



## **“They Roll Different”: International Division II Tennis Athletes’ Initial Transitions to the United States**

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*International college athletes come to the US for enhanced educational as well as athletic opportunities. Despite the fact that the majority of Division II tennis athletes are international, the literature has ignored this population. This study explored Division II international tennis college athletes’ perceptions of transitioning to an institution of higher learning in the US. Informed by Schlossberg’s Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition, 12 international Division II tennis players representing 9 countries participated in semi-structured interview method. Four main themes emerged from the data: reason for coming to the US to play sports, transition to the US, transition through college, and impact of COVID. The results of this study provide unique insight into experiences of Division II college tennis athletes in hopes of designing programming to ensure this population receives the support necessary to thrive in a new environment.*

*Keywords: international college athletes, transition, tennis, adaptation*

Prior research has examined the transitional experiences of college athletes (e.g., Stokowski et al., 2019; Wylleman et al., 2004). However, much of the literature has focused on Division I college athletes' adapting to a life beyond sport (i.e., retirement) (e.g., Bopp et al., 2021). Limited scholarship has been devoted to understanding the experiences of the 120,846 college athletes participating at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II institutions (NCAA, 2021a, Williams et al., 2021).

Division I institutions receive 92.45% of NCAA resource allocations, as opposed to the 4.37% allotted to Division II institutions (NCAA, 2022b). The median athletic expenses at Division II institutions is \$6.8 million (Nite, 2012; NCAA, 2021a). To this, often universities in this classification struggle to provide college athletes with adequate resources (e.g., academic support, athlete development personnel, mental health services, transitional programming; Beattie & Turner, 2020; Judge et al., 2018; Nite, 2012; Ryan et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2019).

At the Division II level, "athletics programs are financed in the institution's budget like other academic departments on campus" (NCAA, 2022a, p. 1). With the mantra "life in the balance," the 300 active members of the Division II classification focus on a well-rounded athlete experience (NCAA, 2021b, p. 1). Division II institutions tend to offer a combination of academic and athletic scholarships (Butler et al., 2020). However, it should be noted that Division II college athletes spend nearly as much time on athletic related endeavors as their Division I counterparts (NCAA, 2011).

College athletes are a distinctive population that warrants individualized inquiry (Strehlow et al., 2021; Stokowski, 2013; Stokowski et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2007). Although scarce, a few studies have investigated Division II institutions. Research has examined the athletic performance of Division II athletes (Garstecki et al., 2004; Sygulla & Fountaine, 2014), faculty perceptions of Division II athletes (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Feezell, 2013), as well as spectatorship at Division II institutions (DeSchraver & Jensen, 2002). Ryan et al. (2022) study of Division II softball and baseball athletes demonstrated that the participants felt mental health services were needed and that COVID-19 had a tremendous impact on the participants. Other studies (Beattie & Turner, 2020; Judge et al., 2018) have examined the lack of academic support services and facilities at the Division II level.

Although most college students experience a change in social roles upon entering higher education, the adjustment of international students is different in that this population must assimilate to an entirely new culture (e.g., Gallagher, 2013; Newell, 2015; Popp et al., 2009; Popp et al., 2011; Pierce et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2014; Stokowski et al., 2013). There is a demand for international athletes to migrate to the United States (US) and participate in intercollegiate sport (Weston, 2006). Each year, nearly 21,000 international college athletes compete at NCAA (2021b) membership institutions. Tennis has the highest numbers of international students participating (Parrish et al., 2020). Among tennis college athletes competing at the Division II level, 40% (840) of women and 59% (950) of men are international (NCAA, 2021b). Thus, the initial transitions of international tennis college athletes at the Division II level warrants further exploration. Informed by Schlossberg's (1981) Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition, the purpose of this study was to explore Division II international tennis college athletes' perceptions of transitioning to an institution of higher learning in the US. Specifically, this study strived to address the following research questions:

RQ 1: What factors lead Division II international tennis college athletes to migrate to the US?

