interviews, including guiding conversations pertaining to the participants' personal artifacts. In addition to guiding interview questions, providing triangulation, and eliciting further reflection and conversation with participants, the purpose of using the

Pre-Interview Questionnaire was to obtain an overall understanding of the extent to which participants identified with their athletic roles at the time of data collection (see Appendix B for the Pre-Interview Questionnaire).

Interviews and Fieldnotes

To obtain thick, rich descriptions of their experiences, and to engage in deep meaning making from the participants' experiences and the meaning, we co-constructed meaning (Creswell, 2014). This study went into considerable depth with each of the participants through three one-on-one interviews. Each of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes, with open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview format. When appropriate, taking fieldnotes before, during, and after the interviews allowed me to document participants' verbal and non-verbal expressions (Stage & Manning, 2003). Fieldnotes provided me with additional rich data to understand the case data. So that the interview was fresh in my mind, when appropriate, I expanded upon my fieldnotes immediately after the interviews and during the transcription and data analysis process by filling in any additional information from my observations and adding my reflections (Stage & Manning, 2003).

My approach to interviewing the participants was to first build rapport by getting to know each other and our athletic backgrounds. For three of the participants whom I had not met prior to the study, this involved lunch or coffee prior to our first interview. For the purpose of individual meaning making, my primary goal was to listen and understand the participant's experiences before inserting my own. Secondarily, because this study was about the meaning that we co-constructed together as former student-athletes who experienced the same phenomenon, there were times throughout the interviews that I discussed my own experiences. I shared my stories and experiences when I felt it necessary to enable the participant to deepen her processing. Additionally, I shared my stories and experiences with the participant when she said something that triggered an opportunity for me to process my own transition more deeply. Ultimately, meaning was made in how the participant and I related to one another, but I negotiated a delicate balance between when or how to insert my own thoughts and experiences.

Interview setting was used as a mechanism to facilitate memory and dialogue during data gathering. The first one-on-one interview took place at the participant's alma mater, specifically on the field where she once played soccer. This first interview focused on the participant and I getting to know each other and discussing her experiences as a student-athlete while she was in college. The location of the interview was expected to elicit memories and emotions to help her recall past experiences in greater depth and detail (see Appendix C for the Interview Guide: Interview I).

The second and third one-on-one interviews took place at locations of the participant's choosing, as detailed in the section on research sites. The second one-on-one interview focused on the participant's experience with transitioning to life after collegiate sport. It took place seven to twelve weeks after the first interview to provide me time to transcribe and further consider each interview (see Appendix D for the Interview Guide: Interview II). Due to the possibility that I was asking participants to unpack a part of the transition process that may have been previously unconscious, I gave the participants time and space in between the second and third interviews to fully process and reflect on our previous discussions. The space between interviews also allowed participants time to consider which artifact(s) they wanted to bring for discussion at the third interview. Additional information on artifact collection is detailed in the next section.

The focus of the third interview was on the artifact the participant brought with her (see Appendix F for the Interview Guide: Interview III). This interview also provided an opportunity for me to learn about any new insights that surfaced for the participants between the Pre-Interview Questionnaire and the first and second interviews. The original timeframe for scheduling the third interview was no earlier than two weeks and no later than four weeks after the second interview; however, as I worked with the participants to schedule the third interview, the actual timeframe was about two to eight weeks after the second interview.

Artifacts

In my personal journey with transitioning to life after sport, I experienced a pivotal post-sport transition moment on a mission trip in Catacamas, Honduras. At the time, I was on a soccer field with my guitar, leading worship and speaking to a group of kids about their purpose and identity in Christ (Figure 10). I was fortunate that a photographer captured the moment that was a turning point for me, the moment when I was finally able to walk away from my dream of becoming a professional soccer player. This experience framed my decision to use artifacts as a data collection source. It was my hope that the artifacts would function as touchstones of deeper meaning and information (Kearney & Hyle, 2004), rather than as symbols to interpret. While photography was not the only artifact the participants shared, my intent was similar to Wagner (1979) who said:

> That the dialectic between the use of photographs [artifacts] to study human activity and the study of photographic imagery itself be kept alive. This involves a commitment on the part of those involved . . . that they will use images as well as entertain questions about what they mean. (p. 294)

In this sense, I used the artifacts to discover deeper meaning of the participants' transition experiences and the influences on their athletic identities after collegiate athletics. As the participant shared her story behind her artifact, I asked deeper, probing questions to draw out, or bring to light, deeper meaning.

In instructions prior to the third interview, each participant was invited bring an artifact that she felt represented her transition from competitive athletics to life as she knew it at the time of the study (see Appendix E for the Artifact Prompt). The artifact could take any shape such as a photograph, drawing, journal, video, audio recording, song, document, heirloom, word, phrase, verse, etc. I asked each participant to tell me about the artifact she brought, including the significance of her artifact, the story behind her artifact, and the emotions the artifact evoked for her. Included in each individual case report is a photograph of the artifact(s) provided by the participant (with identifying information removed, blurred, or discolored). As I mentioned before, some of the participants had not fully considered the topic of transitions from collegiate sport and the influences on their athletic identity. Therefore, the third interview also provided an opportunity for participants to share any additional thoughts or insights that surfaced during the reflection periods between interviews.

Confidentiality

To ensure confidentiality, I first sought approval from the IRB to conduct the study with human subjects. Once granted approval, I obtained the approval from each of the research participants via a consent form where the information and risks of the study were clearly outlined, ensuring that the participant always had a right to terminate her participation in the study at any time (see Appendix G for Informed Consent Form). If she agreed to be a part of the study, she signed the consent form. At the point of signing the consent form and beginning the Pre-Interview Questionnaire, participants were given the option to choose their own pseudonyms for the study. I maintained all records on my personal laptop that is password protected and inaccessible to anyone except myself. I will maintain all questionnaire responses, recordings, transcripts, artifacts, fieldnotes, coding sheets, and data analysis documents until the data is no longer needed, upon which time, they will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

This section includes information about the data analysis techniques I employed to construct the individual case records (Chapters V – VIII) and cross-case analysis (Chapter IX). It is followed by a section on quality criteria.

Processes

Analysis began at the time of the first data collection contact with participants through the Recruitment Questionnaire and the Pre-Interview Questionnaire and while transcribing and considering the early data. Specifically, I approached the data analysis process in the following general sequence:

1. I transcribed all of the interviews and audio field notes with the assistance of Otter (https://otter.ai/about), a free audio transcription tool. While I transcribed the data verbatim including the use of fillers (e.g., like, uh, um, yeah, you know, etc.) (Mack et al., 2005), I removed unnecessary interrupters to assist with flow and readability in the case reports and cross-case analysis.
2. I began analysis of each case as an independent unit by intensely reading through each of the transcripts multiple times. During this process, it was important for me to focus on one participant at a time so that I could fully immerse myself in her data to gain a better understanding of her experience.
3. I analyzed the data through members' meanings, coding, and analytic memos, each of which is more fully detailed in the subsection that follows.
4. I identified specific excerpts of data that applied to the research question and copied and pasted them into a new document for a second round of analysis.
5. I drafted a document of themes and findings that emerged from the data analysis techniques. During this stage, additional rounds of data analysis occurred as appropriate to view the individual cases. The additional subsections that follow detail more specific information about the data analysis techniques.
6. As additional themes and findings emerged, I added the participants' excerpts to support them within the document. I continued to massage the themes and findings until they were in a form that was best suited to answer the research question for each individual.
7. I used the data from each case to complete my individual case record. Though not all data was used, I went back to various pieces of data that did not necessarily

apply to the research question but were important in the initial narrative leading to the participants' transition experiences, to assist with writing the case report.

8. In writing the case reports, I took special care to consider the participants' unique timelines so I could present their data in the form of a narrative that best told their story from when they began to play soccer to their life at the time of the study.
9. After completing the individual case reports, I compared, contrasted, and considered the individual cases holistically to understand the phenomenon in greater depth and detail.
10. Finally, I wrote the final chapter on the findings that emerged from the cross-case analysis.

Throughout this process, I had multiple informal and formal conversations with my doctoral adviser and methodologist. I sought to communicate about the raw data, initial themes and findings, biases, and perspectives to gain their feedback on the way I [and they] understood and interpreted the data. At various points in the analysis process, I also connected with a male colleague from my Ph.D. cohort who was a former collegiate athlete; we discussed my initial data analysis process and my progress in processing my post-sport experiences. These interactions both furthered and questioned my understandings and helped me to strike a careful balance between my own experiences and those of my participants. The subsections that follow provide additional depth and detail about the data analysis techniques used to conduct the individual case reports and the cross-case analysis.

Members' Meanings

I began the process of data analysis by first reading through the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts and annotating about shared experiences, self-reflection, and, where appropriate, made notes as I looked for the emic nature of members' meanings through terms and descriptions, definitions, explanations and theories, stories, formulations, questions, and/or indigenous contrasts that the participants used in their language (Emerson et al., 2011, pp. 134-151). Emic means the insider language used by the participants themselves (Pike, 1967). Members' terms, descriptions, and definitions (Emerson et al., 2011) were linked to meanings behind the words and phrases they used to describe their experiences. I left explanations, interpretations, formulations, questions, and theories about meaning to the participants to describe as they saw them. This allowed them to draw their own conclusions and make inferences about reasons or causation without me getting in the way and/or drawing my own conclusions. Members' stories were crucial as they helped to set the scene for me to begin to visualize their transition journey. Finally, indigenous contrasts—the comparisons and contrasts that emerge organically in participant narration—were key for this study because they enabled me to "[draw] distinctions between the self someone used to have and the one they have now" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 148). While they cannot be presented as facts or real truth, "[indigenous] contrasts tend to offer distinctive insight into what a particular group or collection of people perceive and value as central to whom they are and what they do" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 148).

Because I am a member of the social group I studied, I had to remember that my meanings would not identically match the meanings of those I interviewed. As I listened for the words, phrases, and categories they used to describe and explain their experiences, I took care to note in my fieldnotes where I may have been imposing exogenous meanings (Emerson et al., 2011, pp. 131-134). I could not assume that I understood exactly what the participants meant when they said a term or phrase based on my understanding of or experience with that term or phrase. A key example is the participants' definitions of "athlete" (further discussed in their individual case reports and the cross-case analysis). As such, I took care to ask follow-up questions to seek understanding of the words, phrases, and categories the participant used to describe her experiences so I could accurately represent meaning from that individual's perspective and meaning as a whole once I performed a cross-case analysis.

Coding

As I considered the data for each case in depth and detail, I determined that breaking the data down into fine points through coding was necessary. According to Saldaña (2016):

> [A] code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes or "translates" data (Vogt, Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2014, p. 13) [*sic*] and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, assertion or proposition development, theory building, and other analytic processes. (p. 4)

I primarily used in vivo coding, which is coding based on "the terms used by [participants] themselves" (Strauss, 1987, p. 33). It was important to me to bring out the voice of the participants, and in vivo coding allowed me to express the feelings, thoughts, and expressions based on the participants' own words as we constructed and co-

constructed meaning. I used in vivo coding to code participants' words, phrases, and statements as I analyzed the data for themes and findings. In addition, in vivo was the organization technique I used to present the findings and themes in the participants' case reports.

As the themes and findings emerged, I planned for other types of coding to make the familiar strange (Mannay, 2010). Making the familiar strange meant taking everything I knew and understood about the phenomena and stripping it down to view it from different angles and gain additional perspectives and insights. As a participant researcher and member of the social group, I wanted to ensure tunnel vision from my own experiences did not override the data. Opening myself to other coding schemes allowed me to see the data from different lenses, which helped to protect against my preconceptions of the phenomena and how I represented the social group of which I am a member. The various coding types utilized throughout the data analysis process can be seen with their respective definitions in Table 1.

Table 1

Coding Types Applied

Type	Definition
Concept Coding	"A concept is a word or short phrase that symbolically represents a suggested meaning broader than a single item or action . . . that suggests an idea rather than an object or observable behavior" (p. 292).
Descriptive Coding	"Assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase – most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (292).
Focused Coding	"Categorizes coded data based on thematic or conceptual similarity" (p. 294).
Initial Coding	"Breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examines them, and compares them for similarities and differences" (p. 295).
Longitudinal Coding	"Matrices organize data . . . into similar temporal categories that permit researcher analysis and reflection on their similarities and differences from one time period through another to generate inferences of change, if any" (295).
Pattern Coding	"A category label ('meta code') that identifies similarly coded data. Organizes the corpus into sets, themes, or constructs and attributes meaning to that organization" (p. 296).
Structural Coding	"Applies a content-based or conceptual phrase to a segment of data that relates to a specific research question to both code and categorize the data corpus" (p. 297).
Theming the Data	"An extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means. Themes can consist of ideas such as descriptions of behavior within a culture; explanations for why something happens; iconic statements; and morals from participant stories" (pp. 297-298).
Versus Coding	"Identifies dichotomous or binary terms the individuals, groups, social systems, organizations, phenomena, processes, concepts, etc. in direct conflict with each other, a duality that manifests itself as an X vs. Y code" (p. 298).

Note. Concepts and definitions from Appendix A: A Glossary of Coding Methods from Saldaña, 2016, pp. 291-298.

Code Mapping. I used code mapping as a technique to organize and display the codes in various ways during the data analysis process. In particular, code mapping, "clusters of coded data that merit[ed] further refinement into subcategories" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 14), acted as my steppingstone for theming the data in pursuit of the key findings. I went through multiple iterations of this process as I reduced the data to focus specifically on the key pieces of data that were the most relevant for addressing the research question. In using code mapping, I found that, as I read the participants' in vivo phrases one right after the other without the additional data surrounding, a new narrative formed by which I was able to see and visualize the data from a different lens. This assisted with triangulation and development of deeper meaning. In this form, the data came alive and I felt like it would be best represented through the technique of code landscaping.

Code Landscaping. According to Saldaña (2016), "Code landscaping integrates textual and visual methods to see both the forest and the trees" (p. 223). Specifically, I created word clouds to represent the participants' data as it best addressed the research question through an internet tool called Word Art (https://wordart.com/create). I inputted the in vivo coding into the tool, and it randomized the sentences in a word cloud that I massaged and laid on top of each participants' de-identified collegiate player photo. Their more predominant phrases about their experiences transitioning to life outside of athletics appeared larger in their respective word clouds as the tool places greater emphasis on the words or phrases used more frequently. The representations of each participants' data can be seen in their individual case reports in Chapters V – VIII.

Analytic Memos

Once I analyzed the data from the questionnaires and interviews, I began to identify themes emerging from the data as I clustered the members' meanings and in vivo codes into like terms that I used as an inductive coding process (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). Next, I prepared analytic memos to "elaborate ideas and begin to link or tie codes and bits of data together" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 193). As a participant researcher, analytic memos allowed me to insert my own voice, epiphanies, and personal narratives to represent my experiences as a member of the social group and provide "thick [rich] description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 10; Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p.17).

Presentation of Findings

The findings from this multiple case study are first presented via individual case reports in Chapters V – VIII. Each case was analyzed in depth as an independent unit and organized around the deeper research question or issue (Stake, 2014).

A cross-case analysis was then used to compare and contrast the patterns that developed within and between participants (presented in Chapter IX). I made empirical assertions (Erickson, 1986) about the connections across cases from the deeper issues that emerged from the participants' data as they best addressed the overarching research question (Stake, 2014).

Quality Criteria

The analog for validity and reliability in a qualitative research study was handled through the seminal definitions of quality criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity by Lincoln & Guba (1986).

Trustworthiness

Created to parallel historical constructs of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity in quantitative research, criteria of trustworthiness address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Table 2 provides a visual for the strategies I employed to ensure the trustworthiness of my data.

Table 2

Trustworthiness Criteria Table

	Strategy	Purpose	Example
Credibility	Prolonged engagement; practiced triangulation; peer debriefing; member checks; "slice-of-life" items; referential adequacy	Built trust/rapport; verified data; tested insights; ensured accuracy; elicited meaning	Multiple in-depth interviews; multiple data sources/methods; faculty advisors; member checks; artifacts
Transferability	Thick descriptive data	Meaning making; established context/fit	Multiple in-depth interviews; rich, relevant data
Dependability	Established audit trail	Data stability	Faculty advisors; researcher audio journal
Confirmability	Practiced triangulation; practiced reflexivity	Verified data; revealed biases	Multiple data sources/methods; revealed assumptions; researcher audio journal

Note. Adapted from Gay et al. (2011), Guba (1981), and Lincoln and Guba (1986).

Authenticity

This study was personal to me as a participant researcher and someone who is a member of the social group I studied. I felt a deep connection to the topic. My positionality likely contributed both positive and negative aspects to this study that required further unpacking.

I intimately experienced the phenomena I studied. I am a part of this particular socially constructed group, and I was able to dialogue with participants easily and freely because I am "one of them." My experiences provided a richness and insight to the data that an outsider to the topic could not contribute. When useful for rapport building or probing, I also dialogued about my own experiences as it related to participants'. This led to important, shared meaning making.

However, the closeness I felt to the topic, taken too far, could have caused me to make assumptions about others' experiences based upon my own. Therefore, I was committed to allowing the participants' stories to unfold without imposing my own experiences on them, ensuring that I asked questions to understand the meaning each participant contributed to her unique, individual experiences. As the participant spoke, I wrote in my fieldnotes and recorded in my personal audio journal the thoughts that came to my mind about my own experiences so I could reference the notes later. There was a level of patience required on my part. I had reflected on the topic for years, whereas some of the participants in this study considered the topic for the first time when the study began. I could not assume that they fully understood the process because some had not done the reflective work I had. In that regard, I needed to be patient to allow them to come to their own epiphanies and conclusions on their own terms and in their own timing. I shared with them and probed in strategic ways, but I did not push them as this would have negated the purpose and focus of the study.

As mentioned previously, throughout the data analysis process, I intentionally used external people who were not members of the social group I studied (my adviser and methodologist) and one who was distanced in a specific way (male, not in the raw data, did not know the participants) to help me balance my perspectives versus my participants' perspectives. These interactions assisted me with assuring authenticity throughout data analysis, interpretation, and presentation of findings and themes.

Conclusion

This chapter began with the context for the research design. The methods and procedures for the study followed and highlighted the research participants, data collection, and data analysis procedures. The chapter concluded with a discussion of quality criteria. In the next chapter, Chapter IV, I contribute my personal story about my life as a competitive athlete, including how I became interested in the topic of transitioning out of collegiate athletics and the perceived influences on athletic identity. Following Chapter IV, the next four chapters, Chapters V – VIII, provide the participants' individual case report findings. The final chapter, Chapter IX, includes the cross-case analysis findings of the study and conclusions.

CHAPTER IV

MY LIFE AS A COMPETITIVE ATHLETE

"What often heightens the stress that is experienced at this time is not knowing how or from what alternative source they will be able to draw the emotional satisfaction that their association with athletics has provided."

– Parham, 1993, p. 417

While data from four participants were purposefully the primary focus of this study, my qualitative approach also allowed for consideration of my own experiences. While some of us did not play on the same team or at the same time, within the larger community of former Division I soccer players, my participants and I were peers. As discussed in Chapters I and III, I also served as a lens and a tool for design, data collection, and analysis. My perspectives and experiences necessarily entered into the process, likely as both a strength in developing and gaining deeper data and meaning, and perhaps as a barrier to seeing perspectives outside of my own experiences. As a methodological consideration, my positionality is discussed in other chapters. This chapter details my story as an athlete to provide the reader with a lens for understanding who I am as both a former Division I and semi-professional soccer player and the researcher of this study. Through the window of my experience, I invite the reader into my life and the effect sport had on my identity formation.

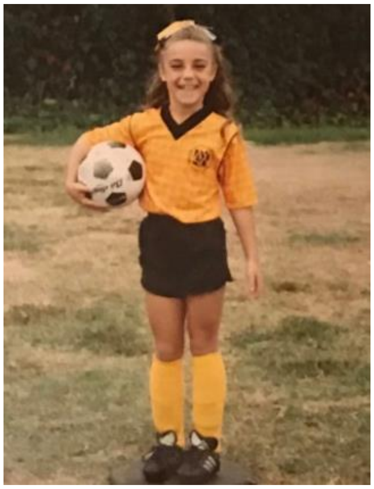
The Early Years

I came from a family of competitive athletes. My dad was a runner and a second-degree black belt and my mom a collegiate tennis player. Both of my parents are retired police officers. While my parents were on the police force, they competed in the international police and fire Olympics and won awards. My brother—who is seven-years younger than me—is a professional hockey player. Becoming a competitive athlete was coded into my genes and came naturally to me from an early age. My desire to win invited many opportunities for my parents to teach me about being a good sport, regardless of the outcome of the game. I also learned the importance of doing my best, and how never giving up and always having a good attitude were the main ingredients to both short- and long-term success. To this day, my dad calls me his "#1 champion."

I joined my first soccer team in 1993 through the American Youth Soccer Association (AYSO), the Golden Strikers, and I LOVED it! While in elementary and middle school, I played just about every sport my school offered. While I loved to play most sports, by high school I was fully focused on my favorite, which was soccer. Little did I know that, at seven-years-old, I would fall in love with a sport that would become a part of me, shaping my identity and dictating the early years of my life up to college graduation.

Figure 1

My First Soccer Team



Club Soccer

I made a club soccer travel team when I was 12 years old. The team was made up of a core group of girls who played together for my remaining adolescent years. My club team was an extension of my family. We practiced together multiple times during the week and spent our weekends together at soccer tournaments. We lived and breathed soccer.

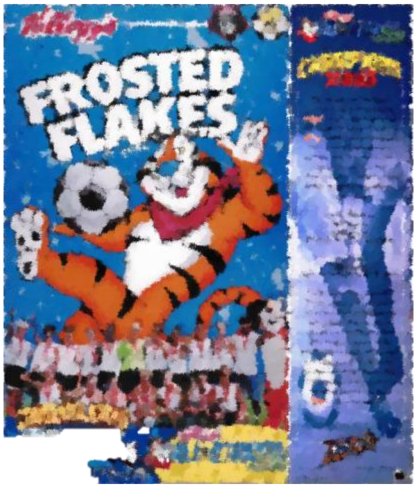
Figure 2

Club Soccer Team

My club team was often referred to as a "dream team" by those in the soccer community who knew of our collective and individual accomplishments. Aside from winning nationals, which was the top tournament in the country, we won every major tournament at least once, both in-state and out-of-state. We even appeared on the front of the Kellogg's Frosted Flakes box that sold in stores across the country in 2000. Due to our accomplishments, my teammates and I and were heavily scouted by the top colleges in the country.

Figure 3

Kellogg's Frosted Flakes Box Team Photo



Club soccer was not always rosy for me, however. I came into a pre-established team and did not become a starter in the line-up for a couple of seasons. Sitting on the bench and getting limited playtime was one of the most debilitating and discouraging times thus far in my life. Each time I got an opportunity to get in the game, the pressure to not mess up and prove that I deserved to be out there was too much to handle, and it did not help my performance on the field. My confidence was at an all-time low, and I told my mom I wanted to quit. She gave me three options: quit soccer, find a new team, or go to private soccer lessons to further develop my skills. I elected the private lessons to "show them" that I could do it. My mom would remind me of the Bible verse, "So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised" (*NIV*, 2011, Hebrews 10:35-36). That verse became a source of encouragement to me for years to come, even to this day.

I continued to train and practice, giving it my all, hoping for the opportunity to prove that I deserved a starting role on the team. My coach approached me during a practice to ask if I would be open to changing positions from forward to defender. He thought my strengths and skills better fit that role and wanted to give me an opportunity to earn a spot in the lineup. I immediately began training. Playing defense came naturally to me, and my confidence began to rise. I earned a starting role and continued to primarily play defense for the remainder of my athletic career.

Olympic Development Program

I was recruited to join the Olympic Development Program (ODP) as a teenager, which provided an opportunity to gain additional training from top tier soccer coaches across the country. Many would say that the ODP is a fast track to a college scholarship and the U.S. Women's National Team. I made the state team and had an opportunity to travel to Laramie, Wyoming, to try out for the regional team, in hopes of eventually making the youth national team. At that point in my soccer career, I was at the top of my game and arguably one of the best defenders in my age group.

Prior to the first game, I made a poor breakfast choice. Within minutes of the opening kick-off, I signaled to my coach that I needed to come off the field. What I did not realize was that coming off the field would be the last time I would see the field for "A-team" games and practices. When we went back to our dorms, I visited my coach to explain what had happened that morning and how terribly sorry I was. What I heard over the next few minutes left a scar that I still carry to this day. I felt betrayed. The coach who I loved and respected completely turned on me.

After our conversation, I was demoted to a different tournament field to play with the players who would likely not go on to make the regional ODP team. I remember calling my parents in complete disarray. My mom got on the next plane to be with me and encourage me through the most difficult circumstance I had encountered at that point in my life. Each time I would step on "the loser field," I felt like a loser. I did not even want to be there anymore. I had been handed my fate already—I was never going to make the regional team. My confidence was completely shattered. Every time I got the ball, I considered it my last chance to show the coaches that I deserved to be welcomed back into the winner's circle.

The pressure and the emotion of the whole experience weighed too heavily, and I was never able to get it together enough to prove myself. It was hard even keeping my emotions under control on the field. My head hung low, and I felt sad and depressed. My future had completely slipped out of my hands, and I felt like I would never accomplish my dreams of making it to the U.S. Women's National Team. I had my shot and I blew it. I could see how much my brokenness hurt my parents. My mom did her best to encourage me with scriptures and my dad reminded me over the phone that I was a champion and could push through the adversity. I do not know what I would have done without my parents during that tournament.

Finally, the tournament came to an end, and all of the players sat in large bleachers facing a field of coaches who would decide our fate and whether or not we would go on to the regional ODP team. We sat there listening and watching as names were called for players to join the coaches on the field. My name was never called, and I was one of very few players left sitting in the bleachers alone that day. Of all the girls on my ODP state team who attended the regional ODP team tryout, I was the only one who did not make the team. It was humiliating. The girls who made the regional ODP team stayed in Wyoming for additional training and I was sent home.

I rode a bus from Laramie, Wyoming, to Denver, Colorado, to catch a plane back to my home state. It was the longest two-hour bus ride of my life. Besides the driver, there was only one other person on the bus. I wanted to curl up in a ball and die. I felt sick to my stomach and spent the majority of the bus ride looking out the window, replaying the whole tournament in my mind, over and over, analyzing how I could have done better and wishing I had opted for the cereal at breakfast. I had failed, and I was devastated. It took a while, but eventually I picked myself up off the ground and continued pursuing my dreams of becoming a professional soccer player. It was the last time, however, that I chose to play on an ODP team.

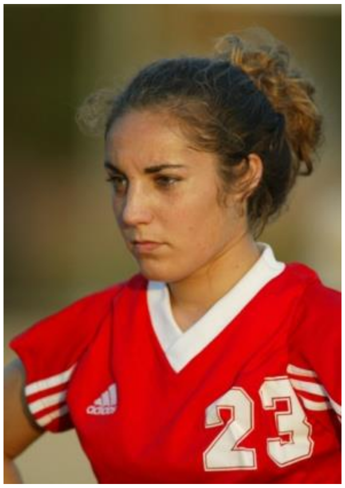
High School Soccer

In high school, I made the girls' varsity soccer team as a freshman; I was the only freshman on the team and the only one from my class each year until my senior year. The first year of high school soccer I lived in fear most of the time, worried about attending the pre-game "pasta parties" with the team due to instances of hazing that occurred in years prior. I will spare the details but let me just say that I avoided every pasta party that year. To say that I hated high school soccer is a massive understatement.

For my freshman through junior year, we had a coach who was a previous athlete at a local university and was out to prove something. She ran our butts off and said she was preparing us for college play. I ran *a lot* in college, but high school was a whole other level of insanity. It was miserable, and I despised going to practices and spending time with the team. There was no joy in the game whatsoever.

Figure 4

High School Varsity Soccer



We got a new head coach my senior year, which made my final season of high school soccer much better. We were close to being able to go to a final match to win our division but, unfortunately, we had a poor game against a team we should have beaten, and that ended the season and my high school soccer career. Thankfully, I knew it was not the end to my journey, and I looked forward to graduation and moving on to the next chapter of my life, college soccer.

Injuries

I dealt with a few different injuries throughout my adolescent years but will discuss the primary one that altered my athletic journey. During my junior year of high school, I was at club soccer practice and we were working on sprinting. I pushed myself as hard as I could go, racing against the teammate next to me. The sound that I heard in the middle of my sprint is one I will remember for the rest of my life. It sounded like a tree branch snapped, followed by a slapping sound as something rolled up. That sound was my right hamstring. I went to the doctor and learned that I was a couple threads away from tearing it from its point of origin. The timing of the injury was heartbreaking.

It took about a year to fully recover from the hamstring tear. I went through various treatments in physical therapy, the most invasive being a Vitamin B injection technique that was meant to stimulate the muscles to begin to repair themselves. I had somewhere between 30-50 long needle injections into my hamstrings, back, and tailbone area over the course of a couple months (hamstrings plural once I learned that my left hamstring was damaged as well). Once I finally got back onto the field, my hamstring did not feel the same, and I was not at my “A” game. I was in pain after every practice and game, and I spent many nights with ice and heat packs strapped to my legs. This injury played a starring role in my journey as many of the colleges that were originally recruiting me began to lose interest when my play did not match my original intensity.

The College Recruitment Process

Following my injury, I put everything into preparing myself to obtain a scholarship to a top tier, Division I university, both athletically and academically. During my prime recruitment years, my mom made a resume of my athletic and academic accomplishments that we sent to the best colleges across the country, inviting them to come watch me play. The pressure to be “on” in every game was intense because I never knew which college scout was going to be there. School came naturally to me, so having the grades to go to college was not a problem; it was just a matter of which school had the best soccer team with coaches who would help get me to the next level. Although academics were important to me, I would not select my university for the academics. As long as they had decent academics, I knew I would figure out my major once I got there.

My first official visit was to a Division I university in the North Central region of the United States. I loved talking to the coaches and felt encouraged by their kudos about me as player—they really stroked my ego. I knew I would likely be leaving my home state to attend college, so I was looking for a place that felt like an extended family and a home away from home. My overall impression of the visit was great. There was just one problem; the soccer team was not at a level that I felt characterized a Division I team. As I watched a couple of their games, I found myself cringing inside, knowing that if I went there, I would never be able to go to the next level.

Due to my hamstring injury, I began to have fewer options available from top tier Division I universities. I turned my attention to my top choice at the time, which was located in the interior Western region of the United States. The coaches made a trip to my home residence to discuss their plans for offering me a scholarship and coming on an official visit, however, it seemed like they kept dragging their feet and we could never nail down a time for me to visit. I started worrying about whether I would get another offer from a Division I school since many of the best players in the country had already given verbal commitments by this time. Roster spots were filling up, and scholarship offers were less available. At a tournament, I scored a goal from the halfway line and a new Division I team began recruiting me immediately.

The head coach reached out to me about five weeks after the tournament to invite me to an official university visit at their South Central United States main campus. It would be the last weekend they would host recruits for scholarship positions on the team, and there was only one scholarship left. Once there, the town and the overall atmosphere of the university mesmerized me. It was a football weekend, so I got to see the town come together in support of the players. It was unlike anything I had seen before, and I was hooked. The soccer team was great, I liked the coaches, my jersey number was available, the facilities were impressive, and it felt like a hometown atmosphere.

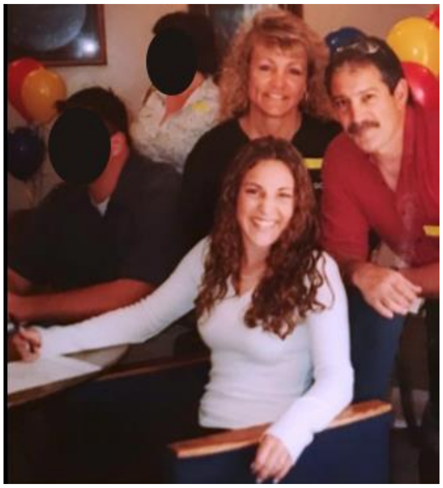
I stayed with two of the players on the team at their rental house, so it gave me a chance to see what off campus life was like. Coming from a Christian household, there were some parts of the college experience that made me a little uneasy. I expressed concerns to my dad who reminded me that those experiences were not exclusive to that university, and I had the power to make my own choices. He told me that I should commit to that university because everything else was on point with what I was seeking in an institution. I trusted his opinion and the push from him was what I needed to get up the nerve to tell the coaches that I would like to commit to their institution and program. Because I made a verbal commitment, I had to call the other two coaches who were recruiting me to let them know I had committed to another university. That was a difficult conversation to have at 18 years of age.

Explaining to someone outside of the athletic domain the tremendous amount of stress and pressure that comes with the recruitment process is tough because the response is often something along the lines of, ‘Oh, how sorry I feel for you that you have to decide among three amazing colleges that are offering you a full-ride scholarship. What do you have to complain about?’ The process is intense. When an athlete is recruited and verbally commits to a team as a junior, the verbal commitment is not actually legally binding, but players give their word and coaches and players count on the commitments being honored by one another. However, according to NCAA rules, athletes cannot officially sign a letter of intent until their senior year.

I signed my national letter of intent at my high school with a couple other seniors who made verbal commitments to play college sports. Outside of keeping my grades up and graduating from high school, the months that followed included working with my collegiate athletic academic counselor to enroll in classes, following the strength and conditioning protocol to prepare myself physically for the required pre-season fitness tests, packing up all my belongings to move across the country, and saying goodbye to my family and friends.

Figure 5

Signing My National Letter of Intent



College Soccer

There are several components to the collegiate soccer experience. In the sections that follow, I chose to highlight the main aspects that displayed my daily life as a student-athlete: pre-season, in season, the pressure to perform, balancing athletics and academics, the celebrity, and the final whistle.

Pre-Season

I was officially introduced to college soccer on day one of pre-season. It was August in the South Central region of the United States. The temperature was in the triple digits, there was no breeze, the humidity was sucking the life out of me, sweat was pouring down my body, and I could taste the heat. Pre-season consisted of three practices in one day, every day, for about two weeks before school started (the NCAA sets the formula for the length of pre-season). The first practice began early in the morning and consisted of conditioning (i.e., fitness tests, sprinting). Practice two was in the middle of the day and involved lifting weights indoors. Practice three was in the late afternoon and was a team practice on the soccer field. By the end of the day, I could not feel my legs, felt sick to my stomach, and consistently questioned why in the world I had chosen to play college soccer. To this day, the smell of fresh cut grass in the summertime makes my stomach turn.

During pre-season, we spent every waking minute together as a team. We lived together, ate together, practiced together, and recovered together. Then we did it all again the next day. As a team, we bonded in the training room as we inched our way into ice baths to numb our aching bodies, hoping to prevent or delay the lactic acid from paralyzing our legs. While I hated just about every aspect of pre-season, I knew it was a necessary evil to ensure that we were prepared to make it through a long and grueling season, and I was glad to not be doing it alone.

In Season

While in season, my typical day began at 6:00 am with mandatory strength and conditioning practice (i.e., running and weights). After one to two hours of running and pushing my muscles to their maximum potential, with no time to shower, I generally put on my team sweats, rode a couple buses, and walked the rest of the way to my 8:00 am class. A couple more back-to-back classes followed that class. When I had the opportunity, I would eat lunch and snacks to maintain the energy I needed to get through the day. After my final class, I would go home to change into my practice gear, tape my ankles, and head to my 3:45 pm team practice. Practice typically lasted two hours and I periodically followed up with an ice bath to help me recover more quickly. Once practice was over, I went to study hall (or to my dorm/apartment) and did homework for the rest of the evening. To say that each day was exhausting is a gross understatement.

There was little time for anything outside of academic and athletic requirements. Aside from practices, games, team meals, travel, and class, there were some added expectations that included activities such as staying after games or being at events to sign autographs for children in the community. While I was tired, I always loved seeing the kids come through the line and was more than happy to sign their soccer balls, t-shirts, or posters. Their faces lit up with excitement when we talked to them—we were their heroes; I thoroughly enjoyed the celebrity moment. I felt a sense of responsibility for being a role model for the child in front of me. I also had some additional responsibilities as the female student-athlete representative on the Faculty Athletics Committee and the women's soccer representative on the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC).

Because I spent so much time with my teammates, I sought out non-athletes for companionship. I met a friend in a freshman chemistry class who became my best friend, and we lived together with some other girls for the next three years. It is a little uncharacteristic for an athlete to live with all non-athletes but, for me, I needed time away from the world of athletics. I appreciated being around other folks who had no clue what being a Division I college athlete meant. I also found a church in the area that I was able to attend for about an hour before my Sunday home games, and the members of the congregation became my family and support system. I fully believe that interacting with the "outside world" helped make the post-collegiate transition experience easier for me. I do not know what I would have done without the care and support of my church family; they were my lifeline, especially as I was far from home.

Pressure to Perform

I did not get a lot of playtime my first season of college. Similar to my experience in club soccer, this led to challenges with my confidence and overall feelings about my abilities and myself. During recruiting, I was told I would have a starting role on the team, but instead I was sitting on the bench, feeling like I had made the wrong choice of university. I felt like an outcast much of the first season because I was not someone who was able to contribute much on the field. Having to travel with the team without playing substantial minutes was miserable. I missed my family, and I just wanted to quit and go home. I even looked into transferring to a university in my hometown, but I knew that I had made a commitment and I needed to stick it out and prove that I deserved to play.

I continued to work hard and eventually earned a starting spot in the lineup the next season, and I maintained it through my senior season. It was not always an easy road, however. Practices and games were intense with coaches yelling, players sometimes putting each other down if they messed up, and competition for starting roles constantly challenged. My coach used to yell at me periodically for random things I would do on the field. Fast forward to my senior year and I noticed he stopped yelling at me. I pulled him aside one day to ask him why he never yelled at me anymore. He told me that he stopped yelling because he saw that I knew when I had messed up and I was harder on myself than he was, and he trusted me to handle it.

Balancing Athletics and Academics

While in season, balancing a full load of courses (i.e., 15 hours) in addition to my athletic responsibilities was no small feat. I had to be extremely disciplined and organized so that I did not forget to do something. Even though I was a student *and* an athlete in high school, the pressure and responsibility in college was a thousand times greater, and there were more moving parts in the equation with travel during the week, multiple practices in a day, additional enrollment hours beyond full-time status, living independently, etc. When our games were away, we would typically leave on a bus Thursday morning and not return until late Sunday night or early Monday morning. I had to drop a Tuesday/Thursday accounting class because I missed too many Thursday classes to keep up with the rigor of the coursework. We were required to talk to our professors on day one of class to let them know that we were athletes and discuss our schedule during the course of the semester to make sure that we could succeed in their course. Oftentimes, we would have to schedule to take exams or turn in homework early or late due to our travel schedules.

While traveling, I had to do homework and study for exams on the bus. That feat was challenging with a bus full of people and television screens with movies playing the whole ride, not to mention the exhaustion from travel and the desire to sleep the whole time. I got terrible motion sickness, so I had to take a Dramamine pill prior to every road trip if I wanted to get any work done and not feel sick. I felt lethargic and exhausted the whole trip and had to work extra hard to find energy for the games. One of the last things I wanted to do after an exhausting day of practice, games, and/or travel was to study. However, I knew that I needed to, so I did. My efforts balancing my dual role as a student and athlete paid off as I was named one of the senior captains of my team, a three-year Academic All-[Conference] member (1st team), an Academic All-American (2nd team), the graduating senior with the top GPA on my soccer team, and the Female Student-Athlete of the Year at my university. I also earned post-graduate scholarships from the NCAA and our athletic conference to complete my master's degree after graduation.

