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Profit-Athletes' Athletic Role Set and Post-Athletic Transitions

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There are several organizational, social and psychological factors that may impede profit-athletes' successful transition out of their salient athletic role set. Consequently, this article summarizes the results of post-athletic surveys and interviews of (n = 17) former National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) profit-athletes from a Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) university. Analyzed data reveal clear evidence of prominence of athletic role set, including normative expectations, athletic role domination, salient athletic identity, and post-eligibility career transition difficulties, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, degree completion, or sport. The results indicate all participants experienced various degrees of athletic role engulfment, which impacted their overall athlete career transition experience. Researchers discuss implications for sport, specifically the need for proactive programming to address athletic role engulfment to ensure positive athlete career transition experiences.

Recent media accounts of college athlete's post-athletic transitions have focused on the difficulties of Black male *profit-athletes*¹ in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football and NCAA D-I men's basketball (Chadiha, 2012; Eisenberg, 2013; LaMonica & Baumbach, 2015). One such high-profile example is *Showtime's* 2016 documentary: *Running for His Life: The Lawrence Phillips Story* that chronicles Phillips' off-the-field difficulties, which were the result of a combination of parental neglect, impaired behavioral health, disappearance of social stature, and suicidal ideation. His story personifies a traumatic post-athletic transition (Briganti & Greenburg, 2016). Sadly, Phillips committed suicide in 2016 while serving a 31-year prison sentence for felony assault with a deadly weapon and domestic assault, while facing additional murder charges (Breech, 2016). While stories such as Phillips' garner wide-spread attention, most athletes' transition difficulties are less titillating and subsequently under-examined (Chadiha, 2012; Eisenberg, 2013; LaMonica & Baumbach, 2015).

While most career-transition research has taken place in non-athletic settings, it has – interestingly – explored retirement experiences associated with abrupt job terminations similar to what college athletes (both profit and Olympic-sport athletes) experience (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Ebberwein, Krieshok, Ulven, & Prosser, 2004; Latack & Dozier, 1986; Marshall, Clarke, & Ballantyne, 2001; Miller & Buttell, 2018; Navaroo, 2015; Van Der Heijden, Schalk, & Van Veldhoven, 2008). In addition, while most individuals facing abrupt career transitions are older (55+) than college or professional athletes, all career transitions occur along a spectrum of challenges, including: decreased financial stability, diminished physical health, and a lack of overall life satisfaction (Ebberwein et al., 2004). Confronted with an abrupt forced retirement, previous research suggests profit-athletes are at heightened risk of experiencing transition difficulties (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Botterill, 1990; Olgilvie & Howe, 1982; Southall, Eckard, Nagel, & Randall, 2015; Southall & Weiler, 2014; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wooten, 1994) when they have not explored a variety of career options (Stankovich, Meeker, & Henderson, 2001), lack viable post-athletic professional options (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), and – due to a lack of social support (Adams, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2015) – face personal alienation and workplace isolation (Coakley, 1986; Frey, 1982; Southall & Weiler, 2014).

¹Profit-athletes are NCAA college athletes whose estimated market value exceeds the value of NCAA-approved compensation (i.e., NCAA Bylaw 15.02.2 “A full grant-in-aid is financial aid that consists of tuition and fees, room and board, and required course-related books.”). While typically profit athletes are thought of as exclusively high-profile NCAA FBS football and D-I men's basketball players, this study's profit-athlete sample includes baseball players, since the university baseball program's average home attendance is among the highest in college baseball, top baseball recruits are scrutinized and often lionized just as basketball and football athletes, and it has produced several hundred MLB/MiLB (minor league baseball) players.

Research Setting

Profit-Athletes

Traditionally, discussions of NCAA profit athletes have centered around discrepancies between the market value of Power-5 FBS football and D-I men's basketball players (i.e., starters and/or impact players) and the value of a grant-in-aid. However, this study includes NCAA D-I baseball players in its definition of a profit-athlete for several reasons. First, NCAA D-I baseball in general has adopted a profit-seeking model consistent Brand's (2006) call for FBS athletic departments to conduct revenue-generating activities in a productive and sound business-like manner (p. 7). In a few specific cases - including at the school from which this study's sample was drawn - the revenue-generating activities as well as the marketing and public relations efforts for the school's baseball team have created an environment that mimics much of the landscape of big-time FBS football and basketball. Second, over the past few years, college baseball fans can watch and listen to a steady diet of regular-season, regional, super-regional, and College World Series games that are re-presented in a manner consistent with a professional baseball institutional logic (Southall, Hancock, Cooper & Nagel, 2012). Third, average attendance for Top-20 college baseball programs rivals that of many minor-league teams (EerSports, 2017; Baseball America, 2017). Fourth, data reveal that 695 NCAA baseball players (9.1% of all NCAA baseball players), including 595 from D-I were picked in the 2016 MLB draft (NCAA, 2017). This total was over 57% of all 2016 MLB draft picks ($N = 1,206$) (NCAA, 2017). Finally, Power-5 conference baseball player adjusted graduation gaps (AGGs) (-33.4) are similar to those of Power-5 men's basketball players (-34.5) (Kidd, Koba, Southall, Eckard & Nagel, 2017). All these factors giving credence to including Power-5 baseball players as profit athletes for this study.

Role Theory: Status, Role and Identity

Fundamentally, examining profit-athletes' post-athletic career transitions involves studying their movement between their athletic and post-athletic *role sets*, including disengaging from one role set (role exit) and engaging in another (role entry) (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Richter, 1984). Consequently, we acknowledge the foundational nature of *role theory* in our assessment of profit-athletes' post-athletic transitions (Biddle, 1979; Goffman, 1959). Within role theory, an individual's role set (comprised of the interconnected concepts of *status*, *role* and *identity*) provides an analytical bridge "...between the individual and the social environment" (Eagly & Wood, 2011, p. 460) across which expectations exist "...in the minds of individuals and also are shared with other people, producing the social consensus from which social structure and culture emerge" (Eagly & Wood, 2011, p. 460) (See figure 1 and also Adler & Adler, 1991; Hogg et al., 1995; Simon, 1992.).