RQ 2: How did Division II international tennis college athletes describe the characteristics of the initial transition and the environment?

This study strived to assist international Division II tennis college athletes in acclimating to the US by providing insight into their transitional experiences to facilitate programming and provide adequate support.

## Literature Review

### *Human Adaptation to Transition*

Individuals often experience difficulties adjusting to significant life transitions. Schlossberg's (1981) Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition established "variables which seem to affect the outcome of the transition of an individual" (p. 5). Therefore, the present study was informed by Schlossberg's (1981) model, which involves "three major sets of factors that influence adaptation to transition: (1) the characteristics of the particular transition, (2) the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments, and (3) the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5).

Transition is characterized as an individual response to a biological, psychological, sociological, or environmental change that occurs in one's life (Schlossberg, 1981; Spierer, 1977). Schlossberg's (1981) model focuses on the three factors that influence the transition to an event or nonevent and how it shapes the final stage, adaptation (Schlossberg, 1981). Consequently, the outcome of the transition can be both positive and negative. The event may help an individual grow and develop, or the event could lead to negative outcomes (Moos & Tsu, 1976). Therefore, as a response to transition, the focus shifts from the transitional process toward adjusting and adapting to life (Schlossberg, 1981).

### *International College Athletes*

Migration patterns (both voluntary and involuntary) have often been an area of interest (Sage, 2010). In modern times, opportunities (e.g., employment, education, marriage) as well as hardships (e.g., conflict, poverty) have led to an array of migration patterns (Sage, 2010). Skilled workers are often those who contribute to global migration (Iredale, 2001) and international college students are often viewed as skilled workers (Elliott & Maguire, 2008; Parrish et al., 2020; Sage, 2010). The demand for collegiate tennis college athletes exceeds the supply among domestic athletes (Weston, 2006). The NCAA (2022b) does not classify college athletes as employees. However, Parrish et al. (2020) described Division I international tennis college athletes as "laborers" fueling "sport labor migration" (p. 1813). Using secondary data, Parrish et al. (2020) examined the talent migration among Division I tennis college athletes. The results indicated that tennis rosters had the highest amount of international college athletes and majority of international college athletes migrated from Spain (Parrish et al., 2020).

Research has examined international college athletes' motivations for coming to the US (e.g., Love & Kim, 2011; Ridpath et al., 2019). Ridpath et al. (2019) study found that access to coaching, the opportunity to obtain a university degree, and competing at an elite level motivated international athletes to compete in the US. Love and Kim (2011) research indicated that motivation was contingent upon home country and gender. However, similar to Ridpath et al. (2019) work, Love and Kim (2011) found that educational opportunities, athletic competition,

athletic facilities, and faculty motivated these populations to come to the US. Lin et al. (2017) work found that for Division II college athletes, the relationship with their coach was critical in the decision making process.

Butler et al. (2019) qualitative study examined female international tennis college athletes' motivations for attending junior college in the US. The participants revealed that they attended junior college in order to transfer to a four-year institution. Additionally, the results indicated that the "head coach, location, eligibility, scholarship money received, and not wanting to commit to a four-year institution" motivated international college athletes to migrate to the US to attend a junior college (Butler et al., 2019, p. 9)

In an effort to enhance the experience for international college athletes, Pierce et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of this population learning about the university and speaking with potential teammates prior to selecting a university. The relationship with coaches is significant for international college athletes. International college athletes that do not feel supported by their coach reported decreased motivation (Popp et al., 2010). Additionally, international college athletes are motivated differently than their domestic peers in that international college athletes' teammates served as their motivating factors (Stokowski et al., 2013).

