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The Transitioning Experiences of Division I and III Collegiate Athletes

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Abstract

Athletic transition has been explored in sport management and sport psychology literature primarily focusing on transitioning into collegiate athletics, voluntary and involuntary transitions out of collegiate sport, and transitioning out of professional sport. This study compared NCAA Division I and III collegiate athletes' perceptions regarding the athletic transition process. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to uncover the perceptions and experiences surrounding the transition process into, during, and out of collegiate sport (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Schlossberg, 1981). Three themes emerged from the data: Moving In: Compatibility, Moving Through: Identity Directly Tied to Sport, and Moving Out: Redefining Oneself. More specifically, the participants explained how coaches and proximity to home helped foster a sense of compatibility in institution choice. All of the participants believed sport was important to their lives and tied to their current identity. Lastly, participants detailed the upcoming transition out of sport either was an opportunity for growth or accompanied with uncertainty and sadness surrounding this significant life change. These findings highlight the responsibility of intercollegiate athletic departments and institutions to provide assistance in these transitional processes through coach, administrator, and athlete education and programming.

Keywords: *athletic identity, collegiate athletes, mental health, transition*

Research has noted many times that mental health concerns accompany collegiate athletes' transition out of sport process due to the stark loss of their most salient identity – their athletic identity (Lally, 2007; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Smith et al., 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019). This sense of loss can be accompanied with a range of emotions, physical repercussions, and severity from post-retirement sadness (Saxe et al., 2017) to changes in moods, confusion, loneliness, isolation, body image issues, grief, weight gain or loss, disordered eating, severe depression, anxiety, and even suicide ideation (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Fuller, 2014; Griffiths et al., 2016; Lally, 2007; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016; McKnight et al., 2009; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010; Papathomas et al., 2018; Petitipas et al., 2009; Smith & Hardin, 2018).

These aforementioned difficulties could be due to the overemphasis of the athletic role or athletic identity, “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role” (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). For collegiate athletes, ties to athletic identity can cause personal and social identity shifts, and further,

those with elevated levels of athletic identity can experience identity issues when leaving their sport (e.g., Beamon, 2012; Fuller, 2014; Kidd et al., 2018; Lally, 2007; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019; Warehime et al., 2017). For example, Smith and Hardin (2018) found in their sample of 10 former female collegiate athletes that participants discussed depression, sadness, and issues understanding their identity and worth without their sports. Similarly, Beamon (2012) found in his sample of 20 African-American revenue-generating Division I (DI) collegiate athletes that participants overidentified with athletics, which caused problems transitioning out of their sports.

Intercollegiate athletic departments and the NCAA currently are leaving many collegiate athletes underprepared to transition out of sport (Miller & Buttell, 2018; Park et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Miller and Buttell (2018) stated, “There is a need for the NCAA to encourage athletic departments to provide exiting student athletes with a retirement planning psycho-educational intervention to enhance a resilient transition from a

life of competitive athletics into a life without elite sport” (p. 54). Previous work in professional sports has shown psycho-education interventions focused on increasing athletes’ resilience upon their athletic transition diminish the chances of encountering mental health concerns (Knights et al., 2016; Lally, 2007; Lavallee, 2005; Park et al., 2013; Wippert & Wippert, 2008).

There has been a call for more research in the field of athletic identity, transitioning, and interventions. Specifically, Park et al. (2013) completed a meta-analysis on previous literature from 1968-2010 searching for research pertaining to transition out of sport. Through this analysis it was found that much is known about transitioning collegiate and even professional athletes’ experiences, but a gap remains on adopting proactive support practices. Thus, Park et al. (2013) and Lavallee (2005) advocated for curricula to be developed and implemented with collegiate athletes focused on understanding the constructs of athletic identity, developing coping skills, planning for career and athletic retirement, and creating a network of support. Navarro (2014) found through her phenomenological qualitative study of 29 DI collegiate athletes that career planning should occur throughout an athlete’s time in school, but is of particular importance during the senior year, as athletes rely heavily on the athletic department for career field preparation. This heavy reliance can prohibit campus-wide and broader resource engagement. Thus, Navarro (2014) suggested that athletic departments work with cross-campus support services to allow greater collaboration between athletics and academics. All of these strategies could create a more positive process and healthier mental state. Additionally, Harrison and Lawrence (2003) found when collegiate athletes are provided with purposeful planning they encounter more positive transitions. This can be encouraged by coaches’ and administrators’ prioritizing sport and education equally, encouraging and enhancing transferable skills (e.g., leadership, organization, time management), and focusing attention on transition issues (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Pallarés et al., 2011).

Transitioning into Collegiate Athletics

The transitioning process begins as freshman collegiate athletes launch their athletic and academic

careers (Galipeau & Trudel, 2004). Team members play a vital role in the transition process as they impact the acceptance of the new team member and offer support and guidance during the transition process (Galipeau & Trudel, 2004). Galipeau and Trudel (2004) examined the process of becoming an accepted team member, which shows the transition from high school to college is not merely arriving on campus. Galipeau and Trudel (2004) interviewed 13 female collegiate athletes concerning their experiences as newcomers to their team. The findings discussed the stages of becoming an accepted team member, which showed that transition from high school to college is not merely arriving on campus, as the collegiate athletes must adapt to a team culture that is new to them as well as a new lifestyle. There are new athletic demands as well as academic demands, and these incoming collegiate athletes may not be prepared to undertake these. Collegiate athletes must learn to manage their time efficiently as well as be prepared to accept their role on the team (Pate et al., 2011). A process occurs in the transition from introduction to other team members to becoming a full team participant. The process deals with adapting to the team culture and forging relationships with other team members and coaches (Galipeau & Trudel, 2004). The change in coaches from high school to college also brings a transitional challenge as collegiate athletes attempt to meet expectations of new leadership (Pate et al., 2011).