Figure 6

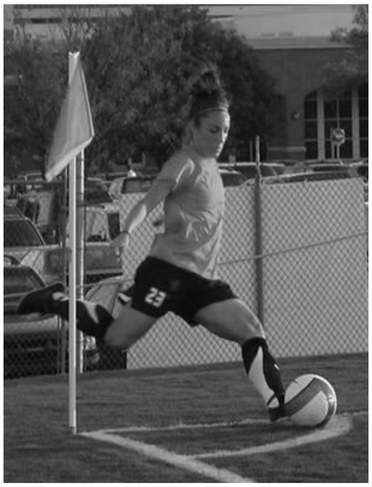
Senior Honors and Awards Banquet

The Celebrity

Our college soccer team was good, and we picked up several fans throughout my years. I was proud to wear my team sweats on campus so that everyone knew that I was an athlete. I would say that the sweats contributed to my identity as an athlete, even to this day; it never hurts when people recognize me as a former member of the soccer team. It was so easy to be lured by the celebrity and to feed off the adoration of fans. The more they liked me, the more I liked myself.

Figure 7

College Soccer Gameday



Our biggest games were on Friday nights. The atmosphere was electrifying. Fans filled the bleachers and lined the fields. Making plays by the bleachers and hearing the fans roar and chant my name fueled my adrenaline rush and self-confidence. The harder they cheered, the better I played. I looked forward to the end of the games when we would mingle with the fans who came to support us. I desperately sought their affirmation and felt validated when they came up to tell me that I played a great game. I was somebody, and people knew me.

The Final Whistle

In my senior year, we were once again in the top rankings for teams that would make it to the NCAA tournament. I remember gathering in the football stadium suites with my teammates and coaches, watching the television screen to see to which bracket we would be assigned. We held our breath as they called out our university and told us that we would be playing a team from my home state in the first round. A couple of days later, we boarded a plane bound for the NCAA tournament. We won our first-round game and advanced to the second round, where we would be playing another team from my home state that was expected to go to the College Cup (i.e., final four teams) of the NCAA tournament. I knew some of the players on the team from my time in club soccer and from the ODP; one of them was actually from my club team. Several of the players had or would eventually have U.S. Women's National Team experience. The team was stacked, but we knew that we had nothing to lose and we were going to give it our all, regardless of the outcome. We played our hearts out, but unfortunately lost 4-0.

When the final whistle blew, I knew that life was going to look a little bit different for me. This was my last game. My last shot at winning the NCAA tournament. Likely my last chance to play soccer competitively since, at the time, the opportunities for female soccer players were very limited. The Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) league started in 2007 but folded in 2012, and the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) did not start until 2012, so it was a gap in professional opportunities. While I was sad at the end of our last game, I was glad that I ended my journey in front of my closest family and friends. Ideally, I would have liked to have won my last game. Nevertheless, losing to the team that would go on to lose in the semi-finals against the tournament champions, was satisfying. I gave it my all and left it all on the field; that is how I wanted to go out.

Figure 8

My Final College Game

One More Try

Once college soccer was over, I experienced a mixture of emotions with a range of other major life events: the end of a four-year relationship, graduation, and moving home. I honestly did not know what to do with myself. Home did not feel like home anymore because I had not lived there in four years. Friends from my past had moved on with their lives. I felt very alone, borderline depressed, and experienced a year-long season of extreme anxiety and fear of the future. I decided that I needed to look into getting my master's degree because that would at least be something to do. Then I got a call from a friend who had joined a semi-professional soccer team and invited me to play.

I joined the team, but never fully committed to being there, which was very uncharacteristic of me. Looking back, I realize I was likely depressed and definitely not myself. There were not a lot of expectations on the players, so practices were mediocre and often did not have all of the players present. I missed several practices due to other responsibilities, which limited my playtime. I was just kind of over it at that point. I was also in a lot of pain from the wear and tear on my body from college soccer. I played with the team for a month or so but decided that I did not want to do it anymore. The experience left a bad taste in my mouth, and that was not how I wanted to remember the game that I had given my life to. I thanked the coach for the chance and told him that I was going to pursue other opportunities.

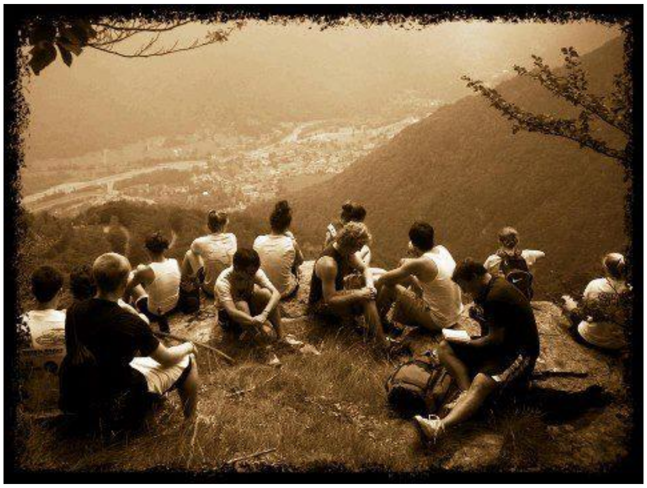
After taking inventory of my life, I decided that I missed my alma mater and the friendships I had developed with my church family, so I moved back to my college town and used my NCAA post-graduate scholarship to begin my master's degree.

The Start of My Post-Sport Identity Journey

After graduating with my master's degree two and a half years after my last season of collegiate eligibility, I went on two mission trips through the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) organization. These trips were monumental turning points in reshaping my identity and my decision to walk away from my dream of playing professional soccer. The first trip was a summer in Bobbio Pellice, Italy, with other recently graduated college athletes. We received intense training on how to be an international missionary and ran a sports camp for children in Italy. The latter part of the trip involved breaking into teams with each team going to a different country for two weeks to put into practice the things we had learned. I learned a lot about myself that summer. I processed through several emotions related to how I had approached competition. I began to consider reawakening my passion to play professional soccer again. First, God needed to do a work on my heart during this time. I was being reminded that my identity was in who God said I was, rather than how I had allowed the sport to define me. This was the start of my post-sport identity journey.

Figure 9

Bobbio Pellice, Italy



The second FCA trip was to Catacamas, Honduras. I went with professional women's soccer players and former collegiate athletes. We ran a sports camp for local children in the area. I told myself prior to this trip that I was going to decide once and for all if I was going to try out for the professional league or hang up my cleats. I prayed and asked God to lead me on the trip, to speak to me while I was there, and to help me make the right decision.

I had learned to play the guitar, so I had the incredible opportunity to lead the kids and my teammates in worship at the camp and in our hotel. I love to teach, and I was asked by the leader of the trip to speak to the kids at the camp about identity and who they are in Christ. It was during this time that God began to speak to me about my passion and my destiny. While I loved the game of soccer, I saw that I had a greater calling: teaching. On that trip, I felt peace about walking away from the game I loved to pursue my passion for education. While leaving competitive sports has and continues to be a process, I have never regretted my decision.

Figure 10

Catacamas, Honduras

Why Study Former Division I Student-Athlete Transitions

I struggled to transition from high-level competition to life after athletics. There are times when I still struggle, though it looks different now. While athletics will always be a part of my life, the amount of time and emphasis currently placed on sports is *significantly* different from when I was playing Division I soccer. I cannot truthfully say that I was not at all prepared for the transition out of high-level competition. I knew that my collegiate eligibility would eventually end, and soccer would not be for forever.

As a former Division I athlete with the dream to play professionally in my sport, my identity was wrapped up in athletics. I struggled with my post-sport identity and re-learning who I was outside of athletics. For my entire life, soccer had been a part of me. It was the longest standing commitment I had known. When it came to vacations, practices, games, what to eat, when to sleep, when to workout, what time to be somewhere, where I went to college, etc., soccer dictated much of my childhood, teenage, and young adult life. I was number 23, the soccer player with the big messy bun, and my university's Female Athlete of the Year. But who was *I* outside of athletics?

When soccer was over, I was not quite sure what to do with myself. I vividly remember when I went to visit my alma mater and was introduced to a current soccer player who had no idea who I was—or used to be. I was not emotionally prepared for what life looked like when my playing career came to an end, and I do not recall anyone talking with me about the emotional and social adaptation challenges I could encounter after I exhausted my eligibility, not just at the time of the conclusion, but for *years* after. Without soccer, I struggled with the question, "*Who am I?"*

Once I transitioned to my career in higher education, I quickly realized that my success, competitive nature, and athletic identity were not always understood, celebrated, or appreciated. Through my experience as a former student-athlete and in my doctoral studies, I was keenly aware of the divide between athletics and academics on college campuses (Kissinger & Miller, 2009; Navarro, 2014). As a student and as an athlete while in college, I experienced what the literature refers to as "role conflict" (Adler & Adler, 1987; Chartrand & Lent, 1987). What I did not realize was that I would also be challenged in balancing my role as a higher education professional with my *still intact* athletic identity. There were times when I felt ashamed of who I was and my sport-influenced ways of thinking, many times feeling the need to apologize for, defend, or mute my core identity.

For many Division I athletes like myself, there is a time when we put our playing days in the past and move forward with life and careers. Ideally, we hope to find a new dream or passion that fills the void that athletics often leaves behind. I am still on my journey, though I have come a long way in discovering who I am outside of soccer. As a Ph.D. student studying educational leadership and policy studies in higher education, I began to wonder if other athletes had similar experiences as me, and I became genuinely curious about their experiences with the transition out of collegiate athletics. I hoped knowing their journeys would help me to better understand my own experiences. Did we face common challenges, obstacles, and emotions? Out of my curiosity and further understanding of the literature in these areas evolved my passion for this research topic. *And so, my story continues.*

Conclusion

This chapter included a synopsis of my life as a competitive athlete, with an emphasis on my collegiate and post-collegiate experiences.

Looking Forward to Case Presentations

As discovered through my exploration of my own experiences, I found that each athlete's athletic story before and during college was critical to understanding the essence of who they were as an athlete. Our athletic identities did not suddenly appear upon entering college; nor did they disappear upon our departures from athletics. Thus, each individual case report presented in Chapters V – VIII takes the reader on the athlete's journey up to and including transition out of sport and up to the present time. The reader should note that I continued to weave in my experiences with my own transitions from sport throughout the case reports, specifically identified as mine in non-bolded *italics*.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS: ADRIANA COSTILOW

“Your ability as an athlete and the success you used to have should never overshadow your other abilities as a person.”

– Malcom Lemmons

It was a hot, Thursday afternoon in August when I drove into “enemy territory” to meet with Adriana on the soccer field that she and I had battled. That morning, I resisted every inclination to dress in my alma mater soccer clothing and colors because I knew it would be disrespectful. Driving to the soccer field brought back all the anxious and excited feelings associated with preparing to play Adriana’s former team, and I was interested to learn about her experience coming from “the other university”—my former rival.

Adriana Costilow was a 34-year-old former Division I collegiate soccer player, wife, mother, and business owner. At the time of the study, it had been roughly 13 years since she exited her collegiate sporting role. While I waited for her to arrive, I sat in the player benches watching the current team prepare for picture day and considering the interesting dynamic their presence would contribute to our time together. When Adriana arrived, she joined me on the player bench for lunch and to get to know each other before starting the interview. She was dressed in neutral athletic clothes with her hair up, an athletic watch, and a hair band on her wrist, the sign of a female athlete. We greeted each other and immediately began talking. It was like we had been friends our whole lives and were just reacquainting.

Adriana joined her first soccer team at the age of five. As the only girl on the team and the top goal-scorer, Adriana grew in confidence and felt validated for her athletic abilities. She said, “I think the fact that I was excelling at the sport definitely kept me interested. I personally loved the team aspect of the sport.” I learned that both achievement *and* devastation had fueled her athlete mentality and competitive nature. Adriana’s loss of her younger sister—almost two at the time—when she was in first grade had a profound impact on her approach to life.

> That shaped a lot of the way that I wanted to live my life because now I’m my parents’ only kid. So, I can’t screw up (laughs). And so, I think it made me want to be the best a lot more.

Adriana’s choice to attend her university had a lot to do with the importance of having her parents close. “Like a 45-minute drive, they could be here at all the games. And so, they never missed a game. Even our away games they would travel to. At least one of them would be there at every game.” Though she said that her parents did not pressure her to achieve, Adriana confessed, “I think I put pressure on myself to be a perfect kid because I was the only one.”

Adriana’s affinity to achieve was a natural fit in the Division I athletic environment, “I was a good student, but I prided myself in being an athlete.” Wearing her athletic clothing to all her classes, Adriana said, “I always made sure everyone knew I played sports. I introduced myself by name and immediately said, 'and I play soccer.'" Adriana told me that being an athlete made her feel "special," "important," and at times, entitled. She recalled her experience during Rush week for a sorority during which she could not miss practice.

> *They* worked around *my* schedule . . . and all the other girls had to walk, and they drove me. . . . Being an athlete, I got picked to be in a [sorority] house without much effort at all. . . . because for them, I was like a stat on their well-rounded clipboard.

After running home from practice to change, rinse off, put on a dress, brush her hair, and paint her toenails before heading back to Rush, Adriana said it was a "stark contrast of the two. . . . I did the whole, here I'm a soccer player, here I'm a real girly girl." Adriana quickly found that the sorority life was not for her.

> I was holding on to my student-athlete identity, and I didn't wanna try to figure anything else out. So, when I would go to sorority stuff, I would just be like, 'I play soccer.' . . . It's who I was, and what *always* came out of my mouth. And so, I always in [the sorority] environment felt like an outsider. . . . I just never really felt like I belonged because I was just attached to my student-athlete identity and didn't really try very hard to get to know anyone or do things outside of that.

Between feeling like she did not fit in with the sorority culture and too exhausted from her athletic responsibilities to do anything outside of soccer, Adriana told me she would *lie* and tell her sorority sisters that she had practice to get out of sorority obligations. She summed up her experience: "I don't really belong *here* [sorority] because I belong *there* [soccer]."

After a successful freshman year getting to start in the games, Adriana decided to give the Olympic Development Program (ODP) another chance after not having ever "made the list." For Adriana, "making the list" symbolized validation.

> If you made that list, you were known. . . . It was gonna validate me if I made the list that I *was* one of the top players in the country. . . . that there *was* potential . . . and that I *could* make some regional team or potentially make [the U.S. Women's National Team]; it was the gateway to going further with soccer.

She attended ODP camp the summer before entering her sophomore year of college. She said, "I *made* the list; I finally made the stupid list. I was like, maybe there *is* a future for me. Or I can do more than just play for my college. I can play on one of these teams."

Her sudden boost in confidence was quickly stifled after looking around and realizing the other girls who made the list had been making the list for years. Adriana recalled:

> It was the most insecure I had ever been in that environment. . . . They weren't very nice, and they weren't very welcoming. And so, I just felt very isolated and like, 'Okay, I made this list, but here I am now, and now I'm at the bottom of the barrel.'

Adriana's insecurity took a toll on her performance in the remaining practices. Reflecting she said, "I think *obviously* that list probably wasn't good for me. Because when I *did* make it, I was scared out of my mind and played my worst soccer ever."

Even though her ODP experience ended on a sour note, Adriana arrived in her sophomore year of college with some confidence after having a good freshman year and making the regional ODP team. "I was like, 'okay, let me show these girls. I made the regional team. I'm here. Let's go.'" Unfortunately, Adriana's sophomore year did not begin well, reflecting, "I had a classic case of the sophomore year rut . . . the slump, where you have a really awesome freshman year and you come back and it's like *mehr*." Adriana attributed her "bad sophomore year" to a university strength and conditioning training program designed for male athletes that made her and her teammates bulk up and become slow. "I think at that point I was just like, 'alright, I'm gonna do the best I can for my next two years. And this is college but, obviously, there's no future beyond that.'"

Adriana's commitment to working hard and giving her best in soccer eventually earned her the title of captain for her senior season.

> Being captain made me feel important. I may not have had the best stats, but to have that role was special to me. For me, [being captain] meant I *was* a leader, and that my coaches respected me, that my team respected me, and that I could have influence.

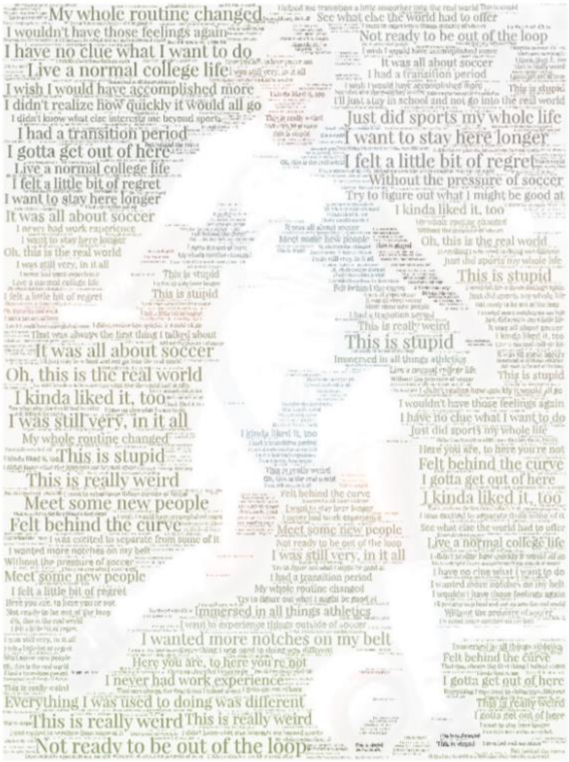
While Adriana did not achieve her childhood dream of becoming a professional soccer player, the leadership skills and qualities nurtured by her athletic upbringing played key roles in her journey to where she is today. The sections that follow detail the findings that emerged from Adriana's transition out of collegiate athletics.

Finding 1: "I Was Not Ready to Just Be out of the Loop"

Adriana's final college soccer game ended in a loss. She recalled feeling the "fight or flight sensation" as she battled aggressively to the end. "I remember panicking. . . . the clock's ticking and we still hadn't tied it up. . . . I remember being like, 'well, this is it! This is the end.' . . . And I was goin' crazy." The panic Adriana experienced in the final minutes of her last game seemed to set the tone for her early experiences with transitioning to life after soccer. Adriana's narrative about the two years following the final whistle reflected strong themes of mental and emotional disorientation, as represented visually in Figure 11. These themes seemed to stem from being forced into the imposed, though inevitable, transition experienced by all athletes at some point in their journeys.

Figure 11

Representation of Adriana Costilow's Data


My whole routine changed
I wouldn't have those feelings again
I have no clue what I want to do
Live a normal college life
I wish I would have accomplished more
I didn't realize how quickly it would all go
I had a transition period
I gotta get out of here
Live a normal college life
I felt a little bit of regret
I want to stay here longer
It was all about soccer
See what else the world had to offer
Not ready to be out of the loop
It was all about soccer
I had a transition period
Just did sports my whole life
I want to stay here longer
I felt a little bit of regret
Without the pressure of soccer
Try to figure out what I might be good at
I kinda liked it, too
Oh, this is the real world
This is stupid
This is stupid
This is stupid
This is really weird
This is stupid
It was all about soccer
Oh, this is the real world
I kinda liked it, too
I was still very, in it all
My whole routine changed
This is stupid
This is really weird
Meet some new people
Felt behind the curve
Meet some new people
I wouldn't have those feelings again
I have no clue what I want to do
Just did sports my whole life
Here you are, to here you're not
Felt behind the curve
I gotta get out of here
I kinda liked it, too
Live a normal college life
Meet some new people
I was still very, in it all
Immersed in all things athletics
I wanted more notches on my belt
Here you are, to here you're not
I never had work experience
Everything I was used to doing was different
This is really weird
This is really weird
Not ready to be out of the loop
Felt behind the curve
I gotta get out of here
This is really weird

"This Is Really Weird"

Upon the completion of her final collegiate game, Adriana said, "I don't think it really sunk in for a while. . . . It probably didn't really click until I was done with grad school." Her last season ending in a loss was typical for how seasons ended in the past and, for that reason, "I don't think I . . . comprehended the whole scope of it." However, when spring arrived, Adriana realized no one expected her to attend workouts or practices. The following fall, her first semester of graduate school, Adriana recounted her shifting reality:

> I just remember being like, 'this is really weird. Like, they're going to pre-season and I'm not going.' . . . It just was very *surreal*. . . . I don't think I understood the impact of the end of the game until later, when my whole routine had changed.
>
> And everything that I was used to doing was different.

Adriana recalled her feelings while sitting in the stands as a spectator for the first game, "I don't know if I can do this. I don't like this." She left the game early. "I remember just being like, 'this is *really* weird to be on *this* side of it all.'" Though she grew accustomed to her new role, a fan rather than a player, Adriana said, "That first fall was probably the hardest just cause my friends were still playing and I was still *here* and seeing it."

"I Didn't Realize How Quickly It Would All Go"

Rather than jealousy about her team moving on, Adriana said, "I think I felt a little regret. . . . I didn't realize how quickly it would all go . . . I wish I would have . . . just been more in the moment." *It was a sentiment I heard all participants express, and one I had also expressed.* Beyond closing a physical chapter of her sports life, Adriana expressed the impact the last game had on her emotions when she said, "I wouldn't have those feelings again, you know? Like stepping out to the field to start the game."

"I Wanted More Notches on My Belt." Throughout our time together, it was evident that Adriana was a competitor and liked to win, achieve, and be the best. She told me that while her college team made it to the NCAA tournament one year, they never won a conference championship. At several points in our interview Adriana said, "I wanted more notches on my belt." As hard as she worked, it seemed that first place was always a little bit out of reach, and there was a sense of associated regret. Adriana recalled:

> When it came to the big things, I never accomplished ‘em. . . . so I always felt . . . this void of, I’m doing good, and I’m good at these things, and . . . sometimes I’m really good and I’m the best, but then when it comes to the “big show,” I never got, like we never got to hold a trophy or do anything like that.

Her statements showcased her competitive nature and the reality of having to live with following a winning formula but not obtaining a winning result. This time, and in the foreign space of post-athletics, she could not try again.

“I Want to Stay Here Longer”

At the time she earned her bachelor’s degree, Adriana told me that she had “*no* clue” what she wanted to do. She was unaware of any interests beyond sports, “I didn’t . . . go to school thinking, ‘oh, I want to be a nurse, oh, I want this.’” *I identified with her statement as I too chose the university I attended primarily for the sport and athletic scholarship and made peace with figuring out a major once there.* Because she never held paying jobs while in school and had limited time to explore other activities beyond athletics, Adriana told me she felt “behind the curve” and lacked the confidence to venture into new areas upon graduation. She said, “When I finished, I was like, ‘I can’t go to work . . . I want to stay here longer.’ . . . So, I decided, ‘how about I just stay in school (laughs), and not go into the real world.’”

“I Was Still **Very** ***Much Immersed in All Things Athletics”***

Adriana began a master’s program at her alma mater in the area of intercollegiate athletics administration. While in school, she had the opportunity to work in the athletic department with the student-athletes. About her decision to earn her master's and stay in the athletic department she said:

> I thought it would be a good transition for me, still getting to dabble in the sports scene and still being around campus, but having my own, actually having a job. . . . and just continuing school without the pressure of soccer.

Adriana helped out in the athletic department with one of the athletic academic advisors and her office was located in study hall. She said, "I was still very in it all. And so, I think I still felt connected to it."

Adriana said her desire early in her graduate program was to be "a normal college student" and "live a normal college life," with normalcy referring to the freedom to attend school and experience college life without the obligations her Division I student-athlete role demanded. *Her desire for normalcy was a sentiment that the other participants and I had expressed as well.* What was unclear to me, however, were any practical steps she took toward a post-athletics life since she continued to live life quite similar to her previous life—she lived in the same house; introduced herself in classes as, "I'm Adriana and I played soccer;" continued to hang out with athletes; worked in the athletic department; pursued an athletic master's degree; received enrollment assistance from the athletic academic advisor she worked for; and for all intents and purposes, was "still *very* much immersed in, all things athletics." Adriana's quest to "experience some other things outside of soccer" and "meet some new people" was challenging due to her continued involvement in athletics. She said:

> I was not ready to be out of the loop. . . . I still had my feet in the water. And I *knew* what was going on. I *knew* who all the players were. I *knew*, you know, all

> of that. But I just wasn't practicing and playing anymore. So, it was very, it was hard.

Though Adriana's role transitioned to former player, much of her environment and many of her relationships remained the same, which appeared to contribute to her *tension* with letting go and her feelings associated with being *in it* but not necessarily *a part of it* anymore.

"I Had a Transition Period"

Adriana mentioned that one of her first glimpses of being a "normal student" was as a graduate student purchasing textbooks for the first time, rather than the athletic department handing her a bag with the books already in it. She said, "I think it was just a little bit of like, 'oh, this is the real world. Like, everyone else has had to do this for four years so I can figure it out.' . . . I kinda liked it too." Knowing her affinity for winning, competition, and control, this simple moment appeared to offer an opportunity to accept the challenge, rise to the occasion, and *translate* her athletic identity in ways that provided space for her to perhaps discover other elements of herself. Adriana said:

> I feel like I had a transition period with grad school . . . whether it was hard or not, or it was helpful, I don't really know. But I feel like it helped me transition a little smoother into the real world instead of going from here you are, to here you're not (laughs). I had that time.

For Adriana, graduate school served as a time and space for her to work on getting out of the athlete space before being thrust into the "real world" and "ripping off the band aid."

Finding 2: “I Can Be Successful, in *Different* Things Besides [Sports]”

Although working in the athletic department brought a sense of comfort and familiarity as Adriana transitioned out of sport, it also finally drove her away. She told me that in her role as a “learning specialist” [*quotes added by her to denote sarcasm*] for the athletic department, a highly intelligent female basketball player was required to meet with Adriana twice a week. Since the athlete had her academics and athletics in order, Adriana thought the required meeting was a waste of the athlete’s time. She said, “I was like, ‘this is absurd.’ . . . And so, she would come in and I would just be like, ‘Are you good? You’re good. Alright.’ (laughs) Like, this is *stupid*.” Her story communicated a transition point in her own life where she became far enough removed from the structure of athletics to view it from the outside. Right, wrong, or indifferent, the athletic department was no longer a fit for her or her life values. She told me, “I think I was excited just to kinda separate from some of it and . . . see what else *the world* had to offer, honestly.”

However, after completing graduate school, Adriana once again found herself unsure of what she wanted to do. The career center at her university introduced her to a company that recruited and celebrated “student-athletes, people with leadership qualities, [and] people [who were] willing to work hard and put in the hours.” Even after starting her new, full-time job in what she referred to as, the “real world,” Adriana said it took her about two more years to come to the realization that it was time to move on from her athletic past. She cited, “getting out of town, getting out of the athletic department, and doing something new” as impactful moments for beginning the next chapter of her life.

Little did Adriana know, however, that her deepest values and skills nurtured by sports—her athletic roots—would continue to weave in and out of her journey.

“Totally Immersed”

Adriana was a natural fit for the “youthful, team-oriented environment” in her first “real world” job out of graduate school. “I became . . . totally immersed in my [work] life and the [company’s] culture.” Her all-in approach seemed to mirror her involvement in soccer and commitment to college athletic culture. Adriana said, “I made friends right out of orientation, connected with my store, the other leaders at my store, and I did well.”

“I Was Excelling”

Adriana quickly learned the “rules of the game” to achieve in her new role.

> They showed me, okay, if you do this, you can get a new position in 18-months. . . . here is what you can do to promote, and you can be making *this* much money. . . . and so, I had . . . things to fight for. . . . I was like, ‘okay, got it! Like, let’s go! Like, this is what I’m gonna do.’

Adriana’s motivation to achieve, combined with the resilience she built while trying to earn and maintain a starting spot on the soccer field, appeared to naturally *translate* to her new work environment. As such, Adriana experienced early success in the “real world.”

> I think it was a pretty smooth transition for me, because I was excelling at the next thing I did. If I would have gotten a job and not been good at it, I’m sure it would have been a lot harder.

Adriana’s early career success made *translating* her athletic identity to life after sport easier, because she could follow the formula to success. *I recognized the confidence (or* *lack thereof) associated with the alluding notions of, 'I do good, I feel good about myself' versus 'I do bad, I feel bad about myself.' Hearing how her athletic identity evolved from her performance on the soccer field reminded me of a roller coaster of emotions I rode repeatedly as an athlete, and even in my post-athletic life. Adriana's statements, coupled with my own experiences, led me to suppose that our investments in performance may in fact be an aspect of athletic culture that extends far beyond the game and into life after sport for how we make sense of, draw our confidence from, and understand the world—through the lens of our performance.*

"It's Me!"

Adriana's experience in the spotlight as a Division I soccer player reappeared in the center of the post-sport artifact she shared with me (Figure 12), except it was not on the soccer field. After about a year into her first "real world" job outside of the university and athletic department, Adriana won a contest. The award was a flight and limo ride to the company's headquarters to model for the cover of the employee magazine. About her celebrity moment Adriana said:

> When you open the magazine, it's me and I'm like, 'aah!!! Like, it's me!' So, that was a cool . . . out of my comfort zone experience. . . . And it was kinda cool cause I'd been on [collegiate soccer] media guides and this and that. So, it was like, kind-of feeling that same like, 'ooh, neato, it's me, I'm on the cover of the [company] magazine,' but *totally* different . . . period of life or whatever.

Adriana associated the feelings from her celebrity moment outside of soccer with the feelings she experienced from the spotlight she knew as a college athlete. *Her experiences reminded me of the "glorified" self, a phrase commonly used in the* *literature to describe an athletic identity known to shape the athlete's personal identity. The "glorified" self forms as athletes are celebrated and idolized (Adler & Adler, 1989; Beamon & Bell, 2011; Lally, 2007; Weigand et al., 2013). I wondered if inclusion in the employee magazine provided a glimmer of hope that the comforting feelings associated with the celebrity may still exist beyond soccer and be achievable in the new spaces she would come to know and* translate *herself in all of her dimensions.*

"Validation for the Person I Am, Beyond Soccer"

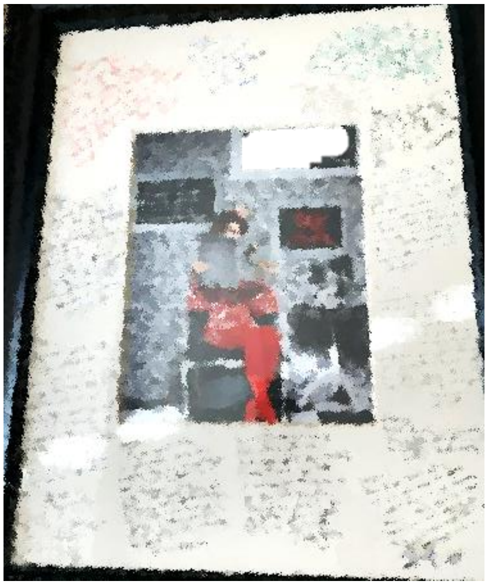
After working for 18 months, Adriana achieved her short-term goals and was promoted to the next position at a different store within the same company. Prior to leaving her work team, she was given the artifact she shared with me: the framed front page of the employee magazine, bordered by her peers' signatures and encouraging words on the mat in the frame. Adriana saved the artifact primarily because of those comments:

> It was just validation for the person I am, beyond soccer. Like, the same things that I'd learned and done through and shown through soccer, but then I was able to . . . do all that and people view me in the same way . . . as a hard-working leader with a positive attitude in a whole different chapter that says nothing about being athletic or playing sports. Hard-working in a totally different way. . . . So, it's always been a reminder for me of how I can be successful, in *different* things besides, [sports].

The artifact was Adriana's first epiphany that she could achieve *beyond* soccer. The same work ethic she applied to soccer seemed to play a role in helping her achieve the success she experienced in her work environment. *I began to wonder if the shaken confidence* *that often occurs when athletes leave competitive sports and step into the unknown is part of the athlete's resistance to moving on, both consciously and subconsciously.*

Figure 12

Adriana Costilow's Artifact

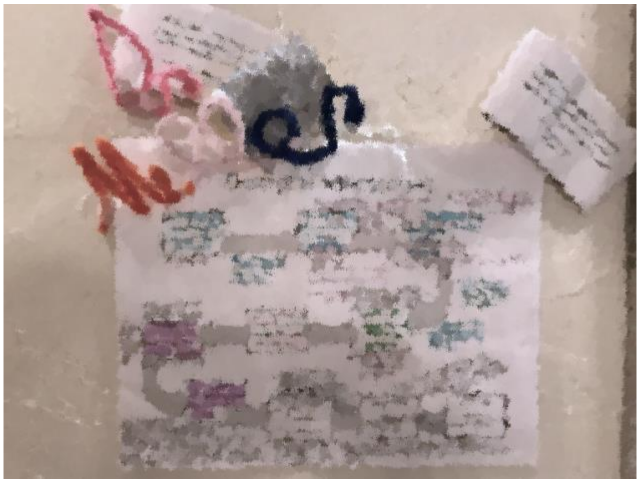


Adriana said that her artifact, the framed magaine cover, traveled with her from office-to-office as she promoted within the company. When she stopped working at the company, she hung it on the wall in her home office. She said, "It's my little reminder. And even now, if I'm doubting myself, I'll go in there and I'll read a few and I'm like, 'ok, I got this.'"

I identified with keeping validation visible as I recounted the words from my peers currently taped to my scanner at work; text messages from my dad checking in on his "#1 favorite daughter" and "champion;" and my doctoral journey sheet taped to my bathroom wall with milestones achieved, coffee sleeves with reminders of the impact the degree will have on our family and future generations, a Dove chocolate wrapper note from my husband, and the pipe cleaner I wrote, "Dr. Miller" with when asked by a *keynote speaker a conference, "What would you do if you knew you would not fail?" I call it, "The Road to Dr. Miller" (Figure 13). I was moved to tears while writing this because of the impact of the visible validation on my life and how it motivates me to keep moving forward, especially in seasons of self-doubt and frustration. The visual validation serves as a form a currency in my life (and Adriana's), which ties back to my earlier comments about the "glorified" self and the motivation that comes from being celebrated, rewarded, or encouraged by the "cheerleaders" and "fans" in our lives. I wondered if the athletes' need for validation remains visible in their lives post-athletics because of the powerful role that such validation plays in athletics and in sports culture.*

Figure 13

The Road to Dr. Miller



"Feeling More Like Myself"

Upon leaving her first job after six years, Adriana found herself in a rut for about two years as she worked part-time jobs and tried to figure out what to do with her life. She got married and had a baby in her early 30s. Like many first-time moms, after going through pregnancy and the initial post-partum stages, Adriana struggled to find herself. Pregnancy took a toll on her body, both mentally and physically, and she told me, "I was pretty *lost* . . . the first year of motherhood. Cause I was like, ‘uh, what? I have no goals’. . . . I remember thinking . . . ‘this is worse than pre-season soccer. I want to go run!’”

At five months post-partum, Adriana found a mom’s exercise class to get her moving again and, at eight months post-partum, she tried a more challenging exercise class for post-partum moms that changed her life. Adriana shared:

> I was like, ‘oh, this feels good.’ . . . it was hard, and those first two weeks, I was sore, and I was like, ‘I’m dying,’ but I was pushing myself again. . . . and it felt, amazing. And then I kinda never, never looked back.

Adriana found other moms through the exercise classes who became a support system of mothers sharing collectively about their experiences with motherhood. Adriana said, “You see . . . other moms struggling and you’re like, ‘okay, this is’ . . . you feel normal.” As she kept attending the exercise classes she said:

> I’d see glimpses. . . . and I find myself again and remember the things that I was passionate about and the things that drove me to wake up in the morning. And so slowly but surely, I would dabble in more things and start feeling more like myself.

It was through exercise classes that Adriana came to the realization,

> ‘I can do this again even though . . . I’m a mom, I can still kick butt here and . . . do these workouts.’ . . . I think that was . . . a big turning point for me, physically feeling better and . . . I’d look in the mirror and I’d be like, ‘okay . . . I feel more like myself again.’

The place Adriana rediscovered herself was associated with her athletic roots. It was as if her athletic identity was finally able to re-surface after months of lying dormant amid the chaos and transitions associated with new motherhood.

“This is What I’m Made for”

After about two years of regularly exercising at the fitness studio, Adriana was offered the opportunity to purchase the business. She said:

> Finally, my two worlds collided with selling the active wear and the opportunity to buy [the business] and it was just like, [*makes an explosion sound*], ‘this is it! This is where I’m supposed to be. . . . all roads have led to this. . . . This is what I’m made for. . . . I get to use . . . my business skills, I get to use my social skills, I still get to be around fitness . . . I still get to be around motherhood and do fun things with my daughter.’ And so, it was the perfect match.

Adriana said that “colliding” moment was a turning point, “I felt like for the first time in years . . . I was exactly where I was supposed to be and doing exactly what I’m supposed to be doing.” The moment Adriana found herself and her passion was roughly nine years after she graduated from college.

Finding 3: “I *Am* an Athlete”

Though Adriana left her competitive sporting role nearly 13 years ago, her identity as an athlete, *in the present tense*, was consistently reasserting itself in her interviews, influencing her mindset and approach to motherhood, leading her businesses, and the relationships with other females who were not competitive athletes in the past.

“It Comes Out”

Adriana shared her definition of an athlete, “I think an athlete is competitive; someone who pushes themselves beyond what’s comfortable. . . . Someone who thrives on the challenge.” I asked her how she would feel if for the rest of her life, no one knew she was a collegiate athlete. Adriana said, “I would hate that. . . . because it’s so much of my identity!” She elaborated:

> I don’t *need* to tell them, but I *want* to tell them at some point. It’s fine if it’s like random people I meet on the street, but people, if they’re gonna be in my life, I do think it comes out and it ends up being important and it helps them understand me better. So, it just depends on, what kind of relationship are we gonna have?

She agreed that others knowing she was an athlete is *knowing* her and the things that are important to her. Adriana said, “I think they’ll just figure out more of why I’m passionate about the things I’m passionate about and why sometimes I still am competitive or why sometimes I still want to push myself really hard and some of that.”

I identified with Adriana’s response, while at the same time pondering the societal view of competitive females and a perhaps related need of female athletes to explain why we are the way that we are. Is it a fear of judgment for who we are? Can we only rest easily in our confidence if others know it is because we were athletes? Is it pride in who we are and how we identify as athletes that enables us to freely express ourselves? Is it the “glorified” self that looks forward to or searches for the “wow factor” when others find out we were athletes? If I am being honest, it is all of those things—fear, pride, the “glorified” self—which are natural human responses to deep, innate desires to be accepted, approved of, and celebrated for who we are.

“They’ll Run the Freakin’ Mile or They Won’t Come”

Adriana and I talked about situating our athletic selves among others in our work environments who were not former competitive athletes. We spoke about our comfort with the “suck it up” mentality, a sense of resiliency that sports cultivated in us to “tough it out” in various life situations. Others without such nurturing in athletic environments do not always understand our mentality. *I could not help but laugh and feel completely “normal” when she gave me an example of how the athlete / non-athlete scenario played out in her business:*

> We had our assessment a few weeks ago, and in the assessment, you have to run the mile. . . Well, we have other girls [who] are on membership and they just drop into classes how they please. So, I always remind them, ‘hey, just so you know, if you’re dropping in tonight, we’re running the mile.’ And, the other instructors are like, ‘well, if they come and they don’t want to run the mile, I’ll just have something in my back pocket, and they’ll do some other cardio stuff while everyone else runs the mile.’ And I’m like, ‘no they won’t. Like, they’ll run the freakin’ mile or they won’t come.’

Her example was humorous because I identified with her athletic approach and mindset, while at the same time understanding what would come next: the apology and/or the dialing back of self when you are met with looks that communicate your intensity is not understood and may have come off as inadvertently offensive. Adriana said, “Then I’m like, ‘oh, gol. I gotta take care of all the moms’ (laughs) . . . so then I have to go back into that role. . . . It’s like this constant balance of me being like, ‘raah!’ But then being like, ‘okay.’” Her comments illuminate the constant recalibration and renegotiation that occurs as women balance their athletic selves with social norms.