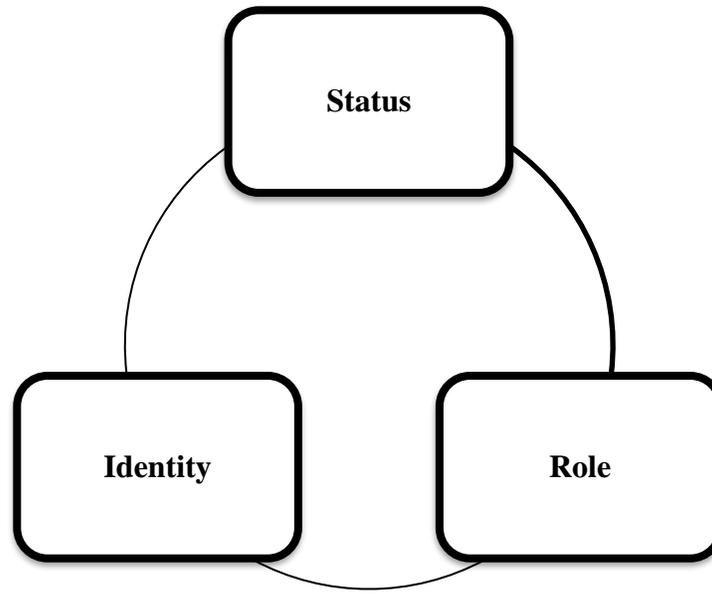


Figure 1. An individual's role set.

One of a role set's three components, status, is an individual's "position in [an] organized group or system...related to other positions by a set of normative expectations" (Adler & Adler, 1991, p. 28). Part of a talented athletes' systemic indoctrination (from middle school, through high school and as part of the college recruiting process) is the conferring of elite athletic status from social support system (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1991; Southall & Weiler, 2014). Elite profit-athletes are often granted a *gloried self-athletic* status, which becomes salient when they – because of repeated direct interactions with the media, fans, and students – develop a campus-wide, local, national and even international celebrity status (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Southall & Weiler, 2014).

This gloried self-athletic status, based on normative expectations and continual reinforcement, is solidified by interscholastic and intercollegiate social systems into a "realistic" view of their sport as a means of economic and social upward mobility (Singer, 2008), which results in profit-athletes coming to view their central role not only as that of a college athlete, but as a "pre-professional" athlete with varying degrees of revenue generation and celebrity status (Adler & Adler, 1991; Emmert, 2012). The *total institution* of interscholastic and intercollegiate athletics establishes and solidifies profit-athletes' singular athletic status (Goffman, 1961; Southall & Weiler, 2014).

Situated within this pre-professional status, profit-athletes have been found to internalize a singular athletic role (another element of an individual's role set) and disengage from academic and social endeavors outside of sport-related capacities (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987, 1991; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). Subsequently, this internalized athletic role becomes *athletic role engulfment* when this internalized athletic role reaches a level of *role domination*, or master status (Adler & Adler, 1985; Brewer et al., 1993; Brown et al., 2000; Hogg et al., 1995; Murphy et al., 1996; Stryker, 1987). Athletic role engulfment necessarily requires *abandonment* of academic and social roles (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987, 1991; Hogg et al., 1995). In this situation, Adler and Adler (1991)

noted subjects “[p]rogressively detach themselves from their investment in other areas and let go alternative goals and priorities” (p. 27-28).

Athletic role engulfment manifests itself by profit-athletes projecting a *salient athletic identity* (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987, 1991; Hogg et al., 1995) to others (within and outside of college sport’s total institutional setting). This may result in their selecting (or have selected for them) an academic major with minimal rigor, increasingly becoming devoted to athletic activities and socially isolating themselves from the general student body. The focal point of these athletes’ collegiate experience is their athletic role set; a student role set becomes not only tertiary but virtually systemically and psychologically impossible.

In our sport-crazed society, not surprisingly, athletic identity has received a great deal of attention (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Brewer et al., 1993; Foster & Huml, 2017; Murphy et al., 1996; Rasquinha & Cardinal, 2017). Brewer et al. (1993) defined athletic identity as the degree to which an individual identifies as an athlete, while Callero (1985) and Martin, Eklund, and Mushett (1997) highlighted the interconnected nature of an athlete’s performance, athletic identity, and self-esteem. Profit-athletes’ team socialization, may include receipt of athletic rewards and attainment of social celebrity, and assignment of an athletic role set they “play” out in their daily lives and by which others identify them (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1991).

Athletes may become devoted to their athletic role set, because they “...perceive many of their important social relationships are predicated on occupancy of that role [identity]” (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 258). Their devotion or commitment can be categorized as *interactional* (when a role is connected with an identity) and *affective* (the strength of the present role/identity) (Hogg et al., 1995; Stryker, 1980). Elevating their athletic role set to a position of prominence along the hierarchy of salience results in athletes fixating on their athletic participation and responsibilities. When their role set within a social system (e.g., team, campus, and media environments) is solidified and they view themselves primarily in terms of their internalized athletic role set, profit-athletes often portray an exacerbated salient athletic identity, the outward manifestation of severe role engulfment.

Many profit-athletes come to college with the desire to participate in rigorous academic majors and general student body extracurricular activities. However, the insular nature of big-time college sport, as well as devotion to their athletic responsibilities, often leads to pragmatic academic detachment and a resulting lack of non-athletic socialization and educational opportunities (i.e., eating with the general student body, internship opportunities, and non-athletic career planning) (Bishop 2013; Southall & Weiler, 2014; Uthman, 2013). Edwards (2000) contends this situation occurs more frequently among Black male profit-athletes is the case for several reasons:

- (1) a long-standing, widely held, racist, and ill-informed presumption of innate, race-linked black athletic superiority and intellectual deficiency; (2) media propaganda portraying sports as a broadly accessible route to black social and economic mobility; and (3) a lack of comparably visible, high-prestige black role models beyond the sports arena (p. 9).