Papanikolaou et al. (2003) and Giacobbi et al. (2004) had similar findings that support the idea of freshman collegiate athletes having high levels of stress caused by the demands of high athletic performance expectations in addition to the change in academic environment. In a study of 16 incoming freshman track and field athletes, Tracey and Corlett (1995) explored academic, athletic, and social aspects of participant experiences. It specifically was found that the first semester or first year was described by participants as “overwhelming, a survival period, and a mixture of fun, stress and challenge with a very busy schedule” (Tracey & Corlett, 1995, p. 96). Incoming collegiate athletes can experience stress from the loss of star status, change in coaches, and the idea of being expendable (Papanikolaou et al., 2003). Furthermore, Clift and Mower (2013) found through interviews, participant journal entries, and participant

observations of eight freshmen Division I female athletes that the power relations between collegiate athletes and coaches normalized the experiences of stress, loneliness, tension, isolation, and can cause a premature exit from athletic participation. Additionally, academic stress arises for collegiate athletes from being underprepared, lower self-esteem due to poor academic performance, and lack of decision-making ability (Papanikolaou et al., 2003). Collegiate athletes generally are under-qualified academically in comparison to the general student population of the incoming freshman class and do not have decision-making power in class scheduling and academic major choice (Gurney, 2009; Schneider et al. 2010; Wolverton, 2007).

Transition Out of Sport: Comparing NCAA Divisions

There is limited research that has documented whether athletic identities are stronger or more prevalent at institutions that place greater importance on education (DIII) and those that place it on athletics (DI) (Coakley, 2017). In one of the few comparison studies, Sturm et al. (2011) examined athletic identity and student identity as their two dependent measures in a sample of 188 DI and DIII collegiate athletes. It was found that despite division, “male participants tended to have a higher athletic identity than females and females had higher perceptions of student identity compared to males” (p. 300). Interestingly, for both divisions and gender, athletic identity and student identity were negatively correlated, meaning as athletic identity increased, student identity decreased.

Division I collegiate athletes have been expected by coaches to place a greater importance and amount of time on their training, practicing, and competition. Society reflects this viewpoint as the perception is DI collegiate athletes are at their institutions to play sports (Sturm et al., 2011). However, inconsistency exists on how DIII collegiate athletes conceptualize their dual identities. Cantor and Prentice (1996) found that DIII collegiate athletes experienced identity strain from their

sport, but other researchers have found no significant difference between DIII collegiate athletes and their non-athlete peers in terms of academic success (Richards & Aries, 1999; Robst & Keil, 2000). This suggests a more balanced approach to identity as implied by the overall perception of the DIII model, which touts a co-existence between education and athletics and focuses on total development both academically and athletically (Brand, 2006; Cooper & Weight, 2012). Furthermore, the mission statement of the DIII model in the NCAA (2019) DIII manual points to the differences in DI and DIII educational experiences. Division III highly emphasizes academics and even specifies coaches as educators first. The NCAA (2019) emphasized:

Colleges and universities in Division III place highest priority on the overall quality of the educational experience and on the successful completion of all students' academic programs. They seek to establish and maintain an environment in which a student-athlete's athletics activities are conducted as an integral part of the student-athlete's educational experience, and in which coaches play a significant role as educators (p. 7).

Additionally, a finite amount of research has explored the transition process or perception of collegiate athletes from these two NCAA divisions. However, based on high athletic identity that has been noted to be prevalent in DI collegiate athletes, and the overall education-based model of DIII athletics, it could be possible that DIII collegiate athletes are more prepared for their transition out of sport than their DI peers. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand DI and DIII collegiate athletes' experiences with transition into, through, and out of collegiate sport to further expand the literature and body of knowledge on athletic identity, the transition process, and how to provide holistic care for collegiate athletes. These experiences are important to understand as transition has been linked with mental health concerns (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Fuller, 2014; Griffiths et al., 2016; Lally,

2007; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016; McKnight et al., 2009; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010; Papathomas et al., 2018; Petitipas et al., 2009; Smith & Hardin, 2018). To further this, athletic departments need institutional support, education, and programs for their athletes.

Theoretical Framework

Transition Theory

Transition theory is used to explain that individuals encounter and react to changes throughout periods of their lives differently, and these reactions to such changes are based on the resources (or lack thereof) available (Barclay, 2017; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). Transition theory posits that an individual experiences transition across a timeline of moving into, through, and out of a situation such as sport (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg (2008) explained that the moving in phase is focused on assessment and planning (e.g., an athlete moving into a dorm, communicating with coaches, registering for classes with an advisor, adjusting to life as a college student). Next, moving through characterizes the actual experience (e.g., being a collegiate athlete, managing academics, athletics, social endeavors, life in college). Finally, moving out represents stepping into the next phase of life (e.g., graduation, entering the workforce, retirement from elite competition). Specifically, transition theory explains the goal is to see the transition phase as a “positive emergent growth process” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 49) and this is done through “taking stock” in the four S’s that either aid or hinder transitioning to the next stage of life: situation, self, support, and strategies (Barclay, 2017; Schlossberg, 2008).