“It Brings out Your Inner Athlete”

Adriana told me a story about a class at her business that encompasses running, speed, and agility exercises. It was about 90 degrees outside, she smelled the grass, and her olfactory memory said, “oh my God, pre-season.” As she was jumping, hurdling, and shuffling through the exercises, the workout instructor said, “You guys look like a bunch of athletes!” To which Adriana said, “Well, duh. I *am* an athlete. . . . I love this class. It brings out your inner athlete.” After she said those words, she noticed the other moms in the class looking at her peculiarly. “And I was like, ‘oh, I forget you guys weren’t technically athletes.’ But for me, it’s just bringing out my innate nature.”

In her story, I sensed Adriana’s confidence, though mixed with a little bit of embarrassment for being who she was among other women who did not seem to understand her athletic self. *I experience similar looks while doing anything competitive, which is why I tend to avoid activities where others are playing “for fun.” Put another way, many competitive athletes only know one speed: our best. When we give our best, it is naturally competitive, aggressive, hard-working, intense, and relentless, which other athletes like us appreciate, understand, and expect, but may be a bit off-putting or intimidating for those who were not of our athletic world.*

“If I Didn’t Have Goals . . . I Would Be Lost”

Throughout my time with Adriana, it was evident that setting and achieving goals were driving factors in her life, along with the validation that came from each. In soccer, her goals focused on winning games, earning playtime, and being the best in fitness. In motherhood, her initial goals were about how long she could make it with breastfeeding her daughter. Adriana said, “If I didn’t have goals . . . I would be lost.” She explained how her life before and after athletics differed, particularly as related to her businesses: “I *always* carried the weight of putting [goals] on myself. . . . *before* I had all these other people counting on me. But now it’s like. . . . every goal I set and everything I want to accomplish is something *I’ve* established on my own.”

“I Can’t Rely on Anyone Else”

We transitioned our conversation to discuss where she received validation when she was in soccer versus now in her life after sports. Her prominent phrase, “making the list,” communicated validation for her athletic abilities while in soccer, in addition to winning, being the best, and the “wow factor” that came after telling others that she was a Division I athlete. In her current life after soccer, she separated the validation she receives from her home life and work life.

When her husband randomly says, “I’m really proud of you,” Adriana said it makes her feel good. With her daughter, Adriana said:

> I think I get a lot of [validation] from [her]. Like when I just see her and I’ve seen what a good kid she is and I’m like, ‘well man, I’ve done a really awesome job as a mother so far. Like, we’ve done really good and I’m proud of her.’

In terms of validation from her businesses, Adriana said, “it’s obviously when I see growth.” Specific areas she noted receiving the most validation from growth—her “wins”—included having big sales months, making money, earning rank advancements for product sales, and when new people are added to the team. She said, “I’m like, ‘okay, that’s validating! Like, we *are* doing something right.’”

Similar to the hard work involved, coupled with the highs and lows of sports, Adriana said with her business, “I think the only way [to] manage . . . is to be able to validate without all of [the “wins”]. Those things are great, and I love them, but if I just lived off that, I would be a mess.” Adriana mentioned that at times, however, she still searches for validation:

> We’ll have a really awesome month and do all these sales and get all these people signed up and it’s super exciting. Like, ‘yeah! This is awesome! I’m doing great!’ Then it’ll be like, ‘okay, now we’re just in our humdrum routine.’ And it’s like, ‘I feel, ugh.’ It’s definitely a roller coaster and I think I’m *always* still searching for validation.

Her comments did not come as a surprise to me because on some level, every true competitor will always be searching for “the next high” because that is how we are hard-wired. Afterall, what is the point of competition if there is no goal or something to strive for? Adriana continued, “But at the end of the day, I think I realize I can’t rely on anyone else. . . . It’s right here [*points to her mind*]. . . . I’ve learned to not seek external things for validation and just to know what’s in my heart and manage my mindset.” Her approach to managing validation suggested an internal locus of control, which is known to be “psychologically empowering for athletes” when they perceive that they are “in control of their own destiny” (Huber, 2013, p. 72). The notion of being in control of one’s own destiny has a solid athletic grounding, particularly in sports psychology. *I submit that the approach to competition and achieving both Adriana and I take in life is a direct result of our internal locus of control that was nurtured through athletics as we learned* *how to accept responsibility, learn from our mistakes, and then work harder to achieve our desired result (Huber, 2013).*

“You Win Some, You Lose Some”

I asked Adriana about whether her approach to sports mirrored her approach to motherhood. She said that teaching her daughter “real-life” lessons is important to her. “I think I approach motherhood with trying to prep her . . . for the real world and not coddle her.” Similar to her approach to sports, Adriana stated, “It is kind-of like the, suck it up, you win some, you lose some, life’s hard. Life’s also great. You got to work hard.” *Her approach was familiar to me as a former athlete who is also a mother.* Adriana continued, “I think a lot of those things were instilled in me at a young age and then enhanced by sports.”

“You’ve Gotta Jump in”

Flowing from her seemingly athletic approach to motherhood, Adriana’s competitive nature was evident during our discussions regarding her daughter’s swim lessons. Adriana said her daughter was “not accelerating at a very quick pace” relative to others in the class whom she had previously surpassed in other developmental milestones. Adriana’s competitiveness became apparent when she told me about watching her daughter “*reach* for the teacher” rather than jumping in the water.

> I’m like, ‘you gotta get to the next level . . . You can’t keep reaching for the teacher; you’ve gotta jump in. Like, you need to be brave.’ . . . [Internally] I’m like, ‘why aren’t you going to the next level?!’ (laughing) I just kinda sit there and in my head I’m like, ‘jump in the freakin’ water. You can do it!’

I could not help but laugh with her because it was like I was listening to someone replay my own experience with my son in swim lessons and the pain of sitting on the sidelines and keeping my mouth shut. Not to mention all the times I hid so he would not see me and maybe commit to doing his lessons rather than looking for me to rescue him.

It almost felt like I was the person "losing" as I watched him not "win" at swim lessons. I realized I was not alone. Adriana said, "I had her get a new teacher! . . . We switched her teacher cause I was like, 'maybe it's the teacher's problem.' And I'm like, 'oh, it's not' (laughing)." *We laughed together about our shared experiences, as I was also guilty of switching my son to an older soccer class because I did not think it was challenging enough for him. He was three at the time. I sensed that our conversation was probably the first time Adriana considered how her approach to mothering compared to her approach to sports.*

Adriana stressed her desire for her daughter "to be involved in a team . . . and to feel included in the world we live in today [and] . . . to have somewhere where she feels important and included." For Adriana, that space was athletics, and now she sees her role as a mother as "*translating* that into her." *On some level, I wondered if it made her uncomfortable to take a step back and consider her approach because it makes me a little uncomfortable to consider my own thoughts and actions (internally and externally) with my approach to my son in sports. I remember watching "that parent" on the sidelines and vowing that I would never be them. Besides me, she was one of two participants in the study who expressed a similar athletic approach to having children in sports.*

“Let’s Check-In on Home Base”

Adriana spoke with me about the challenge she faces with balancing how to make an impact in both her home life and work life since she still has a desire to achieve in all of her major life roles: mother, wife, and business owner.

> I think sometimes I’m *so* passionate about my businesses and how I can help other people . . . I know it distracts me sometimes from focusing on my *daughter*. . . . Sometimes I have to just be like, ‘okay, let’s not forget about the impact I wanna make on her.’ But then I’m like, ‘well, she sees that I can work *and* be a good mom.’ . . . So, I think sometimes I get so caught up in making an impact and helping *other* people that then I have to *reel it in* and be like, ‘hold on, let’s check-in on home base here. Am I making my husband happy? Am I making my daughter happy?’

Adriana told me about her nagging temptation to “knock out” as much work as possible first thing in the morning and how the pressure she puts on herself to pack in as much as possible can open the door for unnecessary frustrations with her daughter. “We get behind schedule, and then she’s driving me nuts and really it’s *my* problem (laughs) because I’m the one who’s made it where now we have to rush around.” After taking a step back, Adriana then does the whole “mom guilt” song and dance, a familiar tune for many mothers.

Though the balancing of home life and work life is not *unique to former athletes, I submit that a former competitive athlete who is a high achiever, particularly a* female*, contends with the challenge in a different way.* Adriana said about the balance:

> I can be an athlete and a jock, but I can also do a business presentation in the class or I can wear a pretty dress and be feminine. . . . I can be a mom, but I can also be a businesswoman. You don't have to just be one thing. And especially in the world we live in now, you can have your cake and eat it too.

What I gleaned from her stories, as well as my own experiences with the same thoughts and struggles, brings to light and/or further illustrates a few points. First, working women who are also mothers and primary caregivers walk a different path than their male partners from an identity perspective. We generally do not hear or read about men discussing or battling with how they manage their roles as worker and father. While not a new concept given the history of the feminist movement (Hochschild & Machung, 2012), it further highlights the *tension* of working women who are also mothers. Second, a high achieving, competitive athlete appears to *translate* desires to accomplish goals and achieve objectives in life beyond sport, and across their various roles and responsibilities—many only know "one speed." And third, the intensity and standard with which athletes place expectations on themselves to do all things well at all times with little-to-no margin for error, coupled with an approval or achievement "addiction," is a prominent feature in my data and may be salient to other athletes as well. Do some athletes hold themselves to such a high standard that they struggle to just be in the moment? Do they render invisible all the small victories they accomplish along the way? *This is often my battle.*

Finding 4: "I've Gotten More Able to See the Big Picture and Not So Competitive"

In her Pre-Interview Questionnaire, Adriana said she somewhat agreed that her competitive nature affects the other areas of her life (i.e., home, work, mothering, etc.).

When I asked her to expand her response, Adriana said, “In college and then coming out of college, I was a lot more competitive. . . . I’ve gotten more able to see the big picture and not so competitive with things.” The subsections that follow reveal Adriana’s internal dialogue of what appeared to contribute to a maturing of her athletic identity and the growing of her personal self-confidence.

“I’m an Outsider and I’m Looking in”

I asked Adriana about how she experiences returning to the soccer games at her alma mater, over a decade removed from being a collegiate athlete. She said, “I just feel like I’m in a *whole* different chapter in my life. I’m here with my *kid* . . . I’m holding *my* child here watching these little kids play.” She expressed the role motherhood had in her mindset shift. “Being a mom definitely changes that . . . mindset and everything in that chapter of motherhood. It doesn’t give me all the emotional feelings like, ‘oh, I wish that was me out there.’ Instead, I’m an outsider and I’m looking in.” Transitioning to a point in life where she no longer knows the girls on the team, coupled with becoming a mother, allowed Adriana to simply become a lifetime fan of the sport of soccer rather than longing to still be a player. She said, “I feel like I’m more just observing the gameplay and the sport and not really connected to the fact that it’s [my alma mater].”

“I’m Not Gonna Be the Best at Everything I Do”

Adriana mentioned that her competitive nature “filtered over into everything” she did in college, from wanting to “make everyone laugh the hardest,” to her desire to compete and win any game she played, athletic or otherwise. As a result of her competitive approach to every aspect of her life, she said, “There was definitely growing pains after grad [and] through graduate school and beyond of figuring out, ‘okay, I don’t need to be competitive about that. Like, it's okay that I'm not gonna be the best at everything I do.'" Adriana attributed her new approach or perspective of not needing to be the best at everything to increasing maturity, though she admitted that her desire to win would always be with her. "It still comes out. . . . I mean, definitely in sports. I think it's always gonna be there. But I've been able to remove it from some other aspects of life, as I've gotten older."

"Delegating and Empowering My Team"

When I asked Adriana how she was able to let go of some of the competitiveness from her life, she attributed the mental shift to the conscious efforts she made in social settings to not put so much of her energy into being in the spotlight. She said, "I still like to be the boss, but I'm doing (laughs) a lot better of delegating and empowering my team to make decisions and just kind of being behind the scenes more." She continued,

> I am a leader. . . . [and] I learned a lot of my leadership skills and teamwork from being an athlete. . . . so, it wasn't a huge surprise that later in life you would find me managing an entire store or now running my own business. I don't think I correlated this when I played but I do now.

Though confident in her ability to run her business, Adriana told me she was initially "hesitant" and "scared to be the face of it." Her comments stemmed from our conversation about her competitive nature as a recurring approach in leading her business. She was concerned with keeping others accountable and how, if her expectations were too intense, she may *translate* to those who did not come from an athletic background. Adriana said that as she began to surround herself with other women on her team with *different* personalities than her, it gave her the confidence to "realize what everyone's good at and where our strengths are and use those to make it run." Adriana became less concerned about trying to be someone other than herself, "I slowly realized, I don't have to be [concerned about who I am] because people are going to connect more and relate to someone who's real and honest and raw about motherhood and all things and unapologetically themselves."

I saw Adriana's experience as a crossing over of sorts; at least that is what it feels like to me. Similar to Adriana, I find myself moving into a position of being a leader who leads teams of leaders. As I poured every part of myself into this study, I received greater clarity about my own purpose and how who I am as an athlete connects to my approach to motherhood, personal career pursuits, and other facets of my life. I grew in confidence, realizing that I never buried my athletic talents and skills; they just manifested in different spaces. I felt encouraged to see my experience parallel Adriana's; but, even more profound, it was one of the first times I was able to take a step back and see how it all connected—how it has always connected.

Conclusion

This chapter detailed the individual case study findings and themes that emerged from Adriana Costilow's transition out of collegiate athletics.

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS: JULIE PARSONS

"Even when you've played the game of your life, it's the feeling of teamwork that you'll remember. You'll forget the plays, the shots, and the scores, but you'll never forget your teammates."

– Deborah Miller Palmore

"I do not view myself as an athlete anymore," Julie Parsons wrote on her Pre-Interview Questionnaire. *Wait, what? I had to read this statement several times to believe what I read. I was instantly intrigued and looked forward to hearing how a former successful athlete could make such a bold statement. Something told me that this participant's perspective would differ from the others, and I was interested to hear her story.*

Julie was a 29-year-old former professional athlete and Division I collegiate soccer player, wife, mother, and public health advocate. At the time of the study, nearly eight years had passed since exiting her collegiate sporting role and about six years since exiting her professional athlete role. I knew of her, but we had not met, because I graduated before she arrived at my alma mater. Julie agreed to join me for lunch prior to our first interview to get to know each other before heading to the soccer stadium in the

107-degree heat. I picked her up from work and drove us to lunch. She was dressed in work attire, including a nice blouse, long earrings and an athletic watch, with her hair up in a bun.

Julie began playing sports at the age of five. She told me she was a shy child and that her parents thought that enrolling her in athletics would help her to become more social through interacting with other kids. They signed her up for soccer. Julie said, "I remember being really nervous. However, I had a teammate who was extremely outgoing and befriended me early on. This friendship allowed me to overcome my shyness around others and really focus on the game." Naturally talented from a young age, Julie was known as fast and athletic with a "natural defensive talent." She said, "I remember enjoying the atmosphere more than anything [and] looking forward to the weekends playing with my teammates." Though Julie played other sports in high school and was a dual sport athlete for a year in college, she said, "I chose to pursue soccer as my dedicated sport . . . [because] I had the most natural athletic talent in soccer. . . . I [also] had a lot [of] closer relationships to my soccer teammates." Julie's relational, team-oriented perspective was a theme that would weave in and out of our conversations.

When I asked Julie to describe what it felt like for her to be a student-athlete from an identity perspective, she said:

> I felt like more of an athlete than a student. . . . I also believe that culture played a role in my self-identification [as an athlete]. Much of the student population, fans, and other individuals who payed attention to athletics identified me with athletics. Therefore . . . I believe I began to see myself in that [way] as well. I had been involved in athletics my whole life, so that perception of myself was also

> ingrained in me. . . . It gave me a sense of belonging and accomplishment. . . . Identifying myself as an athlete made me feel accomplished, a sense of pride, and also brought about a certain sense of privilege. Many of my peers also looked up to me as being an athlete, so it taught me how to be humble.

Her comment about a having sense of privilege as an athlete was timely because this status enabled us to enter the soccer stadium for our first interview. When we arrived, the gate was locked. I was wearing one of my old soccer training t-shirts with our logo and my player number on the sleeve. Two men who were working outside the soccer stadium asked if I needed access. I let them know who I was and what I was doing, and they opened the gate for us, no questions asked.

Though Julie identified as an athlete while in college and during her professional career, her perspective as a student-athlete was unique among those this study. She stated,

> For me it was just, 'I'm here, I'm gonna step out on the field and do the best I can and enjoy the sport.' . . . It was just another game. . . . against a great opponent and we're gonna go and play our best and whatever happened was meant to happen and all we can do is control what we can.

Julie was proud of her accomplishments as a student-athlete, but looking back, winning and accomplishments were not her most prominent memories. "I more regularly reflect back on the relationships fostered between my teammates and the times we shared working toward a common goal than what I or we accomplished." Julie also said, "I'm not a person [who's] driven by an end result. . . . What's more important is, what am I doing to get there?"

The ease with which we conversed felt as if we had been teammates in the past. I even felt like we became friends during the process. I appreciated her instant openness with me, and our deep and meaningful conversations about our lives, our faith, and our children that transcended the interview agenda. The fact that *she* paid for *my* tea during our last interview and spent time at the end thanking *me* for allowing *her* to be a part of *my* study is a perfect example of the genuinely humble, servant leader that I had the honor and privilege to get to know. The sections that follow present the findings that surfaced during our interviews about Julie's transition to life after collegiate athletics.

Finding 1: "I've Always My Whole Life Been Driven by Pleasing Others"

After her senior season, Julie was drafted by a team in the Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) league. Upon finding out that the WPS suspended operations prior to the start of the season, Julie stayed in school an extra year to obtain a dual degree rather than going into a career upon graduation. While pursuing her second degree, she learned that the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) would replace the WPS league.

> I had graduated and just been hanging out in school for a year, living a life that's not a college athlete's (laughs). Not really training or doing anything. And then the league came back open. 'Oh, sure; I'll go try.' And I literally trained the month prior before getting picked up.

Julie quickly found that life as a professional athlete was vastly differently from the life she knew and loved as a student-athlete.

"Check off This Box"

From the very beginning of her athletic career, Julie's parents "had a huge role." Julie said, "I was . . . so influenced by my parents and their dreams and aspirations for me. And that led me through a lot of my career." Growing up, Julie's parents drove her for hours to and from soccer practice multiple days per week, encouraged her to keep pursuing soccer when she wanted to quit, and consistently attended her games. "It was just this relentless support *for* me."

After meeting her now husband a few months prior to joining the NWSL and knowing she wanted to go back to school to pursue her master's degree, Julie said, "I knew it wasn't going to be long-term, regardless of if I was successful or not at it. It just wasn't the path I envisioned for my life." While she was playing professional soccer, Julie said she was committed to practicing and getting better, however, she stated, "I was there to . . . if I'm gonna be 100% honest, check off this box for my parents that I tried this out and did this and I'm going to come home and go back to school."

"All American [to] . . . Bench Player"

Though Julie was often in the spotlight at her alma mater, her success as a collegiate athlete did not mirror her experience in the professional environment. "I went from an environment where I was the team captain, All American, I felt like put on a pedestal at [University] to being the bench player cheering on people." Julie recalled, "It was a very eye-opening experience from going from being *that* player to recognizing my role on the team is to make other players better in practice. . . . It's just a different lens." Julie admitted that she would not change her experience as a professional athlete because she learned so much from it. "I learned probably more in the one season (laughs) of playing pro than I did in my four years playing at [my university], just about myself."

"I Know I'm a Better Player Than This"

The full year off from soccer in between the end of her collegiate career and the start of her professional career took a toll on Julie's ability to perform at her optimal level.

> It was very much so the mentality of, in my head, 'I'm doing this but my body's not so much . . . I know I'm a better player than this. I know I *can* be. It's just, I'm out of shape. And, unfit. And, I haven't had the ball at my feet for a year.'

Unfortunately, the time she needed to get in shape and re-develop her touch was condensed, and Julie was unable to earn much playtime. "That was extremely difficult because my personality is very much so, I want to please people. I want to excel at everything I do, not necessarily for myself, but for others. And so that was really difficult for me."

"Oh My Gosh, I'm Gonna Have to Re-Live This All Over Again"

A few months into the season, Julie learned she was being traded. When I asked her how that felt, she said,

> To be honest, when I got the call in it was almost like a sense of embarrassment but also relief because I thought I was being cut (laughing). . . . It almost felt like, 'oh my gosh, I'm gonna have to re-live this all over again of letting another team down if they have higher expectations than I can perform.'

Julie mentioned the difficulty of joining a pre-established team of players who had been training together and the challenge she experienced of having to re-establish relationships.

After staying with the team that acquired her from the trade for a couple of months, Julie told me, “I just couldn’t do it anymore.” Between the lifestyle (“It’s not a luxurious lifestyle”); “grueling practices;” marginal pay; individualistic culture (“We’re gonna practice hard, we’re gonna party hard”); and the atmosphere (“In college, it was, we’re a team, we’re working together, where professionally . . . it was very much so like a business. There wasn’t necessarily that team camaraderie in the sense of, we’re all gonna pick each other up by our bootstraps and we’re gonna work hard”), Julie found herself “extremely shocked” and unhappy. “It just was a very different culture than collegiately.”

“I’m Forcing Myself to Be Here and I Don’t Have to Be Here”

After sitting on the bench at various points in my athletic career and experiencing some similar trials when I played semi-professionally, I was curious about Julie’s mental state while playing professional soccer. She said, “At that point in time in my life, [it was] probably the most depressive state.” However, her depression related more to her desire to return home than feeling inadequate as a player. She recalled thinking, “I’m not happy here. I’m forcing myself to be here and I don’t have to be here.” Julie also said,

> I *always* felt like I was surrounded by people that I was having to “perform for.” And then when I was taken out of that bubble and put across the country by myself and trying to perform for someone or meet expectations for people that I really didn’t have a relationship built with, I really didn’t know that well . . . internally, I really didn’t care as much as trying to succeed for those [I] cared about.

I gathered that Julie was passionate and motivated most by relationships, commitment, and going through the process with others. After professional soccer began to lack the most enjoyable components—relationship, commitment, process—her passion and motivation for soccer faded because it ceased to be the same sport she used to love. Though she admitted she could have continued on and tried to be on the U.S. Women's National Team, Julie's desires to attend graduate school, marry, and have children won out, and she walked away from soccer. I asked if she experienced any guilt with respect to her parents. She said, "I knew I was disappointing them, but I knew I wanted kids. . . . I didn't feel, I mean, no. I think at that point I was enough of an adult to not care anymore."

Julie told me that her biggest take away from being a professional athlete was "being able to have humility and grace . . . and be honest with myself. . . . It's in *my* hands. . . . I can control, what I can control. And it's not anyone else's fault but my own." As she spoke, I sensed that Julie was less interested in talking about her life as a professional athlete, and I wondered about how she felt when her soccer career ended. Julie said, "When *I* reflect back on my soccer career, I don't perceive [professional soccer] as part of my career. . . . And maybe it's because I [felt] like I wasn't a contributing team member."

I intimately identified with her statement reflecting back on her soccer career because I do not count my experience playing semi-professionally in my tenure as an athlete because of my poor experience. Saying I played semi-professionally just allows me to communicate that I was a good player. I had some good times, but on the field, I remember feeling alone. I was not performing at my best ability and, therefore, I was not *receiving very much playtime or feeling like I was a contributing team member. I missed the life I left behind at my alma mater, and the "church family" that adopted me. I went through the motions and was not at all myself. I was depressed from all the things in my life that ended at the same time, my heart was in a different place, and I had begun to develop new passions outside of "just" being an athlete. I quit the team, moved back "home," went to graduate school, and treated the experience almost as if it never happened. Leaving semi-professional soccer is not the way that I ended my career; my career, like Julie, ended when I left collegiate soccer.* Therefore, the additional findings that follow emerged from Julie's experiences with leaving collegiate rather than professional soccer.

Finding 2: "Ready to Find More Self-Worth Within Myself Outside of Athletics"

When her collegiate soccer career ended, Julie said she had a short-lived, "self-pity party" after telling herself, "Okay, Julie, it's over." It took Julie about two years after she graduated to fully acknowledge that collegiate soccer was done.

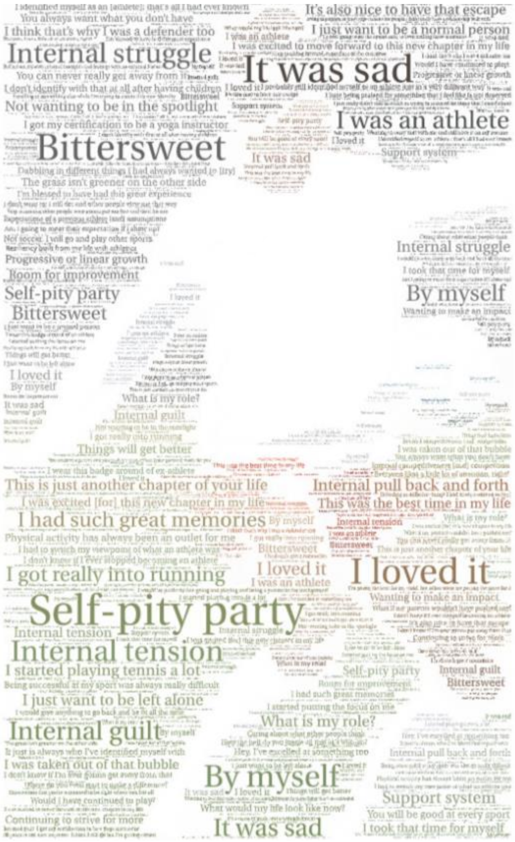
> I just had a meltdown of, 'I'll *never* play on this field again or I'll *never* look over and see my [college] teammates and . . . we're all working toward something together.' I think for me that was really difficult to find [close girlfriends]. . . . I keep going back to that identity of working together as a team and I *really* miss that. And it wasn't until that hit me that. . . something about the music on game day and the crispness of the air in the fall; I'm never gonna have that feeling again. And it was really sad.

In reflecting on the experience, Julie said it was sad and bittersweet because, "I had *such* great memories."

While she felt sad to leave her teammates and the memories they shared, she was excited for the new chapter in her life that she long anticipated. Julie said, “There was definitely internal tension there.” As visually represented in Figure 14, Julie’s mention of *internal tension* became a central theme throughout our conversations as, at the time of data collection, she was in the process of reestablishing her sense of self as a public health advocate and an “ex-athlete” surrounded by athletics in the town of her alma mater. She also used the phrases, “internal struggle,” “internal pull,” and “internal guilt” interchangeably. Julie said, “I just identified myself as an [athlete]; that’s all I had ever known. I was ready to find more self-worth within myself outside of athletics. . . . I’m an athlete, but I can be so much more than an athlete.”

Figure 14

Representation of Julie Parsons’ Data


It's also nice to have that escape
I just want to be a normal person
Internal struggle
It was sad
I was an athlete
Bittersweet
Not wanting to be in the spotlight
Support system
Progressive or linear growth
Room for improvement
Self-pity party
By myself
What is my role?
Internal guilt
Things will get better
This is just another chapter of your life
Internal pull back and forth
This was the best time in my life
I had such great memories
I got really into running
I loved it
Internal tension
I started playing tennis a lot
I just want to be left alone
I was taken out of that bubble
Continuing to strive for more
You will be good at every sport
I took that time for myself

“I Wanted to Know What It Was Like to Be a Normal Person”

As much as Julie loved playing soccer and being an athlete, she told me she was “ready to not have that identity.” She also admitted,

> There was nothing I wanted more desperately my whole life to look forward to one day [of] not being identified as an athlete. I wanted to know what it was like to be a normal person. I wanted to reach my peak goals of playing professionally, and then I wanted to become normal, (laughs) to see what that felt like. And I wanted to be able to intrinsically find myself and find self-worth in something other than athletics.

Julie expressed her desire to explore things she never had the opportunity to because of her regimented athletic schedule. “I wanted to find out what else I was good at because, I knew, I can’t play soccer for the rest of my life. And I wanted to have some time to enjoy some other things besides just soccer.”

As excited as she was to explore what I call, the “civilian” life, Julie admitted, “I think it’s funny because now it’s like, ‘oh, I want to go back to that.’” She used the analogy of the grass is not always greener on the other side. When she was in the thick of practices and waking up at 5:00 am, she longed to be done with soccer and looked forward to living a “normal” life. She stated, “I just wanted my time.” Now that she has some sense of normalcy, she misses what she once had, particularly the ability to “be fit all the time and have relationships with my teammates.” *Though Julie said she was excited to take on a new identity outside of her athlete identity, I wondered if her “internal pull back and forth” throughout our interviews represented the* tension *she* *experienced among her past, present, and future in her process of becoming an "ex-athlete" (Ebaugh, 1988).*

"It Was a Very Humbling Experience Going From Being Coddled With Athletics"

In graduate school, Julie was exposed to college life for the first time as a "normal" student. "When you're a student-athlete and you have someone holding your hand throughout everything and then you're thrown into this world and your identity's taken from you, if you don't have that familial support [that I had], it's *really* difficult." Though she had access to fewer resources, Julie found satisfaction in the normalcy that she craved as a student-athlete:

> In that transition process, I thought it was a very humbling experience going from being coddled with athletics and always having tutors and the resources to then being in a master's program and not necessarily hav[ing] all of those resources. It made me very independent and proud to be able to do it without those resources.

Julie recalled having five different jobs and driving back-and-forth between teaching soccer lessons, personal training at a couple of gyms, working at a manufacturing company, and a few other odd-jobs. Julie said,

> Looking back, I'm like, 'how did I do that?' And I think it really goes back to the strenuous schedule and always going . . . straight from class to practice to tutoring. And that was my life for so long and I was used to it. So, for me, it was no big deal.

In reflecting on her experiences, Julie credited sports and athletics for the resiliency built in her "to get through those tough times" in graduate school and in her jobs.

“What Drives Me With No One Else Around?”

After seeing an injury end her close friend’s athletic career as a college junior, Julie said, “I think it made me realize, this isn’t going to be forever. This could very easily happen to me. What are some other life goals I have outside of just athletics?” Julie used most of her senior year to consider options for her future career and life after soccer. Though she never mentioned what piqued her interest, Julie said it was not until she experienced life as a professional athlete that she found her passion in public health. Her passion drove her through much of graduate school and in the beginning of her career, though Julie admitted:

> I think it was really hard for me . . . to have that drive for myself cause I was so used to always trying to please others, whether it was my coaches, my teammates, my parents, my husband, and to find out who Julie was and what drives me with no one else around?

Though, at the time of data collection, she had worked in her professional field for close to five years, Julie mentioned some questions she had been reflecting on during a work conference: “What impact do I have? What impact do I wanna have? What is my passion? What is my purpose? How can I align those two things with making an impact with my profession?” *They were questions I had asked myself repeatedly over the last several years, particularly at the start of this research study. It was noteworthy to see Julie embarking on a season I recently navigated. I also identified with what appeared to be a deep desire to be a leader in her statements—impact, passion, purpose—three words often used to describe purpose-driven leadership (Craig & Snook, 2014).*

Finding 3: "I View Myself as Athletic but Wouldn't *Call* Myself a Current Athlete"

As I learned about Julie's pursuit to discover more about herself outside of her sport, I asked her to tell me about her self-identity as an athlete—how she saw herself, felt about herself, and thought about herself while playing sports. Julie said,

> [Being an athlete] was so deep rooted and ingrained in who I am from the time I can remember. I always played sports; it was second nature to me. . . . and after, it's *always* been a part of my life. So, identifying myself as an athlete, I feel like is just so hard to answer because. . . . to me, it was who I was. . . . because that's all I ever knew. . . . It's like asking, 'how does it feel to breathe?' I don't know any different.

Observing that her comment, "I don't know any different," was situated in the present tense, I was perplexed as to why she indicated in her Pre-Interview Questionnaire that she neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, "I am an athlete," and why at several points in our interviews she stated, "I'm not an athlete anymore." Halfway through our second interview I realized I had been assuming my definition of athlete was the same as all of the participants'. Julie described her definition of an athlete:

> I think it's (pause), someone who is competitive or competing to reach a certain goal. . . . I wouldn't consider myself an athlete because I don't want to take anything away from friends that I feel . . . are athletes [who] dedicate their lives. I *was* there at one point in my life, but not anymore. . . . I feel like I would be lying or living in the past . . . [or] taking something that wasn't earned, now, in the present.

In that moment I realized I needed to acknowledge that her definition and lens seemed to differ from the other participants', including my own. It was not that she was saying that she was not athletic, just that she no longer identified as an athlete since she was not *currently* playing competitive sports. Julie told me she stopped seeing herself as an athlete almost immediately after soccer ended. "I still view myself as athletic, but I wouldn't *call* myself a current athlete." *While I understood the logic behind her statements, I struggled to accept them—how could someone who dedicated their whole life (to this point) to athletics, who then went on to play professionally, not identify as an athlete? I took note of my blind spot and leaned in a little more during our interviews to listen to her story.*

"Not Having That [Athletic] Outlet . . . Took an Extreme Toll on Me"

About a year after graduating with her master's, Julie gave birth to her first child. Two years later, she had her second child. Though she found passion in being a mother, Julie shared how tough it was—and continues to be—from a physical activity sense.

> I think that transition . . . to be honest. . . . was extremely difficult, and even it still is. After having both my [kids], I didn't do anything the first two years when they were born because they were born so close. . . . [It] took an extreme toll on me, I think mentally and psychology of just not having that outlet that I've always had my whole life to de-stress. . . . It really messed with me when I started working out again because, in my mind, I was still running on a treadmill at eight miles an hour. I would get on and I couldn't even run at six miles an hour. And it really messed with me psychologically of, 'no, I'm supposed to be able to do this.'

Julie's relationship with physical activity was fluid and always served as an "outlet" for her to "de-stress" and "reenergize" herself. She admitted, "It's so deep rooted. . . . I know I have to get active to just feel like myself again." *I remember this part of our interview vividly because it was a profound moment. I noticed an apparent trend for Julie and me (as well as the other participants): we often use our identities as athletes as a touchstone for comparing other aspects of ourselves. Exerting our athleticism emerged as the activity we use as an escape to find our peace and time for ourselves, to feel more like ourselves.*

"Switch My Viewpoint of What an Athlete Was"

To cope with her new reality after having children, Julie said:

> I think what I had to tell myself was, switch my viewpoint of what an athlete was. . . . [and] to tell myself, 'I'm not an athlete anymore (laughs). I'm not expected to do this.' And really have that mindset shift and psychological shift to really figure out, what is the purpose of this? It's not to compete anymore. I don't need to be at that level.

Rather than using physical activity for competition, Julie focused on the purpose being, "to feel healthy and to be a good example for my [children]." Julie reflected,

> I don't even know if I even stopped becoming an athlete [pre-children]. . . . I just changed my mindset of what that was and now, obviously, I don't identify with that at all after having children. . . . I would even venture to say I probably still identified myself as an athlete, just in a very different way.

Julie also mentioned that her goals changed on her journey toward building her self-confidence. “It’s not comparing myself to others; it’s comparing myself to where I was the last time [that] I was here [at the gym] . . . and how can I improve, within myself.”

I was deeply impacted by Julie’s statements about switching her viewpoint of ‘an athlete’ because I live in the same reality she described, especially after having children. What I gleaned most from her statements was to have more grace with myself and to ask myself when I exercise, “Why am I doing this?” Brown (2018) refers to the concept as, “Driving Perfectionism and Fostering Fear of Failure” (i.e., perfectionism versus healthy striving). I am no longer competing as a competitive athlete when I go to the gym. Each time I tried to be where I used to be, I left feeling discouraged and, at times, depressed. Since talking to Julie, I have been intentional about saying to myself, “You are doing this to be healthy for you and your children” and, “I just want to be better than yesterday.” Those simple phrases changed my perspective and ushered in a healthier approach to competition and wellness in my present stage in life. To win is to be healthy, not to beat myself up on the treadmill trying to compete with younger athletes in the gym. I was reminded by Julie of the wise words of Theodore Roosevelt, “Comparison is the thief of joy.”

“It’s Taken Me 30 Years to Really Not Care Anymore.” After her soccer career ended, Julie tried activities she looked forward to but never had time for as a student-athlete. One was training to run a half-marathon. Julie shared a picture of her artifact with me, the finishing medal from her first half-marathon (Figure 15), explaining its significance.

> For me, it was the first time that I can remember that I had really worked to accomplish something that there was no vested interest in *anyone else* [emphasis added] and I wasn't necessarily doing something or working to be a good teammate, or to please my parents, or to satisfy a coach. . . . It was a goal that I had set for myself that I had followed through on. . . . And so, it was kind of a significant moment for me moving forward *[as an] athlete* [emphasis added] where you are, for me at least, continuously surrounded by support and resources my whole life to achieve these [athletic] goals . . . and this was the first time I didn't necessarily have that. . . . I'm really proud of it.

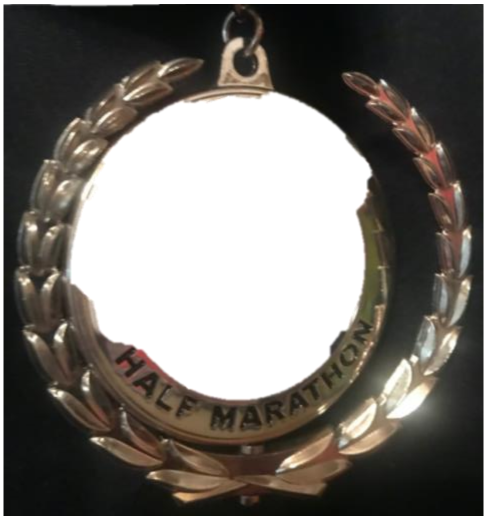
Julie said, "I've really started to figure out who Julie is, what motivates me, [and] really reflect a lot more on my own internal thoughts and feelings with no external factors." Rather than trying to please others, Julie works hard to focus on her internal motivations, particularly in physical fitness.

> I think that's why I picked that medal to represent that [transition from competitive athletics to my life today] because, it's funny; it's taken me . . . 30 years to really not care anymore (laughs). And I think I still do, but I'm getting closer (laughs) to that edge of, it's gonna be okay if it doesn't happen or whatnot.

Since Julie could remember, she wanted to please others. Her comment of it taking her "30 years to not really care anymore" was figurative for a lifetime rather than literal for years. While she admitted that she is not quite there yet, Julie's completion of the half-marathon seemed to symbolize a step closer in her journey to taking charge of her own happiness.

Figure 15

Julie Parsons' Artifact



"That Identity as an Athlete Is Still There"

During our first interview, I learned that Julie and her husband (also a former collegiate athlete) still live in the community of their alma mater. Knowing Julie's desire to distance herself from her former athlete role, I was curious why they never left the athletic community and whether it affected her identity as a former athlete at the university. Julie said,

> Even still to this day, that identity as an athlete is still there. . . . Now that it's over . . . people still view me that way [as an athlete]. . . . And [my husband and I] talked about if we go other places, we won't necessarily have that. . . . and I don't want to say identity, but the connections that it's allowed us to have and the different realms have been extremely helpful as a young couple.

As long as she and her husband continue to live in the community of their alma mater, Julie admitted, "I don't know if I'm ever gonna get away from that [athletic identity]." She elaborated,

> And, even reflecting now back still even through I'm *not* an athlete, I feel like it's still very much ingrained in me because [of] the people I surround myself with, and just still living in the same town. I like to say I'm not treated that way, but I feel like, for the most part, I am. . . . But at the same time, it's almost like *internal guilt* [emphasis added] because I feel like I wear this badge around of 'ex-athlete' or I *was* [an] athlete. And I loved it; I'm not gonna lie and say I didn't. . . . Everyone likes a little bit of attention, right? . . . But I don't know. It is always who I've identified myself with.