The learning process for international college athletes often requires developing an understanding of the NCAA's structure, balancing academic obligations and athletic demands, injuries, as well as navigating expectations from coaches and teammates (Parham, 1993). Often, international college athletes fail to be directed to adequate resources that could assist this population with their initial transition (e.g., Boucher, 2017; Charitonidi & Kaburakis, 2022; Newell, 2015; Manwell et al., 2021; Pierce et al., 2011). Charitonidi and Kaburakis (2022) mixed method study found that international college athletes not only had difficulty adjusting to life in the US, but also experienced "discrimination, negligence, and a lack of support and/or guidance" on their respective campus (p. 95). Manwell et al. (2021) study of international Hispanic athletes reported their "collective experience as most difficult" (p. 524). International college athletes who receive support and encouragement from their coach, the department, and/or academic advisors reported a better overall experience (Newell, 2015). Lastly, visa restrictions do not allow international college athletes the same opportunities as their domestic peers (Solomon et al., 2022).

### *Initial Athlete Transition*

Adjustment to a new environment, is a normative (expected) transition (Baker & Siryk, 1984a, 1984b). According to Ryba et al. (2015) the transition often begins when students leave their hometown to start a collegiate career, leading to an initial transition. Several researchers have taken interest in students' ability to adapt to a collegiate environment. For example, Baker and Siryk (1984b) created the Student Adjustment Questionnaire (SACQ) to explore how students adapt to the transition. The SACQ examines four aspects (i.e., academic adjustment, personal-motional, social adjustment, international attachment) associated with adjustment to transition. Initially, the SACQ focused on domestic (non-athlete) students. However, Ridinger and Pastore (2000) study utilized the SACQ with international college athletes. The findings indicated that international college athletes reported a lower emphasis on adjustment through social aspects than other groups (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000).

Initial adjustment has been found to influence motivation, relationships, academic involvement, learning, and ability to adapt (Baker & Siryk, 1984a, 1984b; Ryba et al., 2015). In a fluid environment, many stressors (e.g., athletic obligations, competitive nature, financial

hardship) affect the experiences of college athletes (Foo et al., 2015). Ridinger and Pastore (2000) highlighted that all college athletes (regardless of citizenship) experience stressors and struggle to adjust to a new environment (i.e., college). International collegiate athletes experience additional barriers which include cultural change, language, and homesickness (Gallagher, 2013; Pierce et al., 2011; Turick et al., 2020). First-year experiences not only determine a successful transition, but ultimately shape a successful collegiate career (Pierce et al., 2011). Thus, it is critical for athletes to adjust and overcome these stressors.

Most athletic departments lack an inclusive culture (Turk et al., 2019). Providing tools, resources, and a supportive environment while recognizing the unique needs of international college athletes can enhance the overall experience (Newell, 2015; Pierce et al., 2012). The needs of international students vary from those of their domestic peers. For example, it has been shown that international college athletes need assistance with paperwork, taxes, and timelines that are specific for international college athletes (Boucher, 2017; Solomon et al., 2022). Therefore, most universities offer programming to assist college athletes with their initial transition (Navarro et al., 2020). Programs often include summer bridge, first-year seminar(s), and career construction opportunities (Coffin et al., 2021; Navarro et al. 2020). Unfortunately, many transition programs are focused on the skills necessary for transition as opposed to understanding how the formation of the experience is shaped or may change (Andrade, 2006). As programming is focused on the transition of domestic students, the international college athlete population is often neglected (Andrade, 2006). Due to budgetary constraints, Division II institutions often lack athlete-specific programming (Beattie & Turner, 2020; Judge et al., 2018; Nite, 2012). Particularly programming for college tennis, in which participants are primary international, is neglected because of the sports' low-profile nature and lack of revenue production (Parrish et al., 2020).

## Method

The present study employed a phenomenological methodological design. A phenomenological approach seeks to understand the lived experience of a specific phenomenon (Lester, 1999). Phenomenology is described as a manifestation of one's experiences by responding to everyday life and actions happening in the world (Heidegger, 2010). Therefore, by utilizing phenomenological narratives, the researcher can connect the information gained from international college athletes' immediate response to the phenomena they lived through by sharing those experiences afterward. Since phenomenology primarily focuses on exploring meaning through acknowledging lived experiences, the phenomenological method is appropriate for this study (Osbourne, 1994). This study aims to understand international tennis players' perception of adaptation to higher education in the US. As a result of this study, the researcher hoped to understand international tennis players' perceptions of adaptation to different environments and the ways that help connect the experiences and meanings of those experiences. Those experiences are shaped by adjusting to a new country, campus, language, university, sports, and team.