Given these factors, as well as parents and family members – especially in lower socioeconomic settings – who “...intentionally and intensely socialize Black males into focusing on athletics” (Southall et al., 2015, p. 398) athletic status, role engulfment and development of a salient

athletic identity has been found to be prevalent among Black profit-athletes from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Edwards, 2000; Harris, 1994; Hawkins, 2010).

Such intensive role-set socialization may also reflect the awareness on the part of profit-athletes' and their families of their substantial market value.² Though compensation-restrictive NCAA rules prevent elite profit-athletes coming close to maximizing their sport-based income potential while in school, the existence of an underground economy and future earnings from potential Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), or National Football League (NFL) contracts are significant elements that contribute to profit-athletes adopting an athletic role set, which – in many ways – can be viewed as a rational labor-market response.

However, the NCAA and defenders of its collegiate model (Southall & Staurowsky, 2013) question the veracity of such an assumption, contending men's basketball players (especially Black players) who are portrayed as among the most role engulfed of all profit-athletes possess distinct and well-rounded academic and social identities. According to the NCAA, it's modern-day collegiate model preserves "...an academic environment in which acquiring a quality education is the first priority. In the collegiate model of sports, the young men and women competing on the field or court are students first, athletes second (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], n.d.). Supporting this perspective, John Calipari (University of Kentucky's men's basketball coach), recently claimed NCAA Division-I men's basketball players are – in fact – focused on academics, receive a quality education, and earn "...college degrees at historically high rates" (Kruzel, 2018, para. 6). During a January 20, 2018 broadcast of ESPN's *College Gameday*, Calipari explained:

'I go back to this: We have the highest graduation rate of basketball players in the history of the NCAA... We have the highest graduation rate of African-American basketball players in the history of the NCAA in basketball' (Kruzel, 2018, para. 7).

Questioning these claims, Southall et al. (2015) contend the NCAA's Graduation Success Rate (GSR) is institutional propaganda (Southall & Staurowsky, 2013) that glosses over the disconnect between the business of college sport and seeks to obfuscate the systemic obstacles that impede profit-athletes from taking advantage of meaningful educational opportunities. Our study sought to further explore from the perspective of former profit athletes how systematic forces also influence post-athletic career behavior.

Profit-Athletes' Career Transitions

Schlossberg (1981) defined a transition as "an event or non-event, which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). Researchers have examined the post athletic-career transitions of former elite Olympic athletes, professional tennis players, female gymnasts, soccer players, and alpine skiers (Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Knights,

² The average "season" market value for an FBS Power-5 player has been estimated at \$137, and \$289,031 per season for an NCAA Division-I men's basketball players (Manfred, 2013). Star FBS quarterbacks are estimated to be worth an average of \$3 million per season (Gitter & Hunserger, 2014).

Sherry, & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Torregrosa, Boixados, Valiente, & Cruz, 2004; Uberoi, 2015). Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) examined transition difficulties of female gymnasts, finding the majority of participants experienced difficult athlete career transitions with distinctive themes of disorientation, void, and frustration. However, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) recognized their findings failed to identify differences in transition experiences of the gymnasts who retired voluntarily (e.g., discontinuing participation due to other opportunities or aspirations, or simply wanting to stop competing) versus those who retired involuntary (e.g., significant injury or deselection/getting dropped from a team). Erpič et al. (2004) noted this limitation in Kerr and Dacyshyn's work in their examination of sport retirement experiences of former Slovene elite athletes. Their findings strongly suggest transition experiences are significantly different for voluntary versus involuntary retirees.

Several studies, most notably Adler and Adler (1991), Beamon (2012), Beamon and Bell (2011), Cummins and O'Boyle (2015), and Wylleman and Reints (2010) found profit-athletes who focus on high-level sport participation from a very young age often do not have non-sport career aspirations and are inadequately prepared for successful post-athletic transitions. For profit-athletes who are unwilling or unable to modify their attitudes and perceptions regarding alternative career aspirations, transitioning out of college sport can be difficult (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon & Bell, 2011). The end of a profit-athlete's career can be especially challenging if he has lower academic attainment, insufficient social development, and unsustainable occupational skills (Adler & Adler, 1991; Chadiha, 2012; Eisenberg, 2013; LaMonica & Baumbach, 2015).

While profit-athletes may not recognize exhaustion of NCAA eligibility as retirement, as Coakley (1983) notes, the end of athletic participation has many retirement elements, since it is a "process of transitioning from participation in competitive sport to another activity or set of activities" (p.1). In addition, retiring from competitive sport is often abrupt, regardless of whether it is voluntary or involuntary. For a profit-athlete, the transition from a highly competitive and visible existence to an uncertain retirement, often devoid of a clear career path, can be traumatic (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009).

Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer (1996) and Beamon (2012) utilized the concept of *identity foreclosure* to explain post-athletic career transition difficulties, while Cummins and O'Boyle (2015) used the *human adaptation to transition model* (Pearson, & Petitpas, 1990; Schlossberg, 1981). These studies, as well as Singer's (2008) work on the benefits and detriments of athletic participation among former Black Division I FBS football players, found the combination of athletic devotion and role engulfment resulted in an imbalance between academic and athletic roles among profit-athletes. In addition, such imbalances are exacerbated by university athletic departments that neglect to provide current and former profit-athletes programming to address resulting athletic career transition difficulties. Consistently, Division-I FBS football and men's basketball players have been found to experience difficult post-athletic career transitions, which negatively affect their quality of life (Beamon, 2012; Beamon & Bell, 2011; Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015).

Many Beamon and Bell (2011) study participants expressed "feeling depressed and reported feeling a loss liken [sic] to personal death, the loss of a body part, or the loss of a family member" (p. 41) and expressed social alienation upon ending formal athletic participation because of a "loss associated with [no longer] being an athlete" (p. 41). While Beamon and Bell (2011) found a lack of career preparation hindered former profit-athletes' transitions, they failed

to collect data on other contributing factors, such as parents' educational attainment levels, adolescent athletic-role hyper-socialization, or socioeconomic status prior to college enrollment.