As we discussed the topic of athletic identity throughout our interviews, Julie's words continued to display her *internal tension* with respect to having been a former athlete yet no longer identifying herself as an athlete. The switching of her wording from past to present tense in her prior quote seemed representative of that tension. While Julie is an extremely humble person, her past role as a successful athlete appeared to still serve as an anchor point in her life. In listening to her talk, it seemed like her athletic identity was still very much a part of her and who she is.

"I've Excelled at Something Too"

As we talked, I asked Julie to reconcile for me her desire to get *away* from her athlete role yet still *wanting* to live in the community of her alma mater *because* of that role. To me, she seemed to be running away from her athlete role yet, at the same time, pulled to it. Julie explained that as she matured and became more extroverted, the attention from others does not bother her as much as it did when she was younger. She continued,

> I think, too, another part of it is just a different role in being in the professional field and being around a lot of really accomplished people in other realms. . . . and being able to say, 'hey, I've excelled at something too. . . . in my past life as an athlete.' So, wanting to carry that with me and still have it on my resume, if you will, of excelling at something else while I'm trying to create this new identity in . . . my professional realm now. And so, I think it may have something to do with it, as well of wanting to feel that same sense of accomplishment in something that's meaningful.

Her comments almost sounded like a tradeoff. *As I worked with Julie's data, I conjectured, does it have to be one or the other—athlete or ex-athlete? Can you be both? Is there anything wrong with being both, even if you are clear about your definition of athlete and commitment to not taking anything away from someone who is currently pursuing competitive athletics? Coming to the realization that I did not need to shed my athletic identity to take on another identity was a discovery I made during my process of transitioning to life after sport. I learned that it is more about* translating *myself as an athlete—the core of who I am—into new spaces, environments, and roles, but I am a little further down the road than Julie. While on her journey, I wondered if she would eventually come to the same realization.*

Finding 4: "Failure to Meet Cultural Expectations of Being a Previous Athlete"

As an "extremely introverted" person, Julie mentioned that she always struggled with moments where she was placed in the spotlight and the expectations that come with having been a successful athlete. Julie shared,

> I think being successful at my sport was always really difficult cause I would be perfectly fine going and playing and being a person in the background. . . . I think that was my *internal struggle* [emphasis added] of, I just want to be left alone.

I noted the common phrase—internal struggle—what did it mean in a different context? Was part of her trying to shed her athletic identity also about her innate, introverted personality? Now that she is no longer a competitive athlete, I asked Julie if she experienced challenges in other life realms (i.e., work, home, etc.) that she believed were tied to her athletic roots. She said, "I wouldn't necessarily say challenges as much as. . . . failure to meet cultural expectations of being a previous athlete in your sport."

"You're Expected to . . . Support Athletics . . . and Know Everything About Your Sport"

As much as Julie "would rather go incognito" than be known for having been a successful athlete, living in the community of her alma mater made this preference challenging. Julie said,

> I think being an ex-athlete, especially in the community you live in, you're expected to continue to support (laughs) athletics and sports and go to every game and be the biggest cheerleader and know *everything* about your sport (laughs), and who's playing and just the sport in general.

Julie explained the "internal struggle" with others' expectations of her. "It's almost like you can never really get away from it [sports], but it's also nice to have that escape sometimes, cause you get to go back to a part of your life that you really enjoyed." She talked about how friends and coworkers who knew she played soccer in college often ask for her opinion on various soccer topics, such as professional soccer teams, players, or field formations. Julie laughed as she explained, “I think it’s difficult meeting those expectations. . . . I’m like, ‘I have no clue! You tell me!’ . . . I do not follow any of it.” *And I completely understood. People tend to assume that we watch soccer and keep up with all of the professional leagues, the current collegiate players, and attend all of the collegiate games. I did not really enjoy watching soccer when I played; it has never been a thing for me. And it is totally embarrassing when people ask me about collegiate soccer or football and, like Julie, I have to say, “I have no clue!” They look at you like, ‘wait, you were an athlete, you should know this.’ Their expectation feels heavy at times.*

When I attend a soccer game at my alma mater or visit the academic-athletic staff, I often feel embarrassed for not going back more often, wondering if they think less of me because of it. And maybe that is all in my head—hopefully. For a while, it was hard for me to go back to watch the soccer games. Now, it is inconvenient and a part of my life that has been dormant for a while. I do not want to go to just go. I want to take my husband and my kids to watch a game to share the experience together, but we live further away, and it is not something we have been able to do with young children yet. But I feel guilty when I am at the games. Not quite like a traitor, but almost like I feel like others think, ‘oh, there’s Nicci. She got what she needed and peaced out without ever looking back.’ But that is not the whole story. And to explain the whole story, I had to understand it first.

“You’re Supposed to Be Right Where You Left off”

Another cultural expectation Julie often encountered when others discovered she was an athlete previously was, “You will be good at *every* sport.” Julie explained,

> When intramurals email you and say, ‘hey, are you playing this year?’ And almost pinpoint you out . . . it comes with the expectation that you’re supposed to be right where you left off. . . . But also going back to caring what other people think and am I going to meet their expectation if I show up (laughs), too? So, I think it’s extremely difficult for me of, ‘can I meet that expectation if I go?’ And then my internal competitiveness of, ‘I used to be able to do this and I can’t anymore.’

Julie said her feelings toward playing sports were exclusive to soccer due to the struggle of feeling she had to meet others’ expectations. She also said,

> I will go play intramural with people [who] have no clue who I am or my background because if they know (laughing), I will be so embarrassed (laughing). And I’m not ready to face that yet. . . . To go and play and be around other people . . . I don’t think I could deal with it (laughs). Just not care at all, I think it’d be difficult.

The tough part is, I do not know if it really is others’ expectations on us when they find out that we were former Division I (and semi/professional athletes) or if it is just our own expectations of ourselves and what we assume others expect of us due to our athletic background—or a combination of the two. What I do know is, the struggle is real, and I am not sure how to make it go away other than to face it and play or to refuse to face or cope with it. I am not sure there is one right answer; each athlete takes her own path.

“No, You’re Not an Athlete”

While Julie said does not view herself as a “girly girl,” she is known for being more “girly” than other women in her circle. Because of that, some of those women have playfully joked, “no, you’re not an athlete.” Julie shared that when people first interact with her, they are often shocked to find out that she was a former athlete “because I don’t have a lot of competitiveness.” Julie said, “I think I’m competitive within myself, not with others.” She gave an example of how she would *not* try to beat out another colleague for a work promotion if she knew that her colleague was the best fit for the position, even if it meant a salary increase for her.

I asked Julie how it made her feel when people are surprised to hear or believe that she was a former athlete. She stated,

> I think if I wouldn’t have had the success I have in my [athletic] career, I would take offense to it (laughs). But I think because I left on good terms and I enjoyed my time as an athlete, I think it’s funny . . . [and] I don’t take offense to it.

I pointed out to Julie that the examples she provided could almost be seen as compliments because, in theory, they appeared to communicate that she successfully achieved her goal of “normalcy” if people do not view her as an athlete. She laughed as she agreed.

We talked about the culture surrounding the viewpoints our society has about athletes and the stigmas associated. When I asked how she would feel if no one new she met would ever know she was an athlete, Julie said, “I think it’d be great.” She explained,

> I think there’d be no expectations and I think that as I continue down this journey of trying to be physically active again, maybe people would just be like, ‘oh, she just works really hard and is really athletic.’ And I don’t think I would have to have any tie to being a previous athlete at all.

I agreed with her that there is a certain pressure involved. What remained unclear to me was whether her words represented her introverted nature of not wanting to be in the spotlight or if it was related to her internal athletic identity—the one she seemed to be struggling with back and forth. Though Julie thought it would be fun for her children to know she was a former athlete, she also said she did not think it was important due to the pressure that can come with that knowledge. "I think it puts too much pressure on kids if they try to meet their parents' expectations for them or try to meet what their parents or older siblings achieved."

I realized during the course of our conversation that I succumbed to some of the cultural stigmas in how I first approached Julie. Prior to meeting and talking with Julie, I assumed that she would be extremely competitive and identify closely with her athletic identity because of her Division I role. But that is not Julie's identity. She is modest and does not want to be in the spotlight. Whereas, culturally, when we think of an athlete, a common assumption is the athlete seeks the pedestal. I had never met an athlete like Julie before, and that was when I had my ah-ha moment—not all athletes are the same. We laughed together as we both admitted we could use a little of what each other brought to the table—humility from Julie and competitiveness from me. I would love to have been her teammate.

Finding 5: "I'm Just a Person [Who's] Always Been Driven by Relationships"

Throughout our time together, Julie constantly emphasized the value and importance of relationships. When I asked her why she emphasized relationships so much, Julie said, "I'm just a person [who's] always been driven by relationships. I've been driven to excel for my parents, . . . my teammates, my coaches. . . . So, for me, that was always *super* important to have *great* relationships with my teammates." Her desire to create and foster relationships naturally *translated* to her adult life after soccer through the skills she gained from learning how to be a teammate and work collectively toward goals, and her ability to lead by supporting and lifting up those around her.

"Being an Athlete as a Whole Helped Me Transition"

Julie credited her time as an athlete for helping her transition to her professional field. "I would like to credit my (laughs) intellectual ability, but I think it would not be honest of me to state that I've gotten where I am today within my career without the connections from athletics." The athletic community's familiarity with her name was beneficial when applying for jobs or when other opportunities surfaced. "I think the connections you make, especially if you stay in that [athletic] community, are huge. . . . Being an athlete as a whole helped me transition."

Julie credited her "resiliency" and the ability to see the "bigger picture" to her time in sports and having been an athlete. She said,

> I think being able to see the big picture and seeing the domino effect of things has helped with navigating all of those different avenues of seeing, 'okay, I know in the grand scheme of things, if I want to be successful, these are the steps I need to take.'

As difficult circumstances have come her way, particularly within the last year, Julie told me that at times, "it's almost like an out of body experience where I'm thinking about this person and everything that keeps building upon their shoulders and I'm stressed, but I'm not breaking down." She described what sounded to me like an athlete's mentality of battling through adversity. "Continuing to strive for more and not meeting goals.

Continue to strive for more. There is room for improvement. Things will get better. You keep pushing forward, regardless of the outcome." Julie confessed, "Looking back, I wholeheartedly think [the resiliency built from being a part of sports and athletics] was a huge protective factor for me today in being able to handle a lot of things that have been thrown at me."

"I've Learned a Lot of People . . . [Do Not] Know How to Work Well as a Team"

As she transitioned to her professional career after college, Julie was surprised to find that the value of teamwork and relationships did not universally come to everyone.

> As I've . . . been in the professional realm, I've realized the importance of those relationships and something that I took so much for granted of, everyone knows how to work well as a team and build those relationships and foster them and, you know, teamwork. . . . I've learned a lot of people in this world do not have those skills.

Her realization that teamwork did not come organically to everyone led her to emphasize its importance. "I think team sports are so important, whether you were the best one on the team or the one cheering everyone on, because I think there's so much to be learned." *I could not agree more with her. It is the same reason why I emphasize the value of teamwork and leadership so much. Without it, I am not sure what the point is.*

"I'm a Big Believer in . . . My Children Playing Athletics." Because of her emphasis on the skills learned through sports and the impact of athletics in her ability to transition to the professional arena, Julie revealed that she is a "big believer" in her children playing athletics, regardless of their role on the team—starter or supporting player. She said, "I think it just teaches you so much about life and how to cooperate with others and teamwork that I think I took for granted when playing because you're surrounded by like-minded individuals [who] do that naturally as well."

As Julie reflected on her career and parenthood, she acknowledged her appreciation for her parents' role in encouraging her to play sports. She was grateful for all the sacrifices they made for her. She is driven to be a good role model for her children and wants them to develop a healthy relationship with athletics. While her husband takes a more competitive approach, Julie laughed as she said, "[When] I take [my child to sports], I enjoy it. For me, it's about the social experience. . . . We're here for fun."

"I Still Have That Satisfaction Working Again Toward a Goal With Someone Else"

Knowing that Julie missed the collective, team-centered nature of sports— "For each other and with each other" —I asked whether she experiences similar feelings or can gain the same type of personal satisfaction in any other areas of her life (i.e., fill the hole that team sports seemed to leave behind). Julie described the group fitness classes at the gym that she recently started attending and enjoyed due to the "collective, everyone working . . . not in a competitive nature . . . [but] working to beat your previous time" environment. Though she admitted, "It's not as rewarding cause I don't have those close relationships built yet. . . . So, it's a little bit different, but I would say, I've still been able to have that satisfaction in other places." She continued,

> I think now it's just in a different viewpoint. . . . So, me and my husband . . . bought an old farmhouse. . . . It's been a real adventure. But I think renovating it together and doing things like, just the small changes together. I still have that satisfaction I think working again toward a goal with someone else.

Among the support she receives from her husband (“my biggest supporter and biggest teammate”), two “beautiful, loving [children],” family, and colleagues (“I work with some truly incredible people [who] are great supporters of not only the work that we do, but also me as a person”), Julie said, “I feel like I’m extremely blessed.”

“I Get to Make a Difference . . . Behind the Scenes”

Whereas in sports there was “a lot more cheering and instant gratification,” Julie said in her professional work now, “you just learn to be your own cheerleader.” Now that she no longer considers herself an athlete, Julie told me she finds her validation in the relational impact she can have behind the scenes. “I get to make a difference but also not be on the front lines.” Similar to her role as a player in a supportive, rather than glorified, position on the field, her work in the public health arena is often laden with a lot of behind the scenes work that often goes unnoticed but has a great impact.

When I asked where she was at presently with respect to her transition from collegiate athletics, Julie said, “If I’m not fully through, I’m at that 85/90% mark, probably. I mean, I don’t identify myself as an athlete anymore.” *It almost seemed like she had an end goal in mind—to no longer identify as an athlete. I wondered how much of her goal-driven mindset as an athlete was interfering with her transition experience. In other words, if no longer identifying as an athlete was her goal, it seems like that would set up a push/pull situation as one piece of her (goal-driven) competes with another (retaining identity). Perhaps this was the source of her* internal tension.

Julie admitted that our time together brought up a lot of emotions of her memories and experiences of being an athlete when we reminisced.

> [I’ve] really start[ed] to dive into my feelings toward things that I just think I just, ‘oh, it’s done, brush it off and move on to the next.’ But really taking a look deeper of, how I really felt about my time as an athlete.

Above all, Julie said the deeper reflection experience from the study made her more thankful for her life and blessings and the experiences she had as a former athlete. She concluded, “I think it’s really lit a fire in me to want to mentor young athletes to navigate through . . . and . . . help them to change their lens and mindset on those experiences *while* they’re going through them and not after.”

Conclusion

This chapter detailed the individual case study findings and themes that emerged from Julie Parsons’ transition out of collegiate athletics.

CHAPTER VII

FINDINGS: ROXIE HART

"Retirement might come today or it might come 20 years from now, but after your athletic career is over, you still have a hell of a lot of life to live."

– Malcom Lemmons

Roxie Hart was a 38-year-old former Division I collegiate soccer player, wife, mother, soccer coach, and an academic advisor at her alma mater. At the time of the study, nearly 16 years had passed since she exited her collegiate sporting role. I first met Roxie on an early, rainy Sunday morning at a coffee shop in her hometown. I looked forward to finally making her acquaintance as we rescheduled her interview a couple of times. We did not share any identifying information to locate each other; I just assumed I would recognize the "soccer girl" look. When Roxie came in shortly after me, I recognized the look: she was dressed in spandex and a thin, thigh-length sweatshirt with her hair up in a bun, similar to the way she might have worn it when she played. We greeted each other with a hug, as if we had been friends for years. The mutual ease of our conversation that day and the interviews that followed may reflect a natural bond that we share as former soccer players.

Throughout all our interviews, I found Roxie easy to converse with, real, down-to-earth, and relatable. She was instantly open with me and I felt more free to be myself than I had in a while. As interested as I was in hearing *her* story, she was equally interested in *mine*. As we told stories about our individual journeys, I found that we were co-constructing meaning about the sport we loved and our transitions to life as we know it today. I felt like we became friends in the process.

Roxie described herself as a “natural athlete” from age four. She was the only girl on an all-boy soccer team and loved being the best player on the field, *especially* among the boys. Her athlete mentality and competitive nature were fueled by her family, the physicality and aggression of the sport, winning, and a sense of belonging. Recruited to her university by a coach she “adored,” she claimed a starting position as a freshman and started in every game her first season. Roxie said being an athlete “defined me, defined my life, defined my friends.” Sporting her soccer clothes on campus was a badge of honor, and she recounted, “We were proud that we were on the soccer team.”

Roxie’s enthusiasm for the sport was met with devastation as a new head coach arrived at the start of her sophomore year. Uninterested in her style of play, he quickly promoted his recruits and Roxie found herself on the bench, a position to which she said she became accustomed for the remainder of her collegiate career. Though she still maintained pride in her student-athlete role, new, conflicting feelings surfaced about her role as designated by her coach, “the captain of the non-starters.” Roxie said,

> You know it’s interesting because there’s two sides. . . . There’s this weird feeling of feeling better than people but at the same time feeling never good enough. That’s interesting. So, . . . you’re . . . around campus or whatever, you have your

> athletic stuff on, it's like, 'yeah, I'm an athlete, *psh*.' But then maybe on the soccer field, and at games, when you're not playing as much, then you don't feel, you never feel good enough. So, I was never just, in the middle, right? I was either way better than you or not good enough. I was never just one among many.

Roxie's coach expressed to her that she was the best player, but he could not play her because she did not fit his style of play. He even asked her to teach another player how to play her position, a task that she said she willingly accepted. Roxie said her empathetic nature gave her the ability to understand and accept his perspective and she chose to not allow his comments to bother her. I asked if she thought her acceptance was her way of coping with not playing rather than dealing with it. She said, "Of course! 100%! That's exactly right; so I didn't have to deal with it. And then it's like, I'm not playing cause I'm drinking, not because I'm not good enough. . . . I didn't wanna feel *that*!"

The pain she experienced due to the lack of playing time (her validation) led Roxie to adopt additional identities while in college, "the party girl" and "the drunk."

> I prided myself. I mean that *was* my identity. And I'll tell you why. I think . . . it's because I'm very loud. I'm very vivacious. I'm very wild. I'm very, expressive. . . . I did not accept myself for being that. So, I could drink and be that.

She mentioned that her competitiveness on the field "almost turned into, 'I will out-party any of you,'" as a lack of playing time meant she was free to drink, an activity she anticipated with pleasure.

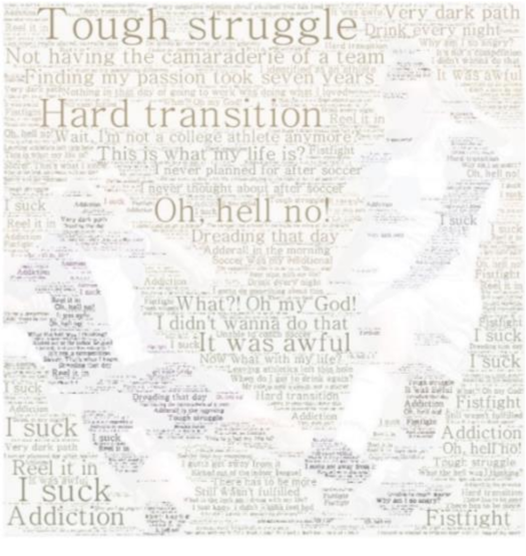
Reflecting back on her active college lifestyle, Roxie mentioned that self-medicating with alcohol was her way of avoiding the pain of not playing or feeling good enough. Her wounded spirit was further hurt by her mother who went from never missing a game to avoiding coming to games due to her embarrassment when people attending the game questioned her about her daughter's lack of playing time. Roxie's struggle to cope with the loss of her sport and transition to life after soccer included alcohol and drugs, a not uncommon response to the athlete transition experience (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Menke & Germany, 2019; Swain, 1991). The sections that follow detail the findings that emerged from Roxie's transition out of collegiate athletics.

Finding 1: "Leaving Athletics . . . Just Left This Hole"

Though Roxie continued to play post-college competitive soccer on her former club team and in an indoor league, the transition to her second "job" (with soccer referred to as her first job) became a mental, physical, and emotional battle. Because soccer was her longest standing commitment and seemed to serve as a dominant anchor in her life, Roxie said she found herself "lost" and trying to "cope" once it was "taken away." Emerging themes related to Roxie's struggle to cope with life after soccer are visually represented in Figure 16.

Figure 16

Representation of Roxie Hart's Data


Tough struggle
Very dark path
Drink every night
Not having the camaraderie of a team
Finding my passion took seven years
It was awful
Hard transition
Reel it in
Wait, I'm not a college athlete anymore?
This is what my life is?
Fistfight
I never planned for after soccer
I never thought about after soccer
Oh, hell no!
I suck
Dreading that day
Adderall in the morning
What?! Oh my God!
I didn't wanna do that
It was awful
Now what with my life?
Leaving athletics left this hole
When do I get to drink again?
Hard transition
Addiction
Fistfight
Addiction
Oh, hell no!
Tough struggle
There has to be more
Still wasn't fulfilled
I suck
Very dark path
Reel it in
I suck
Addiction
Fistfight

“Wait, I’m Not a College Athlete Anymore?”

Upon graduation, finding a job was not difficult for Roxie, who said she felt confident about her resume and ability to market her strengths to an employer, particularly as a competitive person. Moving from an environment where she was accepted and celebrated for being a competitive and driven individual to the world of sales with “jealousy and bitterness,” however, was a difficult transition. She recounted the shifting reality:

> That’s a tough struggle, to go from, an athlete, a very successful [athlete] . . . having something every day that . . . pushes you to be better . . . that you love . . . surrounded by your friends every day. . . . to moving to [a new city], not having . . . friends. . . . and not having the camaraderie of a team that you’ve been with for a long time, and athletes that know how competitive *you* are as a person and how competitive it is in the field, and to push you. . . . and that was a hard transition.
>
> *And* to go to work and do something you’re not passionate about, it’s tough too.

During our first interview, Roxie said that after no longer playing soccer she realized, “I’ve had to *really* work on and get a lot of guidance [on], how do you make friends? I never had to make a friend. They were made for me on the soccer field.”

Like me, Roxie did not recall discussing the emotional impact of the transition to life after sport with anyone while in college. Roxie’s recollection of her initial transition to the workforce appeared to be deeply distressing for her. She explained,

> I knew within the first two hours of my very first job out of college, ‘*whoa*. Hold on. *Errr!* Wait, I’m not a college athlete anymore?’ So, I guess, going back, that’s probably when I actually realized it, within the first two hours of my first job.

> You know it was like, ‘this is what my life is?’ I never planned for after soccer. I didn’t have a plan for after soccer. I never thought about after soccer. Now it’s after soccer, and I’m sitting here at this desk being trained. ‘Oh, hell no! What?! Oh my God!’ . . . And it’s just like, I didn’t *want* to do that. I didn’t wanna sit at a desk. I didn’t want to have that kinda job. But that’s what I, that’s where I was. And it was, awful.

Rather than the personal affirmation, acceptance, and excitement she experienced from playing sports, going to practice, and spending time with her teammates, she was affected by a new, dominating emotion: dread. Roxie said, “I feel like the biggest part *after* athletics is dreading that day because *nothing* in that day of going to work was doing what I loved. So that led to, you know, a lot of different things.”

“I Went Down a Very Dark Path”

As we began to explore the “different things” that emerged from her realization she was no longer a college athlete and doing what she loved, Roxie opened up about her journey.

> I went down a very dark path for about 5-7 years after graduating from college. My whole life I was trying to get a soccer scholarship. I got and completed that, ‘now what with my life?’ I turned to alcohol to help me cope with the loss of my sport. . . . I did not want to deal with life without playing at the highest level of soccer.

Though she mentioned that she did not think she consciously knew *why* she was feeling the way she was feeling, Roxie said, “I just know I didn’t wanna feel bad. . . . If I drink, I don’t feel bad . . . I don’t have to deal with it. . . . Then, if anything comes up, your thoughts are just, ‘okay, when do I get to drink again?’”

One of the most profound moments during our conversation was Roxie’s epiphany about her drinking. Roxie said,

> I don’t think I’ve ever, until this moment, pinpointed when it switched from [social drinking] to an addiction. And that’s *when*. When I started that first job. And I was like, ‘okay. Soccer’s over. . . . I guess this is my life.’ . . . It was really, drink every night, Adderall in the morning [to] get up for work, drink every night, Adderall to get up for work. . . . There was just this hole that athletics, leaving athletics . . . just left this hole. So, I was trying to fill it. Well, for me at the time, what I filled it with was alcohol.

The emotional pain of going to a job every day that she dreaded coupled with the loss of her sport—her anchor point—further invited negative, self-afflicting thoughts. “Every negative emotion about yourself you can feel,” with predominant thoughts such as, “What in the heck am I doing with my life?” and “I suck.” Roxie said, “I identified as an athlete. . . . And I think soccer was my emotional; that's where I put my emotions, on the field.” Once she no longer had soccer as an outlet for her emotions, Roxie confessed, “I turned to alcohol to physically release my emotions.”

“There Has to Be More”

Though Roxie remained in sales for about six years, she realized that even after “kick[ing] everyone’s booty” she “still wasn’t fulfilled.” Described by Roxie as, “a normal Saturday morning, waking up and apologizing and not remembering anything,” her alcoholic lifestyle came to a head on January 15, 2010:

> I was dating this guy, and I woke up Saturday morning . . . and I was like, ‘I don’t remember anything last night. Oh my God I’m sorry. Did I do anything stupid?’ . . . And for the first time he said, ‘you should be sorry.’ . . . I was like, ‘what do you mean?’ And he showed me the door and I [had] kicked a hole through the door. I didn’t remember any of it. I was like, ‘oh my God, I gotta do something about this.’

According to Roxie, after taking inventory of her life and realizing she was almost 30, had no prospective husband or job, and was living with her mom, she said, “There has to be more to life than this. If this is all there is to life, you know, why live it? There has to be more. . . . And there may or may not be, but I gotta try it.”

Roxie turned to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) for help on January 16, 2010, her official sobriety date. She determined, “I’m gonna go one year all-in to sobriety. One year. And see where I’m at.” And that was the day that Roxie quit drinking cold turkey and never looked back. When I asked her how she was able to do it, I saw the drive and vestiges of having been a competitive athlete in Roxie’s explanation and how being competitive played out for her, both negatively and positively:

> The competitive athlete in me is probably what made me more of an alcoholic because. . . . it’s that competitive drive that’s like . . . ‘I will outdrink everyone. Better than everyone. . . . I don’t care if you’re 300 pounds, six-foot seven guy, I will outdrink you (claps) under the table baby.’ So *that* competitiveness kept me drinking. And then the competitive athlete in me says, ‘okay, I stop.’

I began to see a pattern of Roxie’s “all or nothing” attitude. The pattern appeared in other parts of her journey, particularly with her search to find a career she was “made for” and her choice to attend graduate school and earn her master's degree. The search for more; the drive to succeed; it is never good enough; I can do better—these were the manifestations of Roxie's desire to find something to "fill this hole" that soccer left. In her case, these things led to an addiction.

I recognized Roxie's "all or nothing" attitude in my own approach to life, just applied to different situations. Some may argue that the competitive approach Roxie and I take to life is the result of personality—nature versus nurture. I suspect Roxie would support me in saying that, while personality likely plays a role, athletics, particularly at the highest levels, cultivates and nurtures a "there has to be more" mentality because, without it, there would be no competition. For many athletes, without competition, there would be no motivation to succeed at the highest levels. Translating *this mentality or explaining it to others who may not understand is the challenge. It was comforting to meet a kindred spirit.*

"Why Am I *So* Angry?"

After getting sober, Roxie quit club soccer just before starting graduate school. Two years later, she found herself on a soccer field again. Roxie recalled,

> So, the last time I *really* played, to *really* play, was an indoor game. Never been in a fistfight on the field in my life. Never. Over 30, get in a fistfight. . . . And she's on the ground and I could have kicked her really hard and then the ref broke it up or whatever; I don't even know. And I got kicked out of the indoor [league] for a year, suspended for a year, whatever. And that's when I was like, '*errr!* Whoa. What is goin' on in my life? Why am I *so* angry that I'm fist fighting someone on the field? Like, are you kidding? I'm aggressive, but not, I mean, that's

> *ridiculous*.' And so, I really had to *reel it in* [emphasis added] like, '*what?'* And that's pretty much the last time I really played.

Roxie's emphasis on the two times she said the word, "really" (see first line of her previous quote) signaled to me that the game meant something to her, from a competitive standpoint—reflecting a key 'indigenous' distinction (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 148) for her between playing and *really* playing. When *really* playing, she was there to win. *It is exactly how I describe the experience, so I understood her as a fellow former player.*

After being suspended from the game she knew and loved, the constant in her life, her anchor, Roxie's reaction sounded like a wake-up call and a self-intervention moment. Perhaps the change resulted from some form of emotional trauma or drawing on the self-discipline that once made her a top athlete. Regardless, she would only say, "After college I was unable to coach soccer due to the pain of not being able to be on the field."

Roxie never told me the event triggering her to fight on the field that day. She only told me that her feelings of "anger" and "not feeling good enough" likely guided her actions that day. When I asked her why that was her last game, she said, "I don't know. I just kinda quit." As we continued our conversation, it became apparent that Roxie's perception of her performance carved out a lot of her identity as a player. About her approach to playing soccer presently, Roxie said:

> It's a no brainer that I'm not gonna play . . . because I get more embarrassed cause I'm like, I know I can't do it. . . . My brain knows what to do and . . . I don't love playing because I walk away from every game feeling like crap. . . . With soccer, I know I don't suck. And so . . . when I play, and I do bad, then I feel bad about

> myself. And it wasn't worth feeling, so bad. . . . So that's . . . another reason that I had to switch and get out of it.

Roxie's identity as a soccer player appeared to evolve from her performance on the soccer field, and many of her comments led me to believe that soccer may be an identity issue due to the sense of self she seemed to derive from playing the sport, especially when she was doing well. Once her abilities no longer matched how she identified herself as a soccer player, she appeared unwilling to accept anything less than performing at the level that once was her best. It was as if her action to walk away from soccer symbolized her effort to preserve her identity and who she knew she was. Roxie said she would rather go out and play any other sport, even if she is not good at it, because she was never expected to be good at the other sports like she was at soccer. In essence, her words communicated to me that to play soccer now may violate the true expression of who she *is*, as an athlete.

"Why Did I Not Just Keep Pursuing Soccer?"

During our second interview, I asked Roxie to explain how she realized she was approaching the end of her *individual* competitive sporting role. She said,

> My dream and my goal was always to get a college scholarship and then maybe go to the Olympics. . . . So then, I graduated college . . . the very first day I started my first job out of college was probably the first time I was like, '*whoa.* Yeah, this ain't gonna work for me.' . . . When I was in college, everyone told me, oh you'd be an awesome teacher and soccer coach. 'No, I gotta get away from it. I've done soccer my whole life. I want to try something different.' And then, when I

> tried something different, it was like, 'what the hell was I thinking? Why did I wanna try something different?'

Roxie told me that because she was still playing on the highest-level club soccer team available at that time after college, "not that much changed" for her. It was not until her college team had an alumni weekend that she realized she would never play collegiate soccer on that field again. "I remember we walked out on the field in our regular clothes and they recognized us. And I think that's when it hit like, '*woah.'* It's like five years after."

As Roxie processed her career choices post-college and explained the difficulty of working in a career that she was not passionate about, she further pondered, out loud, her choice to not pursue a career as a soccer coach:

> So, today I think, 'okay, what do I *know*? What do I 100% know, without a shadow of a doubt? If I had to do one thing in my life, what do I know?' It's like, 'soccer. That's what I *know*.' And so, there's a part of me that is still to this day . . . has resentment against myself. 'Why? Why did I not in college decide to stick with soccer and become a coach? I could maybe be a Division I head soccer coach right now.' But in that moment in my life . . . I thought, 'I've done soccer my whole life, let me try something different.' And so, still to this day, I mean, I'm 38 years old . . . 'why did I not just keep pursuing soccer?' . . . I don't know why I chose to not. Cause if I look at life, that is *the* only thing I know.

As someone who has encountered similar thoughts, I empathized with her pain as she processed and mused through the questions she asked herself because I understood the feelings associated with the loss of sport (and self) and the desire to find a way to get it *back, whatever 'it' is. On some level, I wondered if her instinct she described to me as a mentality of "the grass is always greener" paints a romanticized picture for her of a life that appears to restore her sense of self that she lost and has not quite been able to find in an effort to motivate her to her true calling and passion. The "glory days," for an athlete, if you will. On the other hand, I wondered if the competitive athlete in her could not help but to analyze the situation, find the flaw or mistake she felt like she made, and seek to rectify it because "practice makes perfect" and a true athlete is never satisfied. Either way, I felt compassion for her because I identified with the mental and emotional fatigue that comes with trying to answer the question, "did I bury my talent?"*

As we continued, I was curious about her current sense of her transition process. Had she come through it? Was she still in it? Roxie said,

> There's a part of me that's still in it. . . . I'm not gonna be a professional athlete. Like, that's fine. I've come through that. The, 'why didn't I take my sport and turn it into my career?' I'm not through that yet, no.

The majority of Roxie's statements pointed to what I thought to be her overarching question, "how do I position soccer in my life now?" *It is a question I have asked myself many times. Were we created athletic to be 'just' athletes or does the internal competitive drive serve a purpose in different capacities or spaces when our bodies can no longer sustain the physical pace required to play at the highest levels? Does turning our sport into our career have to involve the sport at all or are we really just talking about finding a space where we feel comfortable to be our athletic selves? Is applying our athleticism the joy of competition rather than the burden—that we are doing something we are* *passionate about? Is it the passion that is missing from post-sport life? These are just my wonderings.*

Finding 2: "I *Am* an Athlete"

Throughout my time with Roxie, it was evident that her athletic identity was still rooted deeply within her, both in words and intensity. "I *am* an athlete, to the core, I'm an athlete." Roxie was passionate, determined, strong, motivated, and competitive. With respect to her transition to life after sport, I thought her athletic mentality remained intact from earlier years. Roxie said, "Everything I do, it's that athlete mentality. Everything." Despite leaving collegiate sports, Roxie's identity as an athlete, *in the present tense*, was consistent throughout her interviews, and it seemed to influence all of her multiple life roles.

"I *Want* Them to Know I *Was* Good"

On her Pre-Interview Questionnaire, Roxie indicated that she strongly agreed with the statement, "I am an athlete." She explained, "To this day, you put me on a tennis court, in a swimming pool . . . on a volleyball, I'm gonna whoop your butt . . . I mean, I'm just, I'm an athlete." After her statement, I asked her how she defined athlete. Roxie said,

> A true athlete . . . can go out and catch on and play and be good-ish at almost any sport. . . . Yes, I *know* soccer. But . . . we have to play cricket, I know nothing about it, I *will* pick it up, and I will be good at, I will, you know, be decent at it.

She elaborated further, "Even at my least fit state, I would say, 'oh, I'm not very athletic right now, but I'm still an athlete. . . . I'll get back there. Don't you worry.'"

We discussed our present athletic states and the feelings associated with getting out on the field and not performing at the same level as we were used to but receiving compliments from others for playing well. Roxie admitted,

> I want them to know I'm [an] athlete, to know I *was* an athlete cause I'm like, 'yeah, I was good at one time.' You know? . . . 'If you think that's good, you should've seen me back in my prime.' . . . I *want* them to know I *was* good, even if I stink now.

At the time we interviewed, my thoughts were fairly opposite of Roxie's. When I received a compliment for playing well when I knew I [once] was better than my performance indicated, my competitive, perfectionist, "you can do better" mindset could not humbly accept it. I felt the need to say somewhere in the neighborhood of, "Thanks, but I really sucked today." After talking with Roxie, I intentionally used some of her phrases when I played soccer on a men's team after receiving compliments when I felt insecure about my playing ability. It helped me to have more grace with myself and a little more humility with others.

"It's Shaped Who I Am"

When I asked her how she would feel if for the rest of her life no one would know that she played Division I soccer, she said, "Then they'll never really know me [and] I don't think that we would ever have a very strong connection . . . cause I don't think they would understand who I truly am." I was curious if she felt like knowing she was a soccer player was knowing *her*. Roxie said,

> I'm not saying that it's knowing *me*, but it's definitely knowing a part of me. . . . I think it's a big aspect because it's shaped who I am. . . . People know that I'm

> competitive, that I'm determined, that I'm motivated, and then it's like, well, yeah, of course, she was a college athlete, of course, that's why she's like that. So, I guess maybe they wouldn't understand *why* I am the way I am.

For Roxie, knowing that she was an athlete seemed to be a prerequisite to understanding who she is and her approach to life. *I closely identified with her responses. I also wondered why we seem to feel the primary way to be truly accepted for who we are as competitive, determined, and motivated individuals is for others to know we were athletes. In essence, knowing we were competitive athletes seems to give us permission to be who we really are, with less fear of judgment.*

"I Haven't Had My Last Game"

Though she was initially unable to coach after college and her suspension from the indoor league, Roxie eventually found her way back to soccer as a volunteer coach. When I asked if she had processed her reasons for quitting soccer, Roxie said, "Probably not. I think that I haven't played because . . . my role is now a coach, not a player. . . I don't even know if there is anything to process through in the fact that I just am now a coach." *I had a hard time processing her comments because it sounded like she viewed playing and coaching as one in the same, which was a different lens than I had ever considered.*

Thinking that maybe I was not communicating appropriately, I asked a question to clarify the point at which she was able to find peace with crossing over to her role as a coach instead of a player and walking away from the game. Roxie responded, "I haven't walked away. I'm still coaching. I haven't walked away." I prodded more to further clarify that I meant the point that she realized as a player that she was not going to try to keep going. Resolutely she said, “But I *am* still keeping going. I mean . . . it *is* still me. . . . I haven’t had my last game. I always knew I’d be a coach. It never crossed my mind I wouldn’t be a coach. So, it’s never been my last game.”

I took a pause moment from our conversation to gather my thoughts and asked her if she was saying that a sport was a sport whether she was a player or a coach. Roxie said,

> I think so. And I think it’s just accepting life on life’s terms. Accepting where you’re at. And life is a journey, you know? And I had the journey as a player and now [I’m] on the journey as a coach. Like, I don’t have any regrets.

As I paused to think about what she said, she asked if she could throw something into our conversation for me to consider.

> I don’t want to offend you in any way, but I *feel* like, maybe because of *your* emotions to not being a player anymore, (pause) it might be hard to understand that it just doesn’t affect me, being a coach and not a player. . . . How does it make *you* feel that I’m just like, ‘yeah, it’s over now; I’m a coach?’

I felt embarrassed because I thought I blew it as a researcher when I realized I allowed bias to sneak in. My stomach turned. While I admitted to her that her perspective differed from any I had considered before, I also was not totally forthcoming with her about my feelings because I was still processing what I thought. In that moment, everything inside of me was screaming. I did my best to push those feelings aside as I was truly trying to understand her perspective. I had never thought about the transition from soccer player to coach before in the way she presented it, and while I could understand on one hand, on the other hand, I was struggling to accept it.

Did it not affect her because she "knows" soccer and it is what she loves, so whether she is a player or a coach, she "knows" soccer and she is doing what she loves? Does she enjoy coaching because being a player leaves her frustrated and "feeling like crap" about herself, as she described in her interview? Is that why the transition from player to coach did not seem to affect her? Was coaching just the next step in the shelf life of a soccer player? What role does the specific sport play in how an athlete thinks about their athleticism? Or athletic identity? I wondered about her future impending transition once she is no longer a coach and how it might extend her responses to my initial questions.

"Everything Is a Competition!"

During our second interview, Roxie and I spoke about the ways that her highly competitive nature affected other areas of her life. Roxie said, "[the challenge] for me, more than changing my identity with the competitiveness in . . . my career, is changing it in relationships." Roxie referenced various situations where loved ones responded to her competitive approach to life with, "It's not a competition," "It's not always a competition," and "Life isn't a competition." Her immediate internal response to them was, "Yes, it is!!! Everything is a competition! Everything."