First, collegiate athletes must determine the situation or what type of transition is taking place (i.e., anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevent; Schlossberg, 2008). An anticipated transition is predicted, such as exhausting eligibility or a collegiate athlete being aware of their last season of sport. Pre-athletic retirement or transition planning and preparedness can reduce some of the traumatic symptoms that can accompany exiting sport (Bardick et al., 2009; Lally, 2007; Park et al., 2013; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Ad-

equately prepared collegiate athletes move into the next stage of their life understanding the benefits of transferrable skills from sport and seeing the change as an opportunity (Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019).

An unanticipated event described by Schlossberg (1981) occurs suddenly and unexpectedly, such as a collegiate athlete enduring a season-ending injury or being suddenly released from the team. These types of unanticipated events have been noted in the literature as being difficult for collegiate athletes to manage and adjust to emotionally, physically, and psychosocially (de Groot et al., 2018; Paule-Koba & Rohrs-Cordes, 2019; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019; Stoltenburg et al., 2011). Finally, a nonevent occurs when a collegiate athlete desires an outcome that does not come to fruition (e.g., playing professional sports after their collegiate career ends, not being granted an additional year of eligibility). Fewer than 2% of collegiate athletes play professionally, thus leaving the vast majority forced to retire when athletic eligibility is exhausted (NCAA, 2018). However, despite these well-established statistics, many current and former collegiate athletes hold on to the “dream of going pro” in their sport, and when transition occurs it is difficult and can result in an identity crisis (Beamon, 2012; Kidd et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019).

Collegiate athletes also must determine their support systems both physically and mentally once the type of transition has been identified (Schlossberg, 2008). First, reflecting on the self is important to determining how collegiate athletes will view and move through and out of sport. Thus, determining personal and demographic factors such as age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and culture, along with psychological factors such as coping mechanisms, outlook, and maturity are important (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2008). Next, collegiate athletes must determine what strategies or resources are available to them to assist with the transition process (e.g., academic support staff, career planning, advisors, faculty members, networking) (Schlossberg, 2008). Social support has been determined to be essential as the collegiate athlete navigates away from life in athletics (de Groot et al., 2018; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Stephan et al., 2003; Stoltenburg et al., 2011).

Thus, coaches, administrators, support staff, family, friends, and other athletes can create a space for collegiate athletes to have a positive transition process in all three phases (Fernandez et al., 2006; Wippert & Wippert, 2008).

Method

Qualitative Approach

A descriptive qualitative approach was adopted in order to explore the perceptions of transitional stages in Division I (DI) and Division III (DIII) collegiate athletes, as the researchers were “seeking to describe an experience” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 335). Furthermore, this approach was taken as it was important for the researchers to participate in a broader narrative and exploration of the topic (Sandelowski, 2010). Thus, the value for this approach is not only the production of original knowledge, but also the opportunity to “present and treat research methods as living entities that resist simple classification, and can result in establishing meaning and solid findings” (Vasimoradi et al., 2013, p. 399). Thus, in order to understand the experiences of participants pertaining to the stages of transition, a qualitative descriptive approach was used for this study.

Sampling

The researchers obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to data collection. A purposeful or specific criterion sample was used for this study as participants had to be current athletes at a DI or DIII NCAA member institution (Patton, 2002). Potential participants were contacted through sports information directors (SIDs), those in charge of communication, websites, and statistics for collegiate teams, at 50 institutions (40 Division I and 10 Division III) and were asked to distribute an informational email about the study. These institutions were selected first through the researchers’ contacts and then through snowball sampling from one SID to the next. The information email included the study procedures, purpose, and ensured confidentiality. Fifty-one potential participants were identified and contacted via e-mail by the SIDs explaining the purpose of the

study and asking for their willingness to participate. Out of the 51 participants, 31 agreed to participate in the study, but only 19 participants completed the interviews as others who indicated interest failed to respond to follow-up scheduling emails.

Participants

Nineteen NCAA collegiate athletes (nine women, 10 men) at the DI and DIII levels participated in the study (nine DI, and 10 DIII). Division I and III collegiate athletes were chosen specifically for this study based on level of competition (e.g., DI athletics tends to have higher athletic expectations, compete on a larger, national scale compared to their DIII peers), as well as the financial resources and support provided. Division III athletics is focused primarily on academics and athletic experience as secondary. In contrast, Division I athletics has a focus not only on academics, but a higher priority on athletics through larger travel and time demands as well as providing spectating opportunities for the general public. Due to a higher emphasis on athletics within DI, this may impact DI collegiate athletes’ transition experiences in a greater capacity than their DIII peers. Although Division II collegiate athletes share similarities with both DI and III, the authors purposely chose participants from DI and III due to the distinct levels and focus of the two divisions and in order to understand the similarities and differences in their transitioning experiences.

The mean age of the participants was 20 years old and the majority of the sample identified as White, with one African-American participant, and two participants self-identifying as bi-racial. Participants covered a wide range in academic classifications with four freshmen, seven sophomores, three juniors, and five seniors. Participants represented a wide array of sports as well: soccer, softball, football, hockey, lacrosse, and baseball. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity (see Appendix A).

