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“You need to allow yourself to grieve that loss and that identity.” College Athletes’ Transition to Life after College Sport

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ABSTRACT

Only a small percentage of collegiate athletes compete at the professional level of sport after they graduate, leaving most athletes to transition out of a life involved in sport. Research reviewing life after competitive sport for college athletes and the consequences associated with such a transition are plentiful, however, additional research also argues that life transition research is necessary to maximize the understanding of such a phenomenon. This case study approach used Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition (2011) to research recently retired college athletes and their time transitioning away from competitive college sports. Several themes emerged from the qualitative results, including: the stress of transition, athletics unites hardworking individuals, freedom after college, physical change, college athlete identity, and a sense of loss in transition. The current study reviewed results to offer new insights into retired college athlete transition as well as how athletic departments and coaches can better prepare their athletes for this transition. Based on the research, a grieving process should be considered as a part of the transition.

Keywords: athlete identity, college sport, grief, retirement, transition

College athletes are no strangers to life transitions. They transition from performing as high school athletes to competing at the collegiate level in associations such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), or the National Junior Collegiate Athletic Association (NJCAA). They then must transition out of college and into the work force, and in a study done on the career-readiness of college athletes, it was found that “the college student-athletes in this study illustrate a wide range of career readiness” (August, 2020, p. 188). Collegiate athletes are asked to dedicate 20+ hours a week to their sport while maintaining good academic standing at an increasingly difficult level of education that they have not yet experienced. In an NCAA study focusing on athletes from the 2015-2016 season, it was found that at the Division I level, athletes committed most of their time to academics and athletics, with an “academics/athletics breakdown [of] 37.3 hours per week and 35.4 hours per week, respectively” (NCAA, 2017).

According to the NCAA website, “More than 500,000 college athletes across all three divisions compete for about 1,100 member schools in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and even Canada” (NCAA, 2022a, para. 2). A 2020 analysis of previous NCAA college athletes found that less than 5% competed professionally (NCAA, 2020). Therefore, a transition from life as a competitive college athlete is the reality for most college athletes. Regardless of when an athlete retires, whether it be from high school, college, or professional sport, a transition from being an athlete to not is inevitable. Literature has reviewed the experience of college athletes and assessed their health in different areas – mentally (Lentz et al., 2018; Moreland et al., 2017), physically (Varvogli & Darviri, 2011), and socially (Kimball & Freysinger, 2003). Research on college athlete transition away from their competitive games has been steady over the past decade; however, more research is necessary as many of these experiences are unique and a continued contribution to the existing body of knowledge around transition is essential.

The purpose of this study is to build upon existing literature by exploring the transition experiences of collegiate athletes once their NCAA eligibility is completed. Using Schlossberg's Theory of Transition (2011), athletes from a women's rowing team at one Division I school in the Western United States were interviewed to ascertain the effect of transition. While there is an abundance of research related to college athlete transition from a variety of sports (e.g., soccer, football, basketball), Jones (2015) reminds us that the use of existing knowledge helps build knowledge. Therefore, athletes from a women's rowing team were used as subjects as there is no prior research done on this specific population, and each sport could result in a different transition process for athletes. Unique factors for these participants included being part of a large team with a roster of more than 50 athletes every year, and training in a facility separate from the rest of the athletic department, which created an isolated experience away from other athletes at their university. The results were identified through a schematic process and have implications for college athletic administrators in assisting college athletes in their transition to life after competitive athletics. This research aims to answer the question of what the transition experience is like for women collegiate rowers and, using the themes found, looks to what athletic departments can do to support their athletes as they leave their life in sport.

Literature Review

Retiring from being an athlete is inevitable, whether as a youth, high school, college athlete, or professional. Retirement may be forced (e.g., injury), a personal decision, or a result of athletic skills that do not meet the demands of competition. Over the past several decades, an abundance of research has taken shape reviewing the element of retiring from sport and transitioning into the next phase of life. Previous research has seen further understanding of athlete transition, focusing on single sports such as American professional football (Coakley, 2006); understanding perspectives of male and female athletes' retirement and transition (Blinde & Strata, 1992, Brown et al., 2000; Lally, 2007; Stokowski et al., 2019); varying sizes of sport organizations and geographical locations (Falls & Wilson, 2012; Murphy et al., 1996); how the method of data was collected for athlete transition research, such as survey (McQuown Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Parker et al., 2021) or interviews (Beamon, 2012; Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Smith & Hardin, 2018, 2020); and the potential consequences from athlete retirement, such as body image issues (Laure & Meline, 2018). Fuller (2014) found the importance of college athlete transition and conducted a meta-analysis of nine qualitative studies. This analysis resulted in the identification of six themes that included: (1) athlete identity; (2) anticipation and preparation; (3) branching out; (4) loss of camaraderie; (5) support systems; and (6) policy and practice. The results of Fuller's (2014) research initially identified the studies utilized for analysis. Table 1 represents these studies as well as an update of additional studies since 2011.

Table 1
College Athlete Transition Research

Authors	Gender	Sport	Methodology	Participants
Blinde & Stratta, 1992	M/F	Multiple	Qualitative	20
Parker, 1994	Male	Football	Phenomenological	7
Murphy et al., 1996	M/F	Multiple	Quantitative	124
Brown et al., 2000	M/F	Multiple	Quantitative	189
Lally, 2007	M/F	Multiple	Phenomenological	6
McQuown Linnemeyer & Brown, 2011	M/F	Multiple	Quantitative	326
Stoltenburg et al., 2011	M/F	Multiple	Qualitative	7
Falls & Wilson, 2012	Female	Soccer (multiple teams)	Qualitative	12
Beamon, 2012	Male	Football & Basketball	Qualitative	20
Flowers et al., 2014	Male	Multiple	Qualitative	12
Warchime et al., 2017	M/F	Multiple	Qualitative	12
Smith & Hardin, 2018	Female	Multiple	Qualitative	10
Stokowski et al., 2019	M/F	Multiple	Quantitative	178
Menke & Germany, 2019	Male	Football & Basketball	Qualitative	15
Smith & Hardin, 2020	M/F	Multiple	Qualitative	19
Parker et al., 2021	M/F	Multiple	Quantitative	331

However, the retirement of college athletes is much more prevalent than ever with more than 500,000 college athletes in the NCAA alone (NCAA, 2022a). Additional research on this topic is necessary to further understand the challenging transition of this time in one's life and how transitions affect one's personal relationships (Schlossberg, 2011) as well as their future career (Navarro, 2014; Savikas, 2002).

