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THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF SPORTS RETIREMENT AMONG ELITE,
ACTION SPORTS ATHLETES

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of
Antioch University Seattle

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

by

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January 2023

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ACTION SPORTS ATHLETES

This dissertation, by Gracie Lu Struthers, has
been approved by the committee members signed below
who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of
Antioch University Seattle
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SPORTS RETIREMENT AMONG ELITE, ACTION SPORTS ATHLETES

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This study explored the lived experiences of sports retirement among elite, action sport athletes. This study examined participants' retirement experiences, their well-being post-retirement, and recommendations participants had for current athletes about retirement. Interviews were conducted remotely with four participants. Participants identified as Caucasian, in the 25–38 age range, had been involved with their sport competitively for 17.75 years, and had been retired for 3.37 years. Data was collected and analyzed utilizing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Participants' experiences during retirement illustrated a significant disruption in their lives and the way they lived. This disruption was characterized by significant grief and distress, followed by a prolonged existential crisis and lack of meaning. Given their level of sport involvement and intensity, athletes struggled to relate with others who had typical social development. As a result, participants felt alone and misunderstood, which compounded their grief, loss, and overall existential crisis. Participants navigated their new lifestyles that were characterized by agency over what they wanted to portray and disclose to others and increasingly living by their values. As participants stepped into their new lives, they had accepted themselves more, were more present, and had an increased sense of well-being. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu>) and Ohio Link ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu/etd>).

Keywords: elite sports, extreme sports, action sports, retirement, sports retirement, existential crisis, sports psychology, well-being

Dedication

This project is dedicated to the adventure athletes.

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Over the course of my academic career, I have been privileged to have worked with and develop meaningful relationships with so many beautiful souls. I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Christopher Heffner, my committee chairperson, for his guidance, his positivity, and belief in me. I would like to thank my committee member, Dr. Melissa Kennedy, for her warmth, compassion, and incredible knowledge. To Dr. Eric Brymer, for shedding so much light on extreme sports and bringing adventure to the field of psychology. Thank you all for your valuable feedback throughout the various stages of this process and for being amazing people to work with!

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores the intersection of elite athletes, action sports, sports retirement, and well-being through the examination of how retired, elite, action sports athletes experienced their transition out of their sport. Research in traditional sports accept that transitions out of sports marks an identity shift characterized by a disruption in self-defining activities (Cosh, Crabb, & LeCouteur, 2013). The period during athletes' transition into retirement is a particularly vulnerable time. For example, athletes participating in traditional sports tend to experience identity crises, depression, alcohol/substance abuse, eating disorders, and decreased self-confidence (Wylleman et al., 2004). However, it is unknown what the retirement process is like among elite, action sports athletes.

Significance, Clinical Implications, and Goals of the Study

This research explored the lived experiences of retired, elite, action sports athletes. This research also examined retired athletes' experiences of well-being post-retirement. The detrimental effects of transitioning out of a sport among athletes is well documented (Cosh, Crabb, et al., 2013; Giannone et al., 2017; Grove et al., 1997; Wylleman et al., 2004). The disruptive identity shift occasioned by retirement from elite sports is accompanied by additional transitions within an individual's physical, social, and occupational life domains. During this transitional period of vulnerability, athletes can experience identity crises, depression, alcohol/substance abuse, eating disorders, and decreased self-confidence (Wylleman et al., 2004). Given that the retirement process can be a highly distressing and vulnerable period for athletes, these transitions might affect their sense of well-being (Stephan et al., 2003). This study's clinical implications include offering insights to clinicians working with this population, and by extension, increasing treatment quality, engagement, and retention, by offering a better

understanding of this population's individual experiences through their narratives. Further, this study can help inform the development and implementation of future research and possible intervention by highlighting specific issues and strengths that are relevant for this population.

Nonetheless, it is important to note some of the unique aspects of conducting qualitative research. First, qualitative research utilizes different methods for validation and reliability than quantitative research. Second, qualitative research commonly requires more time and resources from the researcher when interviewing, interpreting, and analyzing the data. The steps I took to increase this study's reliability and validity will be discussed further in the analysis section.

Gaps in Previous Research

It is currently unknown what the sports retirement experience is like for elite, action sports athletes. Given that such athletes also go through the sports retirement process, the current literature lacks an understanding of what that process is like for these athletes. Literature examining sports retirement spans over 30 years when examining traditional sports. Of that established research, athletic retirement is a complicated and multifaceted endeavor that can be highly distressing to the individual. This multifaceted process encompasses changes to one's psychological, physical, social, and occupational life domains. The relative ease at which athletes experience transitioning includes the level of identification of the athlete role (i.e., athletic identity) and one's level of preparedness and voluntariness of retirement. Moreover, elite athletes spend thousands of hours practicing their sport to achieve a certain level of expertise. These individuals typically begin competing during childhood and continue throughout their adulthood. As a result, the elite athlete's dedication and intensity can result in a lack of exploration of other activities and social interactions which interferes with their identity development during critical time periods (e.g., adolescence).

This study seeks to investigate the gap of how retired, elite, action sports athletes experienced their sports retirement. Additionally, this study also examined what issues or concerns these athletes believe are relevant regarding retirement and what factors they believe would be beneficial for current athletes as they begin their retirement process. Finally, this research addressed the lack of qualitative studies examining action sports athletes' retirement and also provided additional qualitative studies investigating sports that fall within this sports category.

This dissertation will outline the literature gaps in the following chapter that indicate the necessity to explore the sports retirement process among retired, elite, action sports athletes. The literature review first explores the category and definition of action sports. Then, the literature review explores the constructs of elite athletes, sports retirement, athletic identity, and athletes' well-being and how these constructs can be applied to action sports athletes.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Action Sports

Action sports are a relatively new form of sports and are predominately individual sports that have an increased risk, danger, and/or unconventional rules or techniques that are different from traditional sports (e.g., baseball, football, soccer; Bennett et al., 2003; Ko et al., 2008). The operational definition of an action sport is defined as “a relatively new form of sport or combination of extraordinary individual achievement and unmatched personal enjoyment” (Ko et al., 2008, p. 2). Additionally, action sports can be “fundamentally conceptualized as activities which flourish through creative exploration of novel movement experiences, continuously expanding and evolving beyond predetermined environmental, physical, psychological or sociocultural boundaries” (Immonen et al., 2017, p. 1). Examples of action sports include mountain biking, surfing, BMX biking, and extreme skiing and snowboarding (Ko et al., 2008; Rinehart & Sydnor, 2003).

There is established literature examining different constraints (e.g., actions, cognitions, and decision-making processes) among traditional sports athletes (Immonen et al., 2017). For instance, individual constraints include individual characteristics such as one’s height, body weight, technical abilities, and psychological factors. Within action sports, some of the individual constraints that have been established include psychological factors, such as fear, anxiety, beliefs, and motivation that can significantly affect how the individual interacts with their environment (Immonen et al., 2017). To illustrate this, fear can trigger panic, which can impair one’s performance leading to an increase in possible injury. Moreover, environmental constraints (e.g., weather, gravity, light/visual acuity) within action sports offer athletes the opportunity to master abilities and techniques, such as performing in unpredictable weather

conditions and/or performing in different environments depending on the sport (e.g., water, land, air, partially or entirely artificial arenas; Immonen et al., 2017).

Action sports were formally introduced during the 1970s and have since become increasingly popular (Ko et al., 2008; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011). One of the most popular events in the United States for action sports are the X Games, which receives nationwide broadcasting from ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network; Ko et al., 2008; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011). Moreover, the Olympic Games now includes action sports such as BMX racing, snowboarding, and alpine skiing (Ko et al., 2008). In 2003, “five of the top 10 most popular sports in the United States were action sports” (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011, p. 832). It is estimated that “22 million Americans participate annually in action sports, specifically skateboarding, surfing, snowboarding, and BMX riding” (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011, p. 832). It is important to note that this percentage has not been updated to reflect recent trends in extreme sports that is known to the researcher; however, this number suggests that there is increased participation in such sports.

Extreme Sports Versus Action Sports

Due to the relative newness of action sports, there has been confusion surrounding the definition of action sports and how action sports differ from extreme sports. Extreme sports are defined as any sport where “one has to accept a possibility of severe injury or death as an inherent part of the activity” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 1). Examples of extreme sports include BASE jumping, extreme skiing, free solo climbing, and mountaineering (Brymer et al., 2009; Cohen et al., 2018).

The terms “extreme sports,” “action sports,” and “high-risk sports” are often used interchangeably and refer to a specific category of outdoor activities (Buckley, 2018). However,

Brymer and Oades (2009) argued that, although high-risk sports can occur in the natural environment, they do not pose the same level of risk as more extreme sporting activities. To illustrate this, the defining feature of an extreme sport is the potential consequence of severe injury and/or death. More specifically, extreme sports involve “the continuous application of highest-level skills and concentration in order to avoid any error and any failure is likely to prove fatal, unless the participant is especially lucky” (Buckley, 2018, p. 5). In contrast, a high-risk sport also involves a high level of skill and risk, it is unlikely to prove fatal unless the participant is unlucky. An action sport can be performed either outside or inside, such as creating a man-made track or jump that is sometimes seen in BMX or Big Air Snowboarding that is specifically used for the performance of the sport (Cohen et al., 2018).

The performance and skills required in extreme sports significantly differs from the skills needed in traditional sports (Brymer & Feletti et al., 2020). More specifically, the context in which extreme sports occur requires moment-to-moment attention and skill due to the inherent danger if a mistake is made. Thus, extreme sports athletes live more immediately in relation to the environment and perceive a richer landscape of opportunities for actions in relation to their environment (Brymer et al., 2020).

Further, extreme sports differ from traditional sports in that they typically do not have external rules and regulations (Brymer et al., 2020), whereas action sports can be included in sporting events such as the Winter Olympics or the X Games. For example, downhill speed skiing included in events such as the Winter Olympics differs from extreme skiing performed on long, steep slopes in mountainous terrain in that the speed skiing is surrounded by netting (e.g., B-Net) to help keep athletes safe, along with medical personnel available should an accident occur. However, extreme skiing does not have such safety measures in place or medical

personnel readily available. Overall, action and extreme sports could be placed along a continuum from action sports, where the sports performance resembles components seen in traditional sports (e.g., death is unlikely, can involve man-made obstacles, and has external rules and regulations), to extreme sports where death is highly likely and does not involve external rules and regulations (Cohen et al., 2018).

Previous literature examining topics of extreme sports and action sports have focused on the personality characteristics of individuals who engage in such sports. For instance, previous research has shown that individuals who engage in extreme sports tend to rate higher on scales measuring sensation-seeking and preference for novel, high-risk activities (Willig, 2008). Further, some researchers have argued that societal pressures or desires to rebel against mainstream society is a contributing factor in participating in extreme sports (Brymer et al., 2020). From a psychoanalytical perspective, some researchers have stated that extreme sports athletes are “pathologically narcissistic, competitive, and regressive dynamics” (Elmes & Barry, 1999). Further, Self et al. (2007) stated extreme sport athletes lack socially acceptable emotion regulation skills. As such, from these perspectives, engagement in extreme sports can be seen as deviant, socially unacceptable, and thrill-seeking.

However, several researchers in recent studies have argued that previous research focusing on personality characteristics has used theory-driven approaches that emphasize predetermined societal and risk-focused perspectives (Brymer et al., 2020). Further, such approaches have overlooked the positive effects of engaging in extreme sports and their relationship with nature and do not account for the lived experience and the required skill needed and acquired to avoid serious negative consequences (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013).

From a broader and more positive perspective, previous research has shown extreme sport athletes, specifically extreme climbers, rate high in emotional stability and extraversion and low in neuroticism (Freixanet, 1991). Moreover, other studies have shown that extreme sport athletes' scores on cooperativeness, persistence, and social dependency do not significantly differ from scores within the normative population (Monasterio & Brymer, in press).

In addition, research has shown that these athletes tend to strive towards self-actualization (Brymer & Feletti et al., 2020). More specifically, athletes reported some of their motivation to engage in such sports was to challenge themselves, to be in nature, to enhance friendships, and to feel a sense of balance and happiness (Frühauf et al., 2017; Hetland et al., 2019). Further, engagement in extreme sports can enhance an individual's experience of resilience, positive emotions, and acquisition of skills and capabilities that support flourishing (Hetland et al., 2019; Schüler et al., 2018).

Additionally, extreme sports athletes have described a flowlike state, where they became completely absorbed by their experience and time becomes "lost" or slowed down (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2017, p. 70). Further, the performance and skills required in extreme sports significantly differs from the skills needed in traditional sports (Brymer et al., 2020). More specifically, the context in which extreme sports occur requires moment-to-moment attention and skill due to the inherent risk of making a mistake. Thus, extreme sport athletes develop a person-environment relationship and develop a greater awareness of opportunities for actions in relation to their environment (Brymer et al., 2020). Within previous literature, extreme sports athletes' person-environment relationship has been described as feeling a deep connection with nature, feeling at one with nature, and a feeling of being "alive" (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2017).

This connection with nature has also been linked with an overall sense of freedom as a state of mind (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013).

Based on the literature review and findings, the current study focused on retired, elite, action sports athletes versus extreme sports athletes due to having external rules and regulations (Brymer et al., 2020). This study also focused on elite, action sports athletes who competed in high levels of competition (e.g., Olympics, X Games, world championships) to address the gap in the literature regarding sports retirement and to resemble the literature examining traditional sports retirement among athletes who competed at high levels of competition (e.g., NFL, NBA, NCAA Division I, etc.). This will be the first research study known to the researcher that will examine retired athletes who competed in a sport that involves a high level of skill, focus, and risk occurring in the natural environment.

Elite Athletes

Participation in action sports can vary just like any traditional sport in the level at which individuals engage, such as participating in the sport for recreational reasons or for competition. Due to the highly variable participation pool, this current study will focus exclusively on elite athletes.

Elite athletes spend several thousands of hours practicing their sport to achieve a certain level of expertise within their sport. These athletes spend majority of their time living their lives dedicated to optimizing their sports performance, such as spending hours training, engaging in physical exercise, nourishing themselves, getting adequate rest, traveling, and competing. Ultimately, the elite athlete's lifestyle, including their psychological, physical, and social worlds, are consumed by their sport to ensure adequate performance. For the elite athlete, "it is impossible for him [or her] to be much else" (Werthner & Orlick, 1986, p. 337).

Moreover, elite athletes typically begin competing in their sport beginning in childhood and continue throughout their adulthood. For example, gymnastics require athletes to begin rigorous training before the age of ten and demand that they train approximately 20 or more hours per week during childhood and adolescence (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Warriner & Lavallee, 2007). Thus, it is imperative to consider how their sport participation influences their identity formation during adolescence due to this being considered a key time period in identity development, especially with the level of intensity and dedication required to be an elite athlete. This impact is further discussed in more depth in the next section below.

Currently, there is not an overall definition of what classifies an athlete as “elite.” However, Swann et al. (2015) were interested in systematically reviewing the research literature to elucidate a general definition of what makes an athlete “elite.” Out of the 91 studies the researchers analyzed, researchers identified eight broad categories in defining elite athletes. These eight categories included: international/national competitive level (reported by 67% of studies), experience (reported by 49% of studies), professionalism (reported by 29.7% of studies), training time/frequency (reported by 18.68% of studies), participation in elite talent development programs (reported by 12% of studies), regional level competition (reported by 15.4% of studies), objective sport/country-specific measures (reported by 9.9% of studies), and university level (reported by 7.69% of studies).

Based on Swann et al.’s (2015) systematic review, the researchers concluded that a general definition of an elite athlete includes “semi-elite athletes (e.g., NCAA Division 1 student-athlete; national development team), competitive elite (e.g., Olympic trials qualifier, top division), successful elite (e.g., Olympic medalist, winning a major event), and world-class elite (e.g., world record holder, consistent winning of major events)” (Houltberg & Scholefield, 2020,

ap. 2). Based on their literature review and findings, the current study will use the findings and definition provided by Swann et al. (2015).

Sports Retirement

Literature examining sports retirement spans over 30 years, with particular interest among sports psychology and sport sociology disciplines. Initially, sports retirement was viewed as a discrete, negative event (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). However, recent literature has illuminated how various athletic, personal, and situational factors contribute to how athletes experience this process and how it affects their development (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

Athletic retirement, or the process of transitioning out of sport, can be defined as “the process from transition from participation in competitive sport to another activity or set of activities” (Coakley, 1983, p. 10). The terms “retirement” and “transitioning” denote to the process of an athlete ending their participation in the competitive nature of their sport.

It is important to note that the terms “retirement” and “transitioning” will be used interchangeably throughout this research project. Many athletes continue to engage in their sport following their retirement, but in a different capacity (e.g., engaging in their sport as a leisure activity rather than as a competition). For this current study, I examined sports retirement by specifically examining the lived experience of retirement for elite, action sports athletes and did not examine their current involvement in that sport.

Although there is currently no known literature examining the sports retirement process for elite, action sports athletes, there is a plethora of literature examining sports retirement from the perspectives of athletes in traditional sports. Retirement from elite sports is accompanied by additional transitions within an individual’s physical, social, and occupational life domains. Transitions out of sports are characterized by a disruption in self-defining activities and marks an

identity shift (Cosh, Crabb, et al., 2013). For instance, during their sports involvement, athletes' lives are organized around their sport, such as their competition, training, and nourishment. Athletes also tend to retire at younger ages (e.g., early to mid-20s) than the general population, and they face additional challenges of moving into other occupations and careers. This career/occupation shift requires new skills that they will need to acquire (Cosh, Crabb, et al., 2013), thus resulting in additional decision making in how to structure and organize their lives. As such, the period following retirement is highly stressful for athletes and is considered a vulnerable period.

Due to their performance-oriented lifestyle within their sporting environment, the majority of athletes report a significant false sense of being in control during their sport career (Stephan et al., 2003). For instance, many decisions are made for athletes such as when, how, and where to train, and accommodations for travel arrangements. Further, transitioning out of one's sport introduces an inevitable shift in their socio-professional lives. For example, with elite athletes' high achieving status from accomplishing high-level competitions and sports-related goals, their performances and goal attainments occur in the public eye. Their victories lead to positive social recognition and thus, their elite status contributing to their overall sense of competence, confidence, and identity (Stephan et al., 2003) As such, athletes' transition period entails adapting to a new social status and professional responsibilities and questioning their competency and self-efficacy within their new roles.

Within the sports retirement literature, experiences tend to vary when athletes transition out of their sport, and once they are fully retired (Mannes et al., 2019). Within the literature, the relative ease at which athletes experience transitioning currently include the level of identification of the athlete role (i.e., athletic identity) and one's level of preparedness and

voluntariness of retirement. The voluntariness of an athlete's decision is described as the level of control athletes have when choosing to retire (Park et al., 2012). Park et al. (2012) conducted a systematic review of studies examining athletes' career transitions from 1968 to 2010. They discovered that athletes who were forced to retire, such as after a career-ending injury, experienced significant levels of distress, including "fear of a social death or dying, a sense of betrayal and social exclusion, and a loss of identity." Cosh, Lecouteur, Cobb, and Kettler (2013) also discovered that athletes with an involuntary termination tend to experience greater difficulties adjusting to this transition and increased distress.