Positive Athletic Career Transitions

While Cummins and O'Boyle (2015) proposed conceptual underpinnings for successful athletic career transition, what constitutes a successful athletic career transition is still somewhat subjective. However, there have been many attempts to identify attributes of a positive post-athletic career transition, frame the process, and propose needed resources (Adams et al., 2015; Lavellee, 2006; Perna, Ahlgren, & Zaichkowsky, 1999; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stankovich et al., 2001). Adams et al. (2015) examined Scottish athletes experiencing within-career transitions and suggested the importance of adequate and healthy social support. They also identified four categories of social support, including: (a) emotional – presence of optimistic cheering; (b) esteem – presence of a person or object to provide constant encouragement; (c) informational – a coach or trainer who improves athletic skill; and (d) tangible – parent or guardian support (Adams et al., 2015). Interestingly, sport coaches were essential in providing social support, suggesting they play a pivotal role in ensuring positive career transitions (Adams et al., 2015).

Sinclair and Orlick (1993) found post-athletic career transitions were more successful among athletes who retired after achieving self-identified athletic goals (i.e., personal statistics, winning championships, achieving celebrity status). Those who proactively planned for sport retirement were also more likely to experience a successful transition. In addition, Stankovich et al. (2001) reported the success of an implemented proactive program for FBS football players that focused on identity development, athletic transferable skills, and career exploration. Players who went through the program were more likely to address their life after sport even if they had neglected to do so previously.

Knights, Sherry and Ruddock-Hudson (2016) conducted a systemic review of elite post-athletic career-transitions and assigned the term *flourishing* to individuals who experienced successful post-athletic career transitions. Such individuals are optimistic about their life, experience psychological and social well-being, and perceive their successful transition as normative (Keyes, 2003; Knights et al., 2016; Stambulova, 2000). Knights et al. (2016) found a flourishing individual possesses the following attributes: positive emotions, engagement/interest, meaningful purpose, self-esteem, optimism, resilience, self-determination, and positive relationships.

Purpose of the Study

Given that much previous role-set and post-athletic transition research has focused on Black profit-athletes (Beamon & Bell, 2011; Botterill, 1990; Olgilvie & Howe, 1982; Southall et al., 2015; Southall & Weiler, 2014; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wooten, 1994), this study sought to extend previous research and – in light of NCAA claims profit-athletes are "...focused on academics" (Kruzel, 2018, para. 6) – determine the prevalence of athletic role-set elements: (1) glorified-self athletic status, (2) athletic role engulfment, and (3) salient athletic identity among sampled profit-athletes.

Specifically, this study sought to move the discussion away from a focus on profit-athletes' ethnicity as a factor in the development of an athletic role set and refocus the narrative on the *interactional* and *affective* elements of profit-athletes' role set (Hogg et al., 1995; Stryker,

1980) within the total institution of big-time college sport. In addition, we examined profit-athletes' post-athletic transitions and their ability to successfully disengage/exit from an athletic role set and engage/enter into a non-athletic one (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Richter, 1984). Therefore, we sought to answer two fundamental research questions:

1. Do study participants (regardless of ethnicity and socio-economic status) articulate the prominence of an athletic role set?
2. Do study participants express post-athletic transition difficulties that stem from the prominence of their athletic role set?

Method

A socio-demographic survey collected initial data (e.g., years played, academic achievement, age, race/ethnicity, family educational status, college and high school GPA, and current occupation) that informed subsequent qualitative inquiry (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz, & Belgrave, 2002; Creswell 2007, 2009).

Previous investigations of profit-athletes' transition challenges have established semi-structured interviews as a preferred method (Beamon, 2008; Singer, 2008). Therefore, after completing a survey, each participant took part in an audio-recorded 90-minute (+/-) semi-structured telephone or in-person interview that explored their post-athletic transition experiences. Interviews focused on four time periods, during subjects' athletic careers: (1) pre-collegiate recruitment, (2) during college, (3) 1st year post-university, and (4) present. In addition to the four distinct time periods, interviews explored the following domains: (a) social supports, (b) academic success, (c) "life-skills" development, (d) challenges present during transition crisis, (e) pre-retirement preparations for transition, (f) factors that assisted in successful transitions, (g) current occupations, and (h) current life satisfaction.

Open Coding and Triangulation/Crystallization

After interviews were transcribed, member checks were solicited from study participants. This allowed subjects an opportunity to correct any perceived errors and provide additional information or clarifications during the respondent validation process. In order to identify themes across participant interviews, investigators independently coded transcripts using software Atlas.ti 7. Researchers initiated an open coding process by conducting in-vivo coding of participants' transcribed interviews. Conducting in-vivo coding assisted in extraction of themes by using a participant's exact language. While experiencing data saturation, to develop themes, researchers continued the coding process by conducting axial coding (Charmaz, 2014; Khandkar, 2009). Researchers utilized axial coding to re-examine transcribed interviews for theme generation and clarify information gathered from the in-vivo coding process (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007). Guided by the purpose of the study, investigators aligned established themes associated with participants' athletic career transition experiences to elements of their athletic role set (i.e., status, role and identity) (Charmaz, 2014; Khandkar, 2009).

The use of at least three and sometimes four investigators to review transcribed data ensured *triangulation* and strengthened *crystallization* within the dataset. Jick (1979) stated that within method triangulation "essentially involves cross-checking for internal consistency or reliability" (p. 603). Richardson (2000) agreed that a multiplicity of data sources and

investigative perspectives is important, but proposed that a triangle, “a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object,” (p. 934) is an inadequate view of data and thematic analysis, since there are often many more than three sides to a story. While a crystal grows, changes and alters, it is not an amorphous entity. It is a prism “that reflects externalities and refractions within themselves.... What we see depends upon our angle of repose.... [W]e have moved from plane geometry to light theory, where light can be both waves and particles” (p. 934) at the same time and for two different observers.

Triangulation and crystallization both deconstruct the notion of validity and within the postmodernist/constructivist paradigm propose a complex, varied, and thorough data-collection process. Therefore, we sought to have not only investigator triangulation, but also investigative crystallization. Consequently, the developed themes are not presented as definitive, nor the only possible explanations. However, they do provide a multi-faceted prism through which to examine profit-athletes’ post-athletic transition experiences.