Semi-structured interviews were utilized for this phenomenological study. During semi-structured interviews, a participant was asked open-ended questions to allow for open dialogue with the interviewer (Dittmore & Stokowski, 2019). Additionally, the open-ended questions gave a chance for the participants to add additional information about their experiences with follow-up opportunities. The questions were asked casually to ensure that the participants felt comfortable sharing their thoughts. During the interviews, the primary researcher also observed non-verbal cues that gave a more profound understanding of the participant's experience.

## Procedure

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, 12 international tennis college athletes at two Division II institutions participated in semi-structured interviews. As the primary researcher utilized their personal network to recruit participants, purposive sampling was utilized. The researcher contacted two Division II tennis coaches to obtain the contact information for athletes who met the criterion for this study (i.e., Division II international tennis college athlete). The sample included 12 international college athletes (five females, seven males) from nine different countries (see Table 1). After contacting the potential participants, interviews were scheduled. Due to COVID-19 protocols, the primary researcher conducted one-time semi-structured interviews with the participants (via Zoom). Before the interview, each participant was informed of their rights as a participant and asked to sign an informed consent statement (which was sent to the participant via email). Upon agreeing to participate, the participant emailed a signed informed consent statement back to the primary researcher, which permitted the interview to be recorded for meaning. To protect the identity of the participants, the researcher assigned each participant a pseudonym.

The interview protocol was informed by the three factors in Schlossberg's (1981) model: "(1) the characteristics of the particular transition, (2) the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments, and (3) the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). The interview protocol focused five to seven open-ended questions on each factor (see Appendix A). The interviews lasted 45-70 minutes.

Table 1  
*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Classification	Nationality	Native Language
Emily	Senior	Germany	German
Sarah	Freshman	New Zealand	English
Claire	Senior (5 <sup>th</sup> year)	Paraguay	Spanish
Jane	Sophomore	Germany	German
Sally	Freshman	India	Hindi
Andrew	Junior	France	French
Eddy	Sophomore	France	French
George	Freshman	Czech Republic	Czech
John	Sophomore	Argentina	Spanish
Liam	Senior (5 <sup>th</sup> year)	Czech Republic	Czech
Kyle	Freshman	Poland	Polish
Michael	Freshman	Japan	Japanese

## Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using Saldaña's (2009) two cycle coding process (i.e., attribute, structural, description, pattern). The video interview recordings were transcribed using Zoom transcription and verified for accuracy. Attribute coding focuses on participant characteristics or demographics (Saldaña, 2009). It provided generic attributes to the participants. Structural coding focuses on conceptual words or phrases related to the research questions (Saldaña, 2009; MacQueen et al., 2008). Descriptive coding mainly focuses on words or passages that summarize

the research topic (Saldaña, 2009). Lastly, the second round of coding included pattern coding. Pattern coding follows the first coding cycle and identifies the patterns (Saldaña, 2009). It focuses on emerging themes across all the interviews. Therefore, the pattern coding formed themes that helped answer the research questions.

### *Trustworthiness*

Several methods were utilized to assist with trustworthiness. In an effort to finalize the interview protocol, a pilot study was conducted with Division I international college athletes. As the primary researcher was a former Division II international college athlete, a bracketing interview was conducted in an effort to remove bias. Lastly, triangulation of coding, where three experienced qualitative researchers coded the raw data, was utilized to assist in achieving trustworthiness (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

## **Results**

This study aimed to explore Division II international tennis college athletes' perceptions of transitioning to an institution of higher learning in the US. The data revealed four main themes: reason for coming to the US to play sports, transition to the US, transition through college, and impact of COVID.

### *Reason for Coming to Play Sports*

The first theme, reason for coming to the US to play sports, is a collection of responses that explained why the participants chose to come to the US to attend college and participate in their sport. Two sub-themes, Gaining Education and Continuing Sport appeared.