Procedure

A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix B) was developed to ensure consistent inquiry across participants, but also to allow for follow-up

questions and probes that could develop organically through the interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This permits the participants to draw from their values, beliefs, and past to respond to the questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Specifically, semi-structured interviews were used in this study in order to increase awareness of the participants' experiences and inner thoughts as they pertain to transition and life as a collegiate athlete at the DI and DIII level (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Interviews were used because of their ability to assist in discovering meaning of fundamental themes or realities in the participants' lives (Kvale, 1996). This method allowed for the interviewer to foster a more personal interaction with each participant, which enabled the pursuit of responses in greater detail and the ability to ask for clarification if needed (Britton, 2007). Using interviews also fostered the opportunity for participants to discuss their feelings and perceptions about their experiences in descriptive detail, allowed for the use of direct quotations from the study participants, and permitted the participants' voices to be heard (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

An interview guide was structured with an introduction to ease into the interview and three distinct parts to match the transitioning process into college (e.g., explain the process of collegiate recruiting for your sport), navigating the collegiate experience (e.g., describe the experience of being a collegiate athlete), and the upcoming transition out of sport (e.g., describe your thoughts on transitioning out of sport). Interviews were designed to be approximately 30 to 45 minutes long due to collegiate athletes' lack of accessibility and constrained schedules.

The majority of the interviews were conducted via phone, with four interviews completed face-to-face. Telephone interviews were used due to the schedules and various geographical locations of the participants. Telephone interviews have been found to be beneficial in qualitative research as they decrease social pressure and increase rapport between the researcher and participant (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; Novick, 2008; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Participants have been described to be relaxed on the phone creating a willingness to talk freely and privately due to being in their own settings (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; Novick, 2008; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

Semi-structured interviews typically are conducted only once and generally cover 30 minutes to more than an hour (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This study's average interview length was approximately 30 minutes. The 19 interviews resulted in saturation, as similar concepts and ideas became repetitive (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and read multiple times before beginning the process of data analysis to familiarize the researchers with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merriam, 2009). This study went through three rounds of coding, open, in-vivo, and axial coding to generate initial codes. This coding process is described as taking chunks of data and analyzing them based on coherent meaning, direct words, phrases, or quotations from the participants, and understanding deeper characteristics and attributes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Saldaña, 2013). Next, these codes were condensed down to begin searching for themes, then these themes were reviewed in relation to the codes extracted. Finally, these themes were defined and named to tell the overall story of the participants, and quotes were pulled to illustrate each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019).

Findings and Discussion

The data collection and analysis resulted in three distinct themes: *Moving In: Compatibility*, *Moving Through: Identity Directly Tied to Sport*, and *Moving Out: Redefining Oneself*. Findings demonstrated that the majority of participants felt moving into their sport at the collegiate level was accompanied with finding an institution that was compatible with participants' athletic and environmental goals. All of the participants deeply discussed the role that their particular sport had played in their lives and in shaping their identity. Division I participants expressed uncertainty and sadness when approaching their inevitable transition out of collegiate athletics. In comparison, DIII participants felt sport provided them an ability to learn life lessons and transferrable skills.

Additionally, DIII participants saw leaving sport as an opportunity to pursue new adventures, coaching, or give back to their sport.

Moving In: Compatibility

The majority of the participants discussed that the assessment and planning processes of moving into their sport and institution (recruitment) were a positive experience accompanied with a sense of compatibility (Schlossberg, 1981). Participants described the importance of “fit” with the coaching staff or a euphoric feeling when stepping onto their campuses during recruiting trips and making their final decision on where to attend and participate in intercollegiate athletics. Gary, a DI men’s soccer goalie, explained that the coaching staff was his top factor in his decision. He said:

It came down to the coaches, honestly. I felt more comfortable with the coaches. I thought they were honest and would lead me into the right direction and get the best out of me, and so it came down to more where I thought I would fit in soccer-wise.

Similarly, Travis, a DIII baseball pitcher stated, “I liked [institution] because their coaching was outstanding. I liked the school and I felt like I was going to be able to succeed there and they are a winning program.” Irene, a DIII softball pitcher also detailed that the demeanor and style of coaching that her coach portrayed was influential in her decision. She stated, “Coach, he just seemed like a good coach, because he wasn’t a big yeller or anything like that. It felt like the right fit compared to my high school experience. I thought it was going to be something new.”

Participants also discussed a euphoric feeling or sense of intuition when they arrived on campus during their recruiting that led them to choose their current institution. Olivia, a DIII women’s soccer goalie, detailed this compatibility with her institution, saying, “When I stepped onto campus this feeling came over me like this is where I belong.” Similarly, Irene said, “I just felt at home when I walked on campus.” Mary, a DIII women’s soccer goalie, detailed her experience, stating:

I remember everyone on my travel team who are already committed to schools said you just know when you step on the campus – it would

just feel right. I thought they were crazy until I visited [institution] and when I stepped on campus it just felt right.

Furthermore, participants detailed the institutions they chose were based on proximity to home. Fred, a DI baseball pitcher, and Kevin, a DIII baseball pitcher, both detailed how closeness to home was a factor in their college choice. Additionally, Ethan, a DI football punter, detailed location as important in his decision-making: “So I came up here and visited and the rest is history. I just liked the coaches, like the school, the location. It was close to home.” Lastly, Sarah, a DIII women’s hockey goalie, pointed not just to the location of her institution in her choice, but that proximity also meant her parents could attend more games and watch her play. She said, “It’s really close to my hometown, which was a really nice factor when deciding. My parents could make it to the games.”