Results

Description of the Sample

This study’s sample ($n = 17$) consisted of NCAA football, men’s basketball and baseball players who attended a Southeastern United States *Power-5* university between 2003-2013. Subjects were drawn from an initial university-supplied alumni association database of former athletes ($N = 564$), athletic department media guides, and social media platforms. Study participants were recruited by phone, at athletic alumni association meetings, via social media, or by recruited subjects who vouched for the researchers’ credibility. The alarmingly low response rate of 3% was due to the challenging nature of recruiting participants and gaining their trust. The lack of response to the invitation to participate in the study is a noteworthy finding. Building credibility and trust involved numerous pre-study informal conversations in a variety of social settings (e.g., athletic alumni association meetings, tailgating situations, and other informal settings). The study revealed that gaining trust from within “former athlete” channels and snowball sampling are important to studies concerning this population.

The sample included former college: (a) football ($n = 9$), (b) baseball ($n = 7$), and (c) men’s basketball ($n = 1$) players who competed for between two to five years (Note: To insure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for participants’ comments.). Thirteen participants self-identified as White and four as Black. Four participants (three of whom were Black) indicated their fathers had earned high school diplomas, while five fathers had completed some college, and eight had earned college degrees (6 bachelor’s, 2 master’s). In addition, six participants indicated their mothers possessed high school diplomas, one had some college, and nine mothers had earned college degrees (4 bachelor’s and 5 master’s). Fourteen participants had two parents in the household growing up, while all three single-parent households were headed by Black women. Table 1 summarizes participants’ sport, family household, and education information.

Table 1

Participant Sport/Household Background/Parental Educational Attainment Information

Name	Sport	Household	Education Level: Mother	Education Level: Father
Nigel	Football	Single Mother	HS/GED	HS/GED
Clarence	Baseball	Both Parents	Bachelor's	>3 Yrs. College
Ronnie	Baseball	Both Parents	HS/GED	Master's
Jackson	Basketball	Single Mother	Bachelor's	HS/GED
Devin	Football	Both Parents	1-2 Yrs. College	1-2 Yrs. College
Beaux	Baseball	Both Parents	Master's	Master's
Stephen	Baseball	Both Parents	Master's	Bachelor's
Aaron	Baseball	Both Parents	Bachelor's	>3 Yrs. College
Parker	Baseball	Both Parents	HS/GED	Bachelor's
Mike	Football	Both Parents	1-2 Yr. College	HS/GED
Chance	Baseball	Both Parents	HS/GED	1-2 Yrs. College
Templeton	Football	Both Parents	Bachelor's	Bachelor's
Riley	Football	Single Mother	Master's	1-2 Yrs. College
Vincent	Football	Both Parents	Master's	Bachelor's
Sincere	Football	Both Parents	HS/GED	Bachelor's
Maxx	Football	Both Parents	HS/GED	HS/GED
Grayson	Football	Both Parents	Master's	Bachelor's

Twelve participants maintained a college grade point average (GPA) above 3.0, while five had a GPA above 2.5. Thirteen participants had earned a bachelor's degree, with four having earned a master's degree or higher. When asked about involvement in extra-curricular activities other than athletics in college, 16 participants stated they would have liked to participate in such

activities, but their athletic role precluded it. Participants' playing status ranged from four-year starter to reserve, with a total of 11 starters and six reserves or non-starters (including players who did not start, but who typically played during a game). Finally, 15 participants were currently employed, while two were graduate students. Table 2 summarizes additional participant information.

Table 2

Participant College/Current Professional Information

Name	Sport	Race	Sport Participation (Yrs.)	Attended	Current Occupation
Nigel	Football	Black	5	2005-2009	Project Manager
Clarence	Baseball	White	3	2009-2012	Graduate Student
Ronnie	Baseball	White	4	2002-2006	Operations Manager
Jackson	Basketball	Black	3	2007-2010	Pro-Basketball Player
Devin	Football	White	5	2003-2007	Graduate Student
Beaux	Baseball	White	2	2006-2013	Pharmacist
Stephen	Baseball	White	3	2004-2006	Claims Supervisor
Aaron	Baseball	White	2	2004-2006	Insurance Broker
Parker	Baseball	White	4	2008-2012	Medical Salesman
Mike	Football	White	2	2006-2007	Facilities Coordinator
Chance	Baseball	White	4	2004-2008	Supply Chain Mgr.
Templeton	Football	White	5	2004-2008	Financial Advisor
Riley	Football	Black	5	2008-2013	Personal Trainer
Vincent	Football	White	4	2003-2007	Salesman
Sincere	Football	White	3	2005-2007	Sales Director
Maxx	Football	Black	3	2001-2004	Financial Sales
Grayson	Football	White	4	2005-2009	Insurance Salesman

Emergent Themes

This study sought to (a) give voice to former profit-athletes' perceptions of their pre-retirement athletic role sets and (b) allow subjects to discuss their post-athletic career transitions. Within this research setting, four emergent themes were identified: (1) communal expectation of sport participation, (2) athletic devotion at the expense of academic enrichment, (3) professionalism of Division I college sports, and (4) commitment to athletic role set and responsibilities. Table 3 summarizes these themes' prevalence, by number of constructed codes and number of times mentioned.

Table 3

Prevalence of Emergent Themes

Emergent Themes	Initial/Open Coding
Communal Expectation of Sport Participation	Family Pressure (36) Communal Pressure to Succeed (33) Hometown/In-state Pressure (27)
Athletic Devotion at the Expense of Academic Enrichment	Social Alienation in Academic Settings (27) Minimal Time for Academic Application (34) Unable to participate in non-sport extracurricular activities/internships (23) Lack of Connection with Academic Personnel (21)
Professionalism of Division I College Sport	Shared Business Characteristics with Professional Sports (23) Level of Competition/No Longer Playing for Fun (21) Awareness of Revenue Being Generated from Sport (17)
Commitment to Athletic Role Set and Responsibilities	Heightened Commitment to Athletic Role Set (41) Expectation of Extreme Athletic Participation (32)

Note. Number in parentheses indicates frequency of coding occurrences.