During their time as an NCAA competitor, student athletes' identities often can be formed around the fact that they participate in sport. Murdock et al. (2016) claimed that:

In this climate of commitment to athletics, students begin to incorporate being a college athlete into their sense of identity... athletic identity refers to the magnitude in which an individual integrates the social role of being an athlete into his or her self-concept (p. 396). College athletes are expected to dedicate a large part of their time in college to their sport, including changing their daily habits such as eating, sleeping, training, practicing, traveling, competing, and recovery time. In a study done on first-semester, first-year students comparing non-athletes and college athletes, researchers found:

[The] most commonly cited sources of stress for freshmen athletes is time. This issue is important since upon matriculation the freshman athlete is faced with the same increased academic and social demands of the non-athlete. However, they have significantly greater time demands placed upon them, leaving them less time to acclimatize themselves to college life (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005, p. 6).

Even when college athletes are not at practice or with their team, their life choices often are being dictated by their commitment to sport. In research looking at how student athlete development relates to winning success, researchers found "the prestige of an institution of higher learning often relies on the athletic achievements accomplished by the sport programs... [and] athletic departments' desire to achieve athletic success has often come at the expense of student-athlete well-being" (Stokowski, et. al, 2020, p. 37). The NCAA reported that Division I athletes spend more than double the amount of time on academics and athletics than any other activity outside of sleep. These other activities include a job, socializing, and other extracurricular activities (NCAA, 2017). This results in their athletic identity being a large part of who they become during their college years, but it also can result in a difficult transition when their eligibility is completed, as they no longer are responsible for maintaining themselves in the same way (Murdock et al., 2016). For example, their pursuits, endeavors, and goals (both individual and team) shift once retirement from sport occurs; this requires an additional shift in personal

perspective that includes time management and learning more about their personal identity, which previously was entrenched in sport.

Transitioning out of college athletics is expected for college athletes, as there are finite years in which they can compete at the collegiate level. McCarthy (2019) conveyed research presented by Pascale and DeVita at the American College Personnel Association that found while Division I college athletes reported feeling equipped for their lives after college due to the skills they learned as college athletes, they were unable to articulate what life would look like post-graduation when their time in sport was finished.

Most athletes are aware they will not continue their athletic career after college and the NCAA often reminds college athletes of the data. According to the most recent NCAA data (2020), of the nearly 150,000 college athletes that participated in professional draft sports (baseball, men's and women's basketball, football, and men's ice hockey), 33,193 college athletes were eligible to be drafted, but only 3.6% were drafted for the opportunity to play professionally in the United States. This leaves a significant number of college athletes with an unclear idea as to what their lives will look like after their collegiate career ends. A study was done to test how a career preparation workshop for college athletes performed, and researchers found a workshop like this was helpful because "not all graduates are prepared to enter the workforce upon graduation. Student-athletes may be overrepresented in this unprepared group, as student-athletes have been found to lag behind non-athletes with regard to career development" (Van Raalte, et. al, 2017, p. 9). To prepare students for this transition, additional research regarding the transition experience for athletes is necessary.

Transitioning out of college athletics is not one moment, but an ongoing process that individuals experience in their own way. Leonard and Schimmel (2016) claim that "college athletes that transitioned out of collegiate sport experienced a variety of psychological responses such as confusion, grief, loss of social support, feelings of failure, depression, and isolation" (p. 63). Preparing college athletes for the transition out of sport and continuing to support them throughout the process of that transition could result in healthier college athletes entering the next phase of life and doing so with an increased capacity to draw on the skills they developed during their time in college. August (2020) stated:

Given the extraordinary amount of time student-athletes spend in their sport while in college, it seems reasonable that in order to feel career ready, they would need to intellectually connect the domain of sports, in which they have invested so much energy, to their imagined life after graduation (p. 189).

There is an opportunity to prepare college athletes for life after sport by using all they learned in their time in athletics to do that. Stambulova et al. (2021) suggest a holistic approach in guiding athletes through a transition process, reflecting on the athlete's entire career rather than just recent instances (e.g., final season).

Schlossberg's Theory of Transition

Transitions are a common, expected, and natural part of life. According to Schlossberg (2011), transitions are events that people expect to happen "such as graduating from high school or college, marrying, becoming a parent, starting a first job, changing careers, or retiring" (p. 159). Schlossberg's (2011) Theory of Transition clarifies the experiences of change and how people react to it. They claimed it is important to study transitions and that "it is not the transition per se that is critical, but how much it alters one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 159). They go on to note that the alterations and transitions in one's life often explain why they are distressing.

Through more than 35 years of research, Schlossberg (2011) identified four categories to discuss how well a person manages transition: situation, self, supports, and strategies. *Situation* reviews what stressors someone is dealing with at the time of a transition; "For example, if you retire at the same time that a significant other becomes critically ill, coping with retirement becomes more difficult" (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160). *Self* refers to how a person's inherent traits set them up for transitions; "Is the person optimistic, resilient, and able to deal with ambiguity? The power of optimism cannot be underestimated" (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160). *Supports* are the systems in place for someone as they transition, such as the individual, people, or groups available

to help them; “If a new retiree, for example, moves to a new city knowing no one, with no supports, adaptation might be slow” (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160). Finally, *strategies* are ways the person tries to change a situation, reframe it, and reduce stress around it; “There is no single magical coping strategy. Rather, the person who flexibly uses lots of strategies will be better able to cope” (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 161).

Using these four categories, Schlossberg (2011) offered suggestions to ease the transition experience for people while also acknowledging that because of these four categories, everyone’s reaction to transition will be different. Schlossberg (2011) suggests that a transition will be made more easily if all four S’s are at a positive place before the transition. They said, “If one’s situation is problematic or one’s supports minimal, it may make sense to delay the change until supports are established in the new community and the situation improves” (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 161). Unfortunately, college athletes do not always have the luxury of delaying a change until they are fully ready, as graduation and dates of eligibility are set for them. As college athletes leave college, they go through transitions in their physical being, social identity, support systems, and how they identify themselves. Schlossberg (2008) argues that transitions in life (e.g., the birth of a child to the death of a loved one) and those resources associated with these transitions (e.g., loss or addition of family or friends) are distinctive to each situation. Therefore, additional research is necessary to further understand how college athletes prepare, cope, and manage the transition to identify familiar challenges and benefits that arise when athletes move away from their time in sport.

Athletes Transitioning Out of Sport

Much can be gained from understanding research done on the transition related to high school, college, and especially professional sport. In a study of 199 retired, high-performance athletes who all had represented Canada, Sinclair and Orlick (1993) found that positive adjustment from a career as a professional athlete to retirement was related to achieving personal goals in their sport before retirement. If professional athletes felt fulfilled and accomplished in their sport, retirement was an easier transition. Athletes also had a less stressful transition if they had something to focus on right after retirement, whether that was a job, school, or a relationship (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). While this research was focused on professional rather than college athletes, Sinclair and Orlick (1993) offered suggestions that apply to aiding all levels of athletes in general prepare for retirement. These suggestions include seminars to prepare athletes for the transition, a resource center, and mental health skills training geared toward athletes.