Roxie talked about her competitive nature with some minor annoyance that comes with feeling a level of pressure to need to explain her identity and approach to life to others who may not fully "get it." Roxie said, "Everything is a competition to me. Everything in life.. . . . It's not like I'm judging *you*. . . . I'm not competing with you to bring you down. . . . We're competing just because that's who I am." *I strongly identified with Roxie's mindset and the internal feelings and emotions that surge when the words,* *"It's not a competition," are directed at me. On one hand, it frustrates me to the core because there is absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to be the best you can be and conducting yourself with a level of excellence, especially if you are being all that God created you to be. On the other hand, at times I felt shamed for being who I am in environments where my competitive nature seemed to make others uncomfortable. In those situations, I felt the need to mute my core identity because their message communicated that something was wrong with me. What I desperately wish I could help others understand is that I do not have to think or try to be competitive; it is just my natural approach to life and what comes out in everything that I do.*

It has been a long journey to get to the place I am currently in knowing and loving who I am and who I was created to be and finding the confidence to be the full expression of myself, regardless of whether or not others appreciate or understand my approach to life. While I am still on my journey, I am learning the importance of blocking out all other voices except the ones of those who have earned a place in my life because they love me, know me, appreciate me, and see the best in me. As Brené Brown says, "If you're not in the arena also getting your ass kicked, I'm not interested in your feedback."

"I Wanna Be the Best I Can Be"

As we talked, Roxie implied the need to reposition her competitive perspective in life situations where competition and the desire to win can pose challenges. In intimate relationships in particular, not every situation calls for a competitive response. She said, "I wanna be the best I can be. . . . Why would you not want to be the best you could be?" And, when reflecting on her conversations with intimate others, she added,

> I want to understand, ‘why, why, why, why do you feel that way? Why?’ And [the response may be], I just do. . . . I’m so competitive that I want to understand the whole, I wanna understand it all. Like, let’s get to the root of it. . . . And it’s like, ‘do you wanna be happy or do you wanna be right? Both!’ (laughs)

Roxie found that her competitive nature “can really hinder relationships,” but her journey often presented her opportunities to learn that trying to win can become unhealthy in an intimate relationship. *Her comments made me legitimately laugh out loud because they touched so close to home. In the early years of my marriage, I remember arguing with my husband and trying to “win” the dispute, as if he was my competition. It took a few years, but I remember the moment when I finally came to the realization that trying to “win” an argument in marriage actually results in a loss for us as a couple.*

“I’ve Had to Reel Back.” When Roxie was in sales, she said her competitive nature was a natural fit to the cutthroat, commission-driven environment. However, once she transitioned to the field of higher education (as an academic advisor), Roxie told me:

> I’ve had to *reel back* [emphasis added], especially in the interview process, my competitive . . . communication. . . . Because when you’re in sales, it’s like, ‘this is who I am. Okay. Am I hired? Okay. How do I close this deal? Let’s close this deal.’ Where in education, it’s more, ‘I’m very empathetic and I, da-da-da-da. Okay, yeah just let me know what you find out. I’ll talk to you in a week.’ And . . . they don’t necessarily want a very aggressive, competitive person. They *do*, they just don’t realize they do, in the interview process.

Roxie never told me that anyone asked her to dial back her competitiveness, but something about the environment seemed to communicate to her that a more traditional, non-competitive approach was a prerequisite for employment in higher education.

Roxie's work experiences also resonated with my own. We discussed shared experiences in higher education as academic advisors and as competitive women and some challenges we encountered in situating ourselves in a unique environment that often promotes based on seniority. We both took a similar, competitive approach to our work in that we looked at what we wanted, found out what we needed to do to get there, and worked hard to do it. As a result, we both progressed in our careers outside of the natural pecking order. We talked about the awkward position of being the one chosen among our peers, almost made to feel bad about our accomplishments and for working hard, as if we did not earn it because we had not yet paid our dues. Roxie's response to our similar journeys in higher education was simple: "If you're the best, you get it. . . . it's not how long you've been there."

Though she experienced the assumed pressure to mute herself during the interview process for becoming an academic advisor in higher education, Roxie said her competitive drive helps her with advising her students and ensuring they are taking the right steps to succeed in college and in life. She said,

> I'm competitive in the aspect that I want to help everyone. And so, my competitive nature is, I want all my students to be the best they can be. And it's my role to help them be the best they can be. Be a guide for them.

Roxie mentioned that the recruitment aspect of her position also benefits from her competitive athletic background. She elaborated,

> The difference with the sales now to the sales then is I believe in my program. I believe in our professors. I *know*, if you come to my program, I am now your college mom, and I will be your college mom. I *know* that I'm not gonna lead you astray. I *know* that if something happens, we'll figure out a solution.

Her response to her apparent passion for her role in higher education was like a page out of my own book, said almost verbatim. The most profound aspect of her statements, however, was her emphasis on the word 'know' being applied to something other than soccer. Roxie told me on multiple occasions throughout our three interviews that soccer was all she *knew*. I could not help but wonder if her ability to *know* her role as an academic advisor was tied in any way to being able to be the full expression of herself as an athlete in approaching the various aspects of her academic advisor role. While she may *know* soccer, she also *knows* competition, which she can apply to many life situations.

"I'm Not Giving My Team These Medals"

Roxie told me that while she does not attend many of her alma mater's collegiate soccer games, she strives to take her team that she coaches to the games from time-to-time. "The reason I want my girls that I coach to go is to have that dream." Along with the dream, we also talked about the importance of resiliency, learning from failure, and frustrations with the "everyone gets a trophy" mentality. Roxie said,

> I was coaching a rec team . . . we got 4th place in the 'C' bracket, out of four teams. . . . 'I'm not giving my team these medals. Are you kidding me? We're the second worst in the whole tournament. . . . I mean, *no*. No.'

I laughed because I completely understood. For both Roxie and me, being cut from sports teams changed our lives through giving us the motivation to pick ourselves up and keep pressing on to achieve what we wanted. The challenging part for Roxie as a coach is that youth soccer functions a lot differently than it did when we were kids. Today's coaches, per Roxie, are discouraged from cutting kids on the team and leagues sometimes consist of only "friendlies" where traditional competition appears to be missing. When we played youth soccer, there was one team and we either made it or we were cut. We had to compete and win. *I wondered how this change in youth sports may change collegiate athletes and, further, how it may influence their post-sport experiences.*

With her current team of nine-year-old girls who play on the "C" team and are more socially motivated, Roxie said she goes out of her way to plan social events to cultivate their bonding. Though Roxie is highly competitive, she also understands the importance of empathy in coaching *female* athletes and the biological underpinnings that may impact their emotions involved. Roxie said, "I need to probably . . . talk more about the emotional side. . . . 'Okay, let's discuss why are you feeling very frustrated with this player right now, with your teammate?' Well, she pushed me. 'Okay. Why is that frustrating you? Soccer's a contact sport.'" Ultimately, Roxie wants to help the girls figure out how they can become emotionally stronger as they play their sport and learn how to communicate about their emotions when the field (and life) challenges them.

"I'm Gonna Make Her Have a Ball at Her Feet"

The subject of mothering as an athlete emerged at various points in our interviews. Roxie said that one way she approached motherhood as an athlete is, "Now that I have a kid. . . . I've gotten her into every sport as soon as I can. 'Let's get you . . .

involved, let's get you going.' . . . At 15 months, she's already in gymnastics, she's already in soccer." About her daughter's approach to athletics, Roxie said, "I mean, she's already an athlete. I can already tell, cause she's so competitive." Based on her comment, I wondered if being an athlete was more about a competitive spirit rather than a skill.

We talked about the soccer programs in which we enrolled our young children that approached soccer as a social and fun experience rather than a competitive, learn the skills purpose. Roxie said,

> They don't even play soccer, but whatever. . . . My husband took her. I was like, 'well, did they even touch the soccer ball?' No. The soccer balls are sitting there! And I get it. You can't do it with 18-month olds, you can't. But still, with 18-month olds, at some point, instead of just bubbles say, 'as you catch the bubbles, kick the ball! Try to kick the ball!' The balls aren't even there. So, next time I go I'm gonna make her have a ball at her feet. 'Kick the ball while you catch the bubbles!'

As someone who had moved her toddler to an older soccer class because the children were pretending to be butterflies rather than kicking the ball, I had to laugh at our shared perspective. We discussed the pressures involved with our children knowing we were athletes. Roxie stated,

> I think just having that open communication of, 'this is who I was but that doesn't mean that's who you have to be; I love you no matter what you do, it's fine. But you have it in you! You could do it if you want!' (laughs). . . . But I do have a . . . college fund already set up for her, so mommy's *not* expecting that. (laughs)

Our humorous experiences parenting as athletes led me to reflect on both positive and potentially harmful aspects of parenting in sports, which is not *exclusive to children of athletes, and the importance of encouraging our children to achieve* their *dreams and giftings, not* ours.

“I Was Just Determined”

Roxie and I talked at length about our experience with breastfeeding our children. We both had challenges and success from the perspective that we achieved our goals for getting our babies breastmilk. Roxie said,

> Oh my God. I’ve done a lot of shit in my life, right? I’ve been an exchange student, college athlete, like, getting that baby breastmilk was . . . *by far*, *the* most challenging. And that’s why I said, ‘if I wasn’t this competitive.’ . . . And, I think all this competitiveness, led me to make sure my baby had breastmilk.

The competitiveness in breastfeeding for Roxie came through setting a goal and working to achieve it. When she felt like quitting, she found new motivation to continue to press through her exhaustion; specifically, she heard that her doctor pumped for her kids while working. Roxie also had a friend who breastfed for eight months, so she competed and made it to eight months. Then, once she made it to eight months, she set a new goal to make it to a year. Roxie ended up breastfeeding for 13 months when her daughter was ready to wean herself. She said, “For me, I was just determined, for some God unknown reason. And I’m telling you, the *only* reason she had breastmilk was because I was a freakin’ college athlete!”

I had to laugh at her comment. Finally, someone who understood. I also credited my determination and ability to battle through the challenges I experienced with *breastfeeding and pumping for my children to my athletic identity. I too privately competed with friends who breastfed, set goals for myself, and found some level of validation with my achievement. Aside from running a marathon, breastfeeding my children is one of my greatest feats and in my top three accomplishments of which I am most proud.*

"I Never Want **My** *Appearance to Hinder Her Athleticism"*

During my interviews with Roxie, the subject of society's expectations of athletes surfaced. This related to the way that former athletes look, act, and conduct themselves. Roxie shared an experience from when she was a new soccer coach:

> At tryouts . . . one of the male coaches told me, a group of us, if it comes down to two people and you can't really decide, look at their parents and see who has the more athletic parents, and pick that child.

The coach's advice acted as a wake-up call to Roxie, who had lowered her standards for her physical fitness after having her daughter. Roxie said motherhood and the coach's advice "[gave] me this drive to get back more athletic than I had before I had kids" to be healthy for her daughter's sake. Roxie added, "I never want *my* appearance to hinder her athleticism."

Our conversation on the subject of appearance deepened as Roxie told me about an "*amazing*" former female soccer player who gained a large amount of weight after sport. Roxie said, "I'm judging her, so I know people are judging me." We talked about the impact on an athlete's psyche when society's expectations for our appearance do not match our reality or when the person staring back at us in the mirror no longer looks like the person we remember, particularly after having children. Roxie commented, "Just imagine if you were 100 pounds overweight. Would you go back to your soccer alumni weekend? *No*!" From our conversation I gleaned that while there is a stigma with being overweight in American society, a former athlete being overweight may be even more socially perturbing. Our conversation surfaced another layer related to the post-sport pressure to maintain a level of fitness that may feel unattainable, especially for women after having children and juggling multiple roles as wives, mothers, workers, etc.

Finding 3: "I Have Had to Search Hard to Find My True Calling in This World"

Even though Roxie expressed some regret for not making soccer her full-time career, she said she was extremely satisfied with her life after exiting collegiate soccer.

> From graduating college to today . . . it has been a long, soul-searching journey. . . . Since I do not have collegiate athlete or professional athlete as my title, I have had to really search hard to find my true calling in this world. It is an ongoing process, but today I feel very blessed with where I am. . . . I'm right where I'm supposed to be.

While she still identifies as an athlete, the subsections that follow reveal Roxie's thoughts and some internal dialogue that contributed to having a sense of peace in discovering some additional anchor points in her life outside of sports.

"What Got Me *Out* of the . . . Trenches Was Putting Faith in God"

While playing college soccer and enjoying the scene surrounding her "party girl" identity, Roxie said, "There was never a thought in my mind about spiritual growth. . . . It was always, my God knows I'm not where I'm supposed to be." A major transformation was her spiritual growth after committing to "The 12 Steps" of AA and finding recovery through sobriety. Roxie confessed, “*Not* putting enough trust into God (laughs) is what led me down the path. What got me *out* of the . . . trenches was putting faith in God.”

During our final interview, I asked Roxie what she would say to a current athlete about life after sport that she wished she had been told that may have saved her from going down a destructive path. Roxie said,

> Here’s what’s tough about that question. . . . Had I not gotten in those very dark and ugly places, would I be where I am today? . . . I’m not in a position to tell *anyone*, ‘don’t drink, don’t do drugs,’ because, it’s everyone’s journey. I needed alcohol and drugs to get to where I am. It’s part of my journey.

Because I generally have a list of things to improve upon in any given situation when I feel like I was not at my best, I was surprised by her response, particularly since she is such a competitive person. Instead of regret, Roxie gracefully expressed how “grateful” she was for everything that happened in her life.

> Thank God that I hit . . . a downward spiral because had that not happened, I would never have had to look at myself, ‘Okay, how can I be a better person? What’s wrong with me? Why don’t I feel connected to this world? What am *I* doing that’s not connecting me?’ . . . And the only way I think my personality was gonna become spiritually aware and a better person was to have to get to where I was, at the bottom. . . . But I attribute *that* to God. Because I’ve always had a strong connection to God.

Roxie described what she finds most important in life presently after the transformation:

> I believe my role in life now is to love all unconditionally, to accept life and people as is. My journey was a broken road, but I would not change it for

> anything because I am able to really look at myself today and see the world in a new light of love.

I could see the spiritual work she did, and it was encouraging to hear and see Roxie arrive at a place of acceptance, love, and appreciation of herself. As a college athlete, much of Roxie’s validation came from her performance on the field. As she matured and found more of her place in the world, Roxie said, “I’ve learned (laughs) that I have to receive it from within me. Feeling good about my own actions is how I get validation.”

What I found most impactful about her journey and the transformation that took place was in an 18-year-old article about her response to the adversity she experienced in college from a lack of playtime. The reporter wrote, “[Roxie Hart] has learned how to be flexible and stay positive. . . . With a lot on her mind . . . she always remains happy.” Her teammate said, “[Hart] has more energy than anyone else on the team and genuinely motivates everyone around her.” After reading their comments, it was neat to see Roxie *translating* herself to life after sport as an even better version of herself. Roxie said, “To know I was providing that to the team before I realized my purpose is a great feeling.”

“I’m a Warrior Woman”

When I asked Roxie how she would identify herself now, she said, “I’m a warrior woman.” She further situated her new identity. “I love the term, ‘warrior,’ and I would say, ‘I’m a warrior mom, a warrior wife, a warrior worker, a warrior woman. . . . If I wanna do something, I do it.’” Roxie mentioned that she thought her husband was beginning to recognize the benefits of her athlete identity and her “not gonna give up” personality. “And that’s the athlete in me. And now that I’m a mom, it really benefits my kids, me, and my husband.” She also said,

> When I say ‘warrior,’ I just mean that strong, independent, but also very loving and compassionate and empathetic, all into one. . . . where you can fight for yourself but also fight for your team, whatever your team is in that moment, whether it’s your family or your work team or your soccer team.

We spoke about what appeared to be both strength and tenderness in her response. Roxie acknowledged, “I know growing up, especially being in athletics as a woman, I was never appreciative of the tenderness. Sometimes tenderness is a weakness. I’m like, ‘no. Tenderness now is a strength to me.’”

Along the lines of being a “Warrior Mom,” Roxie shared about the vision board she put together in anticipation of her daughter’s birth. She said, “My goals were to love, unconditional love. . . . And my goal is to be their guide, not their dictator. If I had one ultimate goal, it is, this is *their* journey.” Roxie told me that relationships and love are “all there is” in life. As a mother, Roxie does her best to model unconditional love and gratefulness. “I think practicing gratitude . . . and putting it into my life and pointing out the little small things that we’re grateful for is what helps make me a warrior.”

“Never Give Up . . . Perseverance and Tenacity . . . I’ve Grown”

For our third and final interview, Roxie brought her artifact—a letterman ring—a gift she received from her university for playing all four years of college soccer. The feminine band was gold with her school colors on the face of the ring and her university’s primary letter inscribed in the middle (Figure 17). Roxie said she did not pick up her ring until she went back to graduate school, close to seven years after playing collegiate soccer. She said,

> I took so long to get it I guess because it didn't really mean anything. 'I'm an athlete; I don't need that ring to prove anything.' And then when you're far removed, 'I gotta get that ring so I can wear it and show everyone I used to be ath-, I'm an athlete.'

I found her shift in wording interesting—"I used to be [an athlete]; I'm an athlete." Roxie told me that she wears the ring almost every day. The ring appeared to be a visible sign of who she knew herself to be, an athlete.

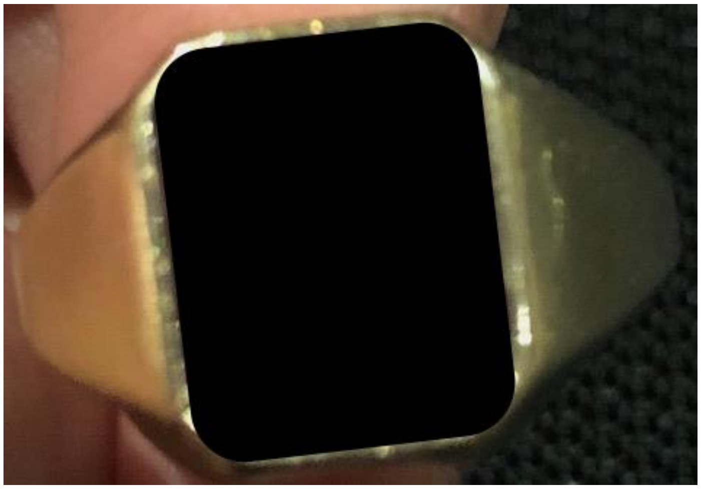
Roxie told me that her inspiration to go and pick up her ring came when she noticed a gentleman in his 60s wearing the letterman ring. She made the connection that he was a former athlete at her alma matter, a unique connection that comes by way of ties to athleticism and the sport, the camaraderie among players and teams, and the instant bond from knowing someone traveled the same path and "gets it." Roxie said,

> [The ring] connects me. It gives me that network of friendship/relationships that's really huge in my life. It's a relationship builder. When you see someone else with this, you already connect, bam. . . . [especially] when people know what it means.

For Roxie, the ring brought her a sense of pride and accomplishment of not only playing her sport, but growing older, maturing, the battles she fought to achieve her athletic goals, and her personal transformation. She said, "It's just that never give up, that perseverance and tenacity, that's what this ring represents for me. . . . It also is a sign that I've grown."

Figure 17

Roxie Hart’s Artifact



[redacted]

Learning about Roxie’s letterman ring moved me to text my former college coach to ask if we had rings. I identified wholeheartedly when Roxie said the ring re-connects you back to the sport and essentially helps validate our core athletic identity. It was as if I was grasping to get that back in some capacity when I picked up the phone to text my coach. When you are in the moment, “I am an athlete; I do not need something to prove that. Come watch me play.” Years later, the landscape is a little different—literally and figuratively, across multiple dimensions (i.e., proximity, age, appearance, ability). So that one little piece of hardware may just be the very thing that reminds us—and others—of who we once were, yet who we never fully ceased to be—an athlete.

Conclusion

This chapter detailed the individual case study findings and themes that emerged from Roxie Hart’s transition out of collegiate athletics.

CHAPTER VIII

FINDINGS: MYA MARIE

"An injury is not just a process of recovery it's a process of discovery."

– Connor McGregor

Mya Marie replied to my request to schedule our interview by saying, "Maybe we could go to a soccer game? We could do our interview then catch some of the game? I can see if my family wants to come too. They may love to catch a game." It had been over four years since I last saw her and over 12 years since we last played together, but Mya had not changed much from when I knew her as my former college teammate; a lover of sports and deeply passionate about her family. *Catching a soccer game was not particularly exciting to me, but I knew how much it would mean to her and her family. It had been over four years since I had attended a game, and at a time when I was still struggling with my new spectator role. But I told myself that the push from my former teammate would be good for me, especially as I was deep "in" my research study.*

Mya was a 32-year-old former Division I collegiate soccer player, wife, mother, and sports marketing professional. At the time of the study, it had been about 11 years since she exited her collegiate athlete role. We played together in college for three years, and between the interview and soccer game, we enjoyed a meal with her parents and daughter. She arrived at the soccer stadium dressed in jeans and a black t-shirt with our alma mater’s logo and predominant color on the lace of her sleeves. Her hair was in a low ponytail and she was carrying a big “mom purse” with sunglasses on top of her head. We greeted each other with a hug, spoke about the 106-degree weather, and looked together in awe at the newly built soccer stadium—funded when I was in college and supposedly “coming” before I graduated. The sea of our predominant school colors painted the beautiful stadium, the pitch (i.e., soccer field) was pristine, and the “jumbotron” better than most basketball facilities. *It looked nothing like it did when we played but watching the gameday crew raise the American flag brought back many of the feelings that I experienced on that field, and emotions overwhelmed me. These were some of the best years of my life. I could not help but ask myself if I had made the most of them.* One of her first comments to me about our interview was, “I don’t want to be *bad* at this.” *I could not help but laugh at her comment—once an athlete, always an athlete.*

Right before our first interview, she put her sunglasses on, which made the process of assessing her feelings difficult. At one emotional point, when I mentioned her family, the sunglasses seemed to act as a guard to her emotions. This was a behavior I recognized from the past if ever she was feeling upset. *I knew the behavior well myself; hold it together and “never let them see you cry.”* During the interview she told me, “Sometimes I don’t know how to describe my feelings. Sometimes I feel like I’m not good at that.” As our interviews progressed and as I shared more about my journey, she became more comfortable.

Mya started playing soccer when she was five years old. She recalled coming home from school and telling her mom she wanted to play soccer because all of her friends were playing. When she found out she missed the cut off date to join her first team, Mya was very upset, but her mom was able to get her a spot on the team. Mya said,

> I really enjoyed [soccer]! I loved how fast the game was, how competitive you had to be, and ultimately, the thrill of it all. . . . I enjoyed learning all the different positions too until I came to find my favorite, which was playing forward (offense).

She remembered the key role her parents played in her athletic life,

> My mom took me out to my first practice and I specifically remember my coach thanking my mom because I was very good, even on day one. Of course, my dad was super proud. That made my parents proud, but they never pushed me to do anything I didn't want to do. . . . My mom was always the manager of the soccer team. My dad even helped coach. They've always played a huge role in my sports. They always encouraged me to do whatever I wanted to do. They never told me I couldn't just play one sport. It was, whatever you wanna do. They've just always been there for me.

Her parents' support, heavy involvement, and presence at all the big moments in her life was a common theme throughout our interviews. Before going to college, Mya had never been away from her family. On several occasions throughout our interviews, Mya told me, "My family is EVERYTHING to me!"

Growing up playing several sports, Mya said, "I was always known as Mya the athlete. The athletic blonde hair girl."

> [It] made me feel good inside, especially when I represented my school on the soccer field. I still remember the first time I put on a [University] jersey. It felt like all my hard work and efforts had paid off because I made it!

Mya loved representing her university and wearing her soccer gear on campus: “I was super proud to play soccer for [University].” She recalled her feelings on game days and her pride,

> It was always exciting lookin’ at the stands or knowing, especially when you played *really* good that you’re like, ‘dang, I tore it up tonight. I am such a badass.’ . . . You know, your ego and all that. It’s an amazing feeling.

Since she was a little girl, Mya said, “[Soccer] is all I knew.” And since it was all *she* knew, “[you want others to know], I play soccer here.”

Without her family around during the week while in college, Mya found comfort and support through the relationships she built with her coaches, teachers, trainers, tutors, athletic academic counselor, teammates, and the various people inside and outside of the athletic department. Mya described her life during college as revolving primarily around school, soccer, working out, traveling, and tutoring. Mya admitted, “There’s not a whole lot of time for anything else really. And if it is, you just try to fit it in wherever you could.”

Throughout our interviews together, I appreciated getting to know Mya in a new way—as a person *and not just as a* player*. Though our experiences were vastly different in college, our approach to sports and the determination and mindset we brought to not only the game, but to life, were very similar. Her love for her family always stood out to me when we played together, and I enjoyed hearing about how impactful those* *relationships were in her life, both during and after sports. The bond we share as former teammates is special, almost like an automatic unspoken sisterhood.*

At the end of our final interview, Mya expressed how much she enjoyed our time together. *It was nice to come full circle with a mutual appreciation in getting to actually know one another. We realized how similar we were and how much we enjoyed the time we shared together, reminiscing about the sport to which we both devoted our early lives.* The sections that follow detail the findings that emerged from Mya's transition out of collegiate athletics.

Finding 1: "Getting Hurt . . . Totally Changed Things for Me"

Though Mya was known in her city and state as a competitive, multi-sport athlete (i.e., athletes who competitively play more than one sport), soccer was her passion and she always knew she wanted to play it professionally. Like many women in this study, the 1999 U.S. Women's National team was a *huge* inspiration to Mya and her dream was to play on the national team. She was the top female soccer recruit coming out of her state, but just months before graduating and beginning her collegiate career, Mya tore both the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and meniscus in her knee during her senior year of high school in a spring club soccer game. She recalled the moment,

> I was in the box with two girls on me trying to score and each kicked me from both sides. . . . I tried to play in the next game and had a breakaway and my knee literally gave out like a noodle and popped. I think I tore it all the way then!

A common injury sustained among soccer players to a major ligament and piece of cartilage in the knee, the ACL plus meniscus tear took Mya about a year, after surgery and rehabilitation, to get back on the field.

The "pop" heard from a serious injury can feel like a death sentence due to length of time it takes to recover, rehabilitate, recondition, get your touch back, and then hope the area is strong enough to never sustain another injury to it, while at the same time working through the mental and emotional fear of playing again (Ardern et al., 2014; Covassin et al., 2015). Mya elaborated on the impact of the injury.

> When I got hurt and tore my ACL is when things changed for me, cause I knew I may never be the same again. I was always tryin' to come back from *that* injury. But I always knew I've never wanted soccer to be over. If I was good enough and able to play, I was gonna do it. But I think getting hurt . . . totally changed things for me.

As Alexander Smith said, "There is no ghost so difficult to lay as the ghost of an injury." *Mya's injury exemplifies the courage and vulnerability athletes display each time we show up to play, knowing full well that everything we ever worked toward can end in an instant.*

"I Got a Little Dose of What Life Was Like Without Soccer"

Mya said that getting hurt prior to college did not initially prompt conversations about life after sport at the time of the injury. "I didn't start talking about it then cause I was die-hard. I was gonna play soccer and I was gonna get better." After admitting that she was not healed and would not be fully recovered by the start of her freshman fall season, Mya elected to medically redshirt when she got to college, and then came the reality.

> I got a little dose of what life was like without soccer. And then, how hard it was to come back and rehab and play in a knee brace. . . . And I knew I wasn't as good

> as I should be, you know, to play. So, I knew it would end eventually, which is *sad*. You play your whole life. I mean, since I was four or five years old, I've played soccer.

As Mya watched her team from the sidelines while rehabilitating her knee, she was forced to see the game and her role as a player from a new perspective. "It changed. I knew that when I was hurt like, 'oh, you don't have practice all the time' and there was a different life."

"I Learned How to Play a Different Role*"*

From her new, unfamiliar view from the sideline, Mya told me, "I learned how to play a different *role*, sitting on the bench." She said, "I didn't love it. But I felt like I was good. I was a good team player. I had, you know, good spirit, good emotions. I was always tryin' to get everybody pumped up." *It is important to note the strength it takes to sit on the bench while watching your teammates play. Not to mention, the courage involved in being a good teammate and cheering others on when your insides are screaming, "PUT ME IN THE GAME!" No doubt there are skills learned through the painful moments of having to sit on the bench that* translate *to life after sport—learning how to champion your teammates, celebrating the successes of others, and continuing to show up and bring it even when you are choking back tears and everything in you wants to quit.*

Mya was also a competitor, and aside from being a good teammate, she said, "I was also tryin' to get in the game and do whatever I *could* to get *in* the game." As Mya mentioned, players called off the bench *have* to be ready at any point during the game to get in the game and make a difference in the play. Mya described her experience,

> That's *hard* to be ready comin' off the bench. You're cold, your legs aren't warm . . . there's so much pressure. . . . I feel like sometimes you don't do well cause you're so like . . . 'I gotta do good. I gotta do good.' So *that* was hard.

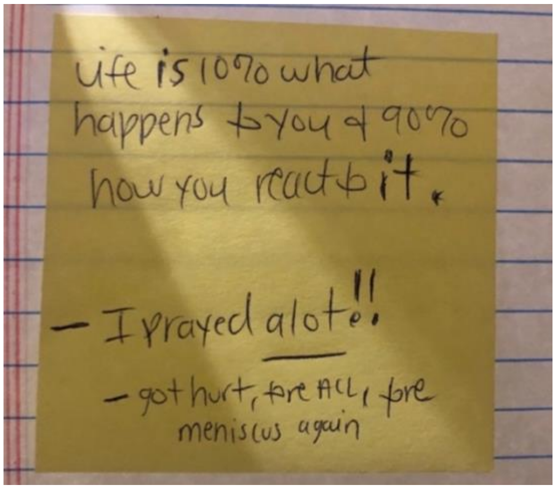
With the surmounting pressure to do well with every minute she was given, Mya found strength in her support system—family, friends, and faith—and in a portion of a quote by Charles R. Swindoll, "Life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it" (Figure 18). Mya described what the quote meant to her during that season of life,

> That [quote] helped me a lot being hurt because I kept getting hurt. Things kept happening to me and how am I going to react to that? How am I gonna come back? Am I gonna be positive? Am I gonna be negative? Like, how am I gonna be?

The quote appeared to lead Mya to an epiphany that helped her make peace with her role on the team—her love for playing the sport could overcome the pain, frustration, and pressure she felt. "I got the hang of just, 'go play soccer and do what you do. And be good and do it.' And I love bein' out there and the way it makes you feel and wearin' the jersey." It seemed like the epiphany freed her to take the pressure off and find her way back to the heart of why she played in the first place—for enjoyment and for the love of the game.

Figure 18

Mya Marie's Inspirational Quote and Jottings



Life is 10% what
happens to you & 90%
how you react to it.

– I prayed alot!!

– got hurt, tore ACL, tore
meniscus again

"I Started Thinkin' Differently About Things and How I Needed to Focus"

About a year and a half to two years after recovering from her ACL and meniscus injury, Mya tore her meniscus for the second time and was out for another six to eight weeks. Mya told me about her shifting reality.

> *That* was really the game changer. . . . And knowin' that I'm probably gonna keep messing up my knees (laughs). So, that was really kind of the game changer and where I started thinkin' differently about things and how I needed to focus.

Because she committed to her university primarily to play soccer and figured she would just determine what to major in along the way, her repeated knee injuries made her realize that she needed other goals and ambitions outside of sports.

> I really had to sit down and have a come to Jesus with myself and be like, 'what am I gonna do one day when I don't play soccer? How am I gonna make money? How am I gonna support my family? What's gonna keep my attention? What will I like to do every day?'

Mya leaned on her familial and institutional support systems to help determine what she wanted to do with her life after soccer, “I remember kind of feeling lost or needing some direction.” After talking to her family and athletic academic counselor, Mya chose to major in business with minors in marketing and sports management because she decided she wanted some type of career in sports. She admitted, however, that even with her current sports marketing career, “I *still* don’t know what I wanna do totally.”

“If I Never Would Have Got Hurt”

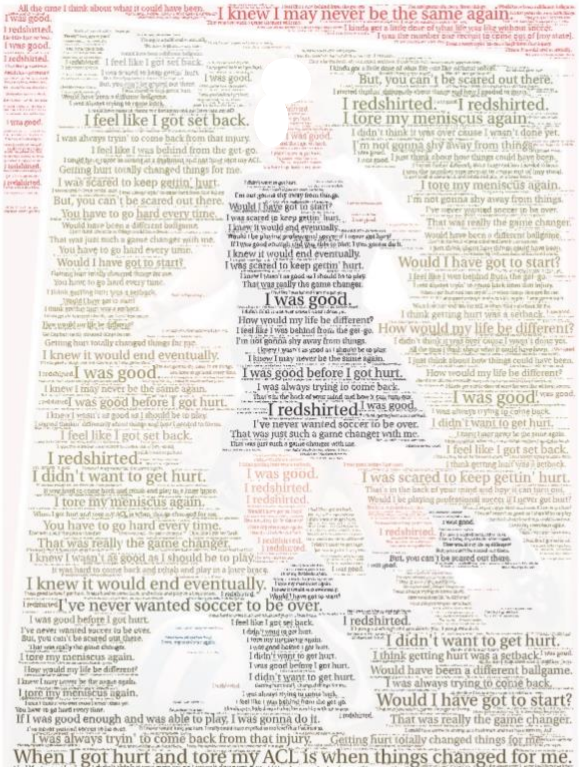
Mya told me that even to this day, “all the time,” she thinks about what life would have been like had she never gotten hurt,

> I just think about how different things could have been or my opportunity comin’ in as a freshman. I mean, would I have got to start? Would I *be* playing professional soccer if I never got hurt? Like, how would my life be different? . . . I think about what it could have been cause I was good before I got hurt. . . . And I feel like I got set back. . . . So, I feel like if I never would have got hurt, I really could have excelled to the level that I wanted to. . . . I think it would have been a different ballgame.

Strong themes related to Mya’s feelings and thoughts associated with her injury and how she felt it was a “set back” and a “game changer” are visually represented in Figure 19.

Figure 19

Representation of Mya Marie’s Data


I knew I may never be the same again
But, you can’t be scared out there.
I redshirted.
I tore my meniscus again.
I feel like I got set back.
I was scared to keep gettin’ hurt.
You have to go hard every time.
Would I have got to start?
I was good.
How would my life be different?
I knew it would end eventually.
I was good before I got hurt.
I’ve never wanted soccer to be over.
That was just such a game changer with me.
I didn’t want to get hurt.
I was scared to keep gettin’ hurt.
That was really the game changer.
I knew I wasn’t as good as I should be to play.
I knew it would end eventually.
I’ve never wanted soccer to be over.
I think getting hurt was a setback.
Would have been a different ballgame.
I was always trying to come back.
Would I have got to start?
That was really the game changer.
If I was good enough and was able to play, I was gonna do it.
I was always tryin’ to come back from that injury.
Getting hurt totally changed things for me.
When I got hurt and tore my ACL is when things changed for me.

Finding 2: “I Had a Lot of Regret [But] . . . I Felt Okay With How I Was Leaving”

While medically redshirting kept Mya from competing in her first fall season, it afforded her a fifth year of eligibility, a gift from the NCAA to make-up for the injured season. Mya, however, elected to forego her fifth year of eligibility after graduation. “I had a lot of regret cause I could have played a fifth year. And so, I was like, ‘should I play? Should I not?’” Mya told me she remembered being “ready to graduate and be done” and said, “to be honest, I was tired with school.” She admitted, however, “You don’t realize how neat it is, or cool it was *in* the moment. . . but now looking back, it was just *awesome*. Playing Division I soccer, . . . it doesn’t get much better than that.” The injuries she sustained prior to college and into her second season seemed to offer Mya additional time to process her exit from sport sooner than the typical timeline (i.e., the end of eligibility after four years), which was a unique experience in this study. The subsections that follow detail Mya's thoughts and feelings that attributed to her stated peace with her decision to exit collegiate soccer.

"I Wanted to Go Out in a Positive Way"

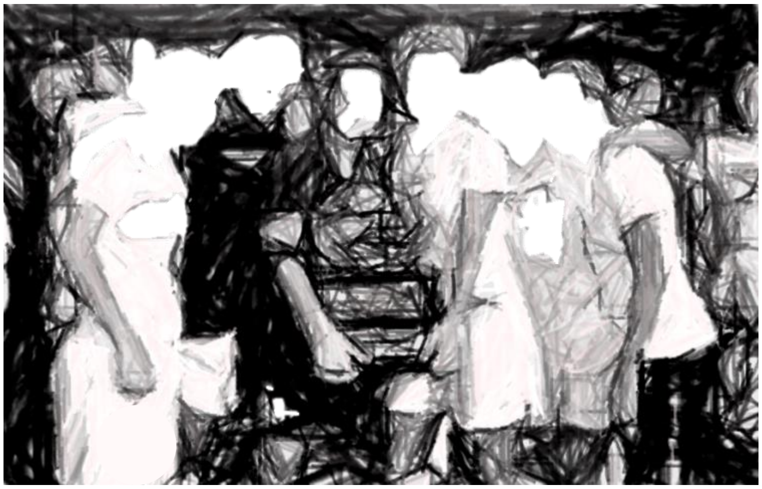
After her college soccer team won the program's first-ever regular season conference championship, Mya said, "I wanted to go out in a positive way and me being fulfilled and feeling successful and all of that. And I feel like I did. It was real positive." She shared her artifact, a photo of her and some of her teammates holding the trophy on the field after the conference championship that "means everything to me" (Figure 20).

> That was a defining moment for me because being hurt and everything. I kinda knew when I tore my ACL, you start thinking about not playing anymore. And then when I tore my meniscus again . . . I was like, 'okay. . . . my dream's probably not happening. . . . It's reality.' . . . And this picture means a lot to me because I was very fulfilled, and I was at peace with everything because we did something in history that we've never done and I felt okay with how I was leaving. . . . They won again the next year, right after me. And so, I was kinda like 'dang,' but I knew in my heart, I was good.

The photo is printed on a canvas that hangs in her office at work, a reminder to her that "everything you work for finally paid off." The prominent position of her artifact was yet another example of the importance of validation remaining visible in an athlete's life post-athletics. *I wondered if the image served a dual purpose as a silencer if or when doubts ever arise in her mind regarding whether or not she made the right decision to waive her final season of eligibility and conclude her collegiate athletic career.*

Figure 20

Mya Marie's Artifact



"We Lost and That Was It"

Mya's final soccer game ended in a loss in the early rounds of the NCAA tournament in the cold, freezing rain, hundreds of miles from home. She said, "Coming into the game, I was very anxious and excited and nervous cause I knew it could end anytime in the tournament, depending on if we won or lost." The weather conditions were terrible, and she recalled that nothing seemed to be working for the team. Mya remembered her feelings after the game.

> I was sad. But then it was bittersweet as well. I'll never forget the weather. It was so, I wish it was just more pleasant. Better conditions to play. . . . to end it better. Go out better. But we lost and that was it.

Mya said, "it took a while" for her to realize that soccer was in fact, done. "It didn't hit me until later that I was like, 'wow, I'm probably *never* gonna play soccer again.'" She remembered her last bus trip after the NCAA tournament game. "I remember settin' on the bus and kind of being teary eyed a little bit—but I didn't want anybody to see me—

and bein' sad knowing this was my last trip on the bus or my last bus ride." Mya described the days after the season was over as "cloudy." She said, "You're kinda shocked. . . . You're just in this weird, funky stage. . . . and then you break out of it and continue on."