Communal expectation of sport participation. Three role set elements (i.e., status, role, and identity) guided emergent theme identification. The first identified theme was an overwhelming communal expectation of sport participation. Maxx, a Black football player, who was a three-year participant (one year as a starter), expressed such expectations:

Socially, mentally coming from the small town that I came from, I was the first guy to make it to a Division I school since 1984. The guy who made it to the Division-I school before me, became All-American, played like eight or nine years in the NFL and made millions of dollars. So just naturally coming from a small town that next guy, people thought it was just assumed that I was supposed to be that next small-town hero. And whenever that didn't happen, I almost went into depression.

This pressure was also communicated by Riley, a Black football player who identified as a reserve or non-starter:

I mean, so many of my old teammates after they finished their football career and they don't make it to the NFL, their lives kind of fall apart because since they were a little kid, their mom, their aunt, their brothers, their sisters, told them okay, you're going to make it

to the NFL. You're going to get us out of this eight hundred square foot house where we have six people living in it. And then they finish up school. They don't make it to the NFL and they feel like they failed their families. So, then they're like what the hell am I going to do now? And they just go off on the deep end because their family is still living in that small home and they feel like they just let them down.

These two examples from former football players highlight the communal pressures and expectations to meet friends and family's expectation that they "go pro" or make it to "The League" (Beamon, 2008). This pressure was not unique to former Division-I FBS football players. Former Division-I baseball players also expressed the communal pressure of being a "local kid" competing at a big-time baseball program. Parker, a White baseball player, who also identified as a two-year starter stated:

Athletically, you know, there is kind of some added pressure being someone local. You know, having a bunch of friends and family that were big fans and kind of being, if you will, highly touted in the area and going to a big university also having the state paper predicting you as a starting outfielder in the upcoming season before you even set foot on campus is a ton of pressure.

Parker, expressed the belief that if – as a local player – you were successful, you could utilize that to your advantage in a post-athletic career. For him the pressure of being local was overwhelming and a source of transition difficulties.

Athletic devotion at the expense of academic enrichment. All participants acknowledged a lack of focus on academics while participating in their sport. When asked about their academic career and success, nine participants stated a desire to commit more time and energy to their grades. Grayson, a former White football player, who also identified as a three-year starter, indicated a strong connection to his academic role and responsibilities, and expressed frustration when a former coach questioned his commitment and devotion to athletics, because of his exceptionally high grade-point-average:

His comment was, 'Man, I can see here that you've got a 4.0 GPA and that means that you probably don't try as hard at football as the rest of these guys.' So, I don't know that that works well for you, or I don't know that that's a good thing for you. He was basically giving me crap because I had good grades.

Several players noted a veiled animosity within the athletic subculture for athletes "too" interested in academics or viewed as intellectuals.

A majority of participants stated they did not have a significant relationship with a faculty member, with only minimal contact after they left the institution. Players expressed this lack of a relationship was due to either large classes, minimal dialogue with faculty or staff members, or a narrow focus on athletic roles and responsibilities. Ronnie, a White baseball player who identified as a four-year starter, put it bluntly:

To be completely honest with you, I don't really have a comment because I don't remember. It might have been baseball mind. I'm there to do one thing and one thing

only. In hindsight, should I have (you know) maybe had more of those relationships [with faculty] and learned more about that because not everybody is going to be a major-league baseball player? But unfortunately, I didn't create those kind of relationships...

Several players expressed no surprise or regret at their non-existent relationship with faculty.

Professionalism of Division-I college sports. The current NCAA collegiate model is a revenue-generating, professionalized, and commercialized entertainment enterprise that operates within a commercial institutional logic (Southall & Nagel, 2008; Southall, Nagel, Aims, & Southall, 2008; Southall & Staurowsky, 2013). Consistent with previous research, a majority of participants acknowledged this reality, often using words and phrases such as: *job, generating revenue, or business oriented* in describing their college-sport experiences. Beaux, a White baseball player, who identified as a two-year starter, noted:

...You're generating revenue for the university. And obviously, there's a lot of money on the line with what you pay coaches and also what you provide your student athletes as far as scholarships and that. So, it's just a whole different... It's more, it's not quite as business oriented as let's say professional baseball is, but it's definitely a different atmosphere. I mean just in terms of practice schedules. I mean your practicing way more. The time that you have to dedicate to sports is a lot more than what it is in high school. So, you know, I don't think I ever could have thought about having a part-time job on the side.

Clarence, a White former baseball player (three years), discussed his transition from high school to college:

From a sports aspect, up until then, sports had been you know something that was definitely extracurricular, it was a lot of fun. It came very easy to me. I just enjoyed playing. As soon as I hit college there was still like, it's still the same sport, there's still the same thing that I love, but it was very, very...very, very down to business. A lot more pressure associated with it than I had ever been in...Definitely really felt like, okay this is a serious business now. Not just going out and having some fun...

These players' view of college sports reflects what Nocera (2017) describes as the crux of the issue "college sports is big business" (para. 12).

Commitment to athletic role set and responsibilities. Adler and Adler (1985) noted profit-athletes frequently pragmatically detach from an academic role set. Such pragmatic detachment results from a real-world need to devote time and energy to their athletic responsibilities. Participant responses reveal they experienced heightened commitment to their athletic role sets and responsibilities during college. When asked about his transition from high school to college competition, Maxx highlighted the need to prioritize his athletic responsibilities:

Everybody earned the scholarship to be there. Everybody was big, fast and strong. So, the strength and conditioning program was something that was a learning curve for me. And,

the playbook. You know, the playbook was a lot different than the simple defenses that you ran in high school. In high school it was cover one, cover two, cover the rear man you know? And then in college, you know, we're doing cover two on one side, man on the other, roll into a punch, like you were saying, a more sophisticated team... You know, again you want to watch a lot of film whenever you go to college. That's the difference though between guys who play earlier on in their career compared to the guys who redshirt...