In a study directed toward retired professional gymnasts, Warriner and Lavelle (2008) interviewed seven female athletes who had competed internationally and had been retired for at least one year. The gymnasts were interviewed a minimum of one year post-retirement “to allow the exploration of disengagement from elite sport and to permit the study of retirement from a process perspective” (Warriner & Lavelle, 2008, p. 304). Participants were asked broad interview questions ranging from how they got into gymnastics, what made them decide to retire, and how they were affected by retirement. The open-ended questions produced conclusive results, as the researchers were able to identify patterns that emerged from the interviews, resulting in two major themes. First, retiring and leaving their sport was tied to feelings of loss and confusion of their identity. Second, accepting the differences in their lives from pre- and post-retirement was mentioned, including lack of personal control, diet, and appearance. The researchers identified a substantial impact on the gymnasts once they retired, due in large part to the dissipation of the support system they possessed as athletes. As they stepped away from full-time competitive athletics, they also stepped away from their full-time support system (Warriner & Lavelle, 2008). This research gives a glimpse into what the transition out of collegiate sport could be like for college athletes and the potential challenges they may face.

College Athletes Finishing Years of NCAA Eligibility

There is a need to further examine college student athletes’ transition out of sport when their NCAA eligibility has concluded, especially because most college athletes do not continue into a career as a professional athlete. The transition from athletics via retirement or graduation from

college is the reality for most athletes. One study reported that during their time in college, college athletes are taught self-discipline, focus, time management, and how to achieve peak performance (McCarthy, 2019). In this study involving male and female NCAA athletes in a variety of sports, college athletes reported feeling prepared for the real world after their athletic career because of skills they developed as athletes (McCarthy, 2019). They also recognized that the advantages of being a college athlete could serve them beyond their time in undergraduate studies (McCarthy, 2019). However, along with the skills they learn and the resources they have access to, college athletes also face challenges specific to their position. For example, “college athletes have difficulty expressing what life will look like after graduation and sport and have a vague, unclear vision of their next steps” (McCarthy, 2019, p. 5). McCarthy (2019) found athletes tended to put their athletic pursuits above their academics, for example, having to be absent from class for competition or choosing majors that better aligned with their sport schedule and calendar. These kinds of decisions lead to a potentially difficult transition, as athletes are not thinking ahead to prepare themselves for life after college athletics. Athletes who participate in career preparation workshops specifically designed for athletes found great benefit and guidance and discovered how to promote the skills they honed as athletes into a career setting (Van Raalte, et al., 2017).

Efforts to prepare college athletes for life after college sport are ongoing. Hansen (2019) identified the needs for college athletes transitioning out of life as an athlete and described the first trial of a workshop designed to prepare students in their final year of eligibility for this expected transition. They modeled their workshop on the results of a study that found an athlete’s transition out of sport often is filled with “negative emotions, feelings of loss, identity crisis, and distress” (Hansen, et al., 2019, p. 1). To address these challenges, they conducted an extensive workshop for eight college athletes in their final year of eligibility. This workshop had four sections: psychoeducation, facilitating a healthy adjustment, processing the loss of sport, and identification of additional resources. The psychoeducation section “sought to target a better understanding of the situation (i.e., the transition out of sport) and how it is experienced” (Hansen et al., 2019, p. 4). In a survey done after the workshop, the researchers found the student athletes’ favorite part was hearing from other athletes about their thoughts on the transition out of college athletics, showing that even starting this discussion with athletes could be helpful.

Recent research has investigated how college athletes in different NCAA Divisions feel as their anticipated transition out of college approached. Hardin and Smith (2020) studied athletes of both NCAA Division I and Division III schools to expand on the possible difference in how they anticipated the transition out of college athletics. This study employed Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition (2011) in looking at the transition into college athletics and becoming part of a team, as well as the transition out after the collegiate athletic experience. Of the 19 NCAA college athletes interviewed, nine were Division I athletes and 10 were Division III athletes. It was found that Division I athletes seemed more likely to avoid preparing for and thinking about the transition, while Division III athletes were proactive in facing their transition out of collegiate athletics (Hardin & Smith, 2020). These findings suggest that the Division III athletes interviewed were not as tied to their identity as their Division I counterparts, which resulted in earlier preparation for the transition out (Smith & Hardin, 2020). “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” (Smith & Hardin, 2020, p. 152).

What happens to these athletes upon graduation or if they continue their education without athletics? August (2020) found a wide range of career-readiness in their research, and the athletes that were prepared for the transition to their career had a clear idea of what they wanted to do next and how to achieve those goals. Those who were not prepared had feelings of anxiety around taking the next steps and could not clearly say what they wanted to do next and how to do that (August, 2020). The transition away from being a college athlete is marked by several other transitions, such as leaving the undergraduate environment for work or graduate studies, exiting full-time training mode, and departing from the services college athletes receive. With more research on college athletes and how their lives are different after their eligibility ends, other athletes nearing an important transition in their life can be better prepared to face those transitions and understand what they might go through as they leave their lives as college athletes behind.

Method

This study reviewed the transition process for female rowers at an NCAA Division I institution in the Western region of the United States. A plethora of research has investigated college athlete transition (cf., Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Fuller, 2014; Hansen et al., 2019; Lally, 2007; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016; McCarthy, 2019; Parker, 1994; Saxe et al., 2017; Stokowski et al., 2019). Specific topics related to the transition out of sport has looked at success and challenges for professional athletes (Wariner & Lavelle, 2008), the college athlete transition through the Work Adjustment theory (Leonard & Schimmel, 2016), the anticipated effects of the transition on Division I and Division III college athletes (Hardin & Smith, 2020), and the reconstruction of college athlete identity (Menke & Germany, 2019).

As Table 1 alludes, there has been no current research on the women's rowing population specifically related to college athlete transition. There are multiple facets as to why women's rowing should be studied beyond the fact that research is scant within this setting. The women's rowing population is different than other popular sports studied in the past due to the size of the team (50+ athletes per year), the isolation of their practice facilities from other teams, and the competition schedule in that they race both in the fall and during the spring championship season. The authors understand the abundance of research in college athlete transition, but as Jones (2015) contests, "almost all research builds upon and uses existing theories and ideas. Often, your originality comes not from generating new ideas and theories, but in using existing ones in an original way" (p. 47). The originality for the current research comes from the women's rowing setting and unique features noted above. To build upon learning more about the women's rowing transition, the current study utilized Schlossberg's Theory of Transition (2011) to formulate interview questions to better understand the transition college athletes experience after their time as NCAA athletes. The current research will contribute to the existing literature by expanding the understanding of college athlete transition utilizing the four areas of Schlossberg's (2011) theory: self, situation, supports, and strategies. The current study aimed to answer the question of what the transition experience is like for women collegiate rowers and, using the themes found, looks to what athletic departments can do to support their athletes as they leave their life in sport.