Interestingly, the participants discussed proximity to home or family, importance of coaching staff, or this sense of compatibility as reasons why they chose their current institutions. In comparison to the NCAA (2016) GOALS report, college choice was influenced by the quality of athletics facilities (not mentioned in this study) and coaching staff (especially in men and women’s basketball). Pauline et al. (2008) found in their sample of college softball players that major of interest, academic reputation, coach’s personality, academic facilities, graduation rate, and opportunity to play early in their career were influential factors on institutional selection. The participants in this study also did not discuss academics in terms of their transition into collegiate athletics or institution selection. Research has found that high school recruits that chose DIII institutions are many times more concerned with their academic considerations than athletic pursuits in comparison to their DI and DII peers (Pauline, 2010; 2012).

Again, participants in this study seemed more concerned with a sense of community and compatibility at their institution and on their team, in addition to the proximity to home, possibly indicating the importance of support. Lowe and Cook (2003) found the transition into college is many times accompanied with a move away from home, which creates social, psychological, and emotional adjustments along with losing a consistent support network (e.g., family). The majority of the participants in this study expressed that parent and sibling opinions were important in

their decision to play sports. Thus, staying closer to home and maintaining this support network could be a contributing factor in the positive transition into collegiate athletics for these participants in comparison to the findings from Lowe and Cook (2003). This is supported by previous research, as parental support in the form of emotional, time, and financial resources was found to positively aid in a smoother transition into the new collegiate athletic role (MacNamara & Collins, 2010).

Social networks for collegiate athletes can be extremely small and bound to their sport or the athletic department (Rubin & Moses, 2017; Watson & Kissenger, 2007). Specifically, Rubin and Moses (2017) found through their focus groups with DI collegiate athletes that athletes dealt with issues of faculty and peer scrutiny, which “shaped their concept of self on the perceptions of being outsiders from the student body and insiders of the student-athlete population” (p. 324). This can cause these collegiate athletes to feel detached from the rest of the student body (Shurts & Shoffner, 2004) or be held in a “celebrity-like status” by others on campus, causing shallow relationships or social isolation (Ahlgren-Bedics & Monda, 2009). In support of avoiding mental health concerns, research has found that parental emotional support is vital to managing and traversing difficult transitions (Mills et al., 2012; Pummell et al., 2008). However, not all collegiate athletes have stable relationships with family and parents, move far from home, or leave their home country (Pierce et al., 2010). Thus, collegiate coaches, administrators, and teammates need to create social networks for incoming athletes in order to deflect mental health concerns. This could be achieved by pairing incoming collegiate athletes with a teammate role model, coaches establishing openness, rapport, and care toward these transitioning athletes, online support groups, and creating time and events to allow athletes to meet friends outside their team (Brown et al., 2015; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2018).

Moving Through: Identity Directly Tied to Sport

All of the participants, regardless of division, expressed the moving through process of Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory in relation to how sport had shaped and currently still was shaping who they are as individuals. Irene credited softball with creat-

ing the person she is today. She said, “It’s [softball] always been a huge part of my life. I can’t imagine growing up and being the same person that I am today without it.” Catherine also discussed how softball had been a huge part of her life and had taught her life lessons: “I think, softball has been a huge part of my life. I’ve learned a lot from it as well, not just the wins and losses and everything to do with the sport. I’ve learned life lessons.” Ethan also discussed that football was influential to his identity and helping him work through tough situations in his life. He said, “It’s [football] always been there for me. I played since I was four. It is part of my life now, it’s something I’ve always done. It’s always helped me through tough situations.” Similarly to Irene and Ethan, Nancy and Jared discussed the link between sport and their identity. Nancy, a DIII women’s lacrosse goalie, detailed, “I’ve been playing for so long that it’s almost become a part of me.” Jared, a Division III baseball pitcher, also spoke about the love of baseball and how it has become a part of who he is. He posited, “Oh man, baseball has always been a part of me. That’s what I’ve always done my whole life. It’s like my love. It means a great deal to me.” Gary expressed his tie to sport simply stating, “I can’t imagine soccer not in my life.” Lastly, Fred detailed that the sport of baseball had provided him discipline and lifelong relationships, stating:

I think it kept me out of trouble. Made me a better man, taught me discipline and how hard you need to work if you want something. I can relate that to life or a future job. It’s done a lot for me. It’s made me have great relationships, great coaches, great friends that I will be lifetime friends with. It’s been a huge chunk of my life.

In support of Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory, participants discussed the importance of sport in their identity formation and overall lives despite their NCAA division. This has implications to the overall athletic identity literature, as previously very few studies have examined DIII collegiate athletes or could attest to findings to support high athletic identity in the DIII collegiate athlete population (Cantor & Prentice, 1996; Richards & Aries, 1999; Robst & Keil, 2000). Participants did not discuss academics, friendships, or social circles indicating a high athletic identity or “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role” (Brewer et al., 1993, p.

237). The collegiate athletes in this study placed high importance on their athletic development, being seen as an “athlete,” and the role athletics played in their life overall regardless of NCAA division (Brewer et al., 1993; Smith et al., 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Specifically, Smith and Hardin (2018) found in their sample of 10 former NCAA athletes that participants detailed that athletics was extremely important to their lives and they felt incomplete without that identity. Similarly, Beamon (2012) also found Division I basketball and football athletes identified themselves with their sport, and all of the athletes felt their peers associated them with their athletic pursuits. This could be due to their extensive time spent in their sport. Anderson (2004) found that athletes who had prolonged sport careers also had strong levels of athletic identity.