Further illustrating the reactions to involuntary sports retirement were Blinde and Stratta (1992), who examined 20 intercollegiate athletes whose sport ended due to an unanticipated or involuntary decision. Blinde and Stratta (1992) utilized Kubler-Ross's stages of death and dying to conceptualize participants' transition. Researchers discovered that the participants' reactions to their sport termination included a significant "amount of trauma and disruption in their lives and frequently equated to feelings of death and dying" (Blinde & Stratta, 1992, p. 1). Additional difficulties during this adjustment from previous literature has included a range from low self-confidence, disordered eating, increased anxiety (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), to clinical depression, substance abuse, and attempted suicide (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Ogilvie, 1987).

However, if the retirement was voluntary, and thus chosen, this allows the athlete a greater degree of choice and control. Some examples of why an athlete may decide to retire include outside life events such as older age, graduation (e.g., high school graduation), and a gradual decline in performance. These athletes tend to experience higher self-efficacy and have a less distressing transition out of their sport (Knights et al., 2015).

This voluntary decision can also allow the athlete to engage in preparation before retiring. Park et al. (2012) discovered that athletes' level of preparedness helped athletes' transition. This preparation included psychological preparation, having a clear goal outside of the sport, and financial planning. As such, taking a proactive approach to one's retirement can help athletes begin to redefine themselves as more than an athlete which could allow for a buffer against a crisis and confusion when leaving their sport (Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Torregrosa et al., 2004).

Identity Development and Athletes

Identity is defined as "a multidimensional view of oneself that is both enduring and dynamic" (Lally, 2007, p. 2). Identity is considered to comprise multiple dimensions that are relatively stable in one's identity hierarchy. Given the multiple dimensions within one's identity, people can prefer one aspect, or dimension, more so than other components. This preference can be beneficial for the individual when they are dominant within that role. However, when the individual must exit this role, they are faced with challenges in defining themselves due to this new absence. Simultaneously, as one area becomes more dominant, one's sense of self can become too restricted thus interfering with a person's ability to explore other multifaceted or alternative roles. As such, it is possible that this emphasis and engagement of a singular dominant role can also affect one's overall self-concept (Lally, 2007). Therefore, within the athlete role, a strong attachment to the athletic identity (i.e., singular dominant role) can affect one's overall sense of self upon retirement (Brewer et al., 1993; Lally, 2007).

Elite athletes tend to begin participating in their sport at a younger age, typically beginning in childhood and participating throughout their adolescence and early adulthood. Erikson (1959) characterized identity achievement as a lifelong process but is mostly centered

within the adolescent time period. Adolescence can be characterized as a life stage in which individuals form a true self-identity (Erikson, 1959). Self-identity refers to “a clearly delineated self-definition ... comprised of those goals, values and beliefs which the person finds personally expressive and to which he/she is unequivocally committed” (Waterman, 1985, p. 6). One’s identity is also shaped within themselves as well as with their social interactions and feedback they receive from their external world (Muuss et al., 1996). This social interaction and feedback is essential in helping one establish their identity and involves individuals trying out different roles and/or ways of viewing and interacting with the world (Muuss et al., 1996). According to Erikson’s theory, a successful identity development is based on the resolution of past psychosocial crises that help the individual address and manage future crises throughout their lifespan (Muuss et al., 1996).

Moreover, 50 years ago, the average 20-something year old living in an industrialized society was married, had at least one child, and most likely a house (Arnett, 2007). Fast forward to today, many individuals between the ages of 18 to 25 years old are attending college and postponing marriage, children, and home buying. This increase in college enrollment and prolonging what may be considered true “adulthood” has been called emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood can be understood as “the age of identity explorations” (Arnett, 2007, p. 8), where individuals continue to explore their identities, other possibilities, and decision making. Additionally, this period is characterized by increased independence from one’s parents and lack of responsibilities in traditional adult roles that allows one to explore different roles thus furthering their identity development (Arnett, 2007).

Kroger (2004) also supports this notion of this period between adolescence and adulthood. Kroger (2004) stated that the university setting is an important one for individuals as

it allows for continued and expanded exploration, examination, and consolidation of competencies and values. Further, Kroger et al. (2010) found support for this time period in their meta-analysis of 565 studies examining identity statuses. Their results demonstrated that the proportion of participants in various statuses fluctuated throughout adolescence and young adulthood, with only approximately one third of those at age 22 categorized as identity achieved. Ultimately, they concluded that “ongoing identity development should be anticipated in the years beyond late adolescence and early adulthood” (Kroger et al., 2010, p. 696).

Given that adolescence is considered a crucial time for an individual’s identity development and formation, it is essential to consider how one’s intense sport involvement impacts their identity development during that time period. Achievement within one’s sport tends to involve considerable sacrifices and dedication that prevents the adolescent from exploring other possible values, beliefs, or behaviors that are associated with identity development (Brewer et al., 1993). An athlete’s commitment to their athletic role without alternative role exploration demonstrates a state of identity foreclosure (Murphy et al., 1996), which prevents the achievement of true identity (Marcia, 1966). This notion of identity foreclosure is further discussed below.

Athletic Identity

Athletes who strongly identified with the athletic role, known as athletic identity, are particularly vulnerable to experiencing psychological difficulties during and after their transition to retirement (Giannone et al., 2017; Grove et al., 1997). Athletic identity can be defined as “the degree to which one identifies within the athletic role” (Brewer et al., 1993). Athletic identity combines cognitive, behavioral, social, and affective domains (Murphy et al., 1996). As an

individual immerses themselves more within their sport, their athletic identity increases and can lead to negative ramifications in other life domains.

For instance, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) examined elite female gymnasts' retirement process. The researchers discovered that these retired gymnasts described drifting into a "Nowhere Land" characterized by a sense of identity loss, disorientation, and confusion that they felt for the subsequent years following their retirement. Over time, three of the seven retired gymnasts reoriented themselves with their identity and established new selves that did not involve gymnastics. However, the remaining four retired gymnasts continued to struggle with their identity for approximately five years post-retirement.

Similarly, Lavalley and Robinson (2007) explored five elite, female gymnasts' retirement process. They discovered that four of the five participants developed an identity and self-concept solely based on their gymnastics. These participants were also encouraged to develop this athletic role from an early age, approximately around age five. This athletic role adoption prevented them from the critical self-exploration during adolescence, resulting in them growing into a gymnast rather than a multidimensional person. As athletes transitioned out of gymnastics, they reportedly knew very little about themselves and what they wanted to do with their lives. Participants were thus jolted onto a new journey of self-discovery in search of a new identity.

Athletes that have a strong athletic identity tend to have more difficulties transitioning to retirement, tend to take longer to adjust to retirement, and have increased levels of anxiety and stress (Grove et al., 1997). Park et al. (2012) conducted a systematic literature review of 126 studies that examined athletes' career transition. Of those studies, 35 studies examined the correlations between athletic identity and athletes' career transition. The researchers found that 34 studies indicated that "a strong athletic identity and high tendency towards identity

foreclosure were negatively associated with the quality of athletes' career transitions" (p. 33).

These studies indicated that athletes with a strong athletic identity at the time of their retirement also experienced a loss of identity and needed a longer adjustment period in their transition.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that not all athletes experience athletic identity or an identity crisis following their retirement. Athletes who engage in preparation prior to retirement have shown to have a smoother transition. This preparation may include psychological preparation, having a clear goal outside of the sport, and financial planning. For example, Lally (2007) interviewed six student-athletes participating in traditional sports regarding their sports retirement. Participants engaged in the following sports: volleyball, swimming, basketball, and track and field. Lally (2007) results demonstrated that five out of six participants did not experience an identity crisis and had a relatively "smooth" retirement transition. Within Lally's (2007) study, the researcher noted that before participants retired, they engaged in an exploration of their "neglected, abandoned, or entirely novel identity dimensions" (p. 95). This finding is consistent with previous literature stating sports retirement can be characterized by any other life adjustment or transition (Perna et al., 1999) and is not always defined by an identity crisis or major life disrupting experience. As such, taking a proactive approach to one's retirement can help athletes begin to redefine themselves as more than an athlete which could allow for a buffer against a crisis and confusion when leaving their sport (Lally, 2007; Torregrosa et al., 2004). Therefore, aspects of one's attachment to the athlete role, their voluntary nature of their retirement, and their preparation before retiring likely influence the degree to which athletes may experience an identity disruption.

Identity Foreclosure. Given that elite athletes typically begin engaging in their sport from youth through adulthood, athletes are at risk of identity foreclosure, especially if they have a strong attachment to their athletic identity. Identity foreclosure, extending from Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development, can be defined as "a construct used to describe people who have committed to an occupation or an ideology without first engaging in exploratory behavior" (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 2). Within Erikson's developmental model, the primary task in adolescence is to establish a sense of personal identity (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Literature examining identity development also concurs with this task and adds that optimal development likely occurs when the person can delve into various activities and interacts with diverse people (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Marcia, 1966). This exploration allows the individual to gather information to ultimately decide what values, beliefs, interests, and skills they personally identify with and successfully enter adulthood.

Marcia (1966) further added to Erikson's theory with this concept of identity foreclosure. Identity foreclosure occurs when individuals make "premature commitments to occupational or ideological roles that are socially and parentally acceptable in order to avoid identity crises" (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017, p. 118). An individual's commitment to this role may allow for increased feeling of psychological safety; however, this role commitment impedes one's personal freedoms and opportunities for psychological growth. Eventually, establishing one's identity must involve a separation from one's early parental values and beliefs to individuate themselves. This individuation process is done through exploratory behaviors and social interactions with diverse people who challenge and/or add new information about one's understanding of the world and how they want to interact with it (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Moreover, individuals who "fail to explore new life options are prone to adopt parental identifications and exhibit

elevated levels of authoritarian thinking, lower autonomy and self-directedness, and an external locus of control” (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017, p. 118).

Given the intensity elite athletes devote to their sport, many athletes do not engage in this exploration of other activities or social interactions, thus inhibiting the establishment of their sense of identity (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Within the literature, athletic identity has been closely related to identity foreclosure (Brewer et al., 1993). More specifically, Brewer et al. (1993) found that athletic identity and identity foreclosure were significantly correlated among 502 student-athletes. Researchers also discovered that identity foreclosure scores increased with the level of athletic involvement. These findings are further supported by a recent study conducted by Borak (2018) who examined 443 student athletes’ athletic identity and identity foreclosure scores and found a significant positive relationship between athletic identity and identity foreclosure results.

Peptitpas and France (2010) further explained that if the main route of parental or societal approval is via athletic accomplishments, these athletes may distance or avoid certain situations or people that might threaten their athletic identity. Additionally, athletes who become enmeshed with the sport’s system or culture may not engage in exploratory behaviors due to time commitments, peer approval within their sport, and intrinsic and extrinsic rewards via their athletic accomplishments (Henry & Renaud, 1972).

The Physical Transition

As an athlete transitions out of their sport, the demands placed upon their physical body also shift. Many researchers have highlighted the impact the physical deterioration an athlete faces when going through the process of retirement. The physical body allows the individual to engage in their sport and can represent a “symbol of correct attitude; it means one ‘cares’ about

oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulses” (Bordo, 1993, p. 94). Athletes who tend to struggle the most with this physical shift are those whose retirement was due to a career ending injury (Gilmore, 2008), and/or those who may be preoccupied with their body shape and size (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Athletes with a strong athletic identity may evaluate their self-worth based on their physical competencies due to the nature of needing their physical body to perform at a certain level within their sport. As a result, the loss of physical competence and athletic abilities, along with their loss in athletic identity, likely intensifies the process of their retirement transition (Warriner & Lavalley, 2007).

Stephan and Bilard (2003) examined 16 transitioning athletes and 16 active athletes and their perception of their body image. Stephan and Bilard (2003) utilized the Body-Image Questionnaire and conducted interviews with participants to address their research question. Researchers discovered that participants’ scores did not differ approximately one and a half months post-termination. However, between one and a half months to five months post-termination, transitioning athletes’ body image significantly decreased. Transitioning athletes noted their awareness of their bodily changes, such as weight gain and decreased physical capabilities, but engaged in avoidance to not think about it. After five months of post-termination, transitioning athletes’ body image decreased. Researchers highlighted how the awareness of bodily dissatisfaction initially may have further decreased their scores as it became more prevalent for participants as time went on. Additionally, transitional athletes no longer received positive social recognition of their bodies and their physical capabilities due to their retirement. The researchers demonstrated how the transitioning athletes were “no longer being

psychologically fortified by public acclaim and were coping with the transition of becoming ordinary citizens” (Stephan & Bilard, 2003, p. 102).

Similarly, Stephan et al. (2003) assessed retired athletes’ bodily transition and adjustment after their elite sports retirement as it related to their physical self and global self-esteem. Participants included 16 former athletes from various Olympic sports and 16 active elite athletes from numerous World Cups and European Championships. Participants completed the Physical Self Inventory and questions about their bodily difficulties they might have experienced after their retirement. Among the retired athletes, results demonstrated that participants revealed lower global self-esteem, physical self-worth, perceived physical condition, sports competence, and physical attractiveness than active elite athletes due to their decreased training and social recognition of their “performing body.”

Additional research examining bodily transitions among gymnasts also shows similar results (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Stirling et al., 2010). The sport of gymnastics strongly emphasizes physical competence and aesthetics, both of which are positively correlated with body weight and shape. Within the sports retirement literature examining gymnasts, results highlighted participants’ body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors as significant concerns during the retirement transition (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Some of the participants’ reports regarding their body dissatisfaction included difficulties adjusting to increased body fat, decreased muscular physique, lack of physical competence, ease of movement and control (Kerr & Dayshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Similar results were also discovered in Stirling et al.’s (2010) study examining rhythmic gymnasts’ perceptions of the influence of their retirement transition on body satisfaction and weight control behaviors. Specifically, researchers found that participants

experienced increased body dissatisfaction during retirement and felt guilty about their weight gain, loss of muscle mass, and eating habits, and engaged in food restrictive behaviors, such as calorie counting, the use of laxatives/diet pills, and excessive exercise.

Furthermore, Lavalley and Robinson (2007) described how retired athletes reported missing the physical sensations of performing high-level complex bodily maneuvers. This physical withdrawal may be a key area within action sports given the high level of skill and risk required to engage in such sports as well as the established notion of these athletes being characterized as having higher levels of sensation and thrill seeking behaviors (Brymer & Feletti et al., 2020; Willig, 2008)

Finally, an essential component to identity development for female identifying individuals within Western society is acceptance of one's physical appearance (Warriner & Lavalley, 2007). Within Warriner and Lavalley's (2007) study, participants struggled to disentangle their beliefs that beauty equaled thinness as a result of their pressure to appear a certain way throughout their gymnastic career. This bodily change can further be complicated for female athletes who "enter" mainstream society that commonly desires women to appear and act a certain way; thus, adding more stress to their transition as they determine how they want to appear outside their sport context.

Well-Being

Well-being can be broadly defined as functioning at an optimal level (Shannon et al., 2019). Martin Seligman, who is considered the father of positive psychology, developed the Well-Being Theory (WBT) in 2011 (Seligman, 2011). According to Seligman (2011), there are five domains that make up the construct of well-being. These five domains include: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Positive Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment, often referred to

as the mnemonic PERMA model. Seligman (2011) stated that each of these five domains contributes to well-being, is pursued for its own sake, and is defined and measured independently from the other domains.

Within the PERMA model, *positive emotions* refer to the range from very active emotions, such as excitement, to less active emotions, such as contentment. The notion of positive emotions is that if people can maximize their positive emotions we can move closer to well-being within this domain. The *engagement* domain refers to being in “flow,” or the “psychological state involving the positive experience of being fully engaged in the successful pursuit of an activity” (Marin & Bhattacharya, 2013, p. 1). In this “flow” state, “alienation gives way to involvement, enjoyment replaces boredom, and helplessness turns into a feeling of control” (Cziksentsmihalyi, 1990, p. 69).

The *relationship* domain refers to the notion that relationships are an integral aspect to well-being and positive relationships significantly add to one’s ability to flourish (Seligman, 2011). The *meaning* domain refers to the idea of “belonging to and serving something bigger than the self” (Seligman, 2011, p. 17). Finally, the *accomplishment* domain refers to an individual’s mastery, competence, and/or success in a variety of settings and is often pursued for its own sake (Seligman, 2011).

Transitioning out of one’s sport is a vulnerable and highly distressing time for elite athletes (Cosh, Crabb, et al., 2013). The elite athlete lifestyle involves a dedicated time commitment, physically and emotionally. Elite athletes’ daily lives are scheduled around their sport, such as their training, exercise, and travel. The majority of athletes tend to report high levels of

well-being during their sports career, especially when they accomplish high status achievements in front of the public eye (Stephan et al., 2003).

Within the sports psychology literature examining well-being, scholars tend to utilize both hedonic and eudemonic approaches. The hedonic perspective relates to “the subjective experience of happiness and includes pleasure attainment and pain avoidance” (Nicholls et al., 2016, p. 48). The eudemonic perspective involves the cognitive appraisal of what the individual finds meaningful to them and pursuing their full potential (Sauvé et al., 2022). The literature examining well-being among athletes examines both psychological and social factors. Within the social component, this refers to the athlete’s interpersonal and social dynamics that exist within the elite athlete’s sport environment (e.g., the coach-athlete relationship). The psychological component refers to the “intrapersonal or psychological characteristics displayed by elite athletes during their respective development (e.g., resilience, focus, mental toughness)” (Sauvé et al., 2022, p. 45).

The social component has emphasized the athlete-coach relationship within the literature. More specifically, coaches have more power and control over the athletes’ sport environment and culture (Sauvé et al., 2022). Further, coaches are considered the primary figure sought out by athletes for support and motivation “to enhance their sport performance and individual well-being” (Sauvé et al., 2022, p. 45).

The literature examining psychological factors influencing athletes’ well-being is limited (Nicholls et al., 2016; Sauvé et al., 2022). However, of the available literature, Sauvé et al. (2022) interviewed 12 recently retired Canadian Olympic athletes from various winter and summer sports to examine factors that contributed to and undermined their well-being while engaging in their sport. Sauvé et al. (2022) discovered that participants’ relationship with their

coach was an important interpersonal factor contributing to their well-being. Specifically, participants reported how their motivation was “influenced by their coach and was related to the autonomy supportive behaviors of their coach” (Sauvé et al., 2022, p. 54). Autonomy supportive behaviors include the coach considering the athlete’s perspective and utilizing a coaching approach that is athlete-centered and less authoritarian. Participants also commented on other personnel that impacted their well-being. For instance, participants noted how the sports psychologist tended to emphasize athletes’ performance and results at the expense of discussing matters that might have impacted their well-being. Nonetheless, some participants mentioned that the sport psychologist valued and emphasized their well-being. Factors that further undermined their well-being included lack of control over funding and policies and operational decisions.