Because of the strength and conditioning program's sophistication, the playbook's complexity, and a need to maintain their position on the depth chart and compete for more playing time, most athletes become increasingly committed to their athletic roles and responsibilities. Riley discussed his decision to devote more time and effort to his athletic role set:

I was very capable of doing all the work and I probably could have been a straight-A student, but I was so focused on football...I was so focused on football at the time...playing football obviously, I had to balance so many things out. But it was hard for me to sit there and make straight A's in college and quote-unquote make straight A's on the football team, you know? I had to put a little bit more time into football...

This quote is consistent with Singer's (2008) observation: "if it were not for the time constraints and physical demands that are associated with big-time college sport participation, they [athletes] could perform as well, if not better, than their non-athlete peers" (p. 404).

In the current study, one participant answered, "that's just silly!" when asked if he had participated in any non-sport or non-university related extracurricular activities. Another participant stated that while he wanted to major in business management, he remained an "Undecided" student his first two years, because business management classes conflicted with his team's practice schedule.

Athlete Career Transitions

In the current study, 14 of 17 participants expressed experiencing significant challenges during their post-athletic career transition, including severe academic, professional, and/or social skill deficits. As a consequence of their foreclosing other identities, all subjects experienced difficulties in exiting their athletic role set. In addition, while all had secured post-athletic jobs, many did not view their jobs as a career. All participants also reported a continual sense of "loss" when asked about their post-athletic career transition experiences. These feelings ranged from the initial trauma of retirement to still holding out hope of a professional sport career several years after their college career had ended. This sense of loss is consistent with Beamon and Bell's (2011) findings that during post-athletic transition periods, athletes experience a traumatic sense of loss akin to the death of a loved one or divorce. Consistent with Beamon and Bell's (2012) findings, our participants overwhelmingly felt their institution did not, but should have, provided extensive and readily-available pre-transition/transition services.

While participants reported initially not feeling prepared to transition to the "real world," several felt the coping skills developed from being a profit-athlete were eventually a helpful factor. Learning to "wake up early," "weather the storm" and "outwork others" were all attributed to being an athlete in a revenue-generating sport at a major university (Chen, Snyder,

& Magner, 2010; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016). Many subjects reported they were resilient and able to overcome obstacles. While all subjects were clearly role-engulfed, they expressed using their college sport participation experiences to navigate their transition. This is consistent with Fraser, Galinsky and Richman's (1999) concept of resilient individuals, "who adapt to extraordinary circumstances, achieving positive and unexpected outcomes in the face of adversity" (p. 136).

While viewing themselves as resilient, some participants also indicated experiencing feelings of being "lost" as they transitioned out of their athlete roles into meaningful non-athletic occupations. Significantly, all participants experienced challenges arising from being athletically role engulfed. Consistent with previous research (Beamon & Bell, 2012), feelings of loss and difficulties in relinquishing their athletic identities were prevalent during this post-athletic career transition process. For some, these feelings manifested themselves in mental health impairments including depression and suicidal ideation. Coupled with a lack of institutional resources to assist with athletic career transition (i.e., proactive programming), the majority of participants reported being "lost" and experiencing difficulties in "identity reformation" after college (Beamon & Bell, 2012).

Nigel, a Black former three-year starter football player, personified the traumatic nature of letting go of professional-football aspirations:

And I never did have an invitation from a NFL team to come to camp or anything like that. I didn't understand given what I did on the football field as a player at the university, being a captain... it was difficult because again I fully expected to come to the university and be a three-year starter and I was out after my third year. So, to deal with the possibility of me not seeing the NFL was difficult to cope with...for me not to get an opportunity I mean to even go to camp and see if I could play on their level, I couldn't quite grasp it.

Nigel explained that even with other non-sport career opportunities available, he still questions why he was not able to play in the National Football League (NFL). Echoing this continual questioning of why their professional sports careers never materialized, Stephen, a White former three-year starter baseball player, said:

I never really, I felt, figured out what my full potential was and that was a little bit difficult because I kind of walked away from athletics with this huge question mark. And so, a lot of, you know that question currently running through your head. Could I still be playing? Could things have turned out differently? Could I be playing professional ball right now? I mean I have my hunches, but that always was in the back of my mind.

One participant explained his initial transition from sport participation by stating "it literally took me two years to make the adjustment from the lifestyle I had been living to what a normal life is all about." Noting a minimal exposure to life outside of sport, every participant felt they would have benefited from a mental-health professional or career counselor being readily available for therapeutic and social support services. This perception supports recent research that has identified the need for trained social workers to assist athletes in addressing mental health issues and developing transition plans (Waller, Martin & Morgan, 2017), as well as the benefits of psychosocial support, development of personal coping skills, and structured goal-setting

programming (Dean & Reynolds, 2017). However, as Moore (2017) noted, successfully implementing such programs is challenging, since Division-I athletes experience significantly lower levels of comfort in seeking behavioral health services. Unfortunately, it seems the most role-engulfed athletes (i.e., profit athletes) may be the least likely to seek out such services (Moore, 2017).

When faced with the end of their athletic careers, every subject reported having been anxious about their futures. The conclusion of their college careers – retirement – was a time of mixed emotions. They were at the pinnacle of their athletic prowess. They were starters and, in many ways, campus celebrities, recognized for their athletic achievements. The end of this life, this role in which they had become engulfed, came as a shock. They had been so focused on the next game, repetition, practice, or play that they were unprepared for the abrupt end of their athletic identity. Coaches had wanted them primarily focused on the short-term goals of winning each game and performing well at each practice. There had been no time to think about what they would do after they quit playing.

Most had not thought about what came after college. Changes in their rituals were jarring. Media, coaches, fellow students, and fans were no longer enamored with them. The loss of their core identity was a letdown. Similar to Adler and Adler's (1991) findings, almost all of our subjects underwent an institutionalized role exit, in which they lacked control over the decision to conclude their athletic role. They often felt powerless and frustrated, but took solace from the fact that they were not undergoing their transition totally alone. They had other teammates who were experiencing the same rite of passage (e.g., end of eligibility, graduation, etc.). Several subjects reported talking with teammates about what was to come next. While they were still anxious about the future, having someone to talk to about it was helpful.