Literature has tied high athletic identity to problems transitioning out of sport and mental health concerns (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Fuller, 2014; Griffiths et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2010; Lally, 2007; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016; McKnight et al., 2009; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010; Papathomas et al., 2018; Petitipas et al., 2009; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Collegiate athletes who associate with a high athletic identity neglect other salient developmental identities (e.g., social, career) causing leaving sport to be more challenging and encompass more difficulty (Kidd et al., 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Similarly, Stokowski et al. (2019) found in their population of former athletes that leaving sport was accompanied with a sense of loss, missing something, confusion, uncertainty about the next phase, physical challenges with nutrition and health, and identity crises; as one of their participants detailed, “[I was] lost, sad and unaware of who I really was outside of my athletic identity. It took me a while to get out of not being a student-athlete anymore” (p. 411).

Thus, if high athletic identities linger throughout a collegiate athlete’s career without development of social and career identities as well, they are at risk for mental health disorders when faced with this transition process (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Fuller, 2014; Griffiths et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2010; Lally, 2007; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016; McKnight et al., 2009; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010; Papathomas et al., 2018; Petitipas et al., 2009; Smith & Hardin, 2018;

Stokowski et al., 2019). Therefore, those working with the collegiate athlete population (e.g., coaches, administrators, academic support staff) must acknowledge the at-risk status of collegiate athletes, the presence of high athletic identity, and stress of the transition process (Stokowski et al., 2019). Furthermore, collegiate athletes should be provided time to adapt to new identities, develop transitional skills that will aid them in leaving sport, and be provided programming (e.g., service learning, job shadowing, mentor pairings, internships, and career planning) early and often in their collegiate careers to negate complete salience in athletic identity and avoid mental health concerns (Cummins & O’Boyle, 2015; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016; Navarro, 2014; Stokowski et al., 2019).

Moving Out: Redefining Oneself

The final stage of Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory was demonstrated when all of the participants discussed the presence of an anticipated transition out of sport. However, DI participants felt a range of emotions from uncertainty to sadness, to a lack of preparation for “moving out” or leaving sport behind once their college athletic careers ended. Anna, a DI women’s soccer goalie and senior about to end her soccer season and career, verbalized the feelings of giving up her identity as a soccer player and goalie. She discussed the unknown of where to find the same feelings she received from her sport:

I feel like that’s just like who I’ve always been – Anna the soccer player. Now it’s like I can’t really say that anymore, the used-to-be soccer player. I think that it will be hard. The feeling like in a game under the lights, all the fans and they are proud of me, that feeling of just like “let’s go!” Then you make a great save and it’s like “yeah!” I don’t know, it’s going to be a feeling...I really don’t know where else you get it. But, it’s going to be hard.

Bethany, a DI softball pitcher, although only a sophomore, also discussed that the pending transition out of college softball and pitching caused sadness and discomfort. She stated, “I’m kind of nervous about it. Because last year when we lost out, I thought my life was over because I was like we don’t have softball for three months. What am I going to do? There is

nothing.” Fred also verbalized this difficulty leaving baseball, saying, “I think that it’s always going to be a big part of my life. I think it will be very difficult to finally not play baseball anymore.” Ethan reiterated the sadness of leaving football, stating, “I think it’s going to be hard. Everyone has told me it’s real emotional once you stop playing and it’s out of your life.” Similarly, Catherine, a DI softball pitcher, explained transitioning would be sad since softball had been a part of her life for so long:

I don’t know that it’s set in yet. I do think about it and it’s crazy to think that the sport that I’ve been playing since I was five years old is almost over. I’m not going to be able to play anymore. It’s kind of sad; kind of bitter-sweet.

Furthermore, Will, a DI baseball pitcher, discussed that he had not even taken steps to prepare for the transition. He said, “I honestly haven’t looked too far ahead yet. I know I probably should start, but I really haven’t thought about it too much.” Henry also explained he had not prepared for this next step. He said, “I try not to think about it too much right now. If you are thinking too early... I just don’t want to focus too much on what is going to happen later.”

Despite the uncertainty and nerves that accompany the upcoming transition out of sport felt by the DI participants, DIII participants had accepting attitudes or were even excited for new opportunities in or out of their sport. Travis discussed the small reality of a professional baseball career after his collegiate baseball career ended:

I think you have to realize that it’s such a small percentage that plays after school and you have to realize who is going to be in that percentage. I have realized that I am not, just because you have to be throwing 90 or above. If you don’t throw at least 90 miles per hour you are not going to get picked up anywhere. I am not doing that, so pretty much all my thoughts after baseball have been about career path. I have accepted it at this point, in three years or when I’m done playing, that’s going to be it.

Jared also explained this acceptance of moving past his sport, stating, “I know that baseball doesn’t last forever. I wish it did, but there’s a day and a time

where you have to hang up your cleats and grow up. So definitely, I have to be ready for that.” Quinn, a DIII women’s lacrosse goalie, explained that acceptance of sport ending was inevitable, but appreciation for the opportunity was key. Quinn posited, “Graduating and thinking about leaving makes me a lot more grateful for the chance to play at the intercollegiate level.” Irene and Sarah detailed not only acceptance of transitioning out of sport, but their enthusiasm to begin their career and/or attend graduate school. Irene stated, “I am excited for the future, like I said I am trying to get into pharmacy school and that is looking good. I am excited for some new things, new changes.” Sarah said:

As you start to find those new passions, I’ve always known I don’t have a career in hockey. It’s not an option for women, so you always know that you are going to school first and have a career. Once I got a taste of that with the internship, I started to get excited about that. The more I think about it, the more I’m ready to move on to grad school. I’m ready to have a career. I really excited about that.