As research reveals the diverse experiences athletes face as they go through the transition out of college, more resources and help can be offered to athletes before they reach this transition point. Results from the current research may help future college athletes prepare for the coming transition and successfully move on from college sports by taking with them what they learned as an athlete, while also preparing for the new challenges and opportunities they will experience beyond their college athletic career.

The current research design took the form of a case study. The essence of case study research is to provide foundational context to a lesser-known phenomenon. Based on Table 1, the use of a case study method in previous research on college athlete transition is limited. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that a case study approach be used with "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context. The case is, in effect, your unit of analysis" (p. 25). Merriam (2009) shares that the purpose of the case study is "the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigation strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive (p. 39). Given these suggestions, more units of analysis, or case studies, are necessary to build upon college athlete transition research, to eventually help larger groups of college athletes successfully transition to life. The directive of case study research is not to offer generalizability of a topic such as college athlete transition, but to build the foundation for additional research that eventually may reach the masses (Abercrombie et al., 1984; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Seminal qualitative case study author Creswell (2007) suggests that data collection for case studies not only involve the use of in-depth interviews, but also should include several sources of data to be collected (e.g., observations, reports) in support of the interviews in building a solid understanding of the case. Creswell's (2007) sentiments also are highly recommended by other important researchers in the field of qualitative research and case study work (e.g., Patton, 2002; Stake, 2005). The suggestion by Creswell (2007) and other authors to gain secondary data via observations, reports, interviews, reports, and other documentation is necessary; but while these authors do offer some secondary source examples through their vast array of publications, it

certainly is not exhaustive, and other authors continue to search for where to obtain this additional information.

We reason here that the case study setting and the resources of the authorship also play a role in the type of multiple sources of information needed for solid case study research. Given Merriam's (2009) suggestion that the researcher is the paramount instrument regarding data collection and analysis, a case study opportunity is imminent. The current case study is built off the experiences and observations of one of the authors of the current study. This individual is a former college athlete rower and former college rowing coach within the same athletic department of the participants (but not necessarily at the same time as the participants). From these experiences and observations, a pilot study was conducted to ground all aspects of the research and then utilized to aid in the finalization of the current case study.

Approach

Participants were interviewed in a semi-structured format, giving the primary investigator the freedom to ask follow-up questions for clarification purposes (Jones, 2015). Similar to Smith and Hardin's (2018) work with female college athletes, the current interview procedure was deemed beneficial to enhance the mindfulness of those being interviewed, as the conversation was intended to be fluid and conversational to generate thoughtful and perceptive responses (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The semi-structured format allowed interviewees to account for their own individual experiences without feeling restricted by the questions. Former athletes had the freedom to reflect on their time in and out of athletics and speak authentically about the transition they went through (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Interview questions were formed with the foundational elements of the 4 S's of Schlossberg's (2011) theory. These elements were offered by Schlossberg as a way for individuals to manage the transition for themselves or to help others. Each participant was asked about their self, situation, support, and strategies during their time as a college athlete and the transition of their time after eligibility (i.e., retirement from their sport). Participant responses were compared to understand the transition out of college athletics and how it affected each participant's 4 "S's." The theory of transition previously has been used in contexts when people are starting new jobs, graduating, moving to a new place, and in several studies done on athletes transitioning out of sport (cf., Flowers et al., 2014; Smith & Hardin, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019).

Sample

This study used convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is when "members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included for the purpose of the study" (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2). After receiving Institutional Review Board approval for research, the authors identified former college athletes that graduated between 2013 and 2018 to recall their transition. This time range was chosen for opportunistic results, as it gave the participants at least a year of transition beyond graduation and leaving college sport, but not more than nine years removed from their college experience. There was a balance of using recent graduates who possibly had not completed their transition and using participants who had completed their full transition cycle but that might not have a clear memory of both their time as an athlete and their initial time post-graduation because of the longer stretch of time since leaving college.

Data Collection and Analysis

One of the authors of the current research team was associated with the women's rowing team in the past. This researcher obtained access to the alumni contact list for the women's rowing team between 2013 and 2018. From this list, 37 former athletes were emailed and invited to participate in the study. Those that responded in the affirmative were sent a letter of consent in an email setting up the time of the interview. At the time of the interview, either in virtual video meetings or over the phone, participants immediately were asked if they had looked over and agreed to the

consent form. For those that answered yes, the researcher began the interview process with semi-structured questions based on Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions (2011).

The possibility of bias based on the researcher's connection to the institution and experience as a collegiate rower was considered while forming the interview questions, as well as while asking the questions. The interview team discussed the possibilities of bias and decided that the connection the interviewer had with the study participants was more beneficial to the study rather than harmful, given the researcher and participants had similar experiences. Robinson (2014) offers insight into interview bias:

The self-selection bias is not possible to circumvent in interview-based research, as voluntary participation is central to ethical good practice, therefore all a researcher can do is be aware of the possibility for bias and consider its possible impact on findings and generalizability (p. 11).

The researcher was an athlete on the same team as the participants and at the time of the study was an assistant coach for the same team. The researcher did not interview any current athletes they were coaching, so there was no crossover between participants and coached athletes. Because the researcher had a previous relationship with all participants as a former teammate, conversation was comfortable and participants were open in sharing their experience transitioning out of collegiate rowing. Questions were kept broad, influenced by Schlossberg's theory (2011), as opposed to the researcher's own experience of transitioning out of collegiate rowing. Guided questions were not asked nor did the researcher attempt to influence the participants' answers. The questions asked in the interviews are attached in Appendix A.

Schlossberg (2011) identified themes individuals experience through a life transition (i.e., self, support, strategies, situation). For the purposes of the current research, these were considered pre-determined themes. The results of the interviews and a coding process show how sub-themes were linked to these pre-determined themes. A code "is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 3). Pattern matching also was used to reduce the repetition of similar words or phrases related to the same sport management topic (Campbell, 1975).

The interviews were coded to form categories of similar answers from subject to subject (Jones, 2015). From there, the codes were grouped into themes, which is "a conceptual label for a group of linked codes, and is more abstract in nature" (Jones, 2015, p. 277). These separate phases include reading the interview transcripts and finding meaningful passages, comparing, and labeling those passages among participants' answers, relating the themes to known concepts, and finalizing the themes that emerge (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). For an extra layer of validity, all data underwent a member checking procedure (Candela, 2019; Creswell & Miller, 2000). No changes were made from this technique. These themes show the common ways college athletes manage transitions in the four areas of Schlossberg's Theory (2011), as well as any outliers among the group of participants.