*Gaining Education.* Several of the participants stated that one of the main motivating factors for coming to the US was the opportunity to earn a college education. Andrew wanted to study in the US because “you cannot study and play a good high-level sport at the same time in my home country. It’s either one or the other...because it’s impossible back in our country to study and play simultaneously.” Andrew continued discussing the college decision and his choice of major. He remarked,

My major is management, and I picked it, because in case I want to go back to [name of home country], I want to have a degree that is gonna work and have the same value in [name of home country]...so I didn’t want to like do something else, and not be able to continue if I come back to [name of home country].

It was important to Andrew to choose a major that would be helpful in gaining employment in the US upon graduation or if he decided to return to his home country.

Claire’s decision to play in the US was due to her desire to “get a degree and learn another language and get to know more places and people.” Similarly, Jane stated, “I thought business would be the only major I would be able to use internationally. I am thinking of going back home. I don’t know what I want to do so this would be the most general thing.”

George also wanted to continue his education; however, his reason for coming to the US was unique when compared to the other participants. He commented,

In [name of home country], if you want to go to college, you must prepare for a long time. I was unsure about what I wanted to do, and it was too late to start preparing, like going to college and doing the tests. And here I just had to do like English and English tests. It was easier to get here than to attend school in [name of home country].

*Continuing Sport.* Not all the participants stated that earning an education served as their primary factor for coming to the US. As athletics ingrained in the educational setting is unique to the US, several of the participants indicated that this was an opportunity worth exploring. Elizabeth expressed her excitement to learn more about the American model and play tennis,

The opportunity to play as much tennis as possible. Sports in America are such a big thing, and that's not how it is at home. I just loved being an athlete here, I don't know but I feel like here if you are an athlete, it is cool and at home no one cares. The opportunity to play tennis, to train, workout, and see how far I can go, not in a pro way obviously but just how well can I do.

Elizabeth went on to say,

I knew it was a common thing to do for tennis players in [name of home country] to go to college after high school so it wasn't even like let's go to America, it was something I knew I was going to do. You do not hear people going to South America to play college tennis. Everyone comes to America to do that.

Liam had similar sentiments to Elizabeth. He decided to come to his university in order to:

Play tennis here...in [name of home country] the situation is they don't support any sports. So, I knew that I would have to start with tennis so it would be an opportunity to come to the United States. The opportunity to actually study abroad and continue playing tennis was exciting for me so I just chose to come here.

Sally also wanted to continue playing tennis. However, she was excited not only for tennis but the funding and training that accompanied being a college athlete in the US. She commented,

In [name of home country] you don't have that much college tennis and the training. There's a lot of expenses that you have to pay for, and there are only two tournaments a year. In America you get tournaments every week that you are playing, you get trainer, and you are on the team environment.

Michael summed it up succinctly when he explained his reason for coming to the US and his specific university as "it has good college tennis, this is what attracted me."

### *Transition to the US*

When a student leaves their hometown to go to college, the initial transition begins (Ryba et al., 2015). In accordance with Schlossberg's (1981) model, the theme of transition to the US



was comprised of responses that indicated a positive or negative transition. The sub-themes that emerged in the data were Support and Initial Challenges.

*Support.* The most important element that aided the participants in their transition to the US was support from their family and friends.

Andrew's family was very supportive of his decision to migrate to the US to participate in tennis. Andrew felt his family "wanted me to have like a new experience. They wanted me to do whatever made me happy. So they were pretty supportive." Additionally, Andrew spoke of the support he received from his friends in his native country. When Andrew told his friends he was going to the US, his friends were "super happy for me, saying they wanted me to go, because they know how I'm lucky to do that, and they want to do the same. They would love to do the same."

Claire said her friends were a great source of support. She mentioned her friends,

Always reach out to check on me and how I am doing. Every single time I go home, they always make this welcome party. We always hangout and everything. All my friends were happy for me. They are always supportive. They even watch lives when we play.