Several DIII participants held a desire to channel their playing experience and passion for their sport into coaching. Travis explained:

As far as coaching on the side, I definitely want to do that. I want to stay in the game because I still love it. At some point, I would definitely like to be an assistant coach or head coach.

Kevin also articulated the desire to coach at some point in the future. He said, “I’d like to stay in baseball. I would like to get a college coaching job like a pitching coach.” Mary reiterated a desire to influence the community and sport of soccer in a positive manner through a career in physical therapy caring for athletes and coaching. She expressed:

I want to go into physical therapy school and become a physical therapist. I think that all kind of stems from soccer because I like being around the sports medicine side of things. Soccer influenced what I want to do in the future. I do hope to be some sort of coach whether it’s a travel team coach or a goalkeeper coach. That’s always been a goal of mine.

The mixed emotions and fear of the unknown in re-

gard to life after sport felt by the DI participants is not uncommon among DI collegiate athletes. Significant to this study, participants seemed to employ a sense of avoidance in relation to their planning for transitioning out of collegiate sport. Participants either avoided discussion of transition at all or lacked planning to adjust and deal with their future transition and career outside of sport. These findings have been reflected in previous literature, specifically Simons et al. (1999), who found in their study of 361 DI collegiate athletes' achievement motivations that the participants identified as failure-avoiders and failure-acceptors were more committed to their athletic role and had poorer academic performance than their success-oriented and over-striver peers.

Research has found that many times exiting of sport can leave athletes questioning who they are and what life is like without athletics (Beamon, 2012; Fuller, 2014; Lally, 2007; Smith et al., 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Athletics can provide a platform for recognition within an athlete's sporting communities (e.g., athletic department, local community) and self-confidence. Some athletes can have difficulty coping, leading to mental health concerns when this platform is no longer available (Jewett et al., 2018). This difficulty or uncertainty can even manifest itself as post-retirement sadness, anxiety, and/or depression (Giannone et al., 2017; Saxe et al., 2017). Research has found athletes in revenue-generating sports are at a heightened risk of experiencing negative drawbacks and difficulties with transition, as importance is placed on winning and revenue generation (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Kidd et al., 2018; Southall et al., 2015; Southall & Weiler, 2014). Specifically, Kidd et al. (2018) found NCAA DI football, basketball, and baseball players had a high athletic devotion at the expense of academics, a professional attitude toward their sport, and high commitment to the athletic role and responsibilities, which caused post-athletic transition problems.

It is clear that difficulties with transition and athletic identity have been noted in the literature and mental health concerns can develop, specifically with DI collegiate athletes (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015; Kidd et al., 2018; Park et al., 2013; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Southall et al., 2015; Southall & Weiler, 2014). Park et al. (2013) found a

correlation between high levels of athletic identity and a negative quality in athletes' transitions. Furthermore, Park et al. (2013) found planning for the transition process had a positive correlation with leaving sport, specifically through the development of coping skills and support. Despite this, studies have continued to find that collegiate athletes did not feel they had institutional support, guidance, or resources upon or beyond graduation (Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015; Kidd et al., 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Training should not be exclusive to mental and physical skills, but education on transition and athletic identity also should be prioritized by athletes, coaches, and athletic departments. It is important for athletes to receive information early in their athletic career about the problems that could occur with a solely focused athletic identity and the possible negative transitional issues that can occur. Consequently, collegiate athletes that have a strong athletic identity and trouble processing leaving sport could encounter harmful physical, mental, and emotional effects.

Significant to the findings in this study, DIII participants demonstrated a positive disposition to life after sport. This could be attributed to the division at which the participants played. However, research also has found that when athletes "branched out" and explored areas neglected due to their sport commitments, they were able to develop new personal identities and re-direct their focus and passions into a different area (Fuller, 2014; Lally, 2007). Furthermore, this "branching out" stage that has been associated with successful transitions included a balanced collegiate experience (social, personal, athletics, and academics); positive social support from coaches, teammates, friends, and family; and pre-transition planning early in the collegiate athlete's career (Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016; Navarro, 2014).

Collegiate athletes that maintain realistic expectations surrounding their athletic careers (such as the DIII participants in this study) coupled with career maturity (using campus career and academic resources along with proactive planning) report a more positive transition to life after sports (Navarro, 2014; Warehime et al., 2017). Navarro (2014) found when collegiate athletes choose their major based on their academic skillset, familial influence, and person-

al passions they were more active in the preparation process for their chosen career field. In comparison, collegiate athletes whose majors are centered on athletic eligibility, coaches, and teammates felt a lack of autonomy to form their own career aspirations and major choices, causing career hesitation and overall uncertainty (Navarro, 2014).

The experiences that the DIII participants shared in this study contrasted with much of the literature surrounding this topic, as they were appreciative of their time in athletics and accepting of a transition into a new stage in life. The DIII participants were optimistic about the prospects of attending graduate school, coaching, or just seeking out new passions outside of their sports. This could suggest that the mission of a co-existence between education and athletics and focus on the holistic development within DIII institutions allows for a more positive transition out of sport (Brand, 2006; Cooper & Weight, 2012). Also, the DIII participants discussed realistic expectations of the possibility of playing professional sports; in contrast, DI athletes many times hold on to this professional dream, which causes additional issues with transition out of sport and mental health (Beamon, 2012; Kidd et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2018).