Results

A total of 11 female participants were interviewed for the current research. All participants had competed with the same women's rowing team for four years during their undergraduate education, attended the same Division I institution, and graduated between 2014-2018 having used all their NCAA eligibility. Utilizing Schlossberg's Theory of Transition (2011) for the foundation of the interview questions, participants were asked about their time as a college rower and then about the time following their collegiate career, in addition to outcomes they experienced during and after their transition.

Themes

Based on responses from the 11 participants, seven themes were identified based on common expressions of transition experiences. The themes were: identity as a college athlete; athletics brings together motivated, hardworking people; new strategies; transition was stressful; freedom after leaving college athletics; physical changes during the transition; and sense of loss in the transition.

When examining qualitative data, themes among the participants’ responses are “a thread of underlying meaning implicitly discovered at the interpretative level and elements of subjective understandings of participants (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The themes found are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2
Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition (2011) Theme Development

Schlossberg’s 4 S’s	Sub-Themes	Participant quote
Self “How the person’s inherent traits set them up for transitions” (p. 160)	-Identity as a college athlete	“...determining what your next steps are and how to figure out how to carry that sense of self with you when you feel like you’re losing your sense of self. Yeah, because it’s tied so strongly in your team”
Support “The systems in place for someone as they transition and what individual people, or groups they have to help them” (p. 160).	-Athletics brings together motivated, hardworking people	“My support system fell apart. I didn’t have anybody to... just to, like, sit and talk to because that’s what I was used to.”
Strategies “Ways the person tries to change a situation, reframe it, and reduce stress around it” (p. 160)	-Recreational competition (e.g., half-marathon) -Other hobbies	“I run at least a few half marathons every single year now, not because I like it, just because I know that I can.”
Situation “What stressors someone is dealing with at the time of a transition” (p. 161)	-Transition was stressful -Freedom after leaving college athletics -Physical changes during the transition -Sense of loss in the transition	“I didn’t need to, like, go to bed at nine o’clock and wake up at five a.m., like, there was so much more freedom that I didn’t realize I had.”

In their Theory of Transition, Schlossberg (2011) suggests that when people go through a life transition, they “begin to separate from the past and move toward the new role, for a while teetering between the two” (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160). All participants were asked how long they thought they were in the transition period from life as a collegiate college athlete to life beyond that. Of the 11 interviewees, nine said the transition lasted about a year and a half. One said it was only about three months, and one said it was nearly three years. One participant said she looked at the transition as the amount of time it took “just to finally be comfortable with myself and knowing that, like, that was a huge part of my life and now it’s over, but then that’s still part of my identity.” The below results offer deeper insights into each of the 4 S’s as described by the study participants.

Self

Identity as a college athlete

Of the 11 participants, seven talked about their identity as a college athlete, and how part of the transition out was understanding or letting go of that part of themselves. One participant stated the following:

I think I felt like I wasn’t worthy anymore because...my identity was sort of lost of who I thought I built for myself for so long. So, trying to find my identity all over again in like a

normal sense, not in like an athlete way, was very difficult because for so long, even though we weren't like a high priority, we were on a winning team, and I still pride myself for being a part of a women's division one team.

Another participant vocalized the sense of loneliness that came with this change in identity as well: "There's this thing that was so important and it's such a big thing. And then you're like on your own ship." One participant talked about the immediate loss of identity when she said: "I was no longer a college athlete. I was just me. And so, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I felt very lost. It felt like a huge identity was taken away." In looking back on her time on the team and then after graduation, one participant said:

For so long, for eight years, I've always had rowing. It's like the way to meet my friends, the way to, like, have an outlet for my anxiety or depression by exercising, like by eating whatever I want, because I know I'll burn it off later on. So, like, I, I think it just destroyed me in that kind of way because I relied so much on it.

Support

Athletics brings together motivated, hardworking people

Schlossberg (2011) stated, "The support at the time of transition is critical to one's sense of well-being" (p. 160). Part of the transition out of college athletics is leaving the team environment. As one participant said, "my support system fell apart. [I] didn't have anybody to say, like, let's watch six hours of [tv] and like someone just to, like, sit and talk to because that's what I was used to." Participants interviewed had competed on a women's rowing team of at least 45 athletes every year. Seven of the participants cited that when they left college athletics, they also left a group of people on their team that both motivated them to work hard and understood their experience as a college athlete. This was an added layer of the personal transition: the lack of accessibility of a support system that had once been theirs as an athlete. One participant said:

What I really miss is that sense of community that I hit on earlier. It was hard going from like, surrounded by about 50 women who are awesome and like, oh, we all support each other, and it was great. And then leaving that being like, oh, I really only have like a handful of like-minded people around me.

Another participant said: "Not having that comfort and support was weird because you built that foundation in that family on that trust over four years and then, poof, you all are crying at graduation."

Strategies

All participants recognized strategies they needed to do to fill time in their day beyond work and other life happenings. The overwhelming response to strategies participants used related to physical fitness. While many of the participants recognized this as a strategy to stay fit and healthy, there still were challenges running through their heads related to evolving their identity after retiring from women's collegiate rowing. One participant said:

Being resilient and being able to find the light at the end of the tunnel, even though it's a big black hole for a good while...finding something to look forward to, or for me it was. So, I kind of buried my feelings or the competitiveness that I was missing in running or in biking, I mean, [one of my former teammates from the rowing team trained together] for a half marathon...we figured out something to do.

The comment or iteration of the comment related to "figuring something out" was a theme within itself. Similarly, another participant discussed life balance, but with limitations in the structure of their life:

It was just, like, figuring it out, like, how to balance work and not just like my identify as a college athlete and that I mean, I still sometimes will, like, tell people I am still a college rower. Yeah, I would say it took me a long time to not introduce myself as a college rower. And I was tempted to go back and join a club and row so I could, but I didn't because I wanted to know who I am outside of rowing. So, I picked up running and cross country skiing. Like, I picked different sports [other than rowing] and explored different hobbies.

Situation

Transition was stressful

Schlossberg (2011) suggests that transitions are stressful because of “how much it alters one’s roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. This explains why even desired transitions are upsetting” (p. 159). All 11 participants talked about how the transition out of college rowing was difficult for them. This spanned from physical changes in their body to a sense of loss around the community of support they once had. One interviewee said the beginning of their transition “felt like the rug was pulled out from under me.” Many of the participants addressed the transition as being surprising or jarring to their lifestyle, even though all of them knew they were graduating and would not be a collegiate athlete anymore. Based on Schlossberg’s theme of Situation (Schlossberg, 2011), the interview question that prompted most of these responses was: “What was the transition out of college athletics like for you?” In response to this question, one participant stated: “It was hard. I feel like this question, there’s going to be more negatives than there are positives...it was really hard.”