Additionally, Nicholls et al. (2016) examined 212 athletes’ well-being, specifically pertaining to their goal attainment. Researchers highlighted how nonsport well-being literature has shown how goal-attainment can influence well-being. Given that goal setting is used throughout sports, the researchers assessed how goal adjustment capacities and stress appraisals predicted well-being leading up to and during an athletes’ competition. Nicholls et al. (2016) discovered that how athletes responded to unattainable goals was associated with their well-being during the time leading up to their competition. More specifically, athletes’ well-being was positive predicted when athletes reengaged with their goal(s), whereas goal disengagement negatively predicted well-being. Moreover, when goals became unattainable consultation with coaches or other consultants were encouraging to athletes, particularly when helping athletes find alternative approaches to achieving their goal or to develop a new goal (e.g., setting smaller goals that would lead to overall goal and/or develop a completely new goal).

One study conducted by Stephan et al. (2003) examined 16 retired athletes' well-being as they transitioned out of their sport. Researchers interviewed these retired athletes four times during the first year post-career transition and implemented the General Health Questionnaire at each check-in. Results demonstrated that athletes' well-being initially decreased in the first two months and was characterized by a period of feeling lost and a sense of "being in a liminal position between their former status and the current one in a new socio-professional setting" (Stephan et al., 2003, p. 365). Following the first two months, participants' well-being increased up to the five months post-career termination. Moreover, athletes engaged in more coping mechanisms, such as avoidance, to bypass their feelings of boredom and engaged in other distracting activities. Following this period, between five to eight months post-termination, athletes' well-being stabilized. Athletes also began to change their coping mechanisms that reflected more perceived control, such as exercising for themselves rather than for their sport performance. Finally, during months eight to 12, athletes' well-being increased again. Researchers highlighted how participants felt a greater sense of control over their lives that helped them make decisions about activities outside their sport lifestyle. Overall, the researchers illustrated how athletes transitioning out of their sport allows for a growth opportunity in that individuals can explore meaning in new settings. As a result, this sense of accomplishment from attaining goals increases one's competence and subjective well-being (Stephan et al., 2003).

Given that the retirement process can be a highly distressing and vulnerable period for athletes, these transitions might affect their sense of well-being (Stephan et al., 2003). Further, athletes' process of transitioning and adjusting out of their sport involves a shift in their identity and creating a new definition of the self (Stephan et al., 2003). Thus, in the current study, the

researcher investigated participants' lived experience of their well-being during their process of transitioning out of their sport (e.g., post-retirement well-being).

Summary of Literature Review

Retirement from an athletic career is a complicated endeavor that can be highly distressing for the athlete. Elite athletes spend several thousands of hours practicing their sport to achieve a certain level of expertise within their sport. These individuals typically begin competing during their childhood throughout adulthood consumed by their sport to ensure adequate performance. Adolescence is considered an essential time for identity development. Thus, the dedication and intensity elite athletes devote to their sport, can result in a lack of exploration of other activities and social interactions further inhibiting the establishment of their sense of identity (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017).

One's athletic retirement is a multifaceted process that encompasses changes to one's psychological, physical, social, and occupational life domains. The relative ease at which athletes experience transitioning includes the level of identification of the athlete role (i.e., athletic identity) and one's level of preparedness and voluntariness of retirement. As such, a strong athletic identity, lack of preparation, and involuntary retirement further intensify one's adjustment to life after sports. To further complicate matters, the physical body and athletic capabilities begin to deteriorate as athletes transition out of their sport. The loss of physical competence and athletic abilities, along with their loss in athletic identity, likely intensifies the process of their retirement transition (Warriner & Lavalley, 2007). Finally, literature examining athletes' well-being post-retirement is relatively sparse. Of the available research, athletes' well-being during their transition is in frequent flux, but eventually stabilizes.

Due to previous sports retirement literature focusing primarily on traditional sports, this study is the first known study to the researcher that examined retired athletes who competed in a sport that involves a high level of skill, focus, and risk occurring predominately in the natural environment. Second, this study examined elite athletes who competed at high levels of competition (e.g., Olympics, X Games, world championships) to address the gap in the literature regarding sports retirement and to resemble the literature examining traditional sports retirement among athletes who competed at high levels of competition (e.g., NFL, NBA, NCAA Division I, etc.). This study examined action sports because this category of sports involves external rules and regulations, thus resembling traditional sports. Finally, this study investigated participants' lived experience of their well-being during their process of transitioning out of their sport.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study's overall aim was to explore the lived experience among retired, elite, action sports athletes. This study also tapped into athletes' well-being postretirement and what retired athletes found particularly challenging and helpful during their retirement process. To best capture the research question, a hermeneutic phenomenological conceptual framework was used to interview retired, elite, action sports athletes within 10 years of their retirement. Specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized for the current study.

The goal of this study was to capture the lived experiences of sports retirement among this population. Given the current lack of research examining athletes' experience with their retirement process and the lack of qualitative research investigating sports that fall within this category, a qualitative methodology was best suited for the current study. Qualitative research allows the researcher to gather "complex and detailed understandings of the issue" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 45). In contrast, a quantitative methodology utilizes previous literature to measure and/or explain the results of the study. Additionally, quantitative methodology focuses on determining cause-and-effect relationship(s) (i.e., hypothesis testing), which was not the current study's goal.

Conceptual Framework and Research Methodology

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Philosophy

The theoretical framework for this study is based on hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy. Hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy was developed by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (Smith et al., 2009), a student of the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. Husserl described phenomenology as "the careful examination of human experience," where the researcher could identify individuals' "essential qualities" of that

experience (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). Husserl approached phenomenology from a descriptive lens, which incorporates the “bracketing,” or setting aside one’s preconceived knowledge such as their assumptions, judgments, and hypotheses (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger branched away from Husserl’s approach and described phenomenology from an interpretive, or hermeneutic approach.

Hermeneutics is defined as the philosophy of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger believed that to reach the essential qualities of an individual’s lived experience, the researcher cannot bracket themselves completely from the individual (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger believed that people are embedded and immersed in the world, which he referred to as “being-in-the-world” (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 16–17). More specifically, “being-in-the-world” denotes to the idea that people cannot separate themselves from the world in which they live. Thus, Heidegger disagreed with Husserl’s view of bracketing one’s preconceived knowledge. Instead, an individual’s preconceived knowledge could be identified and revised throughout the process of gathering information about one’s lived experience. This iterative process of identification and revision is termed the hermeneutic circle.

For the current study, hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen versus descriptive phenomenology for a few reasons. First, I believe the researcher cannot separate themselves from the world. Secondly, descriptive phenomenology focuses primarily on determining the “what” and “how” something is experienced; whereas, hermeneutic phenomenology goes to a deeper level of interpreting the meanings found in relation to the phenomena of interest (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, hermeneutic phenomenology utilizes reflexivity during the interpretation phase of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Reflexivity is “a person’s reflection upon or examination of a situation or experience,” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12) and “describes the process

in which researchers are conscious of and reflective about the ways in which their questions, methods and subject position might impact on the data or the psychological knowledge produced in a study” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The specific methodology, or the “process, principles and procedures” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 5), used in this current study was IPA. IPA is considered a recent methodological approach of phenomenology (Smith, 1996) and is a commonly used method within the field of psychology (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). IPA originates from three key domains within philosophy: hermeneutics, phenomenology, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009, p. 11). IPA aims to “explore, in detail, how participants make sense of their personal world, and the meanings particular experiences or events hold for participants” (Gill, 2020, p. 13).

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that focuses on studying an individual’s lived experience (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 11). Further, IPA “concur[s] with Heidegger that phenomenological inquiry from the outset an interpretive process” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 32). Moreover, IPA utilizes a “double hermeneutic,” which is the notion that the researcher, simultaneously, is making sense of the participants’ lived experience while also making sense of their own experience with the participant(s) (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). Idiography within IPA emphasizes the particularities in a person’s personal experience and perception of a particular phenomenon.

The double hermeneutic and idiographic components to IPA are what separates this approach from other phenomenological methodologies in qualitative research. The ideography within IPA is to demonstrate the “depth of analysis” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29) and “is committed to understanding how particular phenomenon have been understood from the perspectives of

particular people, in a particular context” (p. 29). Therefore, this idiography is a way the researcher can thoroughly and systematically establish generalizations by “exploring every single case, before producing any general statements” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 3).

Smith et al. (2009) describes the hermeneutic circle as “a way of thinking about method for IPA researchers” (p. 28). The hermeneutic circle serves as an iterative process within the analysis stage where the researcher examines each part to understand the whole. Within IPA, researchers also utilize a double hermeneutic which, as stated previously, is the notion that the researcher is simultaneously making sense of the participant, who is making sense of the particular phenomenon. In this vein, the researcher is attempting to make sense of the participants’ lived experience while also trying to “adopt an insider’s perspective” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 36). In other words, IPA is a dynamic process where the researcher is getting as close as possible to the participants’ personal world but cannot completely do so because the access depends on the researcher’s own conceptions and personal world throughout the interpretive process (Smith, 1996). The researcher will not “necessarily be aware of all one’s preconceptions in advance of the reading, and so reflective practices, and a cyclical approach to bracketing, are required” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35).

IPA was best suited as the specific methodology for this study due to the idiographic nature of retirement in that retirement varies from person to person. IPA also emphasizes interpretation via the double hermeneutic where the researcher simultaneously makes sense of the participants’ lived experience as well as their own, and to understand the part-whole relationship. Finally, IPA utilizes reflexivity during the interpretation phase to address and account for the researcher’s preconceptions, personal world, and inability to completely understand the participants’ lived experience.

Sample and Recruitment Procedure

Participant Selection

In accordance with the IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2009), participants were purposefully selected creating a sample that is reasonably homogenous. With a purposefully selected sample, I examined convergent and divergent details within the sample illustrating the context of the particular phenomenon (i.e., sports retirement).

Sample Size

Smith et al. (2009) recommends utilizing three to six participants for an IPA study. This researcher conducted interviews with four participants.

Participant Demographics

Six participants were chosen for the interview process and were interviewed remotely via Zoom. Two participants dropped out of the study. The remaining four participants completed the entire interview process. The interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed. Participants in this study were four women. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 38 (mean = 30.25, SD = 6.4) with 100% (four participants) identifying as cisgender female, 100% (four participants) identifying as Caucasian, and 100% (four participants) were from the United States. Participants' time involved with their sport at a competitive level ranged from 11 years to 27 years (mean = 17.75, SD = 7.27). Participants' total time involved with their sport ranged from 18 years to 31 years (mean = 22.2, SD = 5.91). Participants time since retirement ranged from six months to five years (mean = 3.37, SD = 2.1). A brief description of each participant in the order that they were interviewed is provided utilizing a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality.

Emma. Emma identified as a Caucasian, cisgender female, from the United States. Her stated age was 25 and disclosed her individual sport was alpine ski racing. Based on Swann et al.'s (2015) definition of an elite athlete, Emma classified as a competitive-elite athlete (e.g., top division). Emma reported competing in her sport for 13 years. She stated she was involved with her sport for a total of 20 years. Emma mentioned she chose to retire and has been retired for five years.

Mary. Mary identified as a Caucasian, cisgender female, from the United States. Her stated age was 25 and her individual sport was alpine ski racing. Based on Swann et al.'s (2015) definition of an elite athlete, Mary classified as a competitive-elite athlete (e.g., top division). Mary reported competing for 11 years and was involved with her sport for a total of 18 years. Mary mentioned she suffered with an injury that led to her retirement. She stated she has been retired for five years.

Heather. Heather identified as a Caucasian, cisgender female, from the United States. Her stated age was 33 and her individual sport was alpine ski racing. Based on Swann et al.'s (2015) definition of an elite athlete, Heather classified as a successful-elite athlete (e.g., Olympic medalist; winning a major event). Heather attended two Olympics and earned several successful World Cup Championship competition results. Heather reported competing for 27 years and was involved with her sport for a total of 31 years. Heather mentioned she chose to retire due to suffering with repeated injuries and has been retired for approximately six months.

Christine. Christine identified as a Caucasian, cisgender female, from the United States. Her stated age was 38 and her individual sport was snowboarding. Based on Swann et al.'s (2015) definition of an elite athlete, Christine classified as a successful-elite athlete (e.g., Olympic medalist; winning a major event). Christine attended five Olympics and was a three

time Olympic medalist, and earned several successful World Cup and X Games competition results. Christine reported competing for 20 years. Christine mentioned she chose to retire and has been retired for three years.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

For this study, the individuals chosen to participate were: (a) at least 18 years of age; (b) participated in an action sport at an elite level; (c) transitioned out of their competitive sport for no more than 10 years; (d) spoke English as their first language or possess fluency in English. Participants were excluded from this study if they did not meet these criteria.

Interested individuals contacted the researcher via the provided email or by responding to the direct message sent by the researcher (see Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively). Prospective individuals were called and asked the screening questions (see Appendix C). After potential participants were identified and screened, they were asked to participate in an in-depth interview that lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Participants were contacted via phone and email to set up the interview. The interview took place online through a HIPAA-compliant teleconferencing platform (e.g., Zoom). The informed consent was sent via email to the participants before the interview (see Appendix D). Each participant was asked to complete the informed consent form before starting the interview. The researcher verbally reviewed the informed consent with the participant and asked for verbal consent at the beginning of the interview.

Compensation. In exchange for completion of the interview procedure, participants received a \$25 VISA gift card as compensation for their time.

Recruitment Procedure

In accordance with the IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2009), participants were purposefully selected so that the sample is reasonably homogenous. The participants were recruited through both passive and active recruitment. Passive recruitment involves “distributing recruitment materials (ads, posters, flyers) with the aim of attracting potential participants to contact the researcher for more information” (Gelinis et al., 2017, p. 4). Active recruitment involves the researcher directly “approaching and interacting with specific individuals with the aim of enrolling them in research” (Gelinis et al., 2017, p. 4).

The primary source for passive recruitment of participants was by contacting sports teams and asking them to send an email to former athletes and to solicit potential participants who recently retired (e.g., U.S. Ski Team, USA Surf Team; see Appendix A).

The primary source for active recruitment of participants was directly contacting potential participants via their social media pages (e.g., Instagram; see Appendix B). Recruitment via social media has important ethical considerations. First, there is a concern for respecting the individual’s privacy and beneficence. As such, the researcher was aware of this and interacted with the individual responsibly and ethically (e.g., did not disclose sensitive or personal information without consent, maintained confidentiality, compliance with the site’s terms of use agreement). Second, the researcher was transparent when interacting with individuals via social media. Being transparent included providing an accurate and detailed description of the study’s aims, risks, benefits, and limits of confidentiality to the participant.

The advertisement and message included a detailed description of the study, including the contact information of the researcher, the inclusion criteria, parameters of the study, and limitations of confidentiality (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Participants were interested in

the study were invited to contact the researcher for further information and/or proceed with the study (see Appendix H). Participants who were interested in the study were provided an additional explanation of the informed consent, parameters of the study and limitations of confidentiality prior to the online interview.

To determine if individuals are appropriate for this study, the researcher conducted an initial screening by telephone (see Appendix C).

Measures

Demographic Information

Demographic information included gender identity, age, race, ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, years of action sport competition, and the number of years they have been retired (see Appendix E).

Semistructured Interviews

One-on-one interviews were utilized to investigate the lived experiences of retirement as experienced by retired, elite, action sports athletes. Semistructured interviews were conducted online via Zoom. The researcher also used an interview schedule (see Appendix F) in accordance with an IPA approach. An interview schedule was a way the researcher could prepare a list of questions about relevant topics, in a particular order deemed appropriate for the interview. The interview schedule was intended to serve as a guide and to be flexible to allow for a natural progression for the conversation. The questions utilized for the interview were open-ended (see Appendix F). Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to discuss their experiences in great detail (Smith et al., 2009, p. 59).

Procedure

This dissertation utilized the procedures from IPA as described by Smith et al. (2009). The procedures, methodologies, and analysis will be guided and supported by Smith's IPA approach.

Procedure for Conducting the Study

Interviews took place online through a HIPAA-compliant teleconferencing platform (i.e., Zoom). The researcher sent the informed consent to each participant via email before the interview. Prior to the interview, the researcher sent the participant a password-protected Zoom link that contained the Zoom meeting and relevant information for accessing the video meeting as well as the date and time of the meeting. The Zoom invitation link was only directly shared with the specific participant to prevent public access to the meeting to protect the participant's confidentiality. The beginning of the interview was focused on reviewing the informed consent and obtaining verbal consent from the participant. The participant was informed both in the informed consent and verbally, that the interview would be recorded and security procedures for maintaining confidentiality were discussed.

After the interview, each session was transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Participants' names were anonymized with key codes and only the researcher knew the participants' name. The data was encrypted and stored in a password protected file on the researcher's personal password-protected computer. When the study was finished, the data will be maintained for a minimum of three years. After three years, the data will be purged and deleted from data storage files and devices.

The researcher allowed time at the beginning of the interview to establish rapport with the participant and to put participants at ease. Interviews were conducted using a semistructured

interview with open-ended questions (see Appendix F). Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to discuss their experiences in great detail (Smith et al., 2009, p. 59).

Reflexivity. As recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), the study began with a detailed account of the researcher's view and personal experience of retiring from an action sport to understand the preconceptions of the researcher prior to interpreting the experience of the participants.

Protection of Human Subjects

Privacy and Confidentiality

The proposal of the current study was sent to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the Antioch University Seattle and was approved on July 27, 2021. No participants were involved in the study prior to the completion of the dissertation committee and IRB review.

Four participants, who have retired from an elite, action sports were included. All participants were cognitively able to provide written and oral consent to participate in this research. No participant was excluded based upon their race, gender, culture, national origin, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or religion.

Interviews took place online through a HIPAA-compliant teleconferencing platform (e.g., Zoom). Prior to the interview, the researcher sent the participant a password-protected Zoom link that contained the Zoom meeting and relevant information for accessing the video meeting as well as the date and time of the meeting. The Zoom invitation link was only directly shared with the specific participant to prevent public access to the meeting to protect the participant's confidentiality.

Prior to the interview, each participant was asked to sign a consent form as well as give verbal consent at the beginning of their interview to participate (see Appendix D). Participants

received a copy of the consent form for their own records. The informed consent also included a notice of audio recording (see Appendix D). The researcher also had a discussion with each participant about recording and asked for verbal permission to record before the interview. Participants were informed that they could leave at any point, without an explanation and without any negative consequences. Each participant was informed at the beginning of their interview that they could refuse to answer any question, talk about any topic, or end the interview whenever they wished without any explanation or negative consequence.

Confidentiality was maintained for the participants by converting their names to pseudonyms. Only the researcher had access to the actual names, email addresses, and phone numbers of the participants. All the signed informed consents and identifying information related to each participant was stored in a password protected file on a password protected personal computer within a locked room.

Although participants information will be de-identified, comments, de-identified descriptions, and metaphors were included in the results section that might be recognizable to the participant. The researcher informed the participant that verbatim quotes are common in qualitative research and might be used in this study and that they can opt to not have quotes from their interview be in the final project. When the study was finished, the data was purged and deleted from data storage files and devices.