When I asked Mya to describe her experience with transitioning to life after athletics and why she indicated in her Pre-Interview Questionnaire that she somewhat disagreed that she was prepared for the transition, she said:

> I've played soccer my whole life. . . so it's just weird. It's like a void. You're not playing soccer anymore, so what are you gonna do with your time? And you don't really think about all that while you're still caught up and playing soccer.

Though Mya felt content with her decision to end her collegiate career, she continued to play indoor soccer and taught personal training soccer lessons to the daughters of some of her mom's friends after graduating and moving home. She explained:

> I was still kinda in it. . . . [and] had my hands in it a little bit afterwards. . . . But nothin' to the level that we played at. . . . You're not feeling that competitiveness when you step on the field and how it feels to score and all of that. I mean, it's just totally different.

Even though Mya missed athletics, she said, "You're relieved as well, cause it's just, you're closing a chapter and starting a new one."

Finding 3: "I Was Excited for the New Journey"

Even though soccer was her first priority while in college, Mya said that she would work whenever she had a break from soccer.

> I tried to transition [from soccer] by working. I was already a manager . . . before I graduated college. . . . I'd try to be in the real world and just work and make money and pay my bills and all that. So, I just really tried to stay busy and that helped me with the transition. But still, there's still that void of not playing soccer and not being on a team and that team environment and being around all those people too. So, it's very different. And I don't know if anything can really prepare you for that.

With the NCAA's specific bylaws surrounding student-athlete employment and compensation, Mya's experience moving up in management in a non-athletic company while still in college and playing her sport was unique. She said, "It's also nice to have other goals and wanna have a career and have your degree and focus on the future too."

In addition to working, Mya was in a relationship with the man who became her husband. In hindsight, Mya said that, although it would have been wonderful to use her fifth year of eligibly to begin work on her master's degree, especially before having kids, she does not regret her decision to forgo eligibility, graduate, and enter the workforce.

> I was excited to start life and rent a home, buy a home, start my life with Mason [*pseudonym*]. I already had a job lined up and just working and trying to make money and save money, start my family. . . . I was excited for *that* part of my life. . . . I'd played soccer *forever*, *constantly* since I was five years old. I mean, it never stopped, you know, spring, fall, the whole bit, training, all of it, soccer camps; it's like nonstop. So, it's actually a relief too to not know that you have to be somewhere.

For all the times that soccer dictated her schedule, her family vacations, her opportunities to try different activities in college and such, and as sad as she was to conclude her soccer career, Mya told me several times throughout our conversations, “It’s also nice to look forward to the future and your career.”

Her statement about looking forward to the future and her career made an impression on me because of how nervous and hesitant many athletes are to head into the “real world” after their athletic journey comes to an end. It seemed like her injury was a key factor in helping shape her outlook and consider what life after sport might look like earlier than many athletes who traditionally encounter it after the final game of their senior season. Because Mya began the process of envisioning life after sport early in her collegiate career, she appeared to be more and better prepared to make the transition when the time came—and even looked forward to it.

“I Wanted to Be Involved Around Sports”

At the time Mya sat down with her family and athletic academic counselor to figure out her major and career path after graduation, she kept coming back to her love and passion for sport. Originally, she wanted to become a physical therapist and help others rehabilitate after an injury “and get back to playing the sport that they love or doing the things that they love to do in life.” But with the demands of soccer and the required rehabilitation training scheduled at the same time as practice, she had to find another avenue for her passion. Mya said that majoring in business with minors in marketing and sports management was “the route that *I* went cause I felt like it was the closest to everything that I enjoyed in life.”

Since she indicated in her Pre-Interview Questionnaire that she strongly agreed that athletics influenced her career choice, I asked her if she was looking for a career that mirrored the sports environment. She responded, “Yeah. I wanted to be involved around sports if I could. I knew that’s what I loved and would catch my eye and keep my attention.” Mya did not, however, find her career in sports marketing until about seven years after graduating. Prior to her current role in sports marketing, she worked in sales positions in the beauty industry for 10 years and the banking industry for two years. Mya found that though her competitive nature thrived in the banking industry, it was not the environment that she knew and loved from her time in sports. “Banking was fun, but it wasn’t for me. That’s too uptight and I’m more outgoing.” Her current job appeared to better mirror the team-oriented, competitive athletic environment to which she was accustomed. Mya said, “I spend a lot of my time here and I think it goes well with me cause it’s [related to sports].”

Finding 4: “I’m Still an Athlete”

Even though Mya left her competitive sporting role 11 years ago, her identity as an athlete, *in the present tense*, was consistent throughout her interviews. She said:

> I’m still an athlete. That’s still a huge part of my life and I still like to talk about that, you know, so people know. Because that’s what I did so much in the beginning of my life, my childhood, and my adulthood.

She described playing soccer to me as her “brand.” Identifying with her athlete role appeared to serve as a lens for how she viewed herself, her approach to work, and other athletes.

“I *Like* Being Known as an Athlete”

On the Pre-Interview Questionnaire, Mya strongly agreed with the statement, “I am an athlete.” When I asked her about it, however, her tone seemed a little hesitant at first, as if she was waiting for some sort of catch. She went on to conclude that people would likely say she *was* an athlete, but she believed being an athlete is who she *is*.

> I *like* being known as an athlete. . . . I like that feeling. I guess it does kinda give ya a high or rush that, you know, ‘this is Mya; she plays Division I soccer at [University].’ . . . Or, ‘hey, I know her.’ You’re proud of those people. I’m proud to know other people that have excelled and played DI ball. I mean, that’s exciting to me.

I recognized the “glorified” self in her language, coupled with a deep sense of pride in playing Division I soccer and respect for other athletes who excelled at their craft. She stated:

> I would rather be known as [an athlete] than something else or people that don’t play sports. I mean, not that there’s anything *wrong* with that, but I hope my children or my child plays sports one day. I think it teaches you a lot just about life in general.

I noted her need to clarify and further explain her comments to me. I wondered if she felt like I was going to judge her preference for being known as an athlete. I wondered if she had been criticized for her thinking in the past or if she only shared that piece because we were both former athletes and teammates. I cannot say for sure, but I know that throughout this study, I was at times more vulnerable with the participants about my *athletic journey, my mindset, and my struggles than I am with others. I felt like these participants would understand and not judge me for my athletic way of thinking.*

When I asked her how she would feel if for the rest of her life, no one new she met would ever know she was an athlete, Mya said, “I don’t like that.” She elaborated,

> That’s a huge part of my life and where I came from. . . . I was an athlete before, all my accomplishments. . . . I played soccer. I played college ball. That makes me proud and so that’s something that I want people to know about me. Not that I’m bragging or whatever but that’s just a part of my life.

Mya said that knowing that she was an athlete is knowing a lot about her and that someone would not know her as well if they did not know that about her. “You don’t know my whole story and all that . . . That’s my whole core part of my life before.”

“They Know* That *Name From When I Played Soccer”

Mya mentioned that it often takes a minute for people to recognize her name now that she is married.

> I’m Mya Marie now. . . . I was Mya Wagner previously and . . . people are like, ‘are you, or, did you used to play soccer?’ And I’m like, ‘yeah. Mya Wagner, that’s my maiden name or whatever.’ And they’re like ‘oh, yeah, I know you.’ They know *that* name from when I played soccer. Now, Mya Marie? They don’t always know that.

I asked her if it makes her feel good when people make the connection between her name and having been an athlete. She said, “Oh yeah! Yeah. It’s exciting. It’s like, ‘okay, how do you know me or where do you see me play?’ So yeah, I *love* that.”

Her comments about not fully being identified as a former soccer player without using her maiden name struck a chord with me. For years I struggled to put my finger on why I strangely missed my maiden name. And then I had a personal epiphany—my maiden name is deeply tied to my identity as an athlete and as an Italian and without it, I am not sure that people fully know who I am (and who I was). My maiden name is a part of me and who I was known as for the first 25 years of my life—I even wore it on my back for 18 of those years. Profoundly described in an ABC News article by Rittenberg and Jennings (2015), "College football players are taught to play for the name on the front of their jerseys. They teach us about themselves with the names on their backs" (para. 1). It is the name that is printed on both of my degrees that hang in my office. It is the name that signals my heritage as an Italian. My notoriety and accomplishments as an athlete are attached to that name. When you perform a Google search for me by my married name, you will not find much outside of my current role at the institution where I work. However, when you search for me by my maiden name, you will find photos, news articles, press releases, and information associated with my athletic background.

The concept of women changing their names with marriage is not new as the common law rule and women's rights to their maiden names have been written about and discussed for decades (Emens, 2007). However, referred to by Rittenberg and Jennings (2015) as the "Maurice Jones-Drew effect," many of the current sports media articles about the changing of names by college and professional athletes contain primary references to male athletes who changed their names; there are few references to female *athletes and their choices to keep, change, or hyphenate their last names with marriage. For example, a search for "athletes changing their names" generates several articles* *related to male athletes who changed their names (Chase, 2013; Dan, 2019; Gilbert, 2011; Rittenberg & Jennings, 2015), whereas a search for "female athletes changing their names" turns up only one article (Robertson, 2016). The one article was about female athletes at Brigham Young University, which actually did get to the heart of the identity conversation. I submit that there may be deeper athletic identity undercurrents involved with female athletes maintaining their maiden names beyond solely feminist viewpoints as the names they became known by as athletes, perhaps some that they may not even fully understand or be aware.*

"Everybody Knows That I'm Competitive"

Throughout our time together, Mya's competitive nature was evident. At home and in her personal life, Mya mentioned her competitiveness in "the littlest things," such as when playing boardgames with her family. In her job, she said, "Everybody knows that I'm competitive. . . . The competitiveness just doesn't go away." She told me that she is competitive about anything, from a scavenger hunt at work to being in CPR training demoing the use of a tourniquet or finding the best parking spot.

> I'm always sprinting and trying to run and it's just, it's just in me. I don't know. I don't *think* to do that. That's just how I am (laughs). . . . I think it's a good thing to be competitive. I think it's weird when you're not. Or it is to me, you know what I mean? Cause I'll be like, 'well, do you not really care? Like, what do you care about?' And that's okay. Some people are just different.

For years I described my competitive nature by saying, "I only know one speed," which is exactly what her statement further accented. I could not have described it any better. I found myself screaming inside, "YES! EXACTLY!" I felt validated. Finally, someone who *understood. Somebody who could identify. Someone like me. Because some people do not fully understand that competitive athletes who identify with their competitive nature do not try to be competitive; it happens organically from years of sport. It is who we are.*

Mya said that at work, "everybody jokes around with how competitive I am," but her competitive nature is welcome in her work environment.

> It's not anything like, oh, I hate them or whatever. . . . We'll have [competitions in] our department. . . . [so] it's fun and friendly and it's a healthy environment. . . . I'm always like, 'you want to be on my team for sure, because we're gonna win (laughs). We're gonna find a way to win' (laughs).

Mya suggested her competitiveness amplified her work performance. "I think it helps in my job because I'm more in the sales area. So, you want to be the best [and] you want to do the best that *you* can for your own self." Where Mya works, the focus is on being the best, not just personally, but as a unit and as a company. She said, "I think it works out well in my career. Cause you don't wanna be the worst by any means, you know what I mean?"

"I'm Tough and I'll Get Right in There With the Best of 'Em"

We went deeper into our conversation about competitiveness to touch on the influence of society, gender roles, and/or cultural norms regarding her transition from athletics as a female and making her way in the sales arena, a predominantly male-driven industry. Mya agreed that though she had seen the attitude of, "that's a man's job," she was not going to let this stereotype affect her.

> I'm gonna be right in there in the middle of 'em and be the best that I can be, given that I am a female. But I have a lot of confidence and my mom is a strong

> woman and I think I learned a lot of that from her. . . . I've had a good role model my whole life. But I'm tough and I'll get right in there with the best of 'em.

We both agreed that we preferred the challenge of proving ourselves, especially when competing with males since it tends to be more common for men to compete. Mya admitted, "I think I'd rather be with dudes than a bunch of females, you know?" *This is something we also shared—we were often the only girls on our sports teams or the ones playing with all the boys at recess, and we practiced and played against boys in club and in college because they were often faster and stronger, and it made us better. We enjoyed the challenge and the competition. Because of the quality of our play, we were not ever made to feel like 'a girl' (i.e., designed as the weaker being) among the boys; there was a mutual respect among the genders rather than one gender claiming superiority.*

"I Always Want to Be the Best That I Can Be"

When she played soccer, Mya's validation came from hearing her coaches, her teammates, her friends, and her family tell her that she did a good job, and it especially came from winning. "You have to win. . . . You're working toward your goal and your dream and so, you've accomplished it. You've won . . . you're the best." With soccer done, I asked Mya where she received her validation. She said:

> Just bein' the best I can be at work or winning different little awards at work . . . hitting goals and know that you're doing good and meeting expectations. . . . And then being a mom, I look at [my daughter], you know, hear her say thank you or whatever it is and that's fulfilling to me cause I've taught her that. So just seeing her grow and the things that she learns is fulfilling too.

I prodded a little more to find out what motivated her. Mya told me:

> Just waking up every day, having the opportunity to have another day of life is very motivating. My family motivates me. My friends. I always want to be the best that I can be. Even at work. I have a lot of good people at work; they motivate me. My daughter motivates me. I want to be the best that I can be for her. So, there's lots of things.

Her responses suggest that validation and motivation from playing soccer to her life now were relatively similar—winning, accomplishments, and people she is close with—it just manifests or *translates* in different ways with new players involved.

"I Feel Like [Being an Athlete] Made Me the Person That I Am Today"

Athletics had a huge influence on Mya's life, not just as a player, but also on the person she became. Mya commented on the impact.

> I feel like [being an athlete] made me the person I am today. I think being a student-athlete in college, I feel like I'm ahead of the game in the workforce cause I've dealt with so many things. And bein' a team player. I just feel like it really *carries over* [emphasis added] into your adult life and your career. . . . There are a lot of traits that I have now from being an athlete. I'm very driven, organized, have self-confidence, an inner desire to succeed, natural goal setter, sense of belonging, natural leader, and self-discipline.

Throughout each of our interviews, Mya made several references to the numerous benefits that sport bestows on her as a worker, what having been an athlete communicates to her as a former athlete, and the value of the resiliency built in her through sports.

“I Think That Gives [Athletes] an Upper Hand”

With respect to their competitive nature as athletes move into the work environment, Mya said, “I think that gives [athletes] an upper hand.” She explained,

> When I look at somebody’s resume and I see that they’ve played [sports], *that* interests me and draws me to them. . . . I relate to that and I *like* that. . . . cause I know, *kinda*, what they’ve been through and how hard they’ve worked and what it took to get through college and everything, not just with being a regular student, but being an athlete. . . . I know they’re gonna be a hard worker and determined and get the job done. . . . You have a lot of discipline, a lot of patience, a lot of drive. I instantly think that of you, or I have a lot of respect for you because of everything that you’ve been through.

We discussed her experience and skills that naturally *translated* from athletics to the working world, particularly those most influential for her transition to the workforce. Mya said:

> I’ve always been a leader. . . . You lead by example and you try to lead by your play. . . . and I think that helps tremendously. I was the manager at [Company] before I even graduated. They thought that highly of me and I could manage people, help people and guide them, so same type [of] thing. And then I ended up being the general manager of the whole store. I ran the whole store when I was 24 years old. So, I feel like I got the opportunity at a young age because of all my experience and leadership with sports. It taught me a lot.

I identified with her experience with having been a leader in her athletic domains and how that naturally translated *to the work environment, opening doors to promote quickly and being entrusted with more responsibilities.*

“You Have *to Be Mentally and Physically Tough to Be an Athlete”*

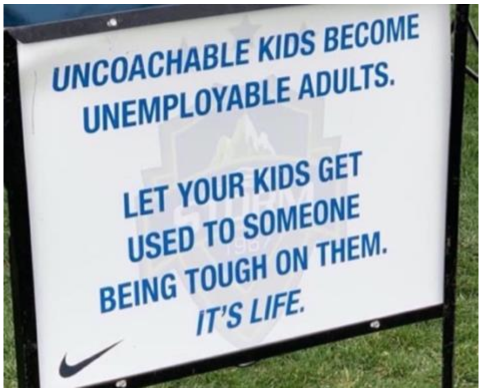
We talked about the sheer mental toughness required to be a competitive athlete. “It takes drive. You have to be driven to improve every day. This worked in sports and now does in my professional career.” Mya described her definition of an athlete.

> [It’s] being tough. You have the right mindset, the desire, physical activity, being fit, in shape. I mean, you’re just tough. You’re badass. You’re an athlete. You can do it all. You’re strong. You’re not weak. You don’t take any shit. You *have* to be mentally and physically tough to be an athlete.

She provided me with an artifact (Figure 21) to bolster her prior comments. She said, “I *truly* believe in this. I think we are—athletes are better off in the real world and jobs because we’ve gotten our ass chewed, you know what I mean?”

Figure 21

Mya Marie’s Artifact Representing Athlete Mental Toughness



Some of the difficult things I walked through in life pre- and post-sport were more manageable because of my athletic background and the resiliency and grit sports *cultivated in me. Being chewed out in front of your entire team with fans in the stands behind you builds thick skin. Waking up at the crack of dawn to run three miles, followed by stadiums and extra weightlifting because your teammates decided that drinking in the dorms was a good idea breeds self-discipline. Having pieces of indoor track thrown at you by football players who refuse to move from the inside of the track while you are running sprints early in the morning and who steal your weights in the middle of a set produces the courage and confidence to speak up and demand something better. There were moments where I took the hits in public and waited to cry and go into the fetal position in private. But as Vince Lombardi said, "It's not whether you get knocked down; it's whether you get back up." Athletics taught me to always get up again.*

In hard times, Mya relies on her athletic mindset, "It's not that I failed; it's just that it didn't work out for me." I asked if she viewed life through the lens of winning and losing. Mya said, "Yeah, in some situations. But if you're having a bad day, it doesn't mean you're losin'. It just means you're hittin' obstacles and you're learnin' how to adjust and maneuver around 'em." She gave me an example,

> I had a contract and it didn't work out [so] I did kinda lose that day. But I have the next day to pick it up and try to do better. . . . Because if I'm gonna focus on the day that I lost those two sales, then I'm not gonna be good the next day cause I'm all down and depressed and I'm not on my 'A' game. So, I've gotta bring it the next day and be back to my 'A' game and be the best that I can that day, cause I can't stay down. . . . It's not a way to live. . . . You need to fuel the fire and be a badass the next day.

Her comments parallel the mindset of athletes after losses. We may feel upset after the game and remember the loss the next day, but the loss fuels a desire to never experience that emotion again and reminds us why we must show up and be better the next day.

Finding 5: “I Think I’m Over It”

In our second interview, I asked Mya to describe where she was at in the transition process presently. Mya said, “I think I’ve come through. I’m through it now. Now, if I had another kid, I think I’d be back down in it fighting and learning. But I feel like I’m, I’m out of it now.” From her response, she seemed to consider motherhood to be a key part of her transition to life after sport, which was interesting because her daughter was two and she had been out of athletics for 11 years. She said, “Yeah. I (pause) just have a new role and just focusing on my career and being a mom and a wife. You’re just at a different point of time in your life now. . . . But I feel like I’m, yeah, I’m out of it.” What stood out most to me was her slight hesitation. Her data suggested that she may be “through it” in that the transition no longer affected her in a negative, non-coping, identity-crisis type of way; however, a little bit of a longing for what once was, or what could have been, seemed to remain.

“I Don’t Have Time to Get Hurt”

When I asked Mya why she stopped playing soccer after college, she told me it was because of her knee. As luck would have it, she was pretty sure that she had torn her meniscus playing flag football at her 10-year high school reunion. She said that her reason for no longer playing indoor soccer was, “Cause I don’t want to get hurt. And especially now—I don’t have time to get hurt when you’re chasing around a two-year-old. I can’t be laid up, having knee surgery or whatever.”

“I’m at a Different Stage of My Life Now”

Without soccer, did Mya still need to get her soccer “fix?” She said,

> I think I’m over it. I’m at a different stage of my life now. I’m a mom. Me and [my daughter] go play soccer. I’m in a different stage where I wanna teach her things or soccer, volleyball, baseball, whatever it may be, but I think I’m past that.

I asked Mya what she thought helped her move past needing the soccer “fix.” She said,

> Especially being an adult, (laughs) there’s so many other things in life that take up your time. I just keep it moving and staying busy. I just think the older you get, you know, your life changes. Not that that’s not still there and I wouldn’t love to do it, but playing with my kid or going outside, swinging, going to the park, running, that sort of thing, that fulfills me and gives me a different fix now, I guess.

I noted a few interesting things in her statements. First, the pendulum appeared to swing from life being all about soccer to life not being about soccer at all. Second, it seemed like her choice to stay busy assisted in her transition process because it felt like her life as a college soccer player—trying to put more things into a day than there were hours available. Additionally, she was also able to compete and achieve in her places of work, which was validating and motivating to her. Third, while not the same type of “fix” as soccer, her time being active with her daughter fulfills her in a *different* way.

We discussed the difference between being a college athlete and mothering responsibilities and having to divide and prioritize attention. Mya said, “It’s totally different now. . . . [In college] you only had yourself to worry about, yourself to satisfy, yourself to push harder and do better. . . . It’s just different now [being a mom].”

“I’m More of a Normal Person Now”

Though she still identified herself as an athlete, Mya also said, “I’m married. I’m a mom. It’s just different. I don’t really know how to describe it. Not that I’m not as tough [as an athlete], but . . . I just feel like I’m more of a normal person now.” *I noted her reference to “normal,” as each participant in the study referred to life roles outside of soccer as “normal,” including myself.* She followed up to clarify her comment,

> I don’t wanna say I’m not tough because I think anybody who’s a mom is *totally* tough. I mean (laughs), all the things you deal with on the daily and how you make things work and everything. It’s just, I’m not out there, kicking the soccer ball and running every day, you know? I do different things and my focus is different; my desires are different.

I completely understood. The best way I can think to describe it is to compare running a marathon physically to having a marathon day of several tasks to accomplish. I like to refer to it as physical exertion versus mental exertion. Being a mom, however, taps into both reserves in different ways and at different times (all the time) and certainly requires a special type of grace and toughness. The degree of toughness depends on what the goal is or what needs to be accomplished. Either way, we [moms] will bring it.

“We’re Supposed to Work Out and Be Strong and Tough.” Like many [first-time] mothers, Mya experienced the “tunnel vision blur” at the beginning of motherhood, but she said, “I feel like I’m in a stage where I’m back.” She told me that she found herself once she was able to get into a routine with her daughter and that her confidence grew as her experience increased. I asked Mya if she felt like any part of her identity changed with pregnancy and after having children. She said:

> I mean, it's different; it changes you. Being a mom and going through all that, especially being, you know, an athlete. Like, you know when you're pregnant you can't do some things. . . . or I can barely get up. So, *that's* really weird cause you feel like you're handicapped, or you're hurt or something and taking it easy; that's hard for me. I never liked being hurt or being restricted, so that was a challenge with me.

She equated moments of pregnancy to what it felt like to be injured, a condition that she knew well and desperately tried to avoid. After she described motherhood changing her, especially after having been an athlete, I was curious how she felt when she looked in the mirror and if she felt like herself. She admitted:

> I did have a real hard time when I *was* pregnant and getting bigger. Most people are like, oh, belly selfie, all this stuff. I didn't wanna take any pictures of my belly. I wasn't really feelin' it. . . . At first, we're not supposed to be fat, we're not supposed to, you know what I mean? Like, we're supposed to work out and be strong and tough, you know, all that. So, that was really weird for me at first.

Mya's comments again reveal the reality of the influence of societal expectations for the physical appearance and physique of athletes and former athletes. I experienced—and continue to experience—the mental, physical, and emotional pressure as well. Most of it is probably self-inflicted, but sometimes I have a fear of telling someone I was a former Division I college athlete because I do not look the part anymore. I also do not put in the time to ensure that my body looks like it used to, so what can I really expect? And that is where the primary challenge comes in; a desire to have what I do not have the time for without the opportunity costs involved to my family, my *career, and the other staple pieces of my life. I do sometimes compare myself to other moms who are former athletes and who somehow manage to look like supermodels. As an athlete, I know what it takes to get there. The motivation, however, is lacking due to tiredness and fatigue, as well as not having the support system that once existed with my teammates putting in the work next to me, all working toward a goal we could achieve together. I am less in interested in goals that only benefit me, so trying to find a comparable opportunity to get "the win" in this season of life can be a challenge.*

"Nothing Will Ever Be the Same"

As much as she loves her family, her career, and feels like she has come through her post-sport transition, Mya told me she still misses soccer. "I miss those feelings [when I played *really* good] or how it feels to step out on the field and what it feels like to compete, cause we don't do that anymore." She admitted, "Nothing will ever be the same as stepping on a soccer field or scoring on national TV. . . . I mean, that's a totally different ball game."

"When the Opportunity Comes Back Up, I Always Take Advantage of It"

Mya indicated in her Pre-Interview Questionnaire that she was somewhat satisfied with her life after leaving her competitive sporting role. Mya explained,

> Anybody could be happier and more satisfied. I think it'd be cool if I still played indoor stuff; that's more satisfying. I'm still playing the game and getting the feeling when you score a goal and all that. . . . I think there's always room for improvement, so I'm not like, 100% satisfied. There's always room for growth or new things.

Her response was athletic to the core and reminded me of Duke Ellington's quote, "My attitude is never to be satisfied, never enough, never" and the anonymous quote, "Be proud. But never satisfied." *I told Mya about my "flare-ups" (i.e., moments when I daydream about making a comeback and trying to play soccer again—maybe even professionally).* She identified.

> I *really* thought about actually trying out maybe for [Semi-Professional Team]. I was pregnant I think when all that was happening. And then right afterwards I was like, 'oh, there's *no* way I can get out there and run.' And then it's always in the back of my mind, 'don't hurt your knee.' But I think that'd be *so* fun to get out there and play.

Mya played out the rest of *her* "flare-up" for me.

> You know there's some of our old teammates and it's like, 'well, if you can do it, I can probably do it.' Especially Sarah [*pseudonym*], cause she's a mom and everything too. And then even watching the women's U.S.A. National Team. . . . I think that'd be so cool to be on a team.

Competition is a healthy striving to better oneself. One way athletes compete is by "comparing" themselves with others to psych themselves up to "get in the game," even if the game is no longer about the sport. This competitiveness enabled me to breastfeed and pump for over a year with each of my boys. I saw another mom with whom I could compete, and I used the experience to achieve a noble and beneficial goal for my children and also myself. It had nothing to do with the other mom. It is just what motivated me. Though Mya said she is in a different stage of her life now and that she is past needing her soccer “fix,” she confessed, “When the opportunity comes back up, I always take advantage of it. . . . I love it. It’s so much fun.”

“Bring Athletics and All That Competitiveness and Sports Back Into My Life”

As previously noted, Mya and I attended a soccer game at our alma mater, alongside Mya’s parents and daughter. She said,

> That was special for me to take [my daughter] and have her watch soccer. Because I feel like, another thing that’ll be fulfilling to me and bring athletics and all that competitiveness and sports back into my life is when *she* starts playing. I’ll probably be her little soccer coach mama or whatever, or basketball or whatever she wants to do. And I think *that’s* really fun . . . That’s really exciting to me so I can teach her everything that *I* know and hope that she’s way better than I ever was. . . . I’m gonna tell her now, ‘mommy played soccer . . . I’ll teach you everything I know.’

Her response communicated to me her desire for athletics and competitiveness to re-enter her life, but in a way that combined both of her passions—being a mother *and* playing soccer [or another sport]. Mya said,

> It is going to be neat to tell my daughter what all I have accomplished one day! I want her to look up to me and want to be successful. My dreams came true of playing college ball and I want her to know hers can too!

I identified with what she said as I also looked forward (and continue to look forward) to the day when I would get to share that passion with my children and cheer them on as they write their own stories. My children’s ages, however, have already allowed me to begin that journey.

During the time I was collecting data for this study, my boys discovered my framed college jersey that was resting against the wall in our laundry room. My now two-year-old loved going into the laundry room and pointing to the picture of me at the bottom right corner of the frame. He knew. I was going to hang it on the wall but decided against it because he would not be able to reach it and see me. It was so precious to me to watch him go in there and recognize his mommy; it was like he was proud of me. Watching him offered me a private "glorified" self moment.

I told my now five-year-old that I wanted to play soccer again and asked him if he wanted to come to my games. He emphatically replied, "Yeah mom! I wanna come to your games!" Each time we would drive by the soccer fields he would ask me, "Mom, when are you gonna play soccer? Like, when are you gonna do it?" I encouraged him to keep asking me to hold me accountable to sign up to play somewhat competitively for the first time in six years. Finally, I was like, "What am I waiting for?" I registered. It was definitely for me to prove to myself that I could do it without having touched the ball in six years—that is the competitive side of me, and I still [sort-of] "had it"—but it was also for him (and my littlest). I cannot fully express how much it meant for me to have my boys and my husband at the games. I even scored a legit goal while they were at the first game, which was a bonus. They think mom is the best soccer player in the world, and that was a good ending for me, for now.

Conclusion

This chapter detailed the individual case study findings and themes that emerged from Mya Marie's transition out of collegiate athletics. The next and final chapter, Chapter IX, includes the cross-case analysis findings of the study and conclusions.

CHAPTER IX

CROSS-CASE FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

“I’m not a woman that’s [**sic*****] an athlete! I’m an athlete!”***

– Skylar Diggins

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how transitioning out of collegiate soccer influenced the athletic identities of Division I female collegiate athletes who were no longer pursuing competitive athletics. This multiple case study focused on female athletes’ narrated experiences of their journeys 8-16 years after they exited their collegiate athlete roles. Four former Division I female athletes who all played soccer and graduated from college between the years of 1999 and 2012 participated in the research study through a Recruitment Questionnaire, a Pre-Interview Questionnaire, three one-on-one interviews, and collection of a personal artifact. Participants’ individual experiences with navigating transitions and the influences on their athletic identities after leaving collegiate athletics were presented as individual case reports in Chapters V – VIII. In addition to the four participants, I wove my reflections about their experiences along with my own experiences transitioning from collegiate soccer throughout the individual case reports, identified in non-bolded *italics*.

Participants' demographic information is visible in Table 3. As noted in Chapter I, I am White, American, married, a mother of two boys, and 34 years old. I left collegiate soccer 13 years ago and semi-professional soccer 12 years ago.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Citizenship Status	Marital Status	Children (No.)	Highest Degree Earned	Years Since College Sport
Adriana Costilow	34	White	U.S.	Married	Yes (2)	Master's	13
Julie Parsons	29	Hispanic	U.S.	Married	Yes (2)	Master's	8
Roxie Hart	38	White	U.S.	Married	Yes (1)	Master's	16
Mya Marie	32	White	U.S.	Married	Yes (1)	Bachelor's	11

This final chapter presents four main findings and two sub-findings that emerged from the cross-case analysis to address the central research question: How do Division I female athletes describe their experiences with transitioning to life after collegiate athletics?

- Finding 1: The initial operationalization of athletic identity was influenced by each individual's attributes, personality, preferences, opportunities, and life experiences.
- Finding 2: Athletes physically transitioned out of competitive sport, but not out of their identities as athletes.

    a. Sub-Finding 2a: The concept of "athletic identity" was too unidimensional to capture women's multidimensional experiences of exiting collegiate soccer.
    b. Sub-Finding 2b: New motherhood required reassessing identity, including recalibration of athletic identity.
- Finding 3: The women's level of anticipation and preparation for the transition out of collegiate sport contributed to the ease of the transition experience participants described.
- Finding 4: Each athlete's transition experience remained unique and did not align with an overall model or expectation.

A discussion regarding each of the cross-case findings and their relationships to the relevant sport, identity, and transition literature are next. Following discussion of findings and the literature, this chapter addresses the benefits of insider research and implications for higher education in the areas of research, theory, and practice. Finally, the chapter concludes with consideration of the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

Cross-Case Findings and Discussion

Multiple case study methodology includes individual and cross-case analysis to first explore the uniqueness of each individual case (Simmons, 2009) and then to understand the quintain (i.e., the phenomenon) in a deeper and more meaningful way (Stake, 2014). While previous chapters detailed each case, in this section I present and discuss cross-case findings. The non-bolded *italicized* inserts following each finding are related snapshots in time from my personal journals and conversations during my post-collegiate sport transition. I wove direct quotes from the participants' experiences throughout the discussion (using ***bolded italicized*** font) to support the cross-case findings.

Finding 1: The initial operationalization of athletic identity was influenced by each individual's attributes, personality, preferences, opportunities, and life experiences.

My whole life, my identity has been in my performance. That's why it was so hard when it all came to an end too because I didn't have the sport or my accolades to show people "who I was." . . . So, I found my major weakness, since this trickles into all other areas of my life—performance, competition, pleasing others, doing things for myself—and I am believing for freedom. . . . The question of, "What would you do if you could do anything and you knew you wouldn't fail?" has always yielded this response from me, "Become a professional soccer player." Now, I don't know if that will ever happen or not, but I'd like to try and see. I believe I'm ready now to try again . . . I cannot do this without God helping me get back in shape, finding the right team . . . giving me favor, opening all the right doors, and creating the windows of opportunity.

June 7, 2010
FCA Missions Trip in Bobbio Pellice, Italy
Three Years, Seven Months After Exiting My Collegiate Sporting Role

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Because of our similar sport pathways, 'athlete' became an all-encompassing identity for a significant chapter in the lives of my participants and me. When I first began this study, I thought the research question was about *transitioning* from an athletic identity to some other post-athletic identity (i.e., once upon a time you were an athlete and now you are not, so what happened in the space in between?). However, as I started collecting and analyzing data, and more deeply considering my own life experiences, what became abundantly apparent is that we, as athletes, are multifaceted people with *unique* attributes, personalities, preferences, opportunities, and life experiences that heavily influenced the initial operationalization of our athletic identities. We were born with our own *unique* characteristics and talents and, thus, athletic identity is a complex (versus singular) concept that looks different and is experienced differently for each individual. These differences explain how Julie and I could have a similar athletic experience (i.e., collegiate soccer) and yet view it, and our post-sport experiences, through different lenses. We were different athletes with *unique* senses of our athletic identities.

In addition, and also in contrast to much of the literature, my data suggests the value of considering multidimensionality in and salience among the individual's various life *roles* and experiences in terms of how athletic identity developed, how it was operationalized during sport, and how it influenced exit from sport. While our athletic identities were perhaps dominant within a certain stage of our lives, the athletic identity never existed fully apart from or independent of the other roles we also filled. For example, Mya's transition to her career appeared smooth because she experienced life after sport while working (a role apart from sport) *prior* to the end of college; however, she *also* strongly identified with her athlete role and never ceased being an athlete or viewing life through the lens of her athletic identity. In fact, she attributed much of her success in her professional career to that very identity.

Parallel to Mya's experience, Brown et al.'s (2000) study exploring the relationships among career decision-making, self-efficacy, career locus of control, identity foreclosure, and athletic identity with 189 collegiate athletes suggested that equal salience between student-athletes' athletic and academic identities was tenable. In their qualitative study with 10 male professional athletes, Hickey and Roderick (2017) found that athletes could manage multiple, overlapping identities and contested the notion of exclusive athletic identity that is prevalent in the literature. While these researchers arrived at similar conclusions, the complex, multifaceted dimensions of athletic identity that emerged from my study add value and further nuances their findings.

In my study, athletic identity did not emerge as an independent unit; rather, it operationalized as it was engaged with, layered upon, and influenced by the individual's attributes, personality, preferences, opportunities, and life experiences in addition to her other life roles. It would make sense, then, that the athletic aspects of our identities and who we are as people would still influence who we are in our post-sport lives. Just like we did not leave our childhood identity to transition into becoming athletes, who we became after sport did not include dropping or leaving one identity to obtain a new identity. Rather, who we were on the field as athletes appeared to *translate* to our post-sport lives.

"I learned a lot of my leadership skills . . . from being an athlete." (Adriana)

"I get to make a difference and also not be on the front lines." (Julie)

"I'm a warrior woman. . . . If I wanna do something, I do it." (Roxie)

"I feel like [being an athlete] made me the person I am today." (Mya)

For example, Adriana was known as a leader and a hard worker; she now runs her own businesses and leads teams of women. Julie's desire to stay out of the spotlight while in competitive sport *translated* to a behind the scenes role in public health. Roxie's energy and positive attitude on the soccer field continues to motivate others inside and outside of sport; her competitive nature fueled her to "competitively" breastfeed her child and helps her as an academic advisor working with students as an academic life coach. Mya's competitive, never-give-up attitude propelled her in her career and continues to motivate her to compete and "get right in there with the best of 'em." My defensive role on the field allowed me to see whole field, anticipate the next play, create scoring opportunities, and make strategic decisions; I now lead a student success center where creativity, strategic planning, and setting others up for success is my mainstay. Each of these examples demonstrates a *translation* of our athletic identities, *not* a departure from them. Furthermore, each *translation* of athletic identity to our post-sport lives remains linked to who we were, and who we developed into, as *unique* individuals.

My participants' identification with their athlete roles were not exclusive to when they played soccer, but the athletes they had been for their entire lives, and in the way that each participant *uniquely* identified as an athlete. While athletic identity may be considered in terms of degree of identification and perception of the athlete's sporting role (Brewer et al., 1993; International Olympic Committee, n.d.), what emerged from the data analysis was a contextual, multifaceted *living* identity that spanned well beyond an active sporting role and into realms tied to characteristics, behaviors, skills, and approaches to life. This is really the crux of the study and is the lens through which the other cross-case findings should be viewed. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, "athletic identity" should be viewed contextually as a multifaceted term, *unique* to the individual athlete.

Finding 2: Athletes physically transitioned out of competitive sport, but not out of their identities as athletes.

I started playing soccer again on a co-ed team. Figured it'd be a fun addition to the research. I went to my second game last Sunday, took a shot in warm-ups and then got in my car and drove home because somehow, I pulled my quad muscle. . . . Hadn't played since 2014; I'm still good, which is nuts. But out of shape, oh my gosh, out of shape. . . . I scored a goal! New guy came to the game last week and I felt like I had something to prove to him. Well, I sure did prove something! I'm an idiot. For what it's worth, I did score the warm-up goal. My RQ: How did former Division I female collegiate student-athletes negotiate and experience transitions in their athletic identities after leaving competitive athletics? THEY DON'T! Mic drop and I'm out!

January 15, 2020
Text-Messages to a Former Male Athlete Friend and Cohort Colleague
13 Years, Two Months After Exiting My Collegiate Sporting Role

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While in transition and processing through the psychological and social adaptation aspects of the change from being in competitive sport, the participants' athletic identities appeared to remain intact. As seen in Table 4 and throughout their individual case reports, Adriana, Roxie, and Mya strongly agreed they were *still* athletes. Only Julie felt neutral in that regard. Though the lenses on the participants' definitions of "athlete" differed, Julie's definition of *athletic* was similar to the other participants' definitions of *athlete*, but she distinguished between action (currently playing as an athlete) and identity. Despite leaving collegiate sports, Julie underscored the current commitment and effort involved in maintaining elite status, and her language acknowledged those who were actively competing. However, despite less visible acknowledgement, the totality of her data set revealed her athletic identity remained intact. Thus, although Julie first appeared to be an anomaly in the data, in fact, the participants' identities as athletes, *in the present tense*, was consistent throughout their interviews, and it seemed to influence all their life roles.