Freedom after leaving college athletics

Many participants talked about newfound freedom that came with leaving collegiate sports. All the participants had played sports through high school, all four years of college, and many before high school as well. For a great number of participants, college graduation was the first time in many years they did not have a sport dictating what to do with their time. One participant said they felt a sense of relief:

I had put in so much effort these past four years that I am just ready to be done and see what else is out there. So, I think having, like, the freedom to do that is it is great. It’s just on the flip side of excitement is being scared, right?

The freedom from a strict schedule and strict goals came with some fear but was also accompanied by the freedom to explore different interests as well. Another participant said they could:

...have fun working out and...have fun trying to, like, figure out life and be a normal person in a way. But I think it was also difficult because I was so structured for four years of following a certain rule book, basically, that I was like, how do you do this?

Along with the freedom came a lack of structure that had been so integral in the college athlete experience.

Physical changes during the transition

The fear of physical change was apparent with nine of the participants as they prepared for graduation and considered how that physical change would look after finishing their college career. One participant said:

I mean, we all changed physically. Nobody’s working out for twenty-five hours a week. But for me being like, oh, well, I’ve got a lot more fat in certain places like that. That was definitely a harder transition than I thought it would be, even though I felt like I knew it was going to come.

Even though this change was a bit more predictable for the interviewees, it still impacted many of them in areas of self-confidence. One participant also talked about “feeling sluggish” as she tapered off the regimented workout schedule required by collegiate rowing. In a study done on former collegiate volleyball players and their body image after leaving the sport, the researcher found that a “number of the former athletes reported comparing their current physical appearance and fitness to what it once was, which at times, led to temporary body dissatisfaction and somewhat negative body image” (Laure & Meline, 2018, p. 1). A physical change is likely to happen for athletes, as life outside competitive athletics does not require as much attention to the physical body. Preparation for this change could help athletes embrace the change and know what they can do to maintain a healthy lifestyle during their transition.

Sense of loss in the transition

Part of Schlossberg's Theory of Transition (Schlossberg, 2011) is about a sense of loss when people experience a change in their lives. In the situation area of questioning, participants were asked if they felt a sense of loss in their transition out of college athletics. A participant said the following and was citing a conversation she had with her therapist (the "she" who is referred to):

It's like a death that was like the athlete; that is like a death for you. And she said, you need to allow yourself to grieve that loss and that identity. And she was like, it may take long. It may not. But you might go through all of the stages of grief with it. And I did 100 percent. I hated it for a little bit. I was very sad about it. I felt jealous from my other friends still doing it, like I definitely went through, I mean, you know the stages. They're not really accurate, but I felt a lot of emotions with it.

Another participant talked about the loss of purpose when she said:

I'll never have such a purpose again. That purpose, I really believe like it was bigger than myself. It was bigger than our team. Like it had like a legacy. And it was like so much we had to, like, prove to our school, prove to other schools and prove to myself, you know, oh, my gosh. But like, it like, during that time, we all had, like, such a purpose. And like even now, like being in the real world, I'm like, I feel very like purposeless. I have no purpose.

Discussion

The current research aimed to review factors of transitioning out of college for individuals on the women's rowing team at a Division I institution. Schlossberg (2007, 2011) indicated that several factors go into an individual's transition(s) in life. They note that an individual goes through a transition in many ways, from the transition itself (e.g., graduating from college, marriage, divorce) to how each individual manages internal feelings (e.g., happiness, sadness) [Blinde et al., 1992; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Kimball & Freysinger, 2003; Moreland et al., 2018; Stoltenburg et al., 2011; Wooten, 2015] and external variables (e.g., physical changes, moving away, and losing friends) [Laure & Meline, 2018; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Saxe et al., 2017; Warriner & Lavalee, 2008]. Schlossberg (2011) suggests that each transition process is unique to everyone. Provided that college athlete transition research is abundant, Schlossberg's (2011) argument of life transition distinctiveness begs for continued research in this area. Furthermore, the current research bridges college athlete transition research gaps in areas that previous research is limited when using a case study method with female athlete rowers from one collegiate rowing program.

Interviews among women's rowers showed a common theme of identity tied closely to their time as a collegiate college athlete. This confirms previous work done with collegiate athletes and how, in the environment of college athletics, "students begin to incorporate being a college athlete into their sense of identity" (Murdock et al., 2016, p. 397). Similar to that of previous scholars (cf., Beamon, 2012; Brown et al., 2000; Lally, 2007; Murdock et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 1996) when a college athlete's career has ended, participants felt that shortly after retirement challenges arose with their personal identity without sport or that part of their identity had been taken away. The participants interviewed all had participated in sport since high school if not earlier, so this was a time of eight or more years involved in competitive sport ending. All participants referenced the demand of their college rowing career through the required hours of practice, a strict sleep schedule, and its impact on social schedules. This made for resolute and successful athletes but also was a vast lifestyle change as soon as they graduated, which also supports past scholarly work on college athlete stress (Kimball & Freysinger, 2003; Lentz et al., 2018; Wilson & Prichard, 2005). One participant mentioned "determining what your next steps are and how to figure out how to carry that sense of self with you when you feel like you're losing your sense of self. Yeah, because it's tied so strongly in your team." The athletic identity athletes form as they spend years with their team is something they must grapple with as they leave the very environment that helped form this identity. Part of an athletic identity also is being in good shape and performing at the peak of your body's physicality. The transition away from the college athlete training schedule added to the change in identity for participants could result in some potentially harmful habits. As one participant referenced, being "extra focused on weight, because I had seen so many people I

knew gain so much weight when they stopped rowing, and I was like freaked out about that.” There are many different sides to an identity, especially for athletes, and not addressing these during their time in college could lead to obsessive behaviors or general confusion in who they are if not in the best shape of their lives.

Many participants referenced personal freedom as they left collegiate sports. They were able to explore new ways to workout, including training for an Ironman competition, not having as strict of a schedule, and finding more choices in general. In a study on national-team athletes in Canada, it was found that “high-performance athletes who were satisfied with their lives since retiring had other interests or activities to move into upon retirement” (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). In this study, athletes who were excited about the chance to choose what they do in their spare time or what they do to maintain fitness after sport seemed to have a less challenging time transitioning. Of the 11 participants, nine discussed that finding a way to channel their competitive energy into something new functioned as a strategy to help them transition out of competitive sports. One participant said:

Training for something was helpful for me, so I did like a half marathon, I’ve done two half Ironman, which was kind of like the extreme. But I knew myself and I knew that if I had an end goal like that was going to be way more beneficial for me to feel accomplished, to continue working towards something, and then to, like, push myself, because I think I missed that.