Risks

No major risks were anticipated for participants in this study. However, an interview about one's experiences with sports retirement may bring up a variety of negative emotions or feelings. For example, participants may experience stress, anxiety, depression, and/or loneliness. The participant may wish to withdraw and discontinue the interview. No invasive procedures

were included in this study. No existing medical records were used. No deception was used. There were no other alternative procedures that had less risk than the interview format.

Due to the potential risks associated with participating in this study, this researcher had a handout of mental health resources (see Appendix G).

Benefits

There are several potential benefits to the participant for being a part of this research study. One potential benefit for the participants includes an increased knowledge and awareness of their personal lived experience of sports retirement. Also, participants may gain a better understanding of their retirement process.

The foreseeable benefits of this study are the expanded understanding of how elite, action sports athletes experience their transition out of their sport. By improving the understanding of athletes' experience with their sports retirement through interviews like this, clinicians, researchers, and educators may be better able to serve individuals and populations with concerns about sports retirement from action sports. Moreover, participants might experience fulfillment and meaning at contributing to this research and the possible research and treatment considerations that their discussion and participation might bring. Finally, participants were given a \$25 VISA gift card upon completion of the interview.

Analysis

The following section describes the data organization, analysis, and reflexivity.

Data Organization

The interviews were transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after the interview. Then, the data was checked for accuracy by listening and comparing it to the transcribed notes. Each audiotape was transcribed and then destroyed. Transcribed notes and collected demographics

were kept within a password protected file on a password protected personal computer within a locked room.

Data Analysis

In accordance with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), data analysis used the six steps that were applied flexibly as introduced by Smith et al. (2009). The first step involved the researcher to “immerse themselves into the data” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). In this first step, the transcripts were read and reread, and initial comments were made about the researcher’s own reactions.

The second step involved initial exploratory commenting and examination of participants’ content and language used. Within this step, “the goal is to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). The third step involved developing emergent themes. At this stage, the researcher looked for emergent themes by reducing the volume of detail (the transcript and initial notes) while maintaining complexity, in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes. Within this step, the researcher worked primarily with the initial notes rather than the transcript itself. The emphasis in this step was to turn initial notes into themes to begin getting at the essential qualities of what important in the comments attached to the transcript.

Within step four, the researcher searched for connections across emergent themes. Some of the ways Smith et al. (2009) illustrates this map-making process is through “abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and function” (pp. 97–98). The fifth step involved moving to the next participant’s transcript and repeating the process. During this step, it was essential that the researcher bracketed their emerging ideas that arose from the first

case while working on the second. Although it is impossible to completely remove the emerging ideas, it was important to make note of those ideas. Finally, once each participant's transcript had been analyzed, the researcher then conducted a cross-case analysis and looked for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009, p. 101).

Research Quality and Methodological Rigor

Within IPA, there is no way to reveal or uncover an objective reality (Yardley, 2016). Therefore, there are no universal criteria to determine the validity of claims made by participants. However, there are four general guidelines offered by Yardley that can increase the validity in qualitative research and will be used in this research.

Yardley's (2016) first principle of quality in research is "Sensitivity to Context". To address "sensitivity in context," the researcher used predominately open-ended questions in the one-on-one interviews with participants. Utilizing open-ended questions allowed for more conversation between the participant(s) and the researcher. Further, the researcher drew from previous research literature that focused on elite athletes, action sports, sports retirement, athletic identity, and well-being. Beyond my understanding of previous research on these constructs, I also informed myself on the potential social stigma associated with mental health among athletes, such as seeking/receiving treatment pre and post retirement. In combination, these elements provided a means to move forward with my study as a competent researcher.

The second guideline proposed by Yardley (2016) has labeled the justification and appropriateness of the methodology as "Commitment and Rigor." In this regard, I made sure to outline the use of the IPA model in the previous sections as being congruent with the intentions of my study. Moreover, I expanded my commitment and rigor by ensuring the selection of

suitable participants for the study. The selection criteria for the participants were outlined in the previous sections.

Yardley's (2016) third guideline is termed "Coherence and Transparency." In this regard, I acknowledged that my study will not illuminate causal relationships, and rather it demonstrates the relationships and meaning-making across constructs and contexts explored. To this extent, I also realized that the results of this study are likely to have been impacted by my reflexivity, or influence. Therefore, the readers are encouraged to view the results of this study not as a reflection of reality, rather an interpretation of it.

The final guideline proposed by Yardley (2016) involves the "Impact and Importance." This principle answers the "So what?" question of the research being explored and presented in this study. Ultimately, this study contributed to the existing body of literature regarding elite athletes, action sports, sports retirement, and well-being. Additionally, this study offered insights to clinicians working with this population, and by extension may increase treatment quality, engagement, and retention, by offering a better understanding to this population's individual experiences through their narratives. Finally, this study can help inform the development and implementation of future research and possible interventions by highlighting specific issues and strengths that are relevant for this population.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

I developed my findings for this study based on the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) process. The findings illustrate the phenomenology, or the lived experiences and meaning of a particular phenomenon; in this dissertation the lived experience of sports retirement among elite, action sport athletes. The results section was analyzed and organized by seven themes identified in the analysis process by the researcher: (a) initial reactions and adjustment, (b) sense of loss and grief, (c) lack of social support, (d) existential crisis, (e) new identity reconfiguration and integration, (f) well-being, and (g) recommendations. Additionally, subthemes were identified with each theme listed in Table 4.1. A detailed analytic description of each themes follows.

Table 4.1*Results of Data Analysis (Superordinate and Subordinate Themes)*

Superordinate Theme and Subordinate Theme	# of Participants with Theme
Initial Reactions and Adjustment	
1. Significant Distress in Major Life Adjustment	4
2. All-or-Nothing Approach	2
Sense of Loss and Grief	
3. Depression and Low Self-Worth	4
4. Loss in Relationships	3
5. Loss in Accessibility	2
Lack of Social Support	
6. Lack of Typical Social Development	4
7. Lack of Understanding From Others	2
8. Lack of Preparation	3
Existential Crisis	
9. Questioning One's Meaning and Purpose	4
10. Unstable Sense of Identity Without Their Sport	3
New Identity Reconfiguration and Integration	
11. Bodily Changes	3
12. Freedom of Choice	3
13. Values-Based Living	3
Well-Being	
14. Gratitude	3
15. Positive Relationships	4
16. Self-Acceptance	3
17. Mindfulness	3
Recommendations	
18. Therapy	3
19. Allowing Oneself Space and Time to Heal	3
20. Exploration of Other Activities	4
21. Social Connection	4

Initial Reactions and Adjustment

The initial reactions and adjustment theme contains narratives that demonstrate the participants' responses following their decision to retire from their sport. Two subthemes emerged to inform this theme: significant distress in major life adjustment and an all-or-nothing approach. These subthemes illustrated a progressive pattern of the early adjustment period that participants initially experienced. All of the participants described experiencing significant anguish following their decision to retire. This significant distress was characterized by participants feeling confused, lacking direction, and figuring out how to cope. To cope with this decision, participants turned to what they had known for so long—an all-or-nothing approach. This all-or-nothing approach resembled their perspectives they had developed over time while engaging with their sport. More specifically, the participants discussed how “all-consuming” their sport was and how it required significant time, money, energy, and mental focus. This all-consuming nature structured participants' lives and created a lifestyle that was centered around their sport.

Significant Distress in Major Life Adjustment

This subtheme addresses the significant distress participants experienced following their decision to retire. The distress experienced by participants was characterized by suffering, lacking direction, shock, and uncertainty. The narratives reflect the beginning processes of how participants experienced their retirement. Further unfolding of their experience will be discussed below as participants experienced a sequence of events rather than a discrete event.

For Emma, she illustrated initially struggling when she retired while highlighting a lack of support and feeling underprepared: “I really struggled when I retired at first and like I just needed to fill my time ... But I mean, no one prepares you for it.”

Mary similarly described the unforeseen sense of the brutality the transition would ensue. She also draws upon her self-reflection of sensing a lack of control:

It (retirement) was brutal. Um, I guess it, it was definitely not the transition I expected ... it took me a while to figure out how to pull off the brakes, um, and enjoy life a little bit before it completely passes me by.

Heather illustrates the mixture of emotions that is commonly seen in major life changes, such as confusion, loss, relief, etc.: “I guess confusing but also relieving and um definitely like an extreme life change that is taking some time to figure out and get used to.” Christine’s succinct quote captures the overwhelming emotion each participant felt: “I would say, transitioning out of my sport has been a very difficult experience.”

This theme serves to demonstrate that once participants had retired, their initial reactions reflected significant distress in a major life adjustment. Participants were able to connect with their strong emotions and recall their experiences relatively easily. Their difficulties were characterized primarily of emotional struggles in that participants initially described the emotions that were activated, such as shock, pain, confusion, and uncertainty. Heather reflected on the mixture of relief and struggle while others emphasized the brutality of it or the significant shock and struggle they experienced. Following their initial reaction to their adjustment, some participants mentioned how they began to navigate their new life context.

All-or-Nothing Approach

To cope with their life adjustment and emotional responses, Emma and Mary began to navigate their new lifestyle by utilizing an all-or-nothing approach. This all-or-nothing approach resembled their perspectives they had developed over time while engaging with their sport. Specifically, the participants described throughout their interviews the significant amount of time and resources they had dedicated to their sport, and how “sole focused” they were on “one thing”

for the majority of their lives. As a result, participants initially continued this level of intensity following their retirement to help them navigate their new life phase. This all-or-nothing approach resembled their approach they had developed over time while engaging with their sport. More specifically, the participants discussed how “all-consuming” their sport was and how it required significant time, money, energy, and mental focus. This all-consuming nature structured participants’ lives and created a lifestyle that was centered around their sport. Emma admitted that her competitive background influenced her to maintain a tight schedule:

I felt like I wasn’t even productive when I didn’t have such a tight schedule. I definitely tried to dive into like other activities and naturally just like with my competitive background like I dove into these activities at a competitive level and it was definitely not near like my career in ski racing but I tried to make like parts of my life probably more competitive than I needed to.

Mary recalls adopting the same mentality she had during her sports career characterized by several sacrifices she made and the prescriptive nature of following a program:

Um, and I think then transitioning out of that my greatest challenge was, um, how do I not adopt that same mentality for my work, like how do I avoid stepping into a relationship with design or with writing where I am like all or nothing, and I’m foregoing like personal relationships: family, friends, like all these other things and feeling like I need to sacrifice all the time to be like good or proficient. And it dawned on me that I was like I probably [pause]—you like get a—I had a really warped idea of like work versus reward in the setting that I was in. Because I was used to being—I was like in a program that could get me where I want to go if I put in X amount of effort, and not realizing that there are like some jobs that you don’t have to—you can hone it in sometimes. I was the workaholic pipeline [laughing]. It was brutal.

This theme demonstrated the behavioral response of how some participants decided to move forward in creating their new lifestyles. Participants formed narratives of utilizing what was familiar to them by engaging in an all-or-nothing approach. Emma and Mary were dissimilar in their approaches in that Mary offered insight of how this approach sacrificed her personal relationships whereas Emma highlighted a more general description of how her hyper-competitiveness was unnecessary. Nonetheless, this behavioral pattern may have been a

response to the initial significant emotional reactions whereby participants attempted to control their behavior in a manner that was familiar to them and to navigate *how* to step into their new lives.

Sense of Loss and Grief

As the participants' initial reaction to their major life adjustment settled, participants described a sense of loss and grief. The sense of loss and grief theme is characterized by various losses that the participants experienced as they moved further along in their transition from their sport. This theme begins to tap into the athletic identity participants developed. Particularly, participants' lifestyle was surrounded by their sport and had formed strong attachments to their sport lifestyle. As a result of their retirement, they lost their connection to the sport itself, their peer relationships within the sport, and the accessibility to engage in the sport in the future.

Some of the key clinical features of depression include low mood and a loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities. The difference between a low mood versus a depressed mood is that a low mood tends to lift or resolve within a few days or weeks, whereas a depressed mood can last much longer and affects one's overall well-being and health. Participants illustrated a depressed mood that lasted for quite some time as they adjusted to their new lifestyles without their sport. Frequently, depression and low self-worth are commonly experienced simultaneously. Self-worth generally refers to the extent in which an individual (a) likes themselves as a person, (b) is happy with the way they lead their lives, and (c) is overall pleased with themselves as a human being (Harter, 1988). An individual who experiences low self-worth might experience self-criticism, negative self-talk, low self-confidence, a sense of a lack of control, and increased negative social comparison. Participants described how losing their sport lifestyle increased their feelings of depression and decreased their sense of self-worth. Their worth was strongly attached

to their sport results that without it, they questioned if they would be worth anything anymore. Additionally, participants experienced multiple losses due to ending their sport lifestyle—they experienced loss in their relationships and accessibility to specific variables for their sport. As a result of this significant change, their self-worth and depression worsened.

Depression and Low Self-Worth

Participants described a process of how their sense of loss impacted them, starting with their initial experience and ending with their current perspective. The participants expressed their major life change created a sense of depression and low self-worth. For example, Emma questioned her value outside her sport. She also recalled a significant sense of loss from no longer being in the sport's lifestyle and the people she saw:

I had to talk to people about like what like my worth. I was like am I even worth anything anymore? Like you know, will my parents have anything to brag about? ... It was harder for me to like lose touch with the lifestyle and the people than it was like the actual sport.

Mary recognized the significant portion of her life she had dedicated to the sport. Mary illustrated the complexity of the emotions following the retirement, such as disappointment, personal injustice, and avoidance of facing herself and what she had just been through.

Yeah, no, I just did this for 11 years and then like didn't make it, like which is the same as a lot of people with other things in their career, but it—it feels like especially (pause) like, uh, washed up. I think it feels especially disappointing ... It just was hard to deal with like the randomness of it all and like feeling it like really unfair and like all this work had gone somewhere and just hit this point that it's like, okay, this isn't happening. And like talking about that aspect of my identity I like so [pause] like just put my head down and didn't deal with it, but I didn't realize like all the ways that it was affecting me and not allowing me to like move past it even though I had done coaching and had this like nice kind of transition. I hadn't dealt with my [pause] relationship and identity [pause] to the sport.

Heather struggles to explicitly identify the magnitude of the loss she is experiencing: “I know that I'll like, never achieve anything like quite as extreme as I have. It just feels like it feels like some loss, for sure.”

Similar to Mary, Christine emphasized the significant portion of her life dedicated to her sport and living one way for so long. She also recalls spending time preparing for her transition to find herself disappointed in aspects she did not anticipate:

Everything in my life was kind of filtered through this one thing that was designed to produce results in this one area of life ... What was disappointing was like, you just—I just thought I was like ready for, like, I just thought I was prepared, and I just had no idea.

The depression and low self-worth subtheme highlights the cognitive and emotional processes participants had as they endured their loss. The participants noted the length of time they had spent in their sport to emphasize the strength of their attachment to their sport as well as characterizing their lifestyle. As the depression and low self-worth settled, the participants then described losing their relationships within their sport, which was one of the most significant challenges they had faced.

Loss in Relationships

Given that participants had spent a considerable portion of their lives dedicated to their sport, they had developed a lifestyle centered around their sport. As a result, the participants had created a strong network of social relationships with other teammates, coaches, and sporting community. As participants disconnected from their sport via retirement, they also lost the level of engagement they had with their relationships within their sport.

Three of the participants further discussed a sense of loss in their relationships within their sport. Emma stated: “I think the hardest part was when I moved on I was nervous to lose the people that [pause] like I had been around my whole life.”

Mary also described reaching a certain point where she expected her friends to leave and relying on herself to figure out what to do next: “It got to a point where just like all my friends would leave and I’d just be like there like: ‘Alright, I guess I’ll go workout now’ [laughs].”

Finally, Heather mentioned her sense of loss as ongoing as her significant other is still competing in their sport. Heather illustrates the strain of retirement that has been placed on to their relationship: “It’s been challenging on my relationship. Like on my boyfriend and I just because he still races, and I’m done, and so it’s like a really big shift for us.”

The loss in relationships subtheme demonstrated an additional level of not only loss, but aloneness too. For example, Emma and Mary’s underlying message is, “I’m alone now.” Conversely, Heather’s narrative highlights the ongoing strain she endures as her significant other is still engaged with their sport. Overall, as one transitions out of their sport, there is a considerable shift in their relationships that adds a layer of complexity to their sense of loss and adjustment.

Loss in Accessibility

Action sports are predominately individual sports that have an increased risk, danger, and/or unconventional rules or techniques that are different from traditional sports (e.g., baseball, football, soccer; Bennett et al., 2003; Ko et al., 2008). Examples of action sports include mountain biking, surfing, BMX biking, and extreme skiing and snowboarding (Ko et al., 2008; Rinehart & Sydnor, 2003). Action sports also include external rules and regulation that are commonly seen in traditional sports. Nonetheless, action sports require specific variables to engage with the sport itself. For instance, participants involved in alpine skiing discussed the several required factors that are not accessible to the general public, such as a venue set up particularly for athletes. Given their retirement, participants no longer had access to these specific variables because they were no longer involved in their particular sport.

Emma and Mary expressed loss in no longer having access to the specific variables needed to engage in their sport at the level and intensity they once had. Emma poignantly stated:

I mean the variables are different (when compared to other sports). You can't—you can build a field wherever, you can't like have a good training hill around the corner ... my success is truly behind me and that is that.

Mary described the specific variables that she lost and no longer has access to:

Yeah, now that I ski less and even it's like [pause] when you have a downhill track, and a venue set up for you, you can go down as fast as you want [pause], no one can stop you, no one's going to tell you to go slower. You can't do that [pause] when you're doing that recreationally, so even there's like that element of it where's there's this very specific controlled environment that you just don't have access to anymore.

The loss in accessibility subtheme demonstrated the additional loss participants experienced. This loss was characterized by losing the relationship to the sport itself. While participants are able to engage in their sport recreationally, they can no longer engage with their sport in the way they had while they were competing as athletes. This loss resulted in further grief participants experienced.

Lack of Social Support

Participants illuminated trying to relate with others outside their sport while discovering they had such rich and complex backgrounds that did not resemble typical social development. Participants described a lack of understanding from other peers outside their sport as they tried to step into their new lifestyles. This lack of understanding was characterized by a sense of not fitting in with their new social structure as a result of their unique backgrounds. More specifically, typical adolescents and young adults do not experience the level of sport engagement that participants had. Participants disclosed their lack of engagement with common adolescent experimentation that their peers engaged with while also not understanding what they had experienced up to this point. This disconnection added an additional layer of social rejection as participants attempted to integrate with a new social group. Moreover, participants' perceived

lack of social support may have increased the negative impact of their retirement experience in that they did not feel understood, supported, or valued.