Table 4

Participant Pre-Interview Questionnaire: Post-Sport Identity

Name	I am an athlete.	I am competitive.	My competitive nature affects the other areas of my life (i.e., work, home, etc.).	I view outcomes to my life choices in life through a lens of wins or losses.
Adriana Costilow	Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree
Julie Parsons	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Disagree
Roxie Hart	Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree
Mya Marie	Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree

Though each participant defined the term, “athlete,” a little differently, the fact that they were no longer competing in soccer did not change their athletic approaches to life; in fact, their approaches to their major life roles—mother and worker—appeared to mirror the athletic approaches to life as competitive athletes they described. While the participants adopted new roles, the end of collegiate sport did not seem to change who the athletes were at the core; they did not appear to exit their athletic identities, comparable to Laure and Meline’s (2018) findings from 10 female Division I volleyball players who still identified with their athlete roles more than a decade after exiting their collegiate sporting roles. Rather, my participants’ athletic identities continued to serve as anchors or touchstones for their evolving lifestyles and life demands as they *translated* their athletic identities to other after-sport life roles.

“I am an athlete. . . . It’s so much of my identity!” (Adriana)

“Even to this day, that identity as an athlete is still there.” (Julie)

“I am an athlete. . . . Everything I do, it’s that athlete mentality. Everything.” (Roxie)

“I’m still an athlete.” (Mya)

Adriana, Roxie, and Mya placed great value and importance on others knowing that they were athletes because they believed their athleticism and commitment to high-level competition were key factors in shaping who they were, which served as sources of pride, accomplishment, and validation. In addition, they believed that disclosing they had been collegiate athletes would help others to understand them better and potentially facilitate deeper relationships. While they agreed that their athletic identity was only one aspect of their lives, it was vital to their self-identity, and they valued others' awareness of this role. In fact, the value of others' awareness emerged as an aspect of their athletic identities, which was foundational to their development and associated behaviors. Though Julie preferred to keep her athletic identity private, it still provided a touchpoint for connecting with others and a reminder that excelling in athletics aided in establishing her professional career.

The artifacts the participants brought to symbolize their transitions from sport to life as they knew it today primarily revealed the importance of ongoing validation. It seemed that visual validation served as a type of currency for varied reasons that fit both their individual personalities and the way each woman identified with the athletic aspects of their identities. For Roxie and Mya, hanging or wearing recognizable markers of their accomplished athlete pasts—whether a ring or photograph—seemed affirming. For Adriana, Roxie, and Mya, overt recognition and/or identification as an athlete, with visible artifacts stemming from their core athletic identity, seemed to serve as anchors in their evolving lifestyles—encouragement for Adriana, connection and growth for Roxie, and fulfillment and positive memories for Mya.

For Julie, her half-marathon medal did not matter to anyone other than her, wherein seemed to lie its significance. The covert placement of the medal in the home of her parents rather than as a visible expression of achievement for others to see seemed to match her manner as an athlete—a desire to be out of the spotlight. Nonetheless, the artifacts functioned as touchstones of deeper meaning for each participant. These objects helped to triangulate the data; Kearney and Hyle (2004) applied similar approaches in using participant-produced drawings to examine the emotional impact of change on higher education employees.

The experiences of Adriana, Roxie, and Mya also paralleled the findings from Menke and Germany (2019) and Laure and Meline (2018), with respect to the persistence of competitive drive even after the athlete exits their competitive sporting role. Though they ceased to be competitive athletes, Adriana, Roxie, and Mya still held deeply rooted competitive drives. At various points in our interviews, Adriana and Roxie mentioned they had to learn how to "reel back" their competitive drives in other life roles, environments, and relationships (*as I, too, had to do*). Adriana mentioned she matured in her perspective about competition and accepted that she no longer needed to be the best at everything she did. She admitted, however, that her competitive drive and desire to win would always be with her.

The tenacity of the athletic identity in the current participants may be relevant to the current literature. Participation in sports from a young age is known to contribute to the development of athletic identity. Current participants' identities as athletes were nurtured for almost their entire lifespan by the time they exited their competitive sporting roles. As Julie stated, "It wasn't like I went to college and then all of a sudden, I identified myself as an athlete. . . . That's all I ever knew. . . . It's like asking, 'how does it feel to breathe?'" Perhaps even more telling is that Adriana, Roxie, and Mya specifically mentioned they chose to attend their universities for the athletic programs and the scholarships they received. Each assumed she would determine her major after getting to college.

This reality of choosing a university primarily for sport in the current data is in line with a finding reported by Miller and Kerr's (2002) study that athletics was the prominent deciding factor for attending a university for Canadian student-athletes in their fourth and/or fifth year of collegiate eligibility. Hewitt's (2009) study, conducted with highly recruited high school student-athletes during the college recruitment process, also found that athletics was the driving force behind college choice. The prioritizing of athletics in a major life decision like where to attend college suggests that the athlete identity was central for each individual; it is perhaps foreseeable that a single event, even when it is exit from collegiate sport, would not easily cause a central component of identity to vanish.

As mentioned in Chen et al.'s (2010) study examining perceived athletic identity, sport commitment, and the effect of sport participation on athletic participation, "living a well-balanced academic, social, and athletic life can possibly be achievable ideology" (p. 179). The female student-athletes in Chen et al.'s (2010) study demonstrated similar levels of commitment and perceived athletic identity as the males, a gender-based finding often neglected in the athletic identity literature. These studies, including my own findings, suggest that athletes do not transition 'out' of their athletic identities; rather, their athletic identities continued to be influenced by the environment and the environment influenced by their identities, invariably weaving around and through their various life roles and associated identities (mother/wife/worker).

In a series of three studies used to evaluate the psychometric properties of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), Brewer et al. (1993) defined athletic identity as "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (p. 237).

According to the International Olympic Committee (n.d.), “athletic identity is the way you perceive and feel about your sporting role, which comprises your goals, values, thoughts and sensations related to your sport” (p. 1). These definitions, and the deeper discussions related to these studies, suggest that athletic identity is only pertinent (i.e., active) while competing in sport. However, the individuals in my study retained their athletic identities, up to 16-years post-sport (and likely beyond). My case findings suggest that researchers need to expand definitions of athletic identity beyond the *active* role of playing sports.

During the study, I realized that an internal transition happened when the athletes finished collegiate athletics and came to terms with the role change: student-athlete to no longer a student-athlete. However, their experience did not mirror Bridges’ (1991) three phases of transition (“ending, losing, letting go; the neutral zone; the new beginning”) (p. 5). First, though the participants learned to cope with the end or loss of sport, they never let go of their athletic identities. Second, they seemed to experience a “neutral zone” when they finished playing competitively, but their athletic identities appeared to remain fully operational. Finally, the notion of developing a new identity void of their athletic identities did not seem to apply. Rather, participants seemed to *translate* their athletic identities to new roles and spaces outside of sport.

Drahota and Eitzen’s (1998) study with former professional athletes applying Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory—the process of disengagement, disidentification, and resocialization—revealed that the professional athlete role is never exited completely. The biggest challenge for the professional athletes in their study was learning how to live with their past identity once it no longer assumed an active role in their lives. The final stage of the model involves becoming an 'ex.' According to Ebaugh (1988):

> The process of becoming an ex involves *tension* [emphasis added] between one's past, present, and future. One's previous role identification has to be taken into account and *incorporated* [emphasis added] into a future identity. To be an ex is different from never having been a member of a particular group or role-set. Nonmembers do not carry with them the "hangover identity" of a previous role and therefore do not face the challenge of *incorporating* [emphasis added] a previous role identity into a current self-concept. (p. 149)

Though the professional athletes in their study used various coping mechanisms to create the 'ex-role' by *merging* their athlete roles with their new roles or identities, the researchers concluded that there was not a specific or consistent approach to doing so. What they did confirm, however, was that the process would take time. Similarly, Stier's (2007) qualitative study with Swedish ex-professional tennis players about career retirement, role exit, and the related identity issues concluded that the retirement process was gradual and transitional, often ambiguous in nature, and involving varying degrees of psychological and social adaptation as the athletes began searching for identities outside of sport. For the ex-professional tennis players, "their past remain[ed] a vital source of self-identity and self-confidence for them" (Stier, 2007, p. 108).

As the participants in the current study progressed through the transition process, the meaning of "athletic identity" seemed to shift. Participants detailed the numerous benefits from being competitive athletes that assisted them with their transitions out of competitive sports and *translated* into other life roles. As such, Drahota and Eitzen's

(1998) notion of creating the ‘ex-role’ and Stier’s (2007) findings related to this study with respect to the *translation* of athletic identity for the participants.

First, at various points in their individual transition processes, they felt *tension* among their past, present, and future senses of self. Second, though participants needed several years to move through the transition process (with some still in it at the time of the study), each woman connected their sense of their current selves to their past selves as athletes. Third, participants’ past roles as competitive athletes remained a part of their identities, including one for which they continued to seek validation. Finally, depending on where they were at in their journeys, the participants began to incorporate or *translate* their athletic identities to their lives after soccer, even while their athletic identities continued to serve as anchors for their evolving lifestyles and life demands. This finding, that professional and amateur women in my study *translate* their athletic identities rather than exit them, extends the work of Drahota and Eitzen (1998) noted above that revealed the athlete role for professional male athletes is never exited completely.

In the following two sub-findings, I detail two key points at which participants seemed to experience significant *tension* with their athletic identities and felt pressure to reformulate them in some fashion. The first one was expected and appeared at the time they left collegiate soccer. The second was unforeseen and occurred when these participants became mothers.

Sub-Finding 2a: The concept of "athletic identity" was too unidimensional to capture women's multidimensional experiences of exiting collegiate soccer.

What do You want me to learn from this trip? I feel like it may be time for me to put the whole professional soccer idea to rest. I'm just not really loving it like I used to. I'm not sure exactly why—pain, tiredness, some frustration—but it may be time. Please continue to reveal it to me this week. What is my purpose here, Lord?

October 4, 2010

Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) Missions Trip in Catacamas, Honduras

Three Years, 11 Months After Exiting My Collegiate Sporting Role

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Having played soccer since their youth, all participants struggled with the process of exiting their athletic careers. This component of the data was not surprising. The athletes described their experiences with a range of bittersweet words and phrases signaling both sadness for what they were leaving behind and excitement for the future ahead and the chance to finally be "normal." The end of sport resulted in a significant change of lifestyle as the women transitioned out of the structured, familiar, Division I athletic environment. The participants' experiences demonstrated varying degrees of emotional distress and emotional aftermath, similar to what Menke and Germany (2019) found in their phenomenological study examining the transition out of sport for male Division I football and basketball players. The participants' emotional experiences suggest that the findings of Menke and Germany (2019) may also apply to *female* athletes who played collegiate soccer.

"I was not ready to just be out of the loop." (Adriana)

"I'm never gonna have that feeling again. And it was really sad." (Julie)

"Leaving athletics . . . just left this hole." (Roxie)

"If I would have never got hurt, I really could have excelled." (Mya)

Though they took separate paths after leaving collegiate sport, each participant in my study experienced a "trigger" moment (or turning point) in her transition experience. In her seminal study on role exit and learning how to establish identity or *incorporate* it into a new identity, Ebaugh (1988) referred to this turning point as "the straw that broke the camel's back" (p. 125). Drahota and Eitzen (1998) further defined the turning point as "a time when the individual announces his or her decision and mobilizes the emotional and social support needed to act on the decision" (p. 268).

The timeline for the "trigger" moment varied for each participant in the current study. For example, Mya faced hers within the first two years of college soccer while Adriana, Julie, and Roxie experienced theirs after college. Adriana's "trigger" prompted her to venture outside of the comfort of the athletic department to "see what else *the world* had to offer." Julie decided she was ready to "find more self-worth within myself outside of athletics." Roxie's "trigger" led her to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), where she began her healing journey. A knee injury gave Mya "a little dose of what life was like without soccer" and she "started thinkin' differently about things and how I needed to focus." Correspondingly, the participants' "trigger" moments appeared to set in motion their recognition of the change and eventual processing of their transitions out of soccer.

Although varying in type and timing, the identifiable trigger points found by Drahota and Eitzen (1998) in professional male athletes' exits appeared in the current study. This suggests that similar trigger points occur and kicks off reconsideration of athletic identity, also for *female* athletes leaving *collegiate* sport. Though Drahota and Eitzen's (1998) modified role exit model had some salience to collegiate athletes, there are important dissimilarities between collegiate and professional athletes that should be kept in mind. First, as mentioned by Adler and Adler (1991), the exit from college athletics is an inevitable, institutional exit due to the expiration of eligibility and, therefore, did not completely support the definitions of a voluntary/involuntary role exit used in the modified model. Second, though Drahota and Eitzen (1998) noted the presence of athletic identity as a "central identity" athletes acquire at a young age, what their study did not note, particularly with Ebaugh (1988) titling the theory role *exit* theory, was the tenacity of the athletic identity in the post-sport lives of athletes. My participants' narratives suggest that athletic identity was both enduring and malleable to the complexities of their lives over time. There was no "exit" from athletic identity. Rather, participants struggled in individual ways with their former conception of athletic identities as active Division I players, their touchstone for what "athlete" meant, that was too unilateral for their new multidimensional post-sport pathways. They continued to see themselves as athletes. This reality further indicates the implausibility of a singular stage model of athletic identity after sport.

Sub-Finding 2b: New motherhood required reassessing identity, including recalibration of athletic identity.

I spent most days of my maternity leave (14 weeks) crying at almost every feed due to frustration and feelings of being inadequate for him. It was a lonely season.

March 22, 2016

Four Months Post-Partum

Eight Years, Four Months After Exiting My Collegiate Sporting Role

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Like many first-time mothers, each participant in the current study experienced variations of the mental, emotional, and physical struggles that accompany new motherhood. For the participants in this study, all of whom became biological mothers through pregnancy and childbirth, the situational change also brought about an internal transition in their sense of themselves as athletes. While maintaining a level of fitness similar to when they were Division I athletes was achievable after exiting their collegiate sporting roles, they could not do so during pregnancy and post-partum. This reality complicated that aspect of their athletic identity. As former competitive soccer players, the morphing of their bodies and the battle to get back in shape post-partum required additional recalibration and re-entrenchment over a reduced (as compared to exit from sport) but still critical period of time.

“Oh, this feels good. . . . I was pushing myself again and it felt, amazing.” (Adriana)

“It’s so deep rooted. . . . I have to get active to just feel like myself again.” (Julie)

“I never want my appearance to hinder [my daughter’s] athleticism.” (Roxie)

“This [is] the year. . . . [to] get back on track, workout more, and be [healthier].” (Mya)

Each of the participants were at different points in their post-partum health and wellness journey at the time of the study. After working out for the first time at eight months post-partum, Adriana recalled, “Oh, this feels good. . . . I was pushing myself again. . . . and it felt, amazing. . . . I’d look in the mirror and I’d be like ‘okay . . . I feel more like myself again.’” After getting up early in the morning to “destress” and “reenergize” herself through exercise, Julie explained, “It’s so deep rooted. . . . I know I have to get active to just feel like myself again.” Roxie’s daughter gave her the motivation to “get back more athletic than I had before I had kids.” Mya told me, “this [is] the year for Mya. . . . [to] get back on track, workout more, and be [healthier].” As they returned to their athletic roots, they felt more like themselves. This feeling emerged as a component of the participants’ athletic identities and appeared to anchor, recalibrate, and re-entrench them.

The literature is wholly insufficient in addressing the athletic identity complications associated with getting back in shape post-partum in the *extended* space after female athletes exit their collegiate sporting roles and become biological mothers. There are, however, a handful of studies that focus on elite female athletes in primarily individual sports training to return to sport after having children and negotiating the "mother-athlete" identity (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017; McGannon et al., 2015; Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Tekavc et al., 2020). Though training to return to elite competition did not apply to the present study, negotiating the mother-athlete identity had direct applications.

Utilizing a critical feminist framework, Appleby and Fisher (2009) qualitatively explored the experiences of elite distance runners who returned to competition after giving birth. The researchers found that the athletes' senses of identity shifted with the new, multidimensional identity, the mother-athlete identity. The findings of Appleby and Fisher (2009) echoed the findings of Darroch and Hillsburg (2017), Palmer and Leberman (2009), and Tekavc et al. (2020), researchers who also qualitatively explored the competing identities of mother versus athlete with elite female athletes. McGannon et al. (2015) referred to the concept as "identity dimensionality" rather than the singular athletic identity that often accompanies a dominant performance narrative and may lead to identity foreclosure, a narrative described in Douglas and Carless's (2009) six-year life history study with two female professional golfers who withdrew from professional sport. As stated by Appleby and Fisher (2009), "For athletes who have often spent a large part of their lives devoted to training and competing, allocating their time to mothering may signal a significant shift in their athletic training, participation, and *identity* [emphasis added]" (p. 4). Elite athletes in Appleby and Fisher (2009), Darroch and Hillsburg (2017), Palmer and Leberman (2009), and Tekavc et al.'s (2020) studies returned to their athletic identities in new ways as mother-athletes as they began to see that they were more than *just* athletes.

According to Brewer et al. (1993), "Our conceptualization of athletic identity holds that the individual with strong athletic identity ascribes great importance to involvement in sport/exercise and is especially attuned to self-perceptions in the athletic domain" (p. 238). Though the women in my study reported losing themselves for a period of time after having children and as they re-negotiated their newly-added mother identity with their existing athlete identity, they seemed to recalibrate and find themselves again once they found new ways to return to their athletic roots.

Similar to the athletes in Appleby and Fisher (2009) and McGannon et al.'s (2015) studies, the women in my study began to rediscover the importance of their athletic identities as they re-entrenched themselves in fitness and exercise. For example, Julie mentioned that she arose early in the morning before her children woke up because she realized how important solitary exercise time was for her well-being, sentiments echoed by athletes in Appleby and Fisher (2009) and Darroch and Hillsburg's (2017) studies as well. My participants' comments in the ***bolded italicized*** section of this cross-case sub-finding add weight to the symbolic interactionist work of Palmer and Leberman (2009) with nine, elite level mother-athletes involved in team sports in New Zealand, regarding sport as integral to the athlete's sense of self.

In their ethnographic content analysis study exploring how news media narratives shaped motherhood and athletic identity, McGannon et al. (2015) found the mother-athlete journey to be "*transformative*" by way of the polarization of the mother-athlete role and the mother-athlete as a "superwoman" (i.e., women can have and do it all) when trying to make a "come back" to athletics. Elite long distance runners from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia in Darroch and Hillsburg's

(2017) study about the experiences of athletes returning to international competition after giving birth also mentioned the internal conflict that came with having to choose between their two roles—mother and athlete. The mother-athletes in their study described feelings of guilt or selfishness when choosing one role over the other.

Polarization within the mother-athlete identity did not emerge as a finding in the current study, perhaps because the individuals in my study were not trying to return to elite-level competition. Rather, polarity emerged through the participants' struggles to prioritize their own health and wellness once they gained their mother roles and began to juggle their roles as mothers and full-time workers, similar to the female athletes' experiences in Laure and Meline (2018). As stated by Darroch and Hillsburg (2017), "Given the tensions [of work-life balance] . . . it is sadly unsurprising that once women juggle a career and domestic responsibilities, engagement in sport or leisure becomes an impossibility" (p. 62). Though this struggle is not exclusive to mothers in general, nor to mothers who were competitive athletes, the interplay with their athletic identities makes former collegiate athletes' motherhood experiences unique.

For some athletes in my study, the conception of mother-athlete as a "superwoman" (McGannon et al., 2015) had other implications. Though Adriana reported the realization that she could "have my cake and eat it too" by being a successful businesswoman and mother, Julie, Roxie, and Mya hinted at some of the psychological distress that athletes mentioned in news media representations in McGannon et al.'s (2015) study. Julie said getting on the treadmill and not being able to run at her normal pace "really messed with me." Not wanting her appearance to hinder her daughter's athleticism propelled Roxie to "get back more athletic" than she was before she had kids.

Similar to the Slovene elite female athletes in Tekavc et al.'s (2020) study exploring women's transition experiences of combining motherhood with competitive sport, Mya's pregnancy reminded her of being injured and growing bigger with child did not sit well with how an athlete was "supposed" to look. The individuals in my study all mentioned dissatisfaction with their bodies during the transition phase, as reported by athletes in Tekavc et al.'s (2020) study.

Whereas the athletes in Darroch and Hillsburg (2017), Palmer and Leberman (2009), and Tekavc et al. (2020) emphasized the resiliency and adaptability that new motherhood built in them, the women in my study attributed their resiliency and adaptability that they applied in motherhood *to having been athletes*. For example, Roxie and I attributed our success with breastfeeding to having been determined, competitive collegiate athletes who refused to quit. Individuals in Palmer and Leberman's (2009) study noted that becoming a mother-athlete actually enhanced their mothering by increasing their confidence and learning to relax a little more by taking some of the pressure off of themselves and relinquishing some of their competitiveness. Their findings mirrored Adriana's comments about learning how to save competitive energy for the moments that actually warranted it.

In addition, the individuals in my study all mentioned the importance of acting as role models for their children by showing them that they could be strong mothers *and* successful career women, demonstrating the importance of health and wellness, and encouraging their children to participate in athletics because of its benefits for learning valuable life lessons and skills. Acting as role models for their children also emerged as themes in Appleby and Fisher (2009) and Darroch and Hillsburg's (2017) studies, for many of the same reasons stated by my participants. While I did not, in my study design, focus specifically on soccer players, and certainly not on those who became mothers, the organic makeup of my participants allowed the transition experiences of mother-athletes to emerge in a way that adds value and further nuances the findings. These findings highlight the additional dimensions for *female* athletes of balancing multiple life roles and identities that are often overlooked in the athletic identity and transition literature.

Darroch and Hillsburg (2016) found that a strong support system was key in balancing elite sport with motherhood. The importance of having a strong support system for athletes making a "come back" to competition was also highlighted by McGannon et al. (2015). "It is not simply that women 'need more support' to continue athletic careers . . . but that such support may be difficult to negotiate when athlete and mother identities are polarized" (p. 56). As previously mentioned, the polarization was not a factor in this study with the mother-athlete identity, though it was for the individuals balancing their multidimensional identities at home and work. Whereas the majority of participants in Barcza-Renner et al.'s (2020) study with 15 former *primarily female* NCAA Division I college athletes described the value of social support when transitioning out of sport four to five months post-retirement, support systems did not emerge as a key component of women's descriptions of their transitions to life after sport until the topic of motherhood was introduced. For Adriana, the value of a support system (e.g., her husband and the women at the fitness facility) in new motherhood was foundational to navigating her new mother identity. Julie specifically mentioned a community of support rallying around her and her husband through prayer and encouragement. Roxie and Mya also mentioned their families' support in raising their daughters.

My findings suggest that a support system for a "come back" may not be exclusive to competitive athletes, but also to former athletes navigating life after sport as athletes, workers, *and* mothers. Arguably, all women need support to have successful careers *and* raise children (Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017). If athletic identity is key to an athlete's sense of self (Palmer & Leberman, 2009), then support systems to assist former competitive athletes with the continuing renegotiations of identity appear vital to their success and well-being. As Tekavc et al. (2020) stated, "Female athletes' transition [*sic*] to motherhood can be perceived as a process, starting before pregnancy and lasting (at least) until [*sic*] woman's new identity of a mother-athlete was developed" (p. 746). For my participants, the transition to new motherhood required them to again recalibrate and yet *re-entrench* themselves in their athletic identities and familiar training as athletes to feel more "like themselves." This second key re-negotiation of their athletic identities seemed to occur in less time than did their exit from sport.

As I close this section, I want to again point out that all of my participants experienced pregnancy and were biological mothers. Their bodies, exercise routines, and mobility were thus affected, all of which served as central components in their athletic performance and identity. It also appears (although not always made clear) that the literature also included mother-athletes who assumed mothering roles through pregnancy. While there remains a lack of knowledge about an athlete's transition to motherhood, there seems to be silence in the literature regarding athletes who assume mothering roles and mothering labor, with all of its associated time and emotional commitments, through non-biological means (e.g., adoption, fostering, surrogacy, blended families through marriage). Given the wide variety of mothering journeys, this is an area of identity negotiation that deserves further consideration in the research.

Finding 3: The women's level of anticipation and preparation for the transition out of collegiate sport contributed to the ease of the transition experience participants described.

Diving Board Vision

In my life, I'm like the analogy of going up the steps of the high dive at the pool. Once I got to the top I was scared and afraid to jump off. I was holding on for dear life to the rails. I stood up there for a long time. Sometimes I would have this feeling inside me to just go and walk to the end and jump but I couldn't get my mind and body to do it. I would inch forward but then pull back. The scary part for me is not jumping as much as it is letting go of the rail and walking to the end of the board. It took a lot to let go but once I did, I felt so much better and so proud of myself for overcoming my fear and jumping off. Right now, I want to trust God but for some reason I keep holding onto the rails. What exactly do the rails symbolize?

April 5, 2008

Five Months After Exiting My Collegiate Sporting Role

Prior to entering college, Adriana, Roxie, and Mya had dreams to play professional soccer and specifically cited playing on the U.S. Women's National Team as their ultimate goal. Julie, however, was the only one who played in the professional soccer league—yet mentioned, “I don’t think I necessarily had the dream [to play professionally].” Julie’s lens seemed to differ from the others, particularly as she looked *forward* to diminishing her athlete role. By their senior years of college, Adriana, Roxie, and Mya’s professional athlete aspirations faded when they came to the realization that “there’s no future beyond [college athletics]” (Adriana), similar to the findings in Lally and Kerr’s (2005) qualitative interview study with student-athletes about early and late career plans.

With the exception of one individual in Lally and Kerr’s (2005) study, however, their participants began to invest more of their time and energy into their academic roles at the point that they relinquished their professional athlete aspirations. A similar shift in focus did not occur with all the participants in my study. While their professional athlete aspirations declined, Adriana and Roxie were still exclusively invested in their athlete roles while in college. Mya was the only one who specifically mentioned a mindset shift as she invested more in her academic role while pursuing her bachelor’s degree. Mya’s investment in her academic role perhaps allowed her to make a smoother transition to life after sport. It appeared that the participants’ levels of anticipation and preparation for the transition out of collegiate soccer influenced their transition experiences.

“I want to stay here longer.” (Adriana)

“I was ready to find more self-worth within myself outside of athletics.” (Julie)

“I went down a very dark path.” (Roxie)

“I was excited for the new journey.” (Mya)

Whereas multiple Division I student-athletes in Navarro's (2014) study cited participation in organized events and professional development opportunities (e.g., practicums, internships, etc.) outside of the classroom as key to their career construction processes, the participants in my study mentioned a lack of awareness of opportunities available and/or limited time to focus on anything other than their sport and their studies. Mya, however, specifically placed a strong emphasis on the help and assistance she received from her athletic academic advisor for choosing a major and career, which was also a common theme among the athletes in Navarro's (2014) study. Though some of the athletes in Navarro's (2014) study described pressure from athletic academic advisors and coaches to maintain eligibility, none of the athletes in my study indicated eligibility pressures from athletic department staff.

It was not until the participants graduated and experienced life after sport that they were able to get a taste of what they termed, "normal life" (i.e., life without the demands of being a student-athlete). Although Mya worked while she was still a student-athlete, she still did not fully experience "normal life" until soccer was done. For Adriana, Julie, and Roxie, graduate school appeared to serve as somewhat of a "latency period." Erikson (1956) referred to a "latency period" as a time when the individual is able to delay the full transition into adulthood by first "go[ing] to school" and preparing for life as an adult rather than being thrust into it (p. 66). As Adriana said, "I feel like I had a transition period with grad school. . . . I feel like it helped me transition a little smoother to the real world instead of going from here you are to here you're not." As one of the transition phases, Bridges (1991) referred to the time in between as the "neutral zone," "the limbo between the old sense of identity and the new" (p. 8). However, as mentioned previously, while the “neutral zone” existed for the participants as they were navigating additional new roles with their associated identities, they never let go of their “old sense of identity” (Bridges, 1991, p. 8) as athletes.

Adriana, Julie, and Roxie’s time in graduate school seemed to have diverse effects on each of them, however. Graduate school propelled Julie into her career and strengthened her passion for public health while Adriana and Roxie shifted from loving getting back to their athletic roots to later discovering that working in collegiate athletics was *definitely* not for them. Adriana and Roxie still had some additional processing and exploration to do regarding next steps after earning their master’s degrees. With three out of the four participants electing to pursue a master’s degree, I wondered about the role of graduate school in athlete transition and how it influences identity development outside of sport.

The literature demonstrates that athletes who take time to consider who they are outside of their sporting roles *while still collegiate athletes* are better prepared for their transitions to life after sport. For example, male and female athletes in Lally’s (2007) longitudinal study examining the relationship between identity and athletic retirement reported a smooth transition at the one-year post-retirement mark. The athletes said that decreasing the prominence of their athletic identities to explore other dimensions of their identities that were previously neglected in preparation for the transition to life after sport, was key to their successful transitions. On the flipside, the difficult transition experiences of the male athletes in Menke and Germany’s (2019) study support assertions that pre-retirement career planning and conversations regarding coping mechanisms for the impending transition process are advantageous for athletes prior to exiting their collegiate sporting roles.

Out of all the participants, Mya’s transition experience seemed to most closely align with the literature because she took time to work with her athletic academic advisor to select a major and minors that would help her transition into a desired career upon graduation, in addition to working her way up to a managerial role in the beauty industry while still a college athlete. Her experience was unique, however, as the majority of Division I athletes do not work while also playing collegiate sports (NCAA, 2016). Mya’s experience suggests that athletes *can* take advantage of other opportunities while also playing sports in college. In fact, 36% of men and 40% of women playing Division I sports said they would like to spend *more* time working at a job (NCAA, 2016). The demanding schedule student-athletes maintain, however, often makes it challenging for them to explore other opportunities outside of sport. For example, athletes in Lally and Kerr’s (2005) study indicated that their predominant pursuit of athletic goals early on in their collegiate careers distracted them from investing in their academic identities in preparation for careers upon athletic retirement.

While Mya’s initial transition experience appeared to be smoother than the others’, perhaps because she had an idea of what to expect from being in a career from her college-to-early-career job in the beauty industry, she returned to sports in her current role in sports marketing about seven years after college graduation. I wondered if her post-college job in the beauty industry served as her “latency period,” similar to the role graduate school may have played with the other participants. Mya mentioned that staying busy with work helped her to make the transition to life after soccer. Though Park et al.’s

(2013) systematic review of athletes' career transitions out of sport indicated that keeping busy tended to be a positive coping mechanism for athletes in transition in six different studies (Baillie, 1992; Brandão et al., 2001; Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008; Lotysz & Short, 2004; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Winterstein et al., 2001), I wondered if the busyness combined with working in an unrelated industry actually foreclosed Mya from exploring other opportunities in college that may have connected her to her passions earlier in life. If that is the case, encouraging athletes to explore other opportunities while in college should be an intentional practice whereby advisors, career consultants, coaches, and other athletic administrators take time to connect with individual athletes about their future career goals; results of personality inventories; pros and cons from an internship, job, or club meeting experience; and so forth to help them process the experiences and make applications or draw implications as they move into the future.

Athletes in Lally's (2007) study reported a smoother transition experience after they proactively decreased their identification with their athletic roles and "branched out" to focus on their studies and other areas of interest (e.g., marathon training, preparing for graduate school, etc.) before they exited their collegiate sporting role. Though some of the participants in my study branched out in various ways while in college (e.g., Adriana in a sorority and Mya working), other exploration did not occur until *after* their "trigger" moments, which primarily occurred *after* they ceased being collegiate athletes (with the exception of Mya). These findings parallel the findings in Swain (1991) about withdrawal from sport with professional male athletes. The athletes viewed exit from sport as a process rather than an event, which primarily began with their second career (with their first career as a professional athlete). Notably, while Mya appeared to have a smoother transition experience, perhaps because she took the time to "branch out" prior to the end of her competitive sporting role, at the time of the study she was still trying to figure out next steps for her life. Adriana did not "branch out" until after she graduated with her master's degree, which eventually led her to combining her passions in the form of a personal business and arriving at a place where she felt certain she was meant to be. At the 9-year post-graduation mark, Adriana and Mya were in different places of introspection, which adds a layer for the athletic identity literature to consider about the timing of "branching out" combined with the athlete's levels of maturity and career readiness.

Finding 4: Each athlete's transition experience remained unique and did not align with an overall model or expectation.

The other night was a really powerful night for me and really just broke me down. I was really challenged in my thinking with how I look at performing and winning in soccer and in life with other things. I've been so driven by performance and winning my whole life and I thought I had it under control since soccer has been over and I've worked on chilling out a bit with the need to win and "just play for fun." Being with a bunch of athletes and using my soccer skills has really brought my competitiveness out, and I'm basically unburying the root issue that never got uprooted; I just covered it up.

June 7, 2010

FCA Missions Trip in Bobbio Pellice, Italy

Three Years, Seven Months After Exiting My Collegiate Sporting Role

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Though the immediate transition to life after sport is known to produce varying degrees of emotions such as anticipation and excitement versus anxiety and depression, the literature is sparse regarding the *extended* transition experiences of *female* athletes. As demonstrated in the current study, a critical life event (i.e., a life situation that brings about change for the individual, as defined in the literature by Danish et al., 1993) occurred at the time the participants disengaged from their sporting roles; however, their transitions to life after sport did not happen in isolation from other life events. There were other critical life events happening to the participants that coincided with their "retirement" from athletics (e.g., graduation, starting a career or graduate school, moving, joining a new team, beginning/ending a romantic relationship, etc.). Correspondingly, the participants experienced additional critical life events (e.g., starting careers, getting married, becoming mothers, etc.) in the *extended* transition spaces.

According to Wylleman et al.'s (2004) literature on career transitions in sport, considering sports termination from a lifespan or process perspective, rather than a one-time event, "put the spot light [*sic*] on the role and influence of 'non-athletic' transitions which (may) affect the development of the athletic career, including those transitions at psychological, psychosocial, academic and vocational level" (p. 15). While each participant had a unique experience, her identity was simultaneously influenced by athletic and non-athletic critical life events at the time she exited her competitive sporting role and throughout the *extended* transition space. Therefore, addressing or grouping the individuals' unique experiences as single transition moments is impractical. With the exception that returning to their athletic roots helped recalibrate the athletic aspects of their identities after they became mothers, each athlete's experience remained unique and resistant to an overall model or expectation that could be applied across all female collegiate athletes.

"I've gotten more able to see the big picture and not so competitive." (Adriana)

"Switch my viewpoint of what an athlete was." (Julie)

"I haven't had my last game." (Roxie)

"I don't have time to get hurt." (Mya)

The participants in this study described a sense of excitement and anticipation with the end of their collegiate sporting roles, specifically citing a desire to be "normal" and pursue other opportunities they did not have a chance to while they were college athletes. Julie's half-marathon near the time she began graduate school, and after exiting her professional athlete role, is an example of a significant identity development moment. Julie said, "I've really started to figure out who Julie is, what motivates me, [and] really reflect a lot more on my own internal thoughts and feelings with no external factors." After Adriana realized that working in the athletic department was not a fit for her, she started working with the career center at her university and found a company who celebrated her athletic approach to life. Mya voluntarily waived a fifth year of eligibility from her medical redshirt to start her career and life with her now husband. Though Adriana, Julie, and Mya experienced their own respective challenges with the transition to life after sport, their experiences suggest that the transition may not always be as traumatic as much of the athletic identity and transition literature details.

Paradoxically, the desire to become “normal” was also met with differing levels of challenge for the participants in the current study when the reality of normalcy did not meet their expectations. In particular, Roxie reported *extended* challenges with transitioning and adjusting to her career and personal life after sport due to the loss of her athlete role and the lack of social support. Roxie’s experiences paralleled similar experiences identified in the athletic transition literature. For example, former Division I male African American collegiate athletes in Beamon and Bell (2011) and Beamon’s (2012) ethnographic study of the societal processes and pressures affecting athletes transitioning out of collegiate sport and into their careers detailed negative and distressing experiences, which included depression, suicidal thoughts, grief, shame, alcohol, and feelings compared to loss and/or death. Jewett et al.’s (2018) narrative inquiry with a former semi-elite and university female athlete who competed in an undisclosed, “time-based sport” detailed the athlete’s development of an adjustment disorder that resulted in anxiety and depression after exiting her collegiate sporting role and graduating from the university, though the athlete turned to counseling rather than alcohol and drugs. Though Roxie did not liken her transition experience to a “social death” or detail suicidal intentions as in Beamon and Bell (2011) and Beamon (2012), her reaction to the end of collegiate athletics was more acute than the other participants’ as she began using alcohol and drugs to avoid dealing with the loss of sport and to “physically release my emotions.” Roxie’s reaction to the conclusion of collegiate soccer highlights possible additional dimensions for *female* athletes in non-revenue producing sports that are often overlooked in the athletic identity and transition literature.

The participants also discussed identity challenges associated with playing soccer in their post-college lives. Literature by Stambulova (2000) highlighted the inner struggle and conflict between “what the [athlete] is [and] what he/she ought to be or wants to be” (p. 589). Laure and Meline (2018) noted the female athletes’ tendencies to compare themselves to what they used to look like or perform like as collegiate athletes. Roxie stated, “When I play, and I do bad, then I feel bad about myself. And it wasn’t worth feeling, so bad. . . . So that’s . . . another reason that I had to switch and get out of it.” Many of the participants’ comments about their performances on the soccer field after “retirement” related to feelings of failure associated with thoughts of, “I used to be able to do this and I can’t anymore” (Julie) and not being able to meet societal expectations of being previous athletes in their sport. Julie’s comments were consistent with the experiences of ex-professional tennis players in Stier’s (2007) study who “were forced to cope with people’s reactions both toward who they once *were* and what they are *now*” (p. 107). What remains unclear is whether cultural expectations of the playing abilities of former athletes exist, whether they reflect athletes’ perceptions, or some combination of the two.

As illustrated throughout their individual case reports, the emotional and social adaptation aspect of the transition was the most challenging part for the participants in the current study, which echoed the findings in Menke and Germany (2019). Emotional and social adaptation challenges were also found in a quantitative study about transition out of elite sport with Swiss, Danish, and Polish athletes (Kuettel, 2017). My participants’ struggles primarily involved the emotional impact of strongly identifying with their athlete role for their entire lives and then, suddenly, with a blow of a whistle, it ended.

While their collegiate athlete roles came to a close, their athletic identities remained, and they were left to figure out how to cope with the loss of a role they had occupied since their youth.

For the athletes in Kuettel et al.'s (2017) study, the adaptation process took an average of nine months. The career transition period for former male and female elite athletes from various sports (football, ice hockey, handball, track-and-field, rowing, judo) from the Czech Republic in Kadlcik and Flemr's (2008) study about the process of sport career termination ranged from two months to two-or-three years. Two hundred and sixty retired collegiate, elite, and professional male and female athletes in Baillie's (1992) study about preparation and adjustment to retirement from competitive sports averaged two years, though some athletes reported the adjustment and coping process lasting up to 10 years post-retirement.

The reported timelines of these aforementioned studies are perplexing as, at the time of this study, Adriana (age 34) found herself and her passion roughly nine years after she graduated from college with her bachelor's degree, which occurred about seven years after her "trigger" moment. Close to seven years after she graduated with her first bachelor's degree and five years into her profession, Julie (age 29) was still reflecting on her passion, purpose, and how to align her passion with purpose to have an impact on others—about six years after her "trigger" moment. Nearly 16 years since she graduated with her bachelor's degree, Roxie (age 38) was still asking herself why she did not keep pursuing soccer, "*the* only thing I know." Toward the end of Roxie's five to seven year "dark path" was when she had her "trigger" moment, about six years after her undergraduate graduation. After finding her career in sports marketing about seven years after she graduated, Mya (age 32) admitted that she was still unsure of what she wanted to do. Her timeline put her close to 11 years since exiting her collegiate sporting role and nearly 13 years since her “trigger” moment.

Initially, my findings suggest that, for three of the participants who never played professional sports, their timelines for withdrawal from collegiate sports may parallel withdrawal from professional athletics. For example, the participants in the current study appeared to navigate through each of Drahota and Eitzen’s (1998) modified stages of role exit—original doubts, seeking alternatives, the turning point, creating the ex-role (withdrawal)—like the professional athletes in their study; however, based on the data, they did not chronologically progress through the stages of the model. With the exception of Julie, who was a former professional athlete, the progression among the stages varied and was unique for each individual.