Feelings of loss or not knowing what to do with their life were common feelings. Athletes learn more about themselves, especially when participating in the high-level, competitive world of collegiate sports. They learn what their bodies can do athletically, as well as how their minds react to winning and losing. If there is an emphasis placed on what athletes learn about themselves throughout their collegiate athletic career, a connection should be made to the successes and failures as a college athlete to what may be expected of successes and failures after retirement and what can be done to be prepared. As another participant said: “I can have fun working out and I can have fun trying to, like, figure out life and be a normal person in a way.”

A common part of the transition that was difficult for college athletes was the loss of a community of like-minded people. In a study done on the Sense of Community for collegiate athletes, researchers said that “within a university setting, community building and the creation of a Sense of Community (SOC) are probably some of the most frequently used legitimations of sport” (Warner & Dixon, 2011, p. 257). They found that “the participants in this study defined their sense of belonging in terms of their team or as the athletic department and not necessarily as the campus community as a whole” (Warner & Dixon, 2011, p. 269). The way athletics provides a built-in group in a team or the department upon which college athletes can rely was seen by Warner and Dixon (2011) as a positive trait. However, when athletes are finished with their collegiate career, that community is no longer as accessible as it once was. Specifically, in the context of a women’s rowing team, the athletes were used to being around 50 or more like-minded female college athletes all working toward the same goal. One participant cited losing this community as a sudden part of the transition when she said: “Not having that comfort and support was weird because you built that foundation in that family on that trust over four years and then, poof, you all are crying at graduation.” Those teammates also had an identity as a college athlete and understood the commitment and sense of self that came with that. Although many participants cited those teammates as a source of support for them in the transition, it was not the same as when they were competing on a team together.

The world after college sports is not necessarily filled with the types of people who might replace the support system of teammates, even family, coworkers, or other relationships. One way to prepare college athletes for this upcoming change is through making sure they know how to talk about themselves as more than athletes and equipping them with skills to articulate the strengths that come from having been a collegiate athlete. They should be able to tell non-athletes in their lives what they learned from athletics and how those skills can bring value to a career outside athletics. It is not that athletes should be told they will suddenly lose the relationships they formed during their time in college, but they should be prepared for the transition those relationships might experience. Talking about how to maintain those relationships while also learning how to cope without people constantly near them would be a worthwhile lesson during their time in college. In a study done on college students and their experience in the academic, athletic, and

social areas of college, it was found that “teammates provided an immediate social network on campus and alleviated sentiments of loneliness and stress that often accompany major life changes” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p. 360). When college athletes transition from high school into college, teammates often are an immediate source of support. As they transition out of college however, they are not automatically provided with the same group, and this adds to the difficulty of transition.

Athletes may have varied experiences of this transition, but an overall increase in providing coping strategies could result in an easier and healthier movement away from college athletics. The collegiate athlete experience is different and demanding in a way that the non-athlete college student does not experience. It is not surprising that the transition out of college is difficult for athletes; in fact, it is at least life changing. There is a large community of college athletes around the country that all go through some sort of transition out of college athletics, and this research shows what could be done to prepare them for the transition while they are still receiving support from their school. Researchers have found a variety of strategies that either prepare athletes for the transition out of college, or internal characteristics that can predict a successful transition. Saxe et al. (2017) discuss how “if the student-athletes felt as though they were able to learn from these experiences, help someone else learn from their experiences, or pass down their newfound knowledge to their teammates, their experience seemed worthwhile.” (Saxe et al., 2017, p. 40). August (2020) found that athletes who demonstrated optimism, resilience, adaptivity, and recognition of how their skills and knowledge from sport could apply in the workplace had a consistently easier time transitioning out of sport. In sum, there exist a variety of life after sport transition strategies that athletic departments, coaches, trainers, and support staff could put into place long before athletes leave their programs.

Conclusion

Interview findings from the current study support previous research, as they revealed many common themes among the women rowers. All subjects had rowed at a Division I university for four years and were at least two years out of college when interviewed. Participants of the current study mentioned personal hardship that came with leaving college and their life as a college athlete. Although this characteristic of transition was predictable in that all athletes interviewed knew when they would be graduating, the effect held great impact. This could point to the need for a deeper level of investigation within retiring athletes at all levels. A primary concern of preparing athletes for life after sport is for athletic departments to re-evaluate how this topic of discussion materializes with college athletes. Based on the results of the current research, utilizing a structure of discussion around Schlossberg’s (2007, 2011) 4 S’s (self, support, strategies, and situation) can be the foundation of further discussion, in addition to offering specific examples presented in this study or other studies using the Theory of Transition. Talking about the upcoming transition with college athletes could help them avoid the element of surprise and connect them with peers who will be going through the transition as well. Positioning athletes to use their existing connections with other athletes could be a vital step in easing this transition process.

Schlossberg (2011) recognizes that everyone goes through multiple transitions in their lives, and it is sometimes unpredictable how these transitions will affect them: “Everyone experiences transitions, whether they are events or nonevents, anticipated or unanticipated. These transitions alter our lives—our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions” (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 159). This research pinpointed a specific moment of transition for collegiate women’s rowers and found changes for the participants in each of Schlossberg’s categories of self, support, strategies, and situation. Even though a small percentage of the general population are college athletes, the transition out of college falls in line with other people’s life transitions; future researchers and those trying to help athletes during this time of transition can lean on Schlossberg’s theory to guide a conversation and prepare athletes for the transition process.

A shift in an individual’s identity, having participated in the sport for as many as two decades, is challenging in and of itself. However, the most common theme from the current research was the sense of loss felt by the participants, including a loss of identity (from sport), loss of friends, and loss of other supporters. As college athletes, they were expected to make decisions based primarily on their role as a college athlete in all aspects of life from their drinking habits

(limiting/refraining from alcohol consumption) to their social life (e.g., prioritizing sleep and recovery over socializing). After dedicating so much of their personhood to athletics in college, the transition away from all they have known through sport left many participants feeling lost and confused about who they were and what they were trying to achieve without an athletic goal. A sense of importance and belonging came with being on a Division I NCAA team, and when that was outdated, athletes did not know where they belonged or even what they offered to the world around them.

It is evident that much of the literature identifies that college athletes feel a loss of identity when they leave the sport they have known their entire lives. Much of the Table 1 research offers this as a finding, similar to the current research. However, there are two elements to the current research that are clear – Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition (2011) and the claim that individuals experience transition uniquely as a call for continued research. Additionally, loss of identity should not be taken for granted, and deeper investigation should occur related to loss, grief, and coping. According to the American Psychological Association (n.d.), grief is “the anguish experienced after significant loss” (para. 1). While this definition goes on to state that grief typically is associated with “the death of a beloved person” (para. 1), it is the significant loss itself that triggers grief for an individual, whether it is of someone we know or a feeling of loss of identity. The list of research in Table 1, primarily discussing college athlete identity loss, is limited in identifying grief discussions as a form of therapy. Several authors note grief (cf., Baillie & Danish, 1992; Beamon, 2012) and coping with the loss of identity (cf., Flowers et al., 2015; Lally, 2007; Laure & Meline, 2018; Menke & Germany, 2019; Parker et al., 2021; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Warehime et al., 2017), but less is known regarding the details of such implementation. Authors such as Heird et al. (2013) and Wooten (2015) offer conceptual ideas for college athletes in dealing with such a loss, but more is necessary. It is common for those grieving a death to seek treatment from medical doctors and trained mental health professionals, therapy, counseling, medication, and support groups. However, it could be argued that loss of identity for an athlete and dealing with this loss is seen as more of a stigma, that athletes are meant to be strong physically and mentally, that this loss is not as severe as dealing with the death of someone, and therefore they should not need the same type of coping interventions.