Lack of Typical Social Development

The retirement transition impacted the quality and nature of the participants' relationships in various ways. All participants talked about how they felt there was a gap in the relatability with other individuals. The gap in relatability specifically focused on participants' all-consuming lifestyle and the differences they now experience when interacting with others outside their sport community. Emma recalls grappling with how "different" she feels in comparison to her peers:

And like now I think back I'm like wow I wasn't in a m—like a classroom learning math, like I was in the Alps like and whether I raced well or not like I was still in the Alps with people I really enjoyed ... I think because I'm now surrounded by people who had such normal lives growing up [pause] I didn't even realize at the time like how lucky I was. Or like how much I've seen and experienced through a sport. Like I don't care if I lost every race, like the fact that I traveled the world and like had the opportunity that I did, it sets me aside from every—every single person I've ever met since.

Emma also mentioned still struggling with relating with others and a sense of hopelessness when trying to relate with others who may not have gone through something similar:

That (referring to the lack of understanding from others) is something I'm still struggling with. And I just don't know if that's gonna ever change. I mean I can try but it—you can't comprehend it I guess unless you're—it's just so (pause) it's so different [sigh]."

Mary emphasized the length of time she had spent in her sport to illustrate the level of intensity she endured, such as being a contracted athlete who refrained from ingesting illicit and/or recreational substances. Her contractual agreement hindered her ability to explore parts of herself she wished she had gotten to know earlier. The following quote demonstrates this longing for common adolescent experimentation as well as struggling to connect with her peers now:

Another thing I think about all the time about retirement, it's like I was so intensely devoted to this thing, and, you know, was for—more or less under contract for like no

smoking, no drugs, no alcohol ... I found myself transitioning into college and being like a 20-something and being like, 'Alright, I am not under contract anymore,' but like I'm on the opposite spectrum of a lot of people, where I'm kind of like something like, 'I kind of wanna go be wild tonight,' and people are like—they got their—that way out of their system. It would have been nice to have more of the little like [pause] high school parties and like just have some of those experiences.

Heather similarly draws upon the length of time she was in her sport. As a result, she recognizes how her life history may be different than others:

I'm sort of thinking about what my life has been like so far, 'cause it's been pretty wild. I'm 33 and I've just been an athlete my whole life like it's crazy ... I mean it's easy to feel alone. Feel like nobody understands and you don't really know those resources exist, too.

Finally, like Mary, Christine commented on her lack of development in key areas. More specifically, being so consumed by her sport she did not have time to develop a solid emotional landscape for herself and is now, with a hint of shame, catching up in certain areas.

And I think the hardest thing for me was I realized that I was really overdeveloped in certain areas, um—and as a result I was underdeveloped in certain areas, so I mean I started um competing professionally when I was 15 years old. I wasn't even like a fully formed adult yet. And like for example, like emotionally, I didn't develop some of those things because I was so busy competing. I'm growing up as a 38-year-old.

The disconnection from typical social development subtheme contributes to the lack of social support participants experienced. Specifically, participants described a mismatch in their experiences, such as not engaging in common adolescent experimentation or missing out on typical social development. These narratives illuminate some of the aloneness and lack of support participants felt as they navigated their new lives. This lack of typical social development was recognized by participants as they began to interact with others in their "new" social context. Although participants had the opportunity to engage in the world in a unique way, participants' narrative also reflect a longing for belonging, or a sense of belonging in their new social context. These accounts may reflect participants struggle to integrate into their new lives

and trying to find commonalities they have with their peers. However, due to their unique background, participants have found it difficult to relate with others about common experiences. For example, Emma's narrative about skiing in the Alps versus her nonsport peers being in a math class. This distinction is just one of the ways participants may have experienced a gap in relating to non-sport peers. Given that participants felt different from their peers who had experienced typical social development, there was also a lack of understanding from these peers as a result. Further lack of understanding from others is addressed in the next subtheme.

Lack of Understanding from Others

The lack of understanding from others subtheme contains narratives highlighting the disconnection participants faced when trying to find their new social group. Participants recalled their unique backgrounds were frustrating to explain to others and/or they felt different from other peers. This disconnection added an additional layer of social rejection as participants attempted to integrate with a new social group.

Two of the participants further expanded on their lack of understanding from others. Emma and Mary discussed a sense of aloneness and frustration when trying to communicate what their life was like while they were in their sport.

Like when I say 'oh I've been to boarding school' like me again trying to be normal like 'hey boarding school's a normal thing in some places.' I didn't wanna have to like explain like 'oh I was really good at something and like my sport kind of required me to leave my family.' So when I just say 'oh like I went away for school,' [pause] I've gotten like you know 'oh your parents, like—or you must be like a juvenile kid' or 'your parents must like not have great supervision,' you know like my characteristics and qualities of family then started being like judged and I was like 'woah,' like [pause] cause it's not your average after-school sport.

Similarly, Mary stated:

That's like another like weird thing, is when you start young it's like you develop this very intense no-nonsense mentality that like kind of isolates you from your peers in a way that's not always great. It's like I just need a resume. I just need to be like—I mean

because now it's like shorthand ... And that's hard to relate, like people are just like, 'what are you talk—' and it's kind of an obscure sport so, you know, it's—it's hard to be like ... It's a really complicated backstory, but it's also like so much a part of my fabric that I feel like I have to say like, 'This is what I did. This is the kind of person that I am.'

The lack of understanding from others subtheme demonstrated participants' perceived lack of social support and how that negatively affected their retirement experience. Mary's recollection also demonstrated a further rejection of her own identity from others in that so much of her sport was "part of my fabric" and "the kind of person that I am." Thus, the lack of understanding from others highlighted how participants did not feel understood, supported or valued by others when trying to communicate to new peers about what their life has been like.

Lack of Preparation

Given the relative newness of this category of sport, there is a lack of infrastructure to help athletes transition out of their sport. Additionally, resources, particularly funding, to help athletes during retirement tend to be lacking unless an athlete is on the national team (e.g., U.S. team). Further, athletes tend to not engage in help-seeking behaviors due to the stigma associated with mental health concerns and/or appearing psychologically weak (Cosh, McNeil, et al., 2020).

For participants who were not a part of the U.S. team for their sport, there was no preparation entering retirement. The lack of preparation for these participants added additional feelings of uncertainty and questioning if their experience was common. However, for participants who were on the U.S. team, retirement resources were provided to them. Some of the resources focused on helping individuals find a new career, such as resume building, finding a career, and how to dress for a job interview. Nonetheless, Christine noted, while grateful for the resources, how unpractical they were and would have rather preferred psychoeducation regarding a major life adjustment.

Three of the participants described feeling unprepared as they transitioned out of their sport. Emma shared the excess amount of time was something she did not expect to be so disconcerting:

I didn't really know what that (more free time) meant for like my free time. Like I had never had so much time and I'd never had not had plans. I just really no one prepares you for like the questions to ask yourself after retirement.

Mary shared her longing for some form of support she did not have: "Um, but [pause, sigh], yeah, it wasn't [pause], definitely wasn't fun, it was really—it was hard to deal with and something I definitely [pause], well I guess wish there was more infrastructure for."

Mary also recalls herself within a coaching role and helping younger athletes navigate this sporting lifestyle: "And also, just like give them, for better or worse, like the wisdom of the things that I wish someone had told me as an athlete and making sure that they are feeling that support and that balance."

Christine similarly described her acceptance of unforeseen circumstances while also hinting at feelings of frustration and longing for someone to help her during this process:

I don't think you can prepare for that (referring to retirement). It's kind of something you just have to walk out, which is fine, but it was—yeah, maybe someone should have told me that, like—just keep going ... I was like, 'Why didn't anybody tell me this wasn't, I wasn't healthy, well rounded developed human?' So that was easily—easily the hardest part was realizing that I had a lot of development and growing up to do and it was going to take a lot of work.

Christine also highlighted she was grateful for the resources she had access to but also highlighted their impracticality:

Like it was cool to check out, but I found it was interesting like, the, the resources that they offered were more around like how to interview for a job. Or write a resume. Or things that I as a—things that I didn't necessarily need. I would think maybe like; mental health stuff maybe would have been a better—would be a cool thing for them to offer.

The lack of preparation subtheme contributes to the lack of social support theme in that participants did not feel supported or valued by their sport community. Emma's narrative was more of a general statement regarding the excess amount of time she faced that felt uncomfortable for her and wishing someone had prepared her for. Christine and Mary's accounts also reflected a frustration with their sporting community in that they felt no one had prepared them for retirement or that the resources they were offered were not helpful for them. Participants' overall lack of preparation resulted in feelings of frustration and confusion.

Existential Crisis

As participants moved further into their retirement process, and the settlement of loss and grief had taken place, a new sense of existential crisis had emerged. The term "existential crisis" can be defined as "a moment at which an individual questions the very foundations of his life: whether his life has any meaning, purpose or value" (Buténaité et al., 2016, p. 10). Within the present study, participants were confronted with the fact that they had not experienced typical social development and were essentially different from the norm. They had questioned what their meaning and purpose were now that they were not within their sport's context. Simultaneously, participants came to the realization that they now needed to create or work on their identity outside of their sport. This theme adds to the notion that participants had developed a strong sense of athletic identity and attachment with the athlete role.

Questioning One's Meaning and Purpose

Meaning in life can be referred to one's understanding in the way they live their lives and the experiences they have as it relates to their purpose, coherence, and significance (Martela & Steger, 2016). Each participant emphasized the significant amount of time they had dedicated to their sport throughout their lives. As a result of enduring a major life transition due to their

retirement, participants discussed changes in how they identified themselves and what it was like to step out of their sport's lifestyle (e.g., unstable sense of self without sport). Emma disclosed her internal battle she endured in efforts to recreate herself:

I definitely had to talk to some professionals. Like you have—like I [pause] I literally went through what I would consider an identity crisis. I was lost. I was truly like [pause] I mean back to the identity thing, I didn't have one so I was trying to recreate one that was appealing to society, not myself.

Mary questioned her identity as it related to the sport and deciphering what is okay versus not okay. She further illustrated her recognition of how she has grown to see that her sport lifestyle may have been harmful for her psychologically:

But I think it has been hard [pause] like coming to terms with like how much of this is my relationship, and how much has it like changed [pause] for me like—and is that okay? Does that make me fraudulent? ... Because this is how I grew up, and this is how I have lived my entire life but it's not the only way to live, and in fact, in a lot of ways has been like, pretty harmful psychologically.

Heather shared creating and sticking to routines have helped her create a sense of purpose and without it she feels lost:

I don't feel as fulfilled on those days when I'm like not on the routine, you know ... It feels like, feels a bit like there's like you might have no purpose. You know, like your purpose is lost or missing or whatever.

Christine initially distances herself while sharing a “common” thought pattern athletes have upon retirement. She then recognizes how much of her “brain space” she devoted to her sport that she did not know what she enjoyed outside her sport:

I think it's easy to think as an athlete that, like your athletics, are some high points in your life and the rest of your life is like—I'm gonna just go slowly downhill into the sunset, you know ... It was hard at times. I think I—I, I think on some levels like, I didn't realize how all-consuming my sport was. Um. How much my brain space it occupied. I actually like, honestly, didn't even really know what I enjoyed and what other things I like to do.

This subtheme contributes to the existential crisis theme in that the participants questioned their purpose and meaning without their sport. Participants spoke of their questioning from a reflective standpoint in that it was something that they endured over time. Moreover, each participant expressed their questioning of meaning and purpose differently. Mary and Emma focused on the overall sense of feeling “lost,” or lacking coherence, purpose, and significance. Heather and Christine emphasized their experiences of lacking purpose and not knowing what direction to go with their lives.

Unstable Sense of Identity Without Their Sport

The unstable sense of identity without their sport subtheme differs from the previous section in that participants’ sense of a strong athletic identity is no longer present. Specifically, the narratives are characterized by participants beginning the processes of not only questioning who they are and what their purpose is, but also the realization that there is now a task to complete—to build a new identity without their sport. This subtheme highlights the ritual notion that can be seen in individuals experiencing an existential crisis.

Three of the participants described uncertainty with who they were without their sport. Emma recognizes the patterns of stress she has created for herself to maintain that level of intensity she once had while competing in her sport. She then illustrates a sort of forcefulness in creating and stepping into a new version of herself:

So I think once I finally retired it hit me that, I no longer identified with, you know, being an alpine ski racer which I think was the harder part than actually not racing. Like I’ve only seen myself in one light my whole life. And so whenever there is no longer that light to see myself in like I created an environment where I put stress on myself cause I just [pause] thought like, I just figured like oh that’s like when I do best, like I do best with you know, that, stress level. Stopping ski racing is truly like letting go of a, an entire form of yourself and like having to [pause] choose the new mold you’re stepping into.

Similarly, Mary battles with who she is allowed to be now that she has transitioned out of her sport. She recalls her dreams as a child to then realize several aspects of her life and opportunities she has missed out on due to her sport:

I find myself like dealing with questions about like my identity and like who I'm allowed to be. Yeah again, just the—the main identity. Like I remember that just being my thing when I went to school every day, as like a kid, it was like: 'I'm a ski racer,' like: 'I'm here and this is my personality and I'll be gone for a week because I'm gonna go to a race in Utah' and like I'll come back and it's very mysterious and flashy for my classmates [laughing]—they're like wondering what I'm doing all the time, but then I'm like, I don't know ... it was like a big hang up. Because it's like something I cannot shake, is like the lost time from when I was being really intensely trying to be good at this one thing, that I missed out on trying to be good at these other things. And kind of dealing with the grief of that [pause] of like missed opportunities pursuing other things in the meantime, and knowing to some degree I'm playing catch up, but I have had these things on the back burner, so now how do I transition into a healthy but like growing relationship with these other skills?

Finally, Heather succinctly shared the overwhelm she faces when confronted with the question of “Who am I?” “I feel overwhelmed with the prospective: what's next? ... I was always the skier and now what am I?”

The unstable sense of identity without their sport subtheme illustrates the realization that participants had about needing to take that next step, or task, to step into their new identity. They had acknowledged their pain, the disruption, and are now faced with creating a new identity that does not involve their sport. Participants realization of their need to create a new identity demonstrated the entering stages of their ritual, or the process of moving through their crisis. This subtheme further contributes to the existential crisis theme in that they are realizing the loss in their identity that was once held and integrated so strongly to who they were and how they identified. These narratives reflected an acceptance of loosening their attachment to their sport's identity and beginning the stages of stepping into their next life chapter.

New Identity Reconfiguration and Integration

The new identity reconfiguration and integration theme contains narratives that demonstrate participants' descriptions of beginning to step into their next life chapter. This theme is characterized by some of the initial responses participants had, such as noticing their body changing, while also realizing they had agency over what information they could disclose to others. Finally, participants discussed living their lives that were more in line with their values.

Bodily Changes

As the participants described their sequence of retirement, they described how they navigated their steps of going from an initial distress and adjustment to exploring their next life chapter. One aspect participants noticed first as they began to step into their next life chapter, was that their body was changing. This change was characterized by cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. Specifically, participants demonstrated experiencing significant body image concerns, eating concerns, and pressure to conform to a societal expectation for cisgender females. Specifically, Emma struggled to recall:

I went through a little bit, like honestly, of an eating disorder because I was no longer surrounded by people that looked and did what I did and so going into an environment where, I mean a lot of it is social media but like going into an environment where I was surrounded by just like your normal every day girls. I just was a little bit tough on myself and kind of went into an over-training period after I retired ... I mean borderline eating disorder but also just like a mental like, I was lost.

Mary noticed her physical exercise changed along with her body as she no longer needed to work out the same way she had during her sport. She also highlighted the mental shift in what motivated her to continue working out from one of sports-related to health-related:

Um, and also just be patient with your body when you're moving into that retirement like mentality with working out. I think one of the hardest things I did was just come at it like: 'I have to work out like five days a week and do this much,' and like set realistic

expectations. ‘Cause I was starting to feel so bad when I first got out that I was not working out all the time, and I felt so weak. But there’s just—when you exit it, and you’re trying to transition to: ‘Okay, I’m working out not to- like not get my ass kicked, but to be healthy,’ that’s like a lot less attractive option [laughing].

Similar to Emma, Heather disclosed influences of external pressure to appear a certain way physically and no longer saw the benefit of needing to be of a larger physical size:

My body is definitely changing ... I’m definitely not as fit and I feel that and I feel like I’m getting a little bit softer um, and my body is changing a little bit and I definitely have like some body image stuff going on where I’m like, ‘Ah! Like there’s—this really my body?’ And you know, I was in a gravity sport, so it was good to be bigger and to be able to carry your speed. And now I’m like, well I don’t need all this weight, and like I don’t wanna look like this, like I wanna be skinny and like perfect you know—like society tells me I’m supposed to be, so like, just grappling with that.

This subtheme characterized the struggle participants had disclosing their difficulties when it came to their bodily changes. The struggle to disclose their bodily changes may have been due to the experience of shame that is commonly seen in individuals with eating and body image difficulties. The cognitive aspects of participants’ narratives reflect the need to look a certain way or to be perfect. The emotional experience participants illustrated were that they felt a sense of shame for not being worthy of who they were as they were. Behaviorally, some participants engaged in more exercise or began eating differently to adjust their body composition in hopes of meeting societal expectations for women. Participants may have also turned towards social media to navigate how they “should be” to determine how they could be accepted into their new social group. Participants may also look towards social media to help inform them of what is socially acceptable behavior or appropriate social interactions given their lack of typical social development.

Freedom of Choice

The freedom of choice subtheme demonstrated participants accounts reflecting their acknowledgement of their opportunity and autonomy in disclosing whatever information they

wanted related to their sports background. This freedom of choice, or sense of agency, allowed them to connect with others in new ways they had not before. More specifically, participants could pick and choose what they could tell to others when they were forming new relationships with others outside their sport.

Three participants described agency over what they chose to disclose to others regarding their complex sport history. Emma recalled being “forced” to connect with people in her sport whereas now she can connect with others in a way that allows her to have more agency and genuine connection:

So like the first six months into college was me then [pause] you know, trying to like [pause] I guess like find a place and like without having to rely on my ski racing like without having to bring it up in every conversation, like how can I connect with people because I was put in positions prior that I was forced to connect with people and I was only with people that could understand like what I was doing or going through, you know? ... When you retire, you only get to—you only have to tell and talk about the parts you want to talk and tell about.

Mary also expressed confusion around how much she wanted to disclose to people about her history: “And that’s another weird thing that like there—I wasn’t really prepared for. It’s like how much of my backstory do I give people?”

Christine’s sense of agency surrounded her decision to retire and allowed herself to celebrate all of her accomplishments with her sporting community: “And so it (retirement) was, it ended up being like a choice I made and then a cool culmination and celebration from the sport and from my sponsors.”

The freedom of choice subtheme contributes to the participants’ beginning stages of discovering how they want to interact with their new world (i.e., a world without their sport lifestyle and identity). This subtheme highlighted the realization participants had regarding this agency over what they could disclose to others. Nonetheless, Christine’s sense of agency

surrounded her decision to retire which differed from Emma and Mary's narratives. Christine's choice reflected her acknowledgement of allowing herself the freedom to celebrate her accomplishments with her sporting community. However, Emma and Mary's accounts demonstrated the choice in what they could choose to tell others. This subtheme also demonstrated the adaptation participants may have adopted as a result of social rejection due to the lack of understanding they experienced from others as described earlier. Overall, this subtheme illustrated how participants began stepping into their next life chapter when interacting with others.