Discussion

Historically, a significant number of NCAA profit-athletes are Black, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and have low graduation rates and large adjusted graduation gaps (AGGs) (Southall et al., 2015). While previous research has focused on the academic challenges and role disengagement difficulties of Black profit-athletes from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon & Bell, 2012; Southall & Weiler, 2014) this study's subjects were overwhelmingly White, and middle-to-upper-middle class, with strong local or regional social support systems.

Even though this sample – in which all participants have earned at least a bachelor's degree – is not typical of the overall profit-athlete population, every participant – regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic status – perceived that when they were profit-athletes they had gloried self athletic status, were athletically role engulfed (with their athletic role having reached a level of role domination), and had adopted a salient athletic identity. Without exception, in an attempt to become a successful FBS-level athlete they had all acquiesced and adopted an athletic role set that necessarily required them to abandon any semblance of academic and social role sets. All subjects focused their physical and mental energies on athletics, socially isolating themselves, and minimizing their academic engagement. They were, in many ways, not student-athletes; they were simply...athletes.

In addition to all study participants being college graduates, it should be noted all subjects expressed overall satisfaction with their college experience. However, since hundreds of prospective former athletes did not respond to repeated requests to participate in the study, a

limitation of this study is we have no way of knowing whether the experiences of our 17 subjects are typical of the overall profit-athlete population at this university or within the institutional field of big-time college sport. Significantly, even those who had an “overall” positive college sport experience evidenced role-set engulfment and transition difficulties.

The *typicality* of this – or any – retrospective study is also affected by participants’ ability to accurately recall their experience because of memory transience (Schacter, 1999). Specifically, chronological distance from sport participation can affect subjects’ ability to recall their unique transitional experiences, especially when such experiences were pronounced (Schacter, 1999). Therefore, memory transience may have influenced participant responses to certain interview questions, muting initial feelings associated with a transition event (e.g., sport retirement, athlete career transition, injury, graduation, available transition services).

As Adler and Adler (1991) noted, absent a strong social safety system when profit-athletes’ athletic role engulfment reaches a level of role domination, they “...progressively detach themselves from their investment in other areas and let go alternative goals and priorities” (p. 27-28). Beamon and Bell (2012) contend Black profit-athletes from lower socio-economic backgrounds face social and economic segregation on middle/upper-middle class predominately white institution (PWI) campuses. They intimate that as a result, these athletes have more post-athletic career transition difficulties than athletes (Black and White) from middle/upper-middle socioeconomic backgrounds, who often have more stable family environments and stronger social support systems, and may more easily obtain a meaningful college degree.

In light of the NCAA sponsored research that has been used to support an NCAA narrative that athletic role-set dysfunction is rare among today’s profit-athletes (the majority of whom are Black) (NCAA, 2016-2017; Gallup, n.d.), the universal prevalence of all three elements of athletic role set dysfunction (i.e., gloried self athletic status, athletic role engulfment and adoption of a salient athletic identity) among our predominantly White sample is a significant finding. In addition, while some subjects showed evidence of Coakley’s (2007) “re-birth” hypothesis and had minor transitional difficulties, others – who had lived most of their lives within the culture of elite sports – had more difficult transitions (e.g., depression and lack of adjustment). These findings support the need for proactive programming for profit-athletes whose college sports career is short-term or *compressed* (Gallmeier, 1990). The cornerstone of any such programming is viewing college-sport participation as a short-term career, and providing athletes with alternative identities to “try on” throughout their athletic careers.

While all athletes must be allowed to pursue their athletic dreams, the systematic encouragement of “trying on” alternative identities would likely alleviate or mitigate post-athletic career transition difficulties. The development of non-athletic alternative identities is encouraged by exposure to academic environments with rigor, non-sport activities in the offseason, and increased inclusion of profit-athletes within the general student population. In addition, profit-athletes must be allowed and encouraged to participate in non-sport internships in order to increase their vocational training and professional acumen. Such a mandate is essential, as some of the participants in the current study indicated that due to their athletic participation, they did not have time to participate in meaningful internships prior to their sport retirement.

Proactive programming, developed, controlled and implemented by a non-athletic department entity, would better prepare profit-athletes to transition out of athletics and into other pursuits and/or careers when competitive athletics is concluded. Such programming would prepare athletes for the inevitable termination of their athletic role set. Instead of being an

ephemeral alternative or fall-back plan, the transitioning into a new role/identity could be a prepared-for process. This integration of academic, social, and occupational enrichment activities would help prepare profit-athletes for a successful post-athletic career transition. While coaches and athletic staff can be vital to this transition process, too often they neglect players once they have exhausted their athletic eligibility. Such neglect is not necessarily out of malice, but a function of coaches and athletic department staff members needing to focus their attention on current profit-athletes in order to win games and generate revenue. Therefore, it is crucial control of such programming be outside of an athletic department.

Even within the current college-sport system, there are signs some athletic departments recognize resources need to be directed toward athlete transition programming. One example is the University of South Carolina (UofSC) (a member of the Southeastern Conference [SEC]), which recently hired a well-known former UofSC running back, Marcus Lattimore, as the Director of Player Development and Director of Beyond Football (Cloninger, 2018). According to a news account, Lattimore will assist and aid UofSC football players through their college experience, while developing each player for a life after football. During the press conference introducing Lattimore, University of South Carolina athletic director Ray Tanner noted, “[I regret] the university had ‘missed the boat’ in providing off-field training for its student-athletes in the early years of [my] tenure” (Kendall, 2018, para. 10).

Public acknowledgement of this shortcoming is an initial step in understanding sport retirement and athlete career transition issues within big-time college sport. The University contends Lattimore will bridge the gap between current life as a profit-athlete and after sport participation. Since the primary focus in big-time college sports is unlikely to morph from winning and revenue generation, affecting real change in the lives of profit athletes will be a challenge; it will involve openly addressing profit-athletes’ on-campus lifestyles and post-athletic transition problems. Therefore, even minor change within the current system must involve developing and implementing independent proactive programming in order to help profit-athlete’s develop the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to successfully disengage from their profit-athlete role set and successfully transition into a new exciting and productive one.

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