Conclusion

These findings add further conversation and direction to the body of literature on athletic identity and transition out of sport. The focus of this study was to examine the transition experiences of NCAA Division I and Division III athletes. The transition into sport and through sport were very similar for both groups. All of the participants seemed to indicate a high athletic identity in their respective sports despite division. The finding that is imperative to understand is that DI athletes avoided the notion of having to transition out of athletics and losing their athletic identity. Division III athletes, on the other hand, embraced the change and opportunity to move onto the next stage of their life. It is important for coaches and administrators to understand the three stages of transition and realize collegiate athletes need assistance throughout the transition process. It is even more important for support to be provided to DI athletes as they transition out of sport. There seems to be an

avoidance of the issue and unwillingness from DI athletes to deal with the inevitable change that is coming. Programming and education needs to be put in place to prepare all collegiate athletes for the transition out of sport, but in particular at the DI level.

Limitations

The study solicited sports information directors to engage and locate possible participants. Given the role of the sports information directors to protect the athletes from media, many possible participants did not receive the study's initial contact email, especially those in revenue-generating sports such as basketball. Next, due to the busy schedules and time commitments of collegiate athletes, many participants agreed to participate in the study, but did not complete the interview. Also, asking for an hour of the athlete's time was not possible. The request for interviews was condensed down to 30 to 45 minutes. Interview length is not an uncommon issue that limits the ability of collegiate athletes to participate in research studies due to time demands (Hardin, Cooper et al., 2013; Hardin, Ruibley et al., 2013). The study did not include a highly diverse population, as only three participants were not Caucasian, thus it was not indicative of the overall collegiate athlete population. The researchers struggled to receive information from football players, as they were a more closely guarded sub-population. Lastly, 11 of the 19 participants were underclassmen and they may have lacked the experience and ability to fully speak about transition out of sport and leaving behind an athletic identity after departing from collegiate sports.

Future Directions

Future research not only should continue to explore transition from all three NCAA divisions, but specifically Division II as it was not used for this study. Future research should continue to explore collegiate athlete populations and look to see if there is a tie between mental health, athletic identity, and the transition process. Additionally, future research should explore the types of transition and athletic identity interventions that are taking place across collegiate athletics and the quality of these interventions.

Lastly, future research should focus on the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of practitioners that work directly with collegiate athletes on these issues, as well as the administrators who determine program funding.

This research highlights the experiences of DI and DIII collegiate athletes as they moved into, through, and eventually out of athletics. Participants indicated that moving into athletics was accompanied with a sense of compatibility, as well as how impactful sport was in their lives. Participants differed in terms of preparation for their upcoming transition out of sport: DI participants seemed unprepared, while DIII participants saw moving out of sport as an opportunity. Based on these findings, continued research should look at the impact transition has on the lives and mental health of collegiate athletes.

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Appendix A

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Race	Gender	Academic Classification	Division	Sport & Position
Anna	22	White	Female	Senior	DI	W. Soccer; Goalie
Bethany	19	*Bi-Racial	Female	Sophomore	DI	Softball; Pitcher
Catherine	21	White	Female	Senior	DI	Softball; Pitcher
Derek	21	White	Male	Senior	DI	Football; Punter
Ethan	19	White	Male	Freshman	DI	Football; Punter
Fred	19	White	Male	Sophomore	DI	Baseball; Pitcher
Gary	19	White	Male	Freshman	DI	M. Soccer; Goalie
Henry	21	White	Male	Freshman	DI	M. Hockey; Goaltender
Irene	18	White	Female	Freshman	DIII	Softball; Pitcher
Jared	20	White	Male	Sophomore	DIII	Baseball; Pitcher
Kevin	22	White	Male	Senior	DIII	Baseball; Pitcher
Mary	20	*Bi-Racial	Female	Junior	DIII	Soccer; Goalie
Nancy	19	White	Female	Sophomore	DIII	Lacrosse; Goalie
Olivia	20	White	Female	Sophomore	DIII	Soccer; Goalie
Quinn	22	White	Female	Senior	DIII	Lacrosse; Goalie
Sarah	21	White	Female	Junior	DIII	W. Hockey; Goaltender
Travis	20	White	Male	Sophomore	DIII	Baseball; Pitcher
Victor	19	Black	Male	Sophomore	DIII	Soccer; Goalie
Will	20	White	Male	Junior	DI	Baseball; Pitcher

**Indicates Bi-Racial Athlete Identified as White & Mexican*

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Questions

1. Describe how you began playing sport(s). What or who were your influences?
 2. Describe how you began playing your sport that you play now collegiately. What or who were your influences?
 3. Describe your progression through sports.
 - a. When did you cease playing other sports?
 - b. Why did you cease playing other sports?
 4. If and when did you narrow down to one position within your chosen sport?
 5. Explain the process of collegiate recruiting for your sport.
 - a. Were you recruited for multiple sports? One sport?
 - b. Why did you chose your current institution?
 6. Describe the experience of being a collegiate student-athlete. What is it like playing at the collegiate level?
 - a. What is your experience like on your team?
 7. Describe your relationships with your coaches, teammates, and administrators when you first arrived to the team. Describe that relationship now. Has it changed? If so, why?
 - a. How do these relationships influence your experience?
 8. If and what are some unique challenges that you experience as a collegiate athlete?
 - a. How do you navigate these challenges?
 9. Describe your thoughts on transitioning out of sport.
 - a. How does this make you feel?
 - b. What steps have you taken to prepare for this?
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