Values-Based Living

The values-based living subtheme illustrated participants engaging in activities that give their lives meaning. Values can be defined as

Statements about what we want to be doing with our life: about what we want to stand for, and how we want to behave on an ongoing basis. They are leading principles that can guide us and motivate us as we move through life. (Harris, 2019, p. 191)

Participants spoke of specific steps they could take to help them begin to integrate living more in line with their values and create a new lifestyle. Three participants discussed exploring and integrating new values into their lives that they did not have access to or knowledge of while they were in their sport. More specifically, Emma mentioned:

I'm now listening to my body rather than listening to a program that isn't one size fits all. Like I'm just like 'oh this is better for you know the longevity of my life.' Whereas before, I was doing the one size fits all kind of workouts.

Mary reflected on how success looks different for her now that she is not in her sport. She expressed gratitude for college as a stepping stone for her in helping her determine what she finds interesting and valuable for her life:

The things I've learned and just like being in a different [pause] environment where the goals and like where success looks differently, um, has all been really, really good

[pause], like for sure, hands down. Like I don't know—[pause]. I like would shiver to think what I would do without college as the next step [laughs], like it just opened—it's such a convenient place to see all of your options, you know, as it is for anyone but I think especially when you've been so one track minded it just like—the—the doors open wide and you're like, 'Oh, I can—I don't have to sacrifice my time and like ignore these parts of myself anymore.' I can like fully just indulge in these other things and see where it goes. And also make sure you're working in a program that you are in alignment with, like value wise.

Christine recognized that her faith is something she believes to be a significant piece in helping her find value and self-worth outside the sport context:

And I think a faith component added to my life—really helped me get grounded and feel like I had purpose outside of performance. Like, I had significance outside of performance ... I think, through church I also found people who just like me for me and nobody even knew I snowboarded. You know like you just gotta put yourself into places where it's not about you ... And I think I learned to value like the world that nobody sees more than the world that everybody does. And you value things based off of what they cost you. And so, you just you, you keep that in perspective where I'm like—I'm not here to prove to people how great I am. I'm not I'm not even here to win, I'm here to do my best. I'm here to grow, I'm here to develop.

The values-based living subtheme demonstrated how participants were able to connect with themselves about what is important to them and brings meaning to their lives. This subtheme also adds additional support to the freedom of choice subtheme in that values are inherently choices people make and live by to give their lives meaning. Participants' values-oriented behavior differed in that each participant possessed idiosyncratic values. For instance, Emma reflected listening to her body more and engaging with physical activity to benefit the longevity of her life. However, Mary reflected on her education as helping guide her towards determining what she was interested in and valued. Participants' narratives of values-based living suggested that this was a process that occurred over time as indicated by their statements of discovering what they felt was meaningful for them as they explored their new life context. This process also reflected the defining characteristics of values in that their

statements reflected no end point or accomplishment and were rather indicative of a meaningful life direction.

Well-Being

As the participants described inching their way into their new context and exploring what felt meaningful for them, participants illustrated increased levels of well-being. Given participants' strong attachment to their athletic identities, participants' former well-being was likely solely focused on their athletics. As a result, their well-being was compromised due to their athlete lifestyle because they had relatively few or no opportunities to build multiple identities or parts of themselves that were not focused on their athletics, such as relationships, values outside their sport, meaning and accomplishments unrelated to their sport, among other domains. Nonetheless, the participants expressed increased levels of well-being post-retirement as they navigated their new lives. Specifically, participants spoke of their gratitude, their new opportunities to build positive and meaningful relationships outside their sport context, increased mindfulness, and self-acceptance. This theme illustrated how participants were able to truly tap into their new identities outside the context of their sport and live their lives that felt purposeful, meaningful, and healthy.

Gratitude

The gratitude subtheme contains narratives reflective of participants' appreciation they have for themselves and for their sport. Participants described a sense of gratitude for their experiences as well as the resources and opportunities taken during their transition. Emma expressed gratitude for the experiences she got to live through while also appreciating the process and journey her sport has taken her: "Looking back now, like as I'm finishing school, I

am like so appreciative for it (referring to her sport) and like I now I like can't imagine my life anywhere else.”

Mary expressed her gratitude for the things she can explore with others whom she developed meaningful relationships with now that she is no longer solely devoted to her sport: “There was like so many other interests in my life that I get to now connect to people over.”

Christine expressed her gratitude for allowing herself time and space to let herself figure out her next steps and to heal as she adjusted to her new life chapter: “I was just grateful that I had the time and space to develop and let myself flail and figure it out.”

This subtheme serves to demonstrate that, despite how difficult their retirement process has been, that they felt a sense of gratitude for their experiences thus far. Participants differed in the various aspects that they were appreciative of. For instance, Mary reflected her gratitude towards new meaningful relationships she can have now that she can engage in other interests, whereas Christine's gratitude focused on the space and time she allowed herself to “flail.” Christine's gratitude reflects a self-appreciative notion in that she is grateful for her self-compassion as she endures her transition. The gratitude subtheme demonstrates the participants' acceptance and the integration of the positive experiences that they had as a result of their retirement.

Positive Relationships

The positive relationships subtheme characterized participants' accounts of how their relationships had transformed since they had retired. Within Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, positive relationships represent a sense of feeling supported, loved, and valued by other people. Human beings are social creatures and have a natural desire to connect with other human beings. Participants noted how positive relationships were a key element when they began to fully step

into their new lives throughout their retirement journeys. Some participants found a strong desire to connect with others outside their sport whereas others found it helpful to connect with others within their sports community at a deeper level.

Participants also reflected upon their positive relationships, both new and within their sport. Emma reflected on her new relationships as experiencing a genuine connection with others: “Like the friendships I have created in school are some of my like [pause] my closest friendships now because [pause] they—it wasn’t about like our similarities, it was just we truly connected I guess.” Mary disclosed craving these new relationships because she can connect with people about different things which she did not experience before: “I find myself almost like craving that (referring to new relationships), because it’s like a different—I get to connect to people about different things now, which like I wasn’t able to do before.”

Although Emma and Mary reflected on their new relationships, Heather and Christine shared their relationship experiences within their sports. For instance, Heather admitted the resources and people within her sport community were valuable to her as she transitioned out of her sport:

The tools that are available to a lot of athletes, especially if you’re an Olympic athlete. That connection with the U.S. Olympic Committee is such a valuable one during retirement and transition to the next phase. Um not only can you take like free courses and free transitional lessons and stuff, you can like talk to people. That’s been really helpful.

Christine took a different route than Heather, in that she focused on the team aspect of her relationships. More specifically, Christine believed it was valuable to continue a team environment to maintain her connection with the sport and her sport’s community as well as to help her transition out of her sport:

It just takes a team of people and so—maintaining that team vibe as you transition is super important because those relationships are what helped you achieve at a high level and will help you function as a human on the back end.

Within this subtheme, participants illustrated building new relationships built from genuine connection. Some participants differed in how their relationships were helpful during their transition. For instance, Emma and Mary demonstrated a strong desire to connect with others outside their sport that was new and more meaningful to them. This desire for outside connection might reflect an attempt at further pulling themselves out of, or detaching themselves, from their athletic identity and lifestyle. However, Heather and Christine disclosed connecting with others within their sports community at a deeper level throughout their retirement process. This deeper level of connection may resemble the greater amount of time they had spent within their sport and having more time to develop deeper, meaningful relationships. Specifically, Heather and Christine were a part of their sporting community for over 20 years, and thus may feel a much stronger attachment to their sport. As a result, they might feel a desire to deepen and/or maintain those relationships given the length of their sport involvement. Nonetheless, these relationships were helpful for participants and showed them that new and/or more meaningful relationships could be achieved along their retirement journeys.

Self-Acceptance

Participants further described adopting a practice of self-acceptance as imperative for their new lifestyle as they transitioned out of their sport. Acceptance was a fundamental component for three of the participants in adjusting to stepping into their new lifestyles. Over time, participants reflected a process of acceptance that was illustrated by starting with discussions of the past and moving towards more recent coping or concerns with present functioning. Emma reflected this past tense succinctly: “Even though it (retirement) was

miserable stopping at first, like I'm very appreciative of it as well." Mary highlighted a sense of moving forward with her life and inevitably accepting she was no longer her former self:

Because I didn't wanna be the shadow of my former like very strong self, and that's like very hard to like do and do that every day ... And also, uh, avoid putting yourself in situations where you're comparing yourself to how in shape you were at an 18-year-old at an elite level, and instead find new ways to challenge your body and move that are fun, and that are intrinsically like rewarding in the moment, and that aren't so competitive as much as it is.

Christine discussed accepting that part of her healing and adjustment process is being uncomfortable and allowing herself to grow beyond what she has been:

I think another part that was a little difficult was um, like, I had to be OK with being uncomfortable ... And I think that was one of the more—it was really uncomfortable to just embrace the uncomfortableness ... Like I would also say like it's going to be really uncomfortable and like just embrace it and don't—don't rush somewhere because you're uncomfortable or because it hurts.

This subtheme offers insights regarding participants' self-acceptance of no longer being in their sport or athletic role and sitting with their discomfort. Rather than trying to push away their discomfort, participants leaned into it to help them figure out who they were without their athletic identity or former selves. Participants' narratives began with their experience of discomfort, their distress of their discomfort, and walking the interviewer through their process of ultimately accepting themselves as they were and as they are now. Participants' self-acceptance in turn helped them increase their overall sense of well-being.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness can be defined as "the awareness that arises by paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. xxxv). The mindfulness subtheme demonstrated one of the ways participants used their extra time now that they were not consumed by their sport. Participant' previous all-consuming schedule did not allow them the opportunity to slow down and be within their present moment. As a result, a sense of being on

autopilot ensued and life passed them by. Participants' narratives demonstrated a present-focused discussion regarding their mindfulness while reflecting on their previously busy schedules.

Three participants explicitly discussed being more present as a result of their transition. Each participant highlighted how their "all-consuming" sport did not allow them the time to be subjectively still or within the present moment. As a result of having a significant amount of more time, the participants may have moved through a process of completely filling their time to slowing down to contact and be within the present moment. Emma reflected experiences of learning more about being present: "It was just a matter of not being present and so I think like that's another thing I've really learned since retirement. Like I know how to be present in my—in each day."

Mary explained a sense of forcefully "pulling" herself off of autopilot. Being more present allowed her to really evaluate what she wanted with her life: "That was like a big thing is pulling myself off autopilot. Like reflecting and like stopping myself to be like, 'Is this what I want?'" Similarly, Christine acknowledged the significant dedication her sport required of her. She reflected on how she can be more present now that she is not dedicating so much time to her sport: "It (sport) required every last bit that I had to invest into it, and so it was great, but it was—in hindsight, it was exhausting. And I'm enjoying just taking a breath at the moment."

The mindfulness subtheme captures the essence of how each participant is engaging with their own present moment. Emma reflected more of a daily practice of mindfulness and being more present within her daily life. However, Christine and Mary zoomed out and focused on being more present in general and interacting more purposefully and mindfully with their lives now. The participants' hectic sports schedule did not allow for adequate time to truly slow down and attend to their present moments. Participants were filled with one task after the next,

demonstrating a sort of a rat race approach to their living. As a result of their retirement, they were afforded more time to slow down and reflect—to be within their present moment.

Participants' mindfulness helped them to savor the positive experiences they had, thus increasing their gratitude and presence in their positive relationships, while also helping them accept themselves as they are. Overall, participants' mindfulness contributed to their overall well-being.

Recommendations

As part of the research project, participants were asked what they would recommend to athletes who may be going through a similar transition or how to prepare for such transition. Participants offered several ideas with the most frequent being therapy, exploration of other activities, social connection, and allowing oneself space and time to heal. Participants reflected on things that they themselves engaged with while also reflecting on things they wished they had done. The therapy subtheme illustrated the need participants experienced to seek support from a mental health professional to help them navigate their major life adjustment and identity. The exploration of other activities demonstrated additional self-exploration that participants recommended that helped them figure out their new sense of self and form new relationships with themselves. The allowing space and time to heal subtheme extends the self-acceptance and well-being theme in that participants described providing oneself permission to fall apart and reflect on everything they had just been through. The social connection subtheme contributes to the well-being theme, particularly the positive relationships subtheme, in that it provides richer descriptions of how social connection helped them throughout their transition process and how this would help other athletes.

Therapy

Of the four subthemes, therapy was emphasized by participants as one of the most helpful things they did and would recommend to others. This subtheme represents both the need to seek mental health support as well as the positive benefits that they experienced from seeking such support. Moreover, individuals who experience an existential crisis tend to need therapy or express a stronger desire to seek help from mental health professionals (Buténaité et al., 2016). While not reflected in the quotes below, participants initially hesitated to engage with therapy, which may resemble the common resistance athletes experience to seek out and receive mental health support. Nonetheless, three participants discussed seeking professional mental health support to aid their healing and adjustment processes. Mary enthusiastically proclaimed her love for therapy and the significant effect it had for her. She further described therapy allowed her to spend time reflecting on her life, especially given the all-consuming nature of her sport:

Huge shout out to therapy, like [laughs] I—I love therapy. Um, highly recommend it. There's just like zero reflection period from like [pause] eighth grade on, for me, it was just like on this track, which—yeah, it's—that will mess with you when you retire and I think if I hadn't had that, I would be much more lost than I am now.

Similarly, Christine emphasized her appreciation for therapy and seeking mental health support:

Counseling was the 100% the best thing I could do to, to get through and get tools really to do that ... I would say get like, like just start going to counseling now—just to do it steady Eddie.

Finally, Emma stated: “I definitely had to talk to some professionals.”

Participants discovered that therapy was immensely valuable to them during their transition and would strongly recommend it to anyone currently or about to enter retirement. The therapy recommendation and participants' enthusiasm is positive given the well-documented stigma athletes experience when seeking and/or receiving mental health support.

Allowing Oneself Space and Time to Heal

Similar to the therapy subtheme, the allowing oneself space and time to heal subtheme contains narratives that extend the self-acceptance subtheme and well-being theme in that participants describe providing oneself permission to adjust and reflect on everything they had been through. Given the all-or-nothing theme described previously, the participants acknowledged this space and time recommendation as one they may have wished they had or that they learned to adopt early on in their transition. The space component within the subtheme refers to the psychological and physical space (i.e., distance) from the sport itself. For instance, the space involves the process of detaching from one's athletic identity while also physically not engaging with their sport. The time aspect refers to the notion that this entire retirement transition is a process and thus occurs over time. The space and time subtheme allowed for a self-compassionate approach to their transition in that participants acknowledged their major life adjustment, to notice their pain, and offered a self-understanding when confronted with their hardships.

Three participants described allowing themselves time and space to heal and to adjust slowly. For instance, Christine stated: "Yeah, I honestly haven't been in a rush to, just figure out exactly what I want to do or what's next for me..." Similarly, Heather mentioned taking more time and space for herself to help her navigate her next chapter:

When I decided to retire, I was like 'I'm going to give myself a year to figure out what I'm doing' like I'm not going to jump into anything. And just like, not make any rash decisions. And also just taking the time to like process everything and like recognize what I've been through.

Mary also stated to give oneself space and time before moving on too quickly: "Don't get super wrapped up in your job and then just jump from one intense thing to the next."

The allowing oneself space and time subtheme contributed to the recommendations theme by participants reflecting on their experiences thus far and what they found helpful or what they would have done differently (e.g., allow themselves more time and space). Given that the average length of time participants spent engaged with their sport was 22.2 years and during key developmental life stages, participants needed ample time and space to process what their lives have been like up to this point, their current psychological functioning as a result of their sport and their retirement, where they would like to go from here, and how to get there. The next subtheme addresses the questions, “where should I go?” and “how do I get there?”

Exploration of Other Activities

The exploration of other activities subtheme differs from the values-based living subtheme in that participants engaged in new activities and hobbies that they had not engaged in before or did not have much opportunity to engage with while in their sport. These behaviors allowed participants to discover new parts of themselves or parts of themselves that had not received much attention while they were in their sport.

Emma found social clubs and leadership positions to be fulfilling and meaningful to her:

I joined every social—I was in a sorority, like every social club and like also through leadership ... I’ve taken board positions within my school clubs and was captain of the water ski team and I’ve joined the board of like the over, you know, of water skiing. I’ve really just [pause] kept my time [pause] like so busy.

Mary advised having some sort of a plan for what to do next while also recommending an exploration of the self to help navigate this next life stage:

Figure out what you’re doing next, don’t freak out about it. But like go do things that are going to make you think about what you want next. Like take some community college classes, um, if that’s available to you, like vocational stuff. Um, find a hobby, join a club. Like do things that are completely uninvolved. I think that’s my main advice. Find something that’s like stimulating in and of itself, and fun, and that’s also challenging.

Heather similarly emphasized exploring activities that she enjoys and is passionate about. She also mentioned engaging in hobbies that had helped her cope with the intensity of her sport:

I get house plants and like have a garden and grow vegetables and take care of my dog and be home more often ... and find something else ... I just love too many things. I always had these other things that I really enjoy doing and I also found it helped me find some balance with skiing cause skiing is such like a high intensity, really stressful sport. And I think being able to balance that with you know some downtime of, just like sitting going back to my room and playing guitar. Having those creative outlets has been really helpful in this phase of transition.

Finally, Christine illustrated an acceptance of self-exploration of finding new activities and new relationships with others that she has more time to do now that she is not consumed by her sport: “Just let myself try new things and explore new things and develop new friendships and have time for relationships and stuff like that that I just never really had before.”

The exploration of other activities subtheme were constructed over time. Participants grew into these notions of exploration while in the process of overcoming their athletic identity, discovering new parts of themselves, and integrating multiple new pieces of information about themselves. Exploration of other activities were easily accessed by participants and were expressed in phrases of hopefulness and excitement. Moreover, the narratives demonstrated that achieving goals and engaging with activities increased participants’ self-worth and self-esteem. This subtheme connects with the recommendation theme as a way participants behaviorally answered the questions “where should I go?” and “how do I get there?” These activities helped participants in their self-exploration of themselves without their sport.

Social Connection

A constant source of support participants fell back on were their social relationships and connection with others. Similar to the positive relationships subtheme, humans have a natural desire to connect with other humans. Participants within the social connection subtheme focused

on who and how their relationships were meaningful for them. This subtheme differs from the positive relationships subtheme in that participants offered richer insights into their sense of closeness and belongingness, and who they felt valued, seen, and heard with. The social connection subtheme was a recommendation for other athletes as participants noted the personal impact their social connections had for them as they went through this challenging transition.

Each participant advised to increase and/or maintain a level of social connection while transitioning out of one's sport. Emma recalled staying connected with individuals within her sporting community but also creating new connections:

Maintaining my relationships with the coaches and athletes that impacted me more so off the hill ... so since retiring, like keeping connection with those people but also finding the people that I feel the same with and like I feel like I have—I am constantly relating like my friendships and like my relationships with my family, to the relationships I had from skiing that like made me feel good about myself.