Continuing or even beginning a conversation about identity as athletes enter college could help frame their experience as they become more invested in their athletic career in college and beyond. This also could aid in areas beyond the transition out of collegiate athletics, such as the experience of an injury or a disappointing time in their sport career. If athletes learn how to release their whole identity from sport, but not entirely let go, they have the freedom and strength to draw upon other areas of their lives to keep them focused and purposeful when sport is no longer a big part of their lives. This points to the need to educate athletes as they prepare to end their time in college sports and equip them to formulate strategies for how to manage their own unique transition to life after being a competitive athlete. In reviewing course offerings at the University where participants of the current study graduated, college athletes take a 1-credit course (often during the first year at their university) titled New Athlete Orientation.¹ Currently, there is no course offered for college athlete transition or a course that bookends their career as a college athlete. However, this University employs two full-time sport managers and one graduate-level intern to administer the NCAA endorsed Life Skills program. This program stemmed from a well-respected athletics director from the Georgia Institute of Technology, Dr. Homer Rice, and his personal philosophy toward the college athlete. His belief and much of the values of the program revolve around the notion that “excellence is a result of a balanced life including academic achievement, athletic success, and personal well-being” (NCAA, 2022b, para 2). The Life Skills program at the University where participants of this research rowed are hard at work offering their college athletes education and knowledge based on six pillars: (1) community outreach; (2) leadership development; (3) career development; (4) community building; (5) personal development; and (6) health and wellness. The health and wellness pillar is newer, given the push by the NCAA to increase awareness of mental health issues. Less is known about college athletes

¹ “This course is designed to support the college athlete with academics and Division I regulations.” (University Course Catalog)

dealing with the loss of identity in these programs, but third-party counseling is organized and coordinated for college athletes in dire situations.

Future Research

This research differed from many existing projects by interviewing athletes who already had gone through the transition out of collegiate athletics, not ones who were soon to graduate. These athletes were able to look back on their time as athletes and their time leaving that world to reflect on what impacted them the most. New research could be done by interviewing athletes who are in the transition period (e.g., weeks or months after they leave their collegiate sport) from a team sport aspect such as rowing, or an individual aspect such as tennis or golf. This might provide new insights as the athletes would be in the middle of experiencing the transition instead of reflecting on it. Similarly, identifying college athletes in their final year of eligibility and facing retirement could provide additional viewpoints. Interviews or surveys could be employed, and regular check-ins over the course of a period of time (e.g., 24 months) could occur to understand the specific progress of transition in somewhat of a real-time setting. Furthermore, future research also should be performed with open-ended interview questions, shaped around Schlossberg's Theory of Transition (2011). The themes from this research could be used to inform more direct questions that specifically ask about physical changes, mental health, identity, and loss through the transition, as well as coping with the situation (i.e., grief). This could lead to more detailed responses from the participants, as they know exactly what they are answering.

This research is important, as it prepares athletes to navigate the transition out of sport with the resources they need to find success in the next phase of life. Athletics provides many benefits for athletes throughout their time in college, such as financial help, a built-in community, and an emphasis on health (Lentz et al., 2018; Warehime et al., 2017). This also gives the individual a strong identity as a college athlete that can be jarred when removed from them, as demonstrated through the current research (cf., McCarthey, 2019; Smith & Hardin, 2018; 2020). Athletic departments have an opportunity to demonstrate commitment to their college athletes by beginning conversations about identity early in an athlete's career and providing them with resources in preparation for life after athletics. The University of Michigan is a notable example of what this can look like. They have a website for athletes entitled "Life After Sports" (University of Michigan, n.d.), which is part of their larger mental health resource page for current athletes. This is a good start. The opportunity for athletic departments and outside organizations to provide resources for college athletes to support them in their transition from sport to life is significant.

Practical Implication

For the majority of college athletes, their athletic career ends when they leave their undergraduate institution. The current research applied Schlossberg's (2011) theory to the college athlete transition. This process did not necessarily build upon the theory, but rather confirmed the essence of the theory among the women's rower setting. The use of Schlossberg's (2011) theory did confirm the necessity of practical implications within college athletics. Investments should be made into resources that can help prepare these athletes for life beyond college without the structure of their athletic team. This preparation needs to happen while the athletes are still enrolled in college, so they can start processing and getting ready for the transition before they are fully immersed in it. A possible solution would be a course for graduating athletes to take one semester or quarter of their last year. This course could first introduce them to the idea of the transition out of athletics and then offer ways to combat the common themes found in this research – how to form an identity outside athletics, how to process the loss and grief of leaving that identity behind, how to find a community outside their team, and how to prepare for and embrace the physical changes they might go through. This course also could highlight the positives of the transition out, like how they'll find more freedom to do what they want and have time to explore other interests. This class would have to fit into their existing schedules and could be offered by an organization outside the school or by the university as a credited course. If it counted for credit, athletes would be more motivated to take the course and be invested in it. There also has been vast

research done on the importance of effective career preparation for athletes, and that could be built into this potential course as well.

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Appendix A

1. What sport(s) did you play in college?
2. Did you row before getting to college or did you start in college?
3. What was the last year you participated in college sports?
4. Situation: What was your time as a student athlete like? What was positive about it? What was negative about it?
5. Self: What characteristics did you have/do you have that made you successful as a student athlete? Did any of your characteristics make your time as an athlete more difficult?
6. Support: Did you have support during your time as a student athlete? If so, what did that support look like?
7. Strategies: What strategies did you use as a student athlete to help you be successful? This could be to help cope with stress, time management, pressure, and more.
8. Situation: What was the transition out of college athletics like for you? What was positive about it? What was negative about it? When did you go through this transition, are you still in it now? Did you feel like you had control during this transition? Did you feel a sense of loss during this transition? Were there other sources of stress outside of the transition from student athlete to adult life?
9. Self: What characteristics do you have that helped with the transition out of college sports? Again, did any self-characteristics make the transition more difficult?
10. Support: Did you have support during your transition out of college athletics? If so, what did that support look like?
11. Strategies: What strategies did you use during this transition out that helped you be more successful?