With the participants at differing points in their post-collegiate transition journeys, and with every journey so individualized (as evidenced in their individual case reports), I would not recommend a stage model of human transition for this particular population. Though there were commonalities across the case reports, particularly returning to their athletic roots to recalibrate the athletic aspects of their identities after becoming mothers, there was simply too much complexity in the *extended* transition space for a stage model.

Benefits of Insider Research

From the beginning of this study, there was a mutual ease of conversation, and an automatic trust extended to me as the researcher because I was one of them. This trust enabled the participants to freely open up to me about *very* personal aspects of their journeys and experiences transitioning to life after competitive soccer. This mutual trust also enabled me to be vulnerable with the participants about *my* athletic journey and the struggles I encountered along the way. We learned from each other, and the people we were going into the study came out of the study as better versions of ourselves. Like my participants, I leave this study with a deeper sense of confidence in who I am as an athlete and mother. I have a better understanding of how my athletic identity benefits and *translates* to my post-sport life. While not a prerequisite for athletic identity and transition research, my research experience made me curious about the methodological implications of athletes processing their transition experiences with an experienced, fellow former athlete, as a way to better serve athletes in transition.

Implications for Higher Education

The findings from this qualitative multiple case study have significant implications for higher education in the areas of research, theory, and practice.

Research

There is very limited empirical research about the post-collegiate *extended* experiences of Division I *female* athletes. Rather, the majority of the research pertaining to transitions from post-collegiate athletics focuses on professional athletes and more specifically, former professional male athletes. Even with respect to male athletes, the research is limited regarding the *extended* transitions of athletes one to two decades or more after the end of their competitive sporting role. This omission in the literature negates the importance of understanding how transitioning out of collegiate athletics may affect the athlete’s post-collegiate experiences through the influences on their athletic identities, a gap this study sought to address. The length of time post-retirement in my study produced different kinds of findings than other studies applying shorter timeframes as a lens when considering transition out of collegiate or competitive athletics.

Although the NCAA has a branch dedicated specifically to research and a stated focus on life after the game, they do not have a database of former athletes and, due to federal regulations, cannot ask member institutions for lists of alumni contacts to conduct research in these areas (M. Miller, personal communication, September 5, 2018). This further complicates research on the experiences of collegiate athletes after completing college sports. To the extent possible, the NCAA conducts research about every four years through their GOALS survey to learn about the experiences and well-being of *current* student-athletes. As new issues continuously emerge for collegiate athletes, such as student-athlete well-being, mental health, concussions, nutrition, etc., collecting once every four years creates challenges in comparing findings and implementing policy recommendations. The NCAA states that approximately 20,000 student-athletes across their three divisions participate in the GOALS survey each year (NCAA, n.d.b.). With more than 460,000 NCAA student-athletes (NCAA, n.d.c.), a response rate of less than 5% of the student-athlete population makes generalizability a challenge and a concern.

Considering that the various instruments utilized to measure athletic identity, athlete well-being, and contentment with life after sport are quantitative in nature and primarily focus on *current* student-athletes rather than *former* student athletes (see, for example, AIMS, Brewer et al., 1993; BIMS, Harrison et al., 2014; LASS, Harrison & Lawrence, 2004), researchers might develop a scale focused on the population of former Division I collegiate athletes I studied. It may be that the Pre-Interview Questionnaire that I utilized to collect initial data from the participants' three life domains—pre-college, during college, and post-college—may provide a foundation for scale development in the future. Additionally, the elicitation methods employed in this study—artifacts and interviewing the research participants in the spaces where they once played—provided a unique and novel contribution to the sport, identity, and transition literature and assisted with memory recall, meaning making, and triangulation.

This research study focused on how Division I female athletes described how transitioning out of collegiate athletics influenced their athletic identities. Thus, the outcomes of this study advance our knowledge of how Division I female athletes experience life after sport, encourage further research and discourse around the challenges of rechanneling or *translating* athletic identity in life after sport, and identify additional related areas of needed collegiate athlete research.

Theory

Though Schlossberg's (1981) Model of Human Adaptation to Transition is well-known and I expected it to apply to my research, I found that it did not fit as anticipated. The passage of time shaped how the women were able to access the particular details (8-16 years old) surrounding some of their emotions at the time of the transition. Because of this, at times, it became a challenge to ascertain the individuals' *perceptions* of the changes, the characteristics of their pre-transition and post-transition environments, and individual characteristics at the time of their transitions, which are key components in the model for defining and adapting to a transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Applying Schlossberg's model at the time of the transition for an athlete may provide more valuable application; however, I did not find it particularly useful for considering the *extended* transitions of these athletes.

Additionally, as each participant experienced, reacted, and adapted to disengagement from their competitive athlete roles (Schlossberg, 1981), social networks for support did not emerge as a key factor as it had in previous literature and studies (see Barcza-Renner et al., 2020; Chow, 2001; Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015; Stambulova et al., 2009). While participants had various pre-college, during college, and post-college support systems, none of them specifically reported discussing the immediate post-collegiate sport transition process with their support systems; although, as seen in Table 5, Julie, Roxie, and Mya indicated a level of support from their university and/or others outside the university in preparing for the impending transition. Julie mentioned her parents helped teach her about credit and the home buying process. Adriana, Roxie, and Mya cited the support of their university in graduate school with a graduate assistantship paid for by the athletic department (Adriana and Roxie) and in preparation with major selection and tutoring (Mya). Regardless, the reported interactions with support systems were far fewer than Schlossberg's theory might predict.

Table 5

Participant Pre-Interview Questionnaire: Preparation for Life After Athletics

Participant	I was prepared to transition to life after athletics.	I prepared myself to transition to life after athletics.	My university helped prepare me to transition to life after athletics.	Others outside my university helped prepare me to transition to life after athletics.
Adriana Costilow	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Disagree
Julie Parsons	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree
Roxie Hart	Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree
Mya Marie	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree

Erikson's (1956, 1963) Theory of Personality Development was relevant to the data, though not strong enough to support it serving as an *a priori* theoretical framework. I used Erikson's work primarily to support my understanding of identity theory. Considering my data in light of Erikson's theory, the child-to-adult transition was unique for each of the participants in the study. Consistent with Erikson (1956, 1963) and Schlossberg (1981), the intensity and duration of the process varied for each individual. At the time of the study, the process was still ongoing for some of the participants. Erikson (1956, 1963) mentioned that the transition ensues until the individual is able to move past their childhood identity and form or take on a new identity into adulthood. The concept of taking on a new identity and progressing through a stage of development, however, was not consistent with my findings. Though the athletes identified less with their athlete role when defined as no longer playing collegiate sports, the psychological identity aspect of how they saw themselves as athletes in the world around them after sport was consistent across their multiple life domains, particularly mother and worker.

There are other realities that may influence the variability in findings related to time for transition, however. For example, as demonstrated in Adriana's case, athletes who do not graduate in the semester of their final season may contend with an additional layer of identity renegotiation as the next semester begins and they watch from the sidelines as their teams move on without them. Roxie's case nuances the way we understand the transition to life after sport when an athlete transitions from player to coach and prolongs their athletic career through a different athletic role. Additionally, Mya's injury early in her collegiate career seemed to jumpstart the transition process earlier than the natural timing—with the expiration of collegiate eligibility.

As clearly evidenced in my study, there is a real question about whether transition—as typically defined—in athletic identity ever occurs; this brings up the question of how other researchers defined a transition period. Furthermore, the *extended* time period in my study unleashed new nuances to our understanding of post-sport transitions and the duration of time by which they occur, thereby stretching the contours and shaping the parameters of what constitutes a transition. Rather than transitioning 'out' of their athletic identities, my participants seemed to *translate* their athletic identities to their new roles outside of sport, whereby athletic identity became a touchstone rather than a model or framework for transition.

Julie's case offered additional nuances to our understanding of athlete transition research due to her emphasis on teamwork and relationships rather than competition and winning. Her different transition experience and touchstone for what “athlete” meant led me to wonder how that might shape the experience of transition, translation, and identity for athletes who prioritize relationships over competition. Does that ease the journey at all? Likewise, I am aware that I am also a former collegiate soccer player—a peer of my participants. It is possible that my membership in this group produced more nuanced questions and encouraged greater transparency about their struggles than for participants with previous researchers who may or may not have also been former athletes. Regardless of the possibilities, it seems clear from both my findings and their contrasts with the outcomes from other studies, that it is not possible (at least with our current knowledge) to apply tidy stage models to departure from competitive sport, particularly in the *extended* spaces.

Practice

The findings of this study have significant implications for the NCAA, athletic departments, and the personnel who work with current and former student-athletes, particularly at Division I institutions. The implications are presented in two separate categories: support for current student-athletes and support for former student-athletes.

Support for Current Student-Athletes

As a former collegiate athlete, I never engaged in any intentionally designed conversations about the psychological dimensions of life after sport. The majority of the conversations I had with coaches, advisors, and athletics administrators revolved around being a successful student-athlete and the importance of earning a degree for my future career. These exchanges were beneficial, but only a piece of the holistic process. As researchers and higher education professionals, we know a lot more now than we did when I was a student-athlete 13 years ago, and it is encouraging to see the NCAA open the dialogue about life after sport and student-athletes' post-collegiate experiences (Hosick, 2017). My alma mater made strides to connect athletes through online methods, and I receive fairly regular emails from my former soccer coach about how the team is doing and plans for alumni get-togethers. These are in addition to social media posts designed to drive connection and support and remind us of the great memories we shared together. These personal experiences and NCAA efforts suggest we are taking steps in the right direction, though we have much more ground to cover.

It is vital that institutions prepare current student-athletes for the impending transition to life after sport. Instituting programs for current student-athletes about role exit and *translating* themselves to life after sport would be a positive first step in the conversation. Former student-athletes who graduated from the institution should be invited back to their alma maters to talk to current athletes about life after sport in vivid reality. I suggest moderators of a panel of former student-athletes ask questions such as:

1. What were your struggles during the initial transition out of collegiate sport?
2. What struggles have you encountered in the space in between exiting your collegiate sporting role to life as you know it today?
3. What have you gone through from a psychological, emotional, and social adaptation standpoint?
4. What challenges/benefits do you experience in other areas of your life (i.e., home, work, etc.) that you believe are tied in some way to having been an athlete?

5. What significant changes did (or do) you experience in other areas of your life that challenge(d)/encourage(d) the way you felt (or feel) about yourself as a former competitive athlete (i.e., family, wellness, lifestyle, career, etc.)?
6. How do you *translate* yourself to life after sport without losing the core of who you are?
7. What can student-athletes be doing now to help set themselves up for future success in life after collegiate sport?

Though some student-athletes may not be ready to hear about some of the post-sport challenges, not building awareness by introducing them to conversations about the emotional and social adaptation processes that follow in life after sport is a failure on our part as practitioners. If anything, those simple conversations may be the lifeline an athlete needs several years down the road when they experience similar struggles—reminders that they are not alone, it is a normal part of the process, and that there is support available. If only someone had told me those things, particularly another athlete whom I respected and someone who had gone before me, I would have spent much less time thinking something was wrong with *me*, and post-sport life would have been easier to navigate. The importance of this conversation *before the end of sport* becomes magnified as we consider the implications surrounding mental health and identity foreclosure. Some of these topics may situate well in an athlete transition course offered to junior and/or senior athletes prior to exiting the institution, similar to the student-athlete success courses that many athletes at Division I institutions often take as freshmen.

The findings of this study suggest that in comparison to their non-athlete peers, collegiate athletes in the college-to-post-college transition contend with an additional layer of identity negotiation—the "hangover identity" as referred to by Ebaugh (1988). As Julie stated, "You're also having that identity of no longer being an athlete." Though the athletic transition literature encourages athletes to 'disengage' from their athletic sporting roles and develop mature career plans in preparation for the transition to life after sport (Fuller, 2014; Hill et al., 2001; Murphy et al., 1996; Navarro, 2014; Parham, 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990), my findings and the major themes from Laure and Meline (2018) suggest this guidance may be greatly oversimplified and somewhat misguided as maintaining a connection with their athletic identity emerged as a form of self-preservation. Along these lines, some suggested questions for personnel who work with athletes to consider include:

1. How do we help athletes *connect* what it is about them that makes them, their giftings, and their skillsets unique *before* they leave formal higher education?
2. Are we reminding athletes that their best is yet to come and that life does not end with their competitive sporting role?
3. Are we communicating the importance of taking time to mentally, emotionally, and socially prepare for the impending transition?
4. What resources would provide references for when they encounter challenges along the way?
5. Are we setting them up to see that they are not alone?
6. On the training ground where they have built unique life and career skills as members of a team since their youth (Chen et al., 2010; Danish, 1983; Shulman & Bowen, 2001), how do we help them *translate* themselves to the world around

them so they can be exactly who they are—athletes—while they forge pathways in new careers, places, spaces, and relationships?

7. How do we help them learn how to *interact* with others—as athletes—who also happen to be professionals in their chosen career and across their other life domains and relationships?

Another aspect of the program for current student-athletes could be assisting them with resume development, interviewing skills, and job search tactics. I would extend such program vision by opening the dialogue with the athlete about which characteristics enhance their marketability to employers. All participants mentioned similar sentiments as Adriana regarding "the importance of college athletes being able to identify their strengths, either on or off the field, and *translate* [emphasis added] those to real life." This is a specific area of focus for advisors and career counselors who work with athletes, whether inside or outside of the athletic department.

Career counselors can also help athletes connect with "athlete-friendly" employers who have a history of being supportive of their athletic mentalities and commitments to growing them into career professionals. These employers may be willing to serve as mentors for student-athletes and/or provide valuable internship experiences that work around student-athletes' rigid athletic/academic schedules and that would offer them opportunities to earn work experience and begin to develop their career identities. Additionally, my participants said they wished they had been afforded time outside of their sport to participate in other meaningful activities such as volunteering and community service. As Julie mentioned, "[it was] not necessarily about the choices but about the awareness that there [were] these opportunities." Volunteer and community service activities may help athletes better define their skills, areas of interest, and learn how to interact with others as well.

As mentioned in Fuller's (2014) meta-synchesis on the transition experiences of collegiate athletes, the importance of helping athletes "de-train" (i.e., educating them on the importance of exercise for health and wellness, including nutrition, rather than solely for competition), as well as discussing the value of athletes exploring other recreational outlets as they transition out of year-round competition contributes practical value. Julie touched on this aspect when she said she had to "switch my viewpoint of what an athlete was. . . . [and] to tell myself, 'I'm not an athlete anymore (laughs). I'm not expected to do this. . . . I don't need to be at that level.'" For all of the participants in this study, myself included, coming to the conclusion that we should exercise for health and wellness rather than for merely competition should not take upwards of 10 years to grasp. To be honest, I would not have arrived at that conclusion at the time I did had I not interacted with the other athletes in this study (about 13 years after I exited my collegiate athlete role). In addition, conversations regarding changes in body composition as athletes age and train less also need to be a part of the de-training program, particularly for *female* athletes who choose to become pregnant and birth children. This type of program would benefit from the expertise of strength and conditioning coaches, registered dietitians, and health and wellness professionals.

Finally, sports psychologists would be a benefit to the program from a psychological standpoint. I am not trained in sports psychology and therefore was unable to go deeper into the topics surrounding the mental and psychological aspects of the transition that these professionals could provide. Harrison and Lawrence's (2003) visual elicitation study with 26 Division IIA African American student-athletes may offer a starting point exercise for current Division I student-athletes working with a sports psychologist. Using the qualitative component of the Life After Sports Scale (LASS) to gauge the athletes' perceptions of the career transition process, the researchers provided a profile of a former student-athlete who graduated and included information on the athlete's athletic and academic accomplishments, career trajectory, personal life, and advice for current student-athletes. The prompt provided to the student-athletes with the profile was, "Please write your thoughts based to [*sic*] his athletic, academic, and bio story. Please relate this profile to your personal reality as a student-athlete. You have 5 minutes to express your personal feelings about this profile" (Harrison & Lawrence, 2003, p. 380). Two key findings that emerged from their study were athletes recognized that the transition to life after sport was an inevitable experience they would encounter, and a successful career transition process was possible with hard work, dedication, and a commitment to finding a major of interest.

Before moving on to discuss support for former athletes, it is vital to note that my recommendations are in no way meant to be prescriptive. Institutions have varying demographic profiles and financial resources, especially considering the various collegiate athletic divisions (e.g., NCAA Division I, II, III; National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics [NAIA]; National Junior College Athletic Association [NJCAA]). Identity renegotiations are bound to happen no matter the collegiate level. It is imperative that each institution and/or athletic department look at these implications for assisting current and former athletes in transition in conjunction with their demographic profile, culture, processes, resources, etc. While a model for human transition may not apply to this particular athlete population, it may be that more prescriptive processes or models for helping athletes preparing for transition (and in transition) could be individually developed on the backend as institutions consider the unique needs of *their* athletes combined with their respective resources. Furthermore, these recommendations may also be handled in distinct ways pending the resources available to institutions for assisting athletes. It is common knowledge that Division I institutions have a different level of financial resources (including personnel) available to support athletes. This does not preclude (nor excuse) institutions with less resources from being able to assist their athletes; it may be that resources need to be leveraged in different ways. For example, for institutions that may not have the financial resources available to develop their own programs or hire enough personnel to assist athletes, bringing in consultants who have developed programs to work with their athletes and/or train staff to assist in these conversations with their athletes may provide a similar level of support.

In addition, the NCAA serves as a central resource hub for athletes from all divisions, even including athletes who elected to play club or intramural sports (or who may simply still identify as athletes from their prior years). The After the Game section of the NCAA website offers several resources for athletes including a career center, NCAA community through LinkedIn, networking events, nutrition tips, stories from other athletes, advice, etc. that institutions can point athletes to for support. Ultimately, the goal is that the institution understands that there is a need for supporting athletes in transition, and that they, as well as the NCAA (or NAIA/NJCAA), *and* athletes share a role and responsibility in the process of athletes transitioning to life after sport.

Support for Former Student-Athletes

Just like current student-athletes need to know about the impending transition, former student-athletes need to know that they are not alone in navigating the transition process, where they can go for support, and how they can inspire and lead the generations coming after them. Regular and consistent alumni get-togethers with periodic breakout workshops for former student-athletes would be a positive first step. Not only could the alumni enjoy reconnecting with one another and watching the current athletes play, but they could select from various topics that may pertain to their life status—newly transitioned, seasoned journeyer, new mother, etc. In talking with Mya, she mentioned the value of some type of focus group at an alumni event just to hear how others had handled the transition process. The conversation could provide valuable connections, especially since alumni are at various points in their life stage journey (outside of chronological age) (Schlossberg, 1981). As my research journey has shown, spending time talking with other former Division I female soccer players who experienced the same phenomenon of exiting competitive sports provided me with a powerful source of connection, friendship, healing, and helped me better understand my own experiences through our shared experiences and the meanings we co-constructed together.

Networking with athletic alumni spans beyond university foundation departments, as athletic relationships are especially built through connection with the athlete's competitive sporting role. As Roxie said, "If we wanna get to the *real* terms, the nicer you are to me, the more money I'll donate." It is important to note the power of the athlete connection and the relationships forged through participation in sport, regardless of whether or not athletes played together on the same team. Building an alumni database takes time, and those best positioned tend to be the ones who stay for years in athletic academic centers and keep stats on their athletes. To many of us (current/former student-athletes), those people become family. The connection between athletes and their athletic academic center community is a huge asset for athletic departments when it comes to staying in contact with athletes and providing resources and support during the transitions in the years beyond college. A simple call to check in at various points after the athlete graduates would help athletic departments extend into spaces that are ripe for connection, support, and maybe even future donations to the university and/or athletic department. Relationships increase the chances of a student-athlete reaching out for help as this population is known to be less apt to do so (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

Ultimately, the primary shift that needs to visibly occur is for teams and athletic departments to show that they are even more proud of the humans their athletes become, aside from what they achieved as student-athletes. It would also help athletic departments to solidify their commitment to the title, “student-athlete.” Highlighting past athletic success only goes so far and misses the essence of who the person becomes after sport, or the person that sport helped them become, depending on the athlete’s perspective or experience. A simple idea would be a social media campaign aimed at highlighting where athletes are now and their activities since graduation, including how they *translated* the athletic aspects of their identities to life after sport. Considering that retention and graduation rates are academia’s key measures of success, I would think that touting the amazing humans produced by teams and athletic departments would be a key selling point, particularly in the increasingly competitive collegiate recruitment environment.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study are specific to former Division I female student-athletes who played soccer. This study was conducted in a specific region of the United States that may have differing demands, environments, demographic profiles, and institutional diversity for student-athletes than other regions. Additionally, not all female athletes become mothers. Readers of this study should consider the boundaries or delimitations of the study discussed in the methodology section in Chapter III and analyze the characteristics of the participants and the descriptions of their circumstances and experiences to determine the transferability to other former student-athletes.

The individual and fluid nature of transitions meant that the participants were in various states of transition and translation, which shaped the data collected. Some were still in an active transition process while others were still processing their own transitions at the time of data collection, which, at times, made processing their experiences with me difficult. Because this study required participants to recall past memories and experiences, the passage of time shaped how they were able to access particular details about how the past influenced their perspectives. Due to the retrospective nature of the study, the inability to recall past memories and the feelings associated with their experiences, however, became a limitation at various points in the study since the data collected were primarily driven by the participants’ responses to the interview questions. At the same time, while the length of time since their exit from sport may have affected memory recall, it also broadened the field of meaning making that was possible as participants reflected on more life events since their athletic careers ended. This study focused on their meaning making of that transition, and people can create cohesive narratives of transition through retrospective meaning making (Creswell, 2014).

Recommendations for Future Research

The research presented in this study encourages and extends ongoing research dialogue about athletic identity and life after sport. The opportunities for future research in this subject area are extensive. First, to gain a better understanding of the athletes' unique experiences by gender, sport, university, region, etc., future studies should include larger samples of athletes (male and female) across different sports and institutions throughout the United States. Second, studying athletes who transferred to Division I institutions and athletes who maintain semi/professional status at the time of data collection would provide additional lenses to view the phenomenon of leaving collegiate sport. Third, future analysis considering gender norms for the sense making for how women can "be" as athletes when moving into professional workplace settings as they focus on new priorities may offer additional insight and understanding to their unique experiences. Fourth, applying transition models as guidelines and touchstones rather than prescriptive frameworks may be of value.

Recall is a challenge in all retrospective studies and the series of interviews in this study design did seem to assist my participants in deepening their recollections, including the elicitation methods employed in the first interview. However, to address the limitations regarding fluidity and memory recall, future researchers are encouraged to consider longitudinal research in this area, beginning with data collection earlier in the athlete's career and continuing into life after sport. Collecting data from a lifespan perspective, beginning with interviewing athletes in high school who are deciding on which college to attend and at each of the key transition moments would help to capture the athletes' perspectives at the time of the transition. For example, the transition to their freshman year of college, required major selection by their fifth semester, their senior year in preparation for transitioning out of their student-athlete role, at the time of transition upon graduation, six months after graduation, a year after graduation, and then in appropriate time increments. Additionally, interviewing significant others (e.g., parents, caregivers, spouses, children) and those who the athlete considered as impactful on their transition journey (e.g., coaches, advisors, teammates, counselors) may contribute additional insight to the athlete's process.

Regarding motherhood, there is fresh space for future studies to consider how former competitive female athletes transitioned into motherhood, both for those who become biological mothers (due to the changes experienced in the mother's body with pregnancy, delivery, and post-partum) and for those who take other paths to mothering. The notion of female athletes becoming mothers is somewhat of a taboo topic and the literature is insufficient to bring to light their experiences, particularly if returning to sport is not their objective. When I was a young girl, many of the women on the U.S. Women's National Team waited until retirement to have children (e.g., Julie Foudy, Mia Hamm, Michelle Akers). Now, we see female athletes having children in the midst of their careers (e.g., Alex Morgan, Christie Rampone, Sydney Leroux). All of the women in my study waited for several years after graduation to have children, though the circumstances surrounding their decisions remain unknown. I would be interested in further considering the circumstances surrounding motherhood and the role of athletic identity, particularly when/if athletes' children begin playing sports, and extending the body image work of Laure and Meline (2018) with respect to the female athlete's body composition changes in the *extended* transition spaces, particularly after they give birth. I am unclear at this point whether this would best begin with an autoethnographic exploration or some other methodological approach.

In addition to my prior recommendations, I encourage future researchers to consider the role that personality type, resiliency, grit, mindset, shame, faith, and coping mechanisms play in the athlete's transition process. The topics of DiSC profiling and resiliency in sports and the works of Angela Duckworth, Carol S. Dweck, and Brené Brown may be of particular interest.

Conclusion

This final chapter included the cross-case analysis findings of the study. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how transitioning out of collegiate athletics influenced the athletic identities of Division I female athletes who were no longer pursuing competitive athletics. The multiple case study focused on individual athletes' narrated experiences of their journeys 8-16 years after they exited their collegiate athlete roles. The participants were from two South Central research (Division I) institutions in the same state. I analyzed each of the interviews and artifacts provided by the participants utilizing members' meanings, coding, and analytic memos. Four main findings and two sub-findings emerged from the data that included:

- Finding 1: The initial operationalization of athletic identity was influenced by each individual's attributes, personality, preferences, opportunities, and life experiences.

- Finding 2: Athletes physically transitioned out of competitive sport, but not out of their identities as athletes.
    a. Sub-Finding 2a: The concept of “athletic identity” was too unidimensional to capture women’s multidimensional experiences of exiting collegiate soccer.
    b. Sub-Finding 2b: New motherhood required reassessing identity, including recalibration of athletic identity.
- Finding 3: The women’s level of anticipation and preparation for the transition out of collegiate sport contributed to the ease of the transition experience participants described.
- Finding 4: Each athlete’s transition experience remained unique and did not align with an overall model or expectation.

I discussed the findings in relation to the current literature and addressed the benefits of insider research and implications for higher education with respect to research, theory, and practice. The chapter concluded with the limitations of the study as well as my recommendations for future research.

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"I hated every minute of training, but I said, 'Don't quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion.'"

– Muhammad Ali

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SUMMARY REFERENCES

“Believe me; the reward is not so great without the struggle.”

– Wilma Rudolph

1. Interview with Monica Miller, September 5, 2018, Associate Director, Strategic and Former Student-Athlete Outreach at the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions: This Recruitment Questionnaire serves as the first point of data collection for this study. The purpose of this questionnaire is to learn more about you as a prospective participant and ensure that you meet the criteria for participating in the study. Please respond to each of the questions that follow.

Contact Information

1. Please provide your personal contact information.
    a. First Name
    b. Last Name
    c. Email Address
    d. Phone Number

Criterion Questions

2. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (2018), “A student-athlete is a student whose enrollment was solicited by a member of the

athletics staff or other representative of athletics interests with a view toward the student's ultimate participation in the intercollegiate athletics program. Any other student becomes a student-athlete only when the student reports for an intercollegiate squad that is under the jurisdiction of the athletics department, as specified in Constitution 3.2.4.5. A student is not deemed a student-athlete solely on the basis of prior high school athletics participation" (p. 62). Based on this definition, do you meet the NCAA's definition of a former student-athlete?

   a. Yes
   b. No

3. Did you have the dream and/or potential of playing professionally in your sport at the time you entered college?
   a. Yes
   b. No
4. Were you recruited out of high school by the university you attended for a full, primarily athletic-based scholarship (some academic scholarship money is appropriate)?
   a. Yes
   b. No
5. Did you play all years of athletic eligibility in a woman's team sport—soccer, softball, or basketball—at a single, Division I NCAA member institution while on scholarship?
   a. Yes
   b. No

6. Did you play college sports at some point between the years of 1999 and 2012 at the institution you attended and graduated from?
    a. Yes
    b. No
7. Are you currently pursuing, or do you intend to pursue professional athlete status in the future?
    a. Yes
    b. No
8. Do you have any apprehensions or see any barriers in your ability to complete this study?
    a. Yes
    b. No
9. Please explain your apprehensions and/or foreseeable barriers to your ability to complete this study. (open response if Q8 is answered, "Yes")
10. Why are you interested in participating in this research study? (open response)

Demographic Questions

11. What is your age?
    a. 32
    b. 33
    c. 34
    d. 35
    e. 36

    f. 37
    g. 38
    h. 39
    i. 40
    j. 41
    k. 42
    l. 43
    m. Other (please specify)
    n. Prefer not to answer.

12. What is your race/ethnicity? (select all that apply)
    a. American Indian or Alaskan Native
    b. Asian or Pacific Islander
    c. Black, Non-Hispanic
    d. Hispanic
    e. White, Non-Hispanic
    f. Race/Ethnicity Unknown
    g. Other (please specify)
    h. Prefer not to answer.

13. What citizenship do you have? (select all that apply)
    a. Africa
    b. Asia (excluding Middle and Near East)
    c. Canada
    d. Europe and Near East

    e. Latin America and the Caribbean
    f. Middle East
    g. United States (excluding territories)
    h. Prefer not to answer.

14. What is your marital status?
    a. Single (never been married)
    b. Married
    c. Divorced
    d. Widowed
    e. Other (please specify)
    f. Prefer not to answer.

15. Do you have children?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Prefer not to answer.

16. What university did you attend?
    a. A UNIVERSITY
    b. B UNIVERSITY

17. What women’s team sport did you play in college? (select all that apply)
    a. Soccer
    b. Softball
    c. Basketball
    d. Other (please specify)

18. What is the highest level of education you obtained?
    a. Bachelor’s degree
    b. Master’s degree
    c. Doctorate degree
    d. Professional degree
    e. Other (please specify)
    f. Prefer not to answer.
19. What is your employment status?
    a. Employed, full-time
    b. Employed, part-time
    c. Unemployed, looking for work
    d. Unemployed, not looking for work
    e. Retired
    f. Student
    g. Disabled
    h. Prefer not to answer.
20. Please fill out the form based on your current job. (open response if Q9 lists employed full-time or part-time)
    a. Employer (open response)
    b. Job Title (open response)

APPENDIX B

PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Contact Information

1. Please provide your personal contact information.
    a. First Name
    b. Last Name
    c. Email Address
    d. Phone Number
2. To protect your privacy, what would you like your name to be when I write up the research (i.e., your pseudonym)?
    a. First Name
    b. Last Name

Pre-College Sport Questions

Instructions: Please respond to each of the questions that follow as openly and thoroughly as you are able based on your **pre-college** sport experiences.

3. When did you first start playing sports? (open response)
4. How did you come to select your sport? (open response)
5. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: My family was heavily involved in my athletic life ***prior to college***.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

During College Sport Questions

***Instructions*:** Please respond to each of the questions that follow as openly and thoroughly as you are able based on your **during college** sport experiences.

6. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: My family was heavily involved in my athletic life ***during college***.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

7. Describe how much time per week you dedicated to the following activities while playing ***in season*** playing collegiate sports: academics, athletics, other. (open response)
8. Describe how much time per week you dedicated to the following activities while playing ***out of season*** playing collegiate sports: academics, athletics, other. (open response)
9. Describe your experiences with balancing your academic and athletic roles while playing collegiate sport. (open response)
10. Describe any significant, non-sports-related interactions you had while playing collegiate sport (e.g., relationships, activities, responsibilities, etc.). (open response)
11. When thinking back to when you were competing in college sports, did you think of yourself as mostly an athlete? A student? Some mix of both? Please describe what this looked like/felt like for you.

Post-College Sport Questions

Instructions**:** Please respond to each of the questions that follow as openly and thoroughly as you are able based on your **post-college** sport experiences.

12. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I am an athlete.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

13. What athletic accomplishments are you most proud of? Why? (open response)
14. Indicate your level of satisfaction with your prior athletic accomplishments.

Extremely dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Extremely satisfied
1	2	3	4	5

15. Discuss your thoughts related to your former student-athlete profile(s) from your university's website and/or media guide that was provided to you. (open response)
16. You previously answered the question, ***When thinking back to when you were competing in college sports, did you think of yourself as mostly an athlete? A student? Some mix of both? Please describe what this looked like/felt like for you.*** How does your response to this question compare with your present life now that you are no longer pursuing professional athlete status? (open response)
17. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I was prepared to transition to life after athletics.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

18. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I prepared myself to transition to life after athletics.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

19. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: My university helped prepare me to transition to life after athletics.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

20. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: Others outside my university helped prepare me to transition to life after athletics.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

21. What do you believe is the athlete’s role in preparing for life outside athletics? (open response)
22. What do you believe is the university’s role in preparing student-athletes for life outside athletics? (open response)
23. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I am competitive.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

24. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: My competitive nature affects the other areas of my life (i.e., work, home, etc.).

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

25. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I view outcomes to my choices in life through a lens of wins or losses.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

26. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: Athletics influenced my career choice(s).

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

27. Describe what you find most important in life presently. (open response)

28. Indicate your level of satisfaction with your life after leaving your sporting role.

Extremely dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Extremely satisfied
1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE: INTERVIEW I

1. Describe what you are feeling right now as you stand on the field where you used to play college sports.
2. Describe 1-2 of your favorite experiences as a collegiate student-athlete.
3. What was it like to be a student-athlete at your university, in your sport?
4. What feelings do you associate with playing your sport during college?
5. Based on your experience, how would you describe the culture of intercollegiate athletics at your alma mater?
6. Tell me about your last collegiate game.
7. Describe your feelings and emotions following your last collegiate game.
8. Take me through your journey to the realization that you were headed toward the end of your competitive sporting role.
9. Is there anything that you would like to elaborate on?
10. Is there anything that I did not ask that you would like to talk about?

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE: INTERVIEW II

1. Describe your experience with transitioning to life after athletics.
2. Tell me about your life after intercollegiate athletics.
3. What ***challenges*** do you experience in other areas of your life (i.e., work, home, etc.) that you believe are tied in some way to having been an athlete?
4. What ***benefits*** do you experience in other areas of your life (i.e., work, home, etc.) that you believe are tied in some way to having been an athlete?
5. What significant changes did you experience in the other areas of your life after you left your competitive sporting role (i.e., family, wellness, lifestyle, career, etc.)?
6. Describe your feelings and emotions when you visit your alma mater and watch the current team play the sport you previously played.
7. What role does athletics play in your life now?
8. Describe where you are at in the transition process presently.
9. Knowing what you know now about transitioning to life after athletics, what advice or recommendations would you offer to a current Division I student-athlete?
    a. Probe: Is there anything specific you would tell a ***female*** student-athlete?
10. Is there anything that you would like to elaborate on?
11. Is there anything that I did not ask that you would like to talk about?

APPENDIX E

ARTIFACT PROMPT

***Instructions*:** For the third interview, I invite you to bring one artifact (e.g., photograph, drawing, journal, video, audio recording, song, document, heirloom, word, phrase, verse, etc.) that you believe represents your transition from competitive athletics to life as you know it today.

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW GUIDE: INTERVIEW III

Artifact Questions

1. Tell me about the artifact you brought
    a. What is the significance of your artifact?
    b. What is the story behind your artifact?
    c. What emotions does the artifact evoke for you?
2. Now that you have had time to process, what else do you consider important to understand about your experience with transitions after college athletics?
3. Is there anything that you would like to elaborate on?
4. What have I not asked you that I should have?

Interview Questions

5. So, how would you identify yourself now? Put another way, who are you?
6. Tell me about what you find most important in life presently.
7. In your Pre-Interview Questionnaire, you indicated that you were _______ satisfied with your life after leaving your sporting role. Can you elaborate more about your selection?
8. Knowing what you know now about transitioning to life after athletics, what advice or recommendations would you offer to a current, Division I student-athlete?

    a. Is there anything specific you would tell a Division I ***female*** student-athlete?

9. Knowing what you know now about transitioning to life after athletics, what advice or recommendations would you offer to universities / athletic departments to help prepare student-athletes for life outside of athletics?
    a. Why should the university care (or should they)?
    b. Based on your experience, do you believe athletic departments are setting up students for success?
    c. What is the university's role in the life of the student-athlete once they've graduated or used up all of their eligibility?
    d. How should / could the university help, specifically? What would [have] appealed to you?
10. What would you say to a student-athlete who is 100% set on becoming a professional athlete about life after athletics?
11. Is there anything else you would like to elaborate on?
12. Is there anything that I did not ask that you would like to talk about?

APPENDIX F

INFORMED CONSENT

Life After the Game: A Multiple-Case Study of Former Division I Female Student-Athletes' Transitions in Athletic Identity After Collegiate Sport

Name of student researcher: Niccole Leanne Miller
Telephone number: [redacted]
Email address: [redacted]

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this doctoral dissertation research study with the student researcher, a graduate student and PhD Candidate at Oklahoma State University. This form outlines the purposes of this doctoral dissertation research study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant. The purposes of this research study are the following:

1. To explore transitions in athletic identity through the experiences of former Division I female student-athletes who are no longer pursuing competitive athletics.

2. To gain knowledge from a recruitment survey, pre-interview survey, individual interviews, and artifacts about former Division I female student-athletes' narrated experiences of their journeys 7-17 years after they exited their competitive athletic role.

The time commitment for you includes a 5-minute Recruitment Survey, a 1-2-hour Pre-Interview Survey, and three 60-90 minute individual interviews with artifact collection. Follow-up may be conducted to clarify any questions later through member checking. Data collection for the first interview will take place at the field or court where you used to play at your university. A lunch up to the amount of $15.00 will be provided for you at the first interview. The second and third interviews will take place at the location of your choice.

As the researcher, I agree to meet the following conditions:

1. I will audio record our interview with your permission and transcribe the recording for the purpose of accuracy. I will give you a copy of the transcript so that you may see that I have captured your words correctly. The audio recording will be de-identified and deleted at the end of the study, up until the point when the data is no longer needed, upon which time, they will be destroyed.

2. I will assign a fictitious name (i.e., pseudonym) on the transcript or you may choose one yourself. Your real name will not be used at any point of information collection or in my dissertation, future publications, or future presentations.

As participant in this research study, you are entitled to know the nature of my research. You are free to decline to participate, and you are free to stop the interviews or withdraw from the study at any time. No penalty exists for withdrawing your participation. Feel free to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the doctoral dissertation research study and the methods I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me. You can direct all questions to me at [redacted] or [redacted], or to my doctoral advisor, Dr. Kerri Kearney at [redacted] or [redacted] [redacted]. Questions regarding your rights as a participant should be directed to the Oklahoma State University Institutional Research Board at 223 Scott Hall, (405) 744-3377, or irb@okstate.edu.

Please indicate your willingness to participate in this research process by checking one of the following statements and providing your signature below. The signatures below indicate an acknowledgment of the terms described above.

______I wish to participate in the research described above, have read this consent form, and agree to be audio recorded.

______I wish to participate in the research described above, have read this consent form, but I do not agree to be audio recorded.

______I do not wish to participate in the research described above.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT DATE

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT DATE

(The participant signs two copies; the participant receives a copy, and the student researcher retains a copy)

Approved:
Protocol #: ED-19-72

VITAE

Niccole Leanne Miller

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: "I AM AN ATHLETE": A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF DIVISION I FEMALE ATHLETES' POST-SPORT TRANSITIONS AND INFLUENCES ON ATHLETIC IDENTITY

Major Field: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Higher Education

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Higher Education at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in November, 2020.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Business Administration at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2010.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Marketing at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2008.

Experience:

University of Central Oklahoma:

2018 – Present	Director of Student Success & Retention
2012 – Present	Adjunct Instructor
2016 –2018	Manager of Advisement, Admissions, & Testing
2014 –2016	Student Success Advisor
2012 – 2014	Academic Advisor I, II

Oklahoma State University:

2011	Adjunct Instructor
2007 – 2011	Student-Athlete Tutor
2009 – 2010	Graduate Assistant

Professional Memberships:

Oklahoma Academic Advising Association (OACADA)