Similarly, Mary mentioned a support system helped her during her transition:

I think like support system of like family, friends, and just me making new friends outside of the sport. Hugely helpful. Um, but that show you the ways that—that you have value outside of this thing you put your whole life into that like [pause], kind of they—my friends that I've made like, I have like wonderful dear friends from ski racing, but I also have made after that [pause] have shown me parts of myself that I never paid attention to or valued. Um, and that is hugely empowering in the transition period of like moving out of something is like having people look at you and being like: 'Oh, these are strengths that you have.'

Heather also stated a positive support system helped her during her retirement: "Leaning on people like just being really open and willing to ask for help and, you know, having a good support system with friends and family has been really key."

Christine agreed that connecting with others helped her during her transition while also emphasizing the meaningful relationships she created throughout her sport career: "I think friends. Like, community, was a really big contribution. Or meet people who just like love me

for me ... Also just still being in a community that I spent 20 years in was really helpful for that.”

In this subtheme, social connection served as a source of support participants had and maintained throughout their retirement process. Participants reflected the importance that their relationships have had for them and how their support system helped carry them through their challenges. The social connection subtheme was a recommendation for other athletes as participants noted the personal impact their social connections had for them as they went through this challenging transition.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

To date, there has been a significant gap in the psychological literature regarding the experiences of sports retirement among elite, action sport athletes. The goal of this study was to understand the individual experiences of retirement among elite, action sport athletes. Four participants were recruited for in-depth, semistructured interviews focusing on their experiences of sports retirement. My research was structured around the overall question: What is the lived experience of sports retirement?

Participants in the current study experienced significant loss, sadness, lack of preparation and understanding from others, and the most poignant—their identity. Participants described struggling to make sense of their loss and how to navigate constructing their new identity following their retirement. This finding is strongly congruent with current literature examining sports retirement from the perspectives of athletes in traditional sports (Brewer et al., 1993; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Park et al., 2012). First, research examining the construct of athletic identity has shown that athletes who strongly identify with athletic identity tend to have more difficulties transitioning to retirement, tend to take longer to adjust to retirement, and have increased levels of anxiety and stress (Grove et al., 1997). Each participant began their sport at a relatively young age and had spent a significant portion of their lives focused on their athletics and likely developed an identity centered around their athletic role and abilities. The participants described how “all-consuming” their sport was and how it required significant time, money, energy, and mental focus. This all-consuming nature structured participants’ lives and created a lifestyle that was centered around their sport, and they had developed a strong attachment to the athletic identity and athlete lifestyle. As a result, their transition propelled them into an extremely

distressing position of figuring out who they were, what they enjoyed, and what they wanted to do with their lives.

This transition was also compounded by the fact that participants began participating in their sport during key developmental stages. Participants were so sole focused on their sport that, while they were in it, their lifestyle felt normal due to being surrounded by other athletes and their sport community sharing similar values and ways of living. However, as athletes retired, they realized how different their lives had been up to that point. These experiences are highlighted in the lack of social support theme, specifically the lack of typical social development and lack of understanding from others subthemes.

Given their lack of role diversification during their development, participants did not partake in many opportunities to create relationships with peers outside their sport or get to know themselves outside the context of their sport. This lack of typical social development was recognized by participants as they began to interact with others in their “new” social context. Although participants emphasized their unique opportunities to engage in the world during their sport, participants’ narratives also reflected a longing for belonging, or a sense of belonging in their new social context. These accounts reflected participants’ struggles integrating into their new lives and trying to find commonalities they have with their peers. As a result of not diversifying or exploring various roles during their development, participants found it difficult to build new relationships and relate to others about common experiences. This disconnection added a layer of social rejection as participants attempted to integrate with a new social group, furthering their challenges of navigating their life without their sport.

The findings from the present study offer new insights to sports retirement among this category of sports. Participants’ sports required them to move away from their friends and family

and attend schooling that was not from a traditional, in-person classroom structure due to the nature of their sport. Participants' discussed attending boarding school, online education, or experiencing a disruption in their schooling that did not resemble traditional sports. The participants frequently discussed experiencing difficulties when relating with other peers outside of their sport context due to the uncommonness of their particular category of sport. This lack of shared experiences with peers outside of their sporting context added an additional layer of complexity and possibly brought a sense of aloneness to these individuals. Thus, this overall social disconnection may further complicate the challenges and isolation these athletes experience during their transition.

As participants moved further into their retirement process, a new sense of existential crisis emerged. The term "existential crisis" can be defined as "a moment at which an individual questions the very foundations of his life: whether his life has any meaning, purpose or value" (Buténaité et al., 2016, p. 10). An existential crisis can also be separated into three elements: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Buténaité et al., 2016). Emotionally, individuals can experience despair, helplessness, emotional pain, vulnerability, fear, anxiety, and loneliness. Cognitively, individuals experiencing an existential crisis may endure a loss of meaning and purpose which negatively affects one's decision-making abilities. Behaviorally, individuals may experience avoidance, rituals, loss in their relationships, increased addictions, and engagement in antisocial behaviors. Within antisocial behaviors, Buténaité et al. (2016) illustrated that an existential crisis "is caused by meaninglessness associated with hostility, antisocial behavior and aggression, suicide, negative life events and the tribulations of life" (p. 23). Nonetheless, rituals may be positive behaviors in that these are behaviors that help the individual move through the

crisis. Specifically, the ritual process can be divided into three phases: separation, finite period, and a new assimilation (Buténaité et al., 2016). As described by Buténaité et al. (2016),

The main element of the ritual is the opportunity to transition to a new status of the new approach to society. In the first stage of separation, a person who, crossing a certain limit, experiences impermanence, refuses the normal social context and situation. This can be perceived as going through an existential crisis, which is regarded as a death, because the individual is not completely dead in his old life, nor fully alive in his new life. (p. 20)

Some of the ways participants experienced their existential crisis was by questioning their meaning and purpose. Meaning in life can be referred to one's understanding in the way they live their lives and the experiences they have as it relates to their purpose, coherence, and significance (Martela & Steger, 2016). One's coherence of their meaning can be understood as the individual making sense of their experiences in life and is often known as the cognitive element of one's meaning in life. Essentially, coherence can be understood as "the feeling that one's experiences or life itself makes sense" (Heintzelman & King, 2014, p. 154). Additionally, purpose refers to "specifically having a direction and future-oriented goals in life" (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 534). A further distinction of one's purpose is that "purposes have nobility and breadth of impact that ideally is measured in terms of lifespan rather than a day" (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 534) and can involve an individual possessing multiple purposes in life. Finally, significance can be understood as one's value, worth, and importance. Specifically, significance can be defined as "a value-laden evaluation of one's life as a whole regarding how important, worthwhile, and inherently valuable it feels" (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 535). Essentially, meaning in life involves comprehension, or sense making of one's experiences, and evaluation of those experiences that provides "value in the world in the present, as well as in the world that might arise from the pursuit of one's purpose" (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 536).

Within this study, participants endured an existential crisis as a result of their retirement and major life adjustment. Participants' retirement created a significant disruption in their lives that shook their entire understanding of themselves, their understanding of others, and their worldview. They also reflected on lacking a purpose or future-oriented goals that they looked towards to help guide them in a direction of living a purposeful life. Moreover, participants experienced a prolonged questioning of what their life was worth living for and their own value once they stopped competing in their sport. Participants' narratives demonstrated a self-reflective stance in that this crisis had developed and was endured over time. As participants lived through this crisis, they metaphorically came up for air by realizing they had to navigate how to build a new sense of identity without their sport. This step illustrated the notion of participants' ritual in that participants began to explore their new lifestyles and identity, figured out what they enjoyed and valued, and created new relationships.

Given that the participants' sole focus was on their sport for such an extended period of time, this resulted in a significant loss during their retirement transition. This transition for participants was also characterized as a process rather than a finite event. More specifically, participants' described retirement as a sequence of experiences unfolding rather than one single event. This finding is consistent with previous literature suggesting that athletes' transitions are process based rather than a discrete event (Holding et al., 2020; Knights et al., 2015; Menke & Germany, 2019). This finding is particularly salient as it illustrated a continuation that participants were confronted with and were challenged to navigate not only their grief, but also to develop a new identity. As participants described in the study, the most difficult aspect of their retirement was with their emotional loss of their constructed athletic identity as well as the

people involved in their sport. This result is consistent with previous literature examining this retirement process of reconstructing identity and coping with grief (Menke & Germany, 2019).

In the present study, participants navigated reconstructing their identity in various ways and offered additional knowledge to how participants integrated with their next life chapter. All of the participants highlighted engaging in an exploration of other activities that might have been new to them or that they had not had much time for while they were in their sport. Participants also discussed engaging in activities that brought them a sense of joy and fulfillment outside the context of pursuing their occupational and/or academic career(s). This finding is consistent with research examining sports transitions programs within traditional sports among student-athletes that encourage behaviors that aim at eliciting a positive transition (Hansen et al., 2019; Reifsteck & Brooks, 2018).

Moreover, participants were able to connect with themselves about what is important to them and determine what brought meaning to their lives as highlighted in the values-based living subtheme. Values can be defined as

Statements about what we want to be doing with our life: about what we want to stand for, and how we want to behave on an ongoing basis. They are leading principles that can guide us and motivate us as we move through life. (Harris, 2019, p. 191)

The values-based living subtheme further supported participants' sense of agency in choosing how they wanted to interact with their new world. Their narratives also reflected this values living was a process that occurred over time, further supporting their overall retirement transition. This process also reflected the defining characteristics of values in that their statements reflected no end point or accomplishment and were rather indicative of a meaningful life direction.

Participants also reflected upon their well-being post-retirement as they began navigating their new context. Given participants' strong attachment to their athletic identity, participants' former well-being was likely solely focused on their athletics. As a result, their well-being was compromised due to their athlete lifestyle because they had relatively few or no opportunities to build multiple identities or parts of themselves that were not focused on their athletics, such as relationships, values outside their sport, meaning and accomplishments unrelated to their sport, among other domains. Nonetheless, the participants expressed increased levels of well-being post-retirement as they navigated their new lives. Specifically, participants spoke of their gratitude, their new opportunities to build positive and meaningful relationships outside their sport context, increased mindfulness, and self-acceptance. This theme illustrated how participants were able to truly tap into their new identities outside the context of their sport and live their lives that felt purposeful, meaningful, and healthy.

Participants were also asked what they would recommend to athletes who may be currently in the process of retirement or who are considering retirement. The most notable findings that participants recommended were seeking professional mental health support, allowing oneself space and time to heal, exploration of other activities, and social connection. Additionally, therapy was emphasized by participants as one of the most helpful things they did and would recommend to others. The therapy recommendation and participants' enthusiasm is positive given the well-documented stigma athletes experience when seeking and/or receiving mental health support (Cosh, McNeil, et al., 2020). This is also encouraging given the strong athletic identity and/or involuntary retirement athletes may face.

Moreover, participants' recommendations are consistent with previous research suggesting athletes' who planned and/or prepared for retirement had more successful transitions

(Cosh, McNeil, et al., 2020). Further, Menke and Germany (2019) demonstrated that “a combination of having a plan for post-sport retirement, talking about the emotions experienced, and keeping busy during the transition process” (p. 27) were helpful for athletes as they transitioned out of their sport.

The participants highlighted the notion that developing multiple identities and entertaining parts of themselves that they did not know, was helpful for them in their transition process. For example, Christine discussed how her faith is something she believed to be a component in helping her find value and self-worth outside her sport context. Therefore, it may be helpful for athletes to develop and/or maintain identities outside of their sport to aid their retirement transition. Specifically, athletes could engage in other activities and create relationships outside their sport to help individuals become “people who do action sports” rather than purely “action sport athletes” (or “the skier” as it relates to three participants in this study).

Overall, participants painted the interviewer a narrative of their sports retirement—beginning with the profound grief and unsettlement, their significant distress and existential crises, and how they navigated reconstructing their new identities. As the sequence unfolded, participants demonstrated a complex and intricate layering of processes that occurred as they went from a strong athletic attachment to tapping into different parts of themselves they did not know existed. As a result, they discovered living their lives that felt more meaningful, increased their social connection with others outside sports, and increased their well-being postretirement.

Limitations

A number of limitations within this study must be addressed. IPA methodology allows for an in-depth analysis of participants’ lived experiences; however, these accounts are from the perspectives that were consciously aware to the participants (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). As

such, some perspectives and details may have been overlooked or forgotten. Moreover, participants' retrospective recall of events and experiences is associated with memory decay and recall bias (Brewer et al., 1991). However, future studies could address this limitation by interviewing athletes at different time periods, such as pre- and post-retirement or conducting a longitudinal study.

Further, the study utilized a reasonably homogenous and purposively selected sample. This purposeful sampling technique limits the amount of people as well as the diversity within the sample that was included in the study. For instance, the sample was comprised of all Caucasian, cisgender females. Therefore, the present study is not an accurate representation of all elite, action sport athletes' lived experience of sports retirement. The researcher would recommend that this study be replicated with different populations, such as male action sport athletes, team action sports, and other individual action sports.

Future Research

This is the first known study to the researcher that examined the lived experiences of sports retirement among elite, action sport athletes. This study demonstrated an existential crisis among athletes within this category of sport and thus should be explored further. This crisis should be explored further to better understand athletes' experiences of this identity disruption and to gather more evidence of the lived experiences of sports retirement among this category of sport. This exploration will benefit future athletes during their retirement as well as clinicians, educators, parents, and/or coaches to help their athletes during this transition.

Further, this study has contributed to the limited literature regarding sports retirement among elite, action sports athletes. Athletes represented individual sports and had competed at high levels. Nonetheless, these athletes represented only on specific sporting group (i.e.,

individual action sports). As such, it is unknown to what extent these findings may cross other contexts and sporting groups. Future research may further examine differences that exist across differing sporting groups within action sports, such as team action sports, and explore any similarities and/or differences between different action sports.

Future research could also examine the effectiveness of developing and applying a psychoeducation program or workshop for action sport athletes regarding sports retirement with sports organizations. Previous literature has examined implementing programs for retired athletes (Hansen et al., 2019; Reifsteck & Brooks, 2018); however, these programs focused on student-athletes within traditional sports. Thus, the effectiveness of a similar program or workshop is unknown within the category of action sports and non-student-athletes. As such, this program or workshop may help action sport athletes better understand retirement and how to navigate this major life change.

Moreover, future research could examine the effectiveness of implementing a support group for recently retired athletes. Given that athletes are frequently involved with their team and sport lifestyle for a significant portion of their lives, their retirement may result in a significant reduction in one's contact and connection with their sports community. As a result, athletes may feel vulnerable to mental health distress and/or experience a sense of a lack of support (Cosh, McNeil, et al., 2020; Giannone et al., 2017). It may be helpful to form a support group of athletes who may be transitioning around the same time to discuss their experiences, to decrease a sense of aloneness, and to maintain a connection with their sports community.

Finally, future research could build upon current literature pertaining to action and extreme sports athletes' experience of adrenaline while engaging with their sport. Although this did not result in a theme in itself, Mary highlighted the adrenaline withdrawal she experienced

from her sport, which may also be experienced by other athletes due to the nature of some action sports (e.g., downhill alpine skiing). Future research could examine any sort of withdrawal athletes may endure and how they cope with this withdrawal as they transition out of their sport.

Conclusion

Action sport athletes' experiences of sports retirement provided additional information to extant literature within sports psychology. Participants' experiences during retirement illustrated a significant disruption in their lives and the way they lived. This disruption was characterized by significant grief and distress, followed by a prolonged existential crisis and lack of meaning. Given their level of sport involvement and intensity, athletes struggled to relate with others who had typical social development. As a result, participants felt alone and misunderstood, which compounded their grief, loss, and overall existential crisis. Participants navigated their new lifestyles that was characterized by agency over what they wanted to portray and disclose to others and increasingly living by their values. As participants stepped into their new lives, they found themselves more accepting of themselves, increased their contact with their present moment, and an increased sense of well-being.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT FLYER AND EMAIL

My name is Gracie Struthers, and I am a clinical psychology doctoral student at Antioch University Seattle. As part of my doctoral degree, I will complete a dissertation. As part of my dissertation research, I am interested in learning more about the experiences of transitioning out of one's sport within the category of elite, action sports. If you are 18 years or older, transitioned out of your sport less than 10 years ago, and are an English-speaker, I would appreciate the opportunity to interview you. Participation includes a telephone or video-conferencing interview lasting approximately one hour.

Some examples of action sports include: alpine sports, ski jumping, BMX biking, mountain biking, surfing, among others.

Some examples of competing at an elite level include: NCAA Division I student-athlete, national development team, Olympic trials qualifier, top division, Olympic medalist, world championships, and/or a world record holder.

The foreseeable benefits of this study are for the expanded understanding of how elite, action sports athletes experience their transition out of their sport. By improving the understanding of athletes' experience with their sports retirement through interviews like this, clinicians, researchers, and educators may be better able to serve individuals and populations with concerns about sports retirement from action sports.

Thank you for your willingness to share your experiences. If you know of anyone who may be interested in participating, please feel free to forward this information. Your participation could contribute to the understanding of how transitioning out of action sports is experienced among athletes and further contribute to studying athletes within this category of sports.

Participants will also receive a \$25 VISA gift card for their time and contribution.

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, you may contact me at

Thank you.

APPENDIX B: DIRECT SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGE

Hi there,

My name is Gracie Struthers, and I am a clinical psychology doctoral student at Antioch University Seattle. As part of my doctoral studies, I will complete a dissertation. As part of my dissertation research, I am interested in learning more about the experiences of transitioning out of one's sport within the category of elite, action sports.

As I have done my own research for my dissertation, it has come to my attention that you have recently retired from your sport. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to interview you and discuss your experience of transitioning out of your sport. The foreseeable benefits of this study are for the expanded understanding of how elite, action sports athletes experience their transition out of their sport. By improving the understanding of athletes' experience with their sports retirement through interviews like this, clinicians, researchers, and educators may be better able to serve individuals and populations with concerns about sports retirement from action sports. The participation includes a telephone or video-conferencing interview lasting approximately one hour.

Your input and time is invaluable, and I want to thank you for your willingness to share your experiences. If you know of anyone who may be interested in participating, please feel free to forward this information. Your participation could contribute to the understanding of how transitioning out of action sports is experienced among athletes and further contribute to studying athletes within this category of sports.

Participants will also receive a \$25 VISA gift card for their time and contribution.

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, you may contact me via email at, or by replying to this message.

Thank you.

APPENDIX C: SCREENING QUESTIONS

- Are you at least 18 years of age?
- Did you participate in an action sport at an elite level?
- Did you transition out of your sport less than 10 years ago?
- Are you an English-speaker?

APPENDIX D: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Purpose, duration, procedures

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this research study is to gain an understanding of retired athletes' experiences of transitioning out of their elite, action sports. The goal of this research is to deepen the awareness of the experience of retirement among action sports athletes for use in research, educational, and clinical settings. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a retired athlete who competed at an elite level in an action sport. If you participate in this research, you will be asked to give personal demographic information related to your age, gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. You will also be asked to share your experiences with and understanding of transitioning out of your sport. The research will have a few questions available to guide the conversations. Your participation in an interview will last approximately one hour, at your convenience. Interviews will be audio recorded and encrypted with a password protected device and stored for later analysis. You are encouraged to leave out any information identifying you or others. Such information spoken during the interview will be excluded from the analysis. You will also be given a \$25 VISA gift card upon completion of the interview.

Participants rights

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to decline or withdraw from the research at any time without consequence or penalty.

Participation consequences and benefits

Discussions of the experiences with sports retirement has the potential to be distressing. If at any time you wish to discontinue the interview, please let the researcher know. The interviewer has a list of resources if you wish to seek support for any discomfort from the interview. The foreseeable benefits of this study are for the expanded understanding of how elite, action sports athletes experience their transition out of their sport. By improving the understanding of athletes' experience with their sports retirement through interviews like this, clinicians, researchers, and educators may be better able to serve individuals and populations with concerns about sports retirement from action sports. There may be no immediate personal benefits from you in this research.

Limits of confidentiality

The amount and type of information you provide in this interview is voluntary. We request that you not use your own name or the names of others in the recorded interview. All information you provide for this study will be treated confidentially, and all recorded data will be kept on an encrypted and password protected device by the researcher. Audio recording will be deleted no more than one year following the interview. There is a risk of compromise with any digitally stored data. All participants will be informed of the unlikely event of a breach of confidentiality. Research results will be reported with direct quotations with an anonymized attribution. Quotations by individual participants with the least amount of corresponding demographic information needed for the purposes of the research may be included in the final report. Themes from the aggregate data will interpreted with as much adherence to the interview as possible. Your signature on this form will be the only information identifying you as a participant in this study, and it will not be linked to your interview recording or transcript.

Research contact information

You have the right to review the results of the research if you wish to do so. If you would like to obtain a copy of the results, or if you have questions regarding the research, please contact the primary researcher.

This research study has been reviewed and Certified by the Institutional Review Board, Antioch University, Seattle. For research-related problems or questions regarding participants' rights, you can contact Antioch University's Institutional Board Chair, Mark Russell, PhD at.

Consent

I have read and understand the information explaining the purpose of this research and my rights and responsibilities as a participant. I have had an opportunity to discuss this information and any questions I may have about my participation in research with the interviewer. My signature below designates my consent to participate in this study according to the terms and conditions outlined above.

Print Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Participant Phone Number: _____
(You will be contacted by phone if any confidential information has been breached.)

Is it OK to leave a voicemail message on this phone? Yes No

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview audio-recorded.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

To be filled out by the researcher -----

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and that I have answered these questions to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and consent has been given freely and voluntarily. A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Interviewer: _____

Signature of Interviewer: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS

Demographic Information

- Age
- Gender identity
- Biological sex
- Country of residence
- Country of origin
- Race/Ethnicity
- Socioeconomic status
- Number of years involved in action sports competition
- The number of years they have been retired

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

All participants will be asked, “What was your experience of retirement/transitioning out of your sport?”

The following prompts may be utilized to foster fuller explanation as needed:

- What stands out to you about being a retired athlete?
- What was the retirement experience like? Did you plan to retire when you did?
- What was your experience like during the first several months of retirement?
- How did that affect you? (your family? your friends? Others?)
- What were some particular challenges that you faced? What helped get you through these moments?
- What did you find helpful during your process?
 - “Tell me about how your accomplishments of achievement have changed since retirement”
 - “Share your thoughts on your relationships and how they have or have not changed post-retirement”
 - “Tell me about how your sense of purpose and meaning has changed since retirement”
 - “How often did you become so absorbed by what you were doing during your sport (or “how often did you lose track of time while engaging in your sport”)? How has that changed since retirement?”
 - “Share your thoughts on your positive emotions (e.g., feelings of contentment, joy, positivity, excitement) and how they have changed since retirement.”

And:

What else you would like to share? As the final question.

APPENDIX G: LIST OF MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

- ⇒ Athletes Against Anxiety and Depression (AAAD)
A nonprofit organization dedicated to mental health advocacy and to connect athletes struggling with anxiety and/or depression.
<https://www.aaadf.org/>
- ⇒ NCAA's Mental Health Educational Resources
Offers a comprehensive guide to student-athletes' mental health.
<https://www.ncaa.org/sport-science-institute/mental-health-educational-resources>
- ⇒ Psychology Today offers a search engine for finding a therapist in your area
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/>
- ⇒ Crisis Connection (WA State)
 - 206-461-3222
 - 866-427-4747
- ⇒ National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
 - 800-273-8255 or dial 911.

APPENDIX H: RESEARCHER'S CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Gracie Struthers, the primary investigator at xxx-xxx-xxxx, or via email at; Dr. Christopher Heffner, Dissertation Chair at

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Dr. Mark Russell, Chair of the Antioch University Seattle IRB, at or via email at

APPENDIX I: IRB APPLICATION

1. **Name(s) of Principal Investigator(s):** Gracie Struthers
2. **Academic Department:** Clinical Psychology, PsyD
3. **Departmental Status:** Student
4. **Phone Number:** (a) Work (xxx) xxx-xxxx (b) Home
5. **Name & email address of research advisor:** Christopher Heffner, PsyD, PhD
 - a) **Name of research advisor**
Christopher Heffner, PsyD, PhD
 - b) **E-mail address of research advisor**
6. **Name & email address(es) of other researcher(s) involved in this project:** N/A
Project Title: The Lived Experience of Sports Retirement Among Elite, Action Sports Athletes
7. **Is this project federally funded:** No
 - a) **Source of funding for this project (if applicable):**
8. **Expected starting date for data collection:** 09/01/2021
9. **Expected completion date for data collection:** 12/31/2021
10. **Project Purpose(s): (Up to 500 words)**
This dissertation research project explores the intersection of elite athletes, action sports, sports retirement, and well-being through the examination of how retired, elite, action sports athletes experienced their transition out of their sport. Research in traditional sports accept that transitions out of sports marks an identity shift characterized by a disruption in self-defining activities (Cosh et al., 2013). The period during athletes'

transition into retirement is a particularly vulnerable time. For example, athletes tend to experience identity crises, depression, alcohol/substance abuse, eating disorders, and decreased self-confidence (Wylleman et al., 2004). It is currently unknown what the sports retirement experience is like for elite, action sports athletes. Given that such athletes also go through the sports retirement process, the current literature lacks an understanding of what that process is like for these athletes. This study seeks to investigate the gap of how retired, elite, action sports athletes experienced their sports retirement.

This study's clinical implications include offering insights to clinicians working with this population, and by extension, increasing treatment quality, engagement and retention, by offering a better understanding of this population's individual experiences through their narratives. Further, this study can help inform the development and implementation of future research and possible intervention by highlighting specific issues and strengths that are relevant for this population.

This research will utilize an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) from hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy to explore retired athletes' lived experience. Utilizing an IPA approach allows the participants to have the opportunity to express their experiences in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. This exploration is expected to illuminate various issues, resources, and challenges that these athletes faced during their transition out of their sport.

All data collected will be treated as confidential, anonymized, and stored in a secure, locked room as described in detail below.

11. Describe the proposed participants- age, number, sex, race, or other special characteristics. Describe criteria for inclusion and exclusion of participants. Please provide brief justification for these criteria. (Up to 500 words)

Inclusion Criteria:

Age: 18 years and older. The minimum age cutoff is set at 18 years to include only legal adult participants.

Sport: participants must have participated in an action sport and at an elite level.

Must have transitioned out of their sport no more than 10 years ago

English Speaking: Participants must speak fluent English

Exclusion Criteria:

Age: under 18 years old

Did not participate in an action sport at an elite level

Exceeded 10 year requirement

Not fluent in English

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were chosen to ensure participants were all retired action sport athletes who retired no more than 10 years ago to create a reasonably homogenous sample.

12. Describe how the participants are to be selected and recruited. (Up to 500 words)

Participants will be purposefully selected so that the sample is reasonably homogenous.

The participants will be recruited through both passive and active recruitment. Passive recruitment involves “distributing recruitment materials (ads, posters, flyers) with the aim of attracting potential participants to contact the researcher for more information”

(Gelinis et al., 2017, p. 4). Active recruitment involves the researcher directly

approaching and interacting with specific individuals with the goal of enrolling them into the researcher's study (Gelinias et al., 2017).

The primary source for passive recruitment of participants would be through contacting sports teams and asking them to send an email to former athletes and to solicit potential participants who recently retired (e.g., U.S. Ski Team, USA Surf Team; see Attachment A).

The primary source for active recruitment of participants would be directly contacting potential participants via their social media pages (e.g., Instagram; see Attachment B).

Recruitment via social media has important ethical considerations. First, there is a concern for respecting the individual's privacy and beneficence. As such, the researcher must be aware of this and interact with the individual responsibly and ethically (e.g., do not disclose sensitive or personal information without consent, maintain confidentiality, compliance with the site's terms of use agreement). Second, the researcher must be transparent when interacting with individuals via social media. Being transparent includes providing an accurate and detailed description of the study's aims, risks, benefits, and limits of confidentiality to the participant.

The advertisement and message will include a detailed description of the study, including the contact information of the researcher, the inclusion criteria, parameters of the study, and limitations of confidentiality (see Attachment A and Attachment B). Participants who are interested in the study are invited to contact the researcher for further information and/or proceed with the study (see Attachment H). Participants who are interested in the study will be provided an additional explanation of the informed consent, parameters of the study and limitations of confidentiality prior to the online interview.

To determine if individuals are appropriate for this study, the researcher will conduct an initial screening by telephone (see Attachment C).

13. Do you have a prior or current relationship, either personal, professional, and/or financial, with any person, organization, business, or entity who will be involved in your research?

Yes

- a) **If yes, describe the situation that presents a potential personal, professional, and/or financial conflict of interest in the proposed research study, (e.g., if you are or have been employed at the research site, have received compensation from a participating organization, have a personal or professional relationship with any participants).**

The researcher include a dissertation chair and two other members from the dissertation committee. The dissertation committee members will serve as research advisors, will not interact directly with participants in connection with the study, will not have access to their individual identities, and all data collected will be anonymized. The researcher may have a prior relationship with some of the participants due to the researcher's previous involvement in an action sport (e.g., alpine skiing).

- b) **Describe how you will mitigate the bias caused by any conflicts of interest in your study and how you will protect the participants against real or potential bias (e.g., you will not recruit anyone who works directly for you or in your direct team, results will be reported in the aggregate so that participants will remain anonymous, any compensation received is independent of the study**

and its results).

The researcher will review expectations regarding confidentiality at the beginning of the interview (see Attachment D). All data collected from participants during the interview will be anonymized. This will be accomplished as follows: each interview will be transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Participants' names will be anonymized with key codes and only the researcher will know the participants' name. The data will be encrypted and stored in a password protected file on the researcher's personal password-protected computer. This will ensure the identities of participants, and the data collected from them, remain confidential throughout the duration of the study.

14. Describe the process you will follow to attain informed consent.

Participants are required to read and execute an Informed Consent Form prior to beginning the study (see Attachment D). The Informed Consent Form will be reviewed with each participant at the beginning of their interview. Each participant will have the opportunity to ask questions, and must execute the Informed Consent Form and return it to the researcher in order to participate.

15. Describe the proposed procedures, (e.g., interview surveys, questionnaires, experiments, etc). in the project. Any proposed experimental activities that are included in evaluation, research, development, demonstration, instruction, study, treatments, debriefing, questionnaires, and similar projects must be described. USE SIMPLE LANGUAGE, AVOID JARGON, AND IDENTIFY ACRONYMS. Please do not insert a copy of your methodology section from your proposal. State briefly and concisely the procedures for the project. (500 words)

Interviews will take place online through a HIPAA-compliant teleconferencing platform (e.g., Zoom). The researcher will send the informed consent to each participant via email before the interview. Prior to the interview, the researcher will send the participant a password-protected Zoom link that contains the Zoom meeting and relevant information for accessing the video meeting as well as the date and time of the meeting. The Zoom invitation link will only be directly shared with the specific participant to prevent public access to the meeting to protect the participant's confidentiality. The beginning of the interview will be focused on reviewing the informed consent and obtaining verbal consent from the participant. The participant will be informed both in the informed consent and verbally, that the interview will be recorded and security procedures for maintaining confidentiality will be discussed.

After the interview, each session will be transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

Participants' names will be anonymized with key codes and only the researcher will know the participants' name. The data will be encrypted and stored in a password protected file on the researcher's personal password-protected computer. When the study is finished, the data will be maintained for a minimum of three years. After three years, the data will be purged and deleted from data storage files and devices.

The researcher will allow time at the beginning of the interview to establish rapport with the participant and to put participants at ease. Interviews will be conducted using a semistructured interview with open-ended questions (see Attachment F). Open-ended questions will be used to encourage participants to discuss their experiences in great detail (Smith et al., 2009, p. 59).

16. Participants in research may be exposed to the possibility of harm - physiological, psychological, and/or social - please provide the following information: (Up to 500 words)

a. Identify and describe potential risks of harm to participants (including physical, emotional, financial, or social harm).

No major risks are anticipated for participants in this study. Participants will be asked to share their experiences of transitioning out of their sport. The informed consent includes that, if a participant does have any adverse stress or reaction to thinking and/or sharing their experiences of sports retirement, they may contact the principal research investigator (contact information provided in the informed consent). The researcher will have a handout of mental health resources (see Attachment H). These conversations may bring up a variety of negative emotions or feelings. The participant may wish to withdraw and discontinue the interview. No invasive procedures are included in this study. No existing medical records will be used. No deception will be used. There are no other alternative procedures that have less risk than the interview format.

b. Identify and describe the anticipated benefits of this research (including direct benefits to participants and to society-at-large or others)

One potential benefit for the participants includes an increased knowledge and awareness of their personal lived experience of sports retirement. Also, participants may gain a better understanding of their retirement process. Further, the foreseeable benefits of this study are the expanded understanding of how elite, action sports athletes experience their transition out of their sport. By improving the understanding of athletes' experience with their sports retirement through interviews like this, clinicians, researchers, and educators

may be better able to serve individuals and populations with concerns about sports retirement from action sports. Moreover, participants might experience fulfillment and meaning at contributing to this research and the possible research and treatment considerations that their discussion and participation might bring.

c. Explain why you believe the risks are so outweighed by the benefits described above as to warrant asking participants to accept these risks. Include a discussion of why the research method you propose is superior to alternative methods that may entail less risk.

Participants involved in this study will be offered support from the researcher during the interview should they experience distress as a result of the conversation/discussion of their experiences. Participants will also be given a handout of mental health resources. The researcher is unaware of an alternative research method which would entail less risk to participants while providing the benefits of open, supportive, and normalizing conversations.

Participants can decline their involvement at any point in this study without any reason or repercussions. Participants may also have the option to not answer questions.

Participants' names will be anonymized with key codes and only the researcher will know the participants' name.

d. Explain fully how the rights and welfare of participants at risk will be protected (e.g., screening out particularly vulnerable participants, follow-up contact with participants, list of referrals, etc.) and what provisions will be made for the case of an adverse incident occurring during the study.

No children will be included in this study. In the event an adverse reaction might occur,

participants are given contact information for mental health resources (see Attachment H). Participants are informed in the informed consent that they can withdraw from the study at any time.

17. Explain how participants' privacy is addressed by your proposed research. Specify any steps taken to safeguard the anonymity of participants and/or confidentiality of their responses. Indicate what personal identifying information will be kept, and procedures for storage and ultimate disposal of personal information. Describe how you will de-identify the data or attach the signed confidentiality agreement on the attachments tab (scan, if necessary). (Up to 500 words)

No participants will be involved in the study prior to the completion of the dissertation committee and IRB review.

Interviews will take place online through a HIPAA-compliant teleconferencing platform (e.g., Zoom). Prior to the interview, the researcher will send the participant a password-protected Zoom link that contains the Zoom meeting and relevant information for accessing the video meeting as well as the date and time of the meeting. The Zoom invitation link will only be directly shared with the specific participant to prevent public access to the meeting to protect the participant's confidentiality.

Prior to the interview, each participant will be asked to sign a consent form as well as give verbal consent at the beginning of their interview to participate (see Attachment D). Participants will receive a copy of the consent form for their own records. The informed consent will also include a notice of audio-recording (see Attachment D). The researcher will also have a discussion with each participant about recording and ask for verbal permission to record before the interview. Participants will also be informed that they can

leave at any point, without an explanation and without any negative consequences. Each participant will be informed at the beginning of their interview that they can refuse to answer any question, talk about any topic, or end the interview whenever they wish without any explanation or negative consequence.

Confidentiality will be maintained for the participants by converting their names to pseudonyms. Only the researcher will have access to the actual names, email addresses, and phone numbers of the participants. All of the signed informed consents and identifying information related to each participant will be stored in a password protected file on a password protected personal computer within a locked room.

Although participants information will be de-identified, comments, de-identified descriptions, and metaphors might be included in the discussion section that might be recognizable to the participant. The researcher will inform the participant that verbatim quotes are common in qualitative research and might be used in this study and that they can opt to not have quotes from their interview be in the final project. When the study is finished, the data will be maintained for a minimum of three years. After three years, the data will be purged and deleted from data storage files and devices.

18. Will audio-visual devices be used for recording participants? Will electrical, mechanical (e.g., biofeedback, electroencephalogram, etc.) devices be used? (Click one) Yes

If YES, describe the devices and how they will be used:

Computer and/or smartphone devices that connect to the internet will be required to conduct the interviews with participants. The participants will be audio recorded during their interviews with the researcher's personal computer.

19. Type of Review: Exempt

Please provide your reasons/justification for the level of review you are requesting.

The researcher is requesting Exempt review status for the current study. The study includes low to no risk. Pursuant to 45 CFR 46.101(b), research studies of this type qualify for exempt review status. This research has been approved for submission by my advisor and by others as required by my program (e.g., my departmental IRB representative, thesis or dissertation committee or course instructor as applicable).

20. This research has been approved for submission by my advisor and by others as required by my program (e.g., my departmental IRB representative, thesis or dissertation committee or course instructor as applicable).

Yes

21. Informed consent and/or assent statements, if any are used, are to be included with this application. If information other than that provided on the informed consent form is provided (e.g. a cover letter), attach a copy of such information. If a consent form is not used, or if consent is to be presented orally, state your reason for this modification below. *Oral consent is not allowed when participants are under age 18.

Participants are required to read and execute an informed consent form (see Attachment D) before participating in the study.

22. If questionnaires, tests, or related research instruments are to be used, then you must attach a copy of the instrument at the bottom of this form (unless the instrument is copyrighted material), or submit a detailed description (with examples

of items) of the research instruments, questionnaires, or tests that are to be used in the project. Copies will be retained in the permanent IRB files. If you intend to use a copyrighted instrument, please consult with your research advisor and your IRB chair. Please clearly name and identify all attached documents when you add them on the attachments tab.

No questionnaires, tests, or related research instruments will be used for this study.

I have agreed to conduct this project in accordance with Antioch University's policies and requirements involving research as outlined in the IRB Manual and supplemental materials. I certify that I have attached documentation confirming completion of the CITI Modules.

Yes