Eddy said his family provided support through reassurance and advice. Eddy expressed his family told him "to enjoy my life here [in the US]. It's a good life, and it's only for four years so I have to enjoy it, every moment."

Sally's father served as a driving force in her coming to the US to play tennis. She said her father wanted her "to go to the US because of the opportunity. He got me a recruiter who would talk to coaches and see what college I can get into. Then paid for the recruiter and paid for the expenses here." Sally's father previously and currently provided financial support so she could have the opportunity to participate in collegiate athletics.

Elizabeth discussed that her parents were supportive in a variety of areas. She discussed her parents helped,

Financially, and then just being there. I mean I can call them anytime. It's awesome to know that they take time in their day whenever I'm free and want to talk. They will let everything else fall and they're there for me to talk and that means a lot.

Similarly, Sarah commented on the financial support she received from her family. Sarah explained that she is not on a full athletic scholarship; as such, her parents were "helping me pay for tuition because I cannot." The financial aspect served as support for Sarah. She expressed,

The big thing is that they are there and call them when I need their support. But the biggest thing is letting me know I can always come back, and they are okay with it. Not like I left and should stay here for four years. Letting me know that I can always come back, and I do not have to stay for four years here. That's the biggest thing for me.

Her parents support financially helped Sarah in affirming her decision to migrate to the US. The support also gave Sarah the option to stay in the US to complete her degree or to return home early (if in her best interest).

*Initial Challenges.* While many of the athletes discussed the positive elements of coming to the US for college and tennis, there were also a variety of challenges the participants faced

that they did not prepare for prior to arriving on campus. These challenges included language difficulties, culture shock, and weather.

Claire had a difficult time when she first came to the US. She discussed the trouble she had with the language and the overall culture shock she experienced upon her arrival. Claire said her initial struggle was “definitely [the] language barrier, culture too. Like the jokes, people did not get anything I was saying and I was trying to make a joke and people were looking at me like, WHAT? You know, [the] language and culture are different.” Clair continued discussing another difference between her home country and the US, explaining that time management and timelines were different. She explained,

Time management that’s part of the culture for example in America. You have to be there if they said 4 [you need] to be there at like 3:45 3:50. In my country if we say 4, we do not start before, we start at 5:30 you know just one of the things. You have to be very punctual here.

John had problems understanding teammates, coaches, and professors when he first came to his campus. He stated, “Sometimes it was hard for me to understand the classes because they speak too fast or speak with a mask.” Eddy also had difficulty with the language when he first arrived on campus. He said, “I kind of understand people but to speak it was, even today sometimes, it’s hard say what I want to say. At first it was really hard to for people to understand me.” The difficulty with communication led to feelings of isolation and loneliness. John stated,

The first two weeks were really hard. I was completely lost, I didn’t know what I was doing here. But then I used to meet some people, to have some, I do not know how to say, hobbies. And to find like a place, my place here. I wasn’t like feeling at home here. First, I was seeing myself as a visitor or someone that’s an outsider. And now I feel more at home.

George also had issues when he first came to the US. He described language barriers he experienced attended a school in the Southern US. George explained he “had the problem understanding, like the accent. But it’s getting better.” While understanding a Southern accent was difficult, he believed the biggest challenge was the environment, specifically the weather. He remarked that “the humidity was insane.” The weather in the Southern US was different from George’s home country. It took time for George to adjust to the elements, specifically regarding training outside.

## Transition Through College

Transition through college was similar to the previous theme, coming to the US. While the theme of Coming to the US is focused more on the support from family and friends, the theme of Transition Through College involves on-campus support. The athletes discussed positive elements of adapting to campus life, which included the sub-themes of Support, Academics, Comradery, and negative elements that included the sub-theme of Being Homesick.

*Support.* In addition to speaking about the support they received from family and friends, the participants discussed the on-campus support they received from coaches and faculty members at their institution.

Liam said his coach supported him in “every possible way. I cannot say anything negative about the coach.” Similarly, John felt completely supported by his coach. He stated,

I feel supported by coach because he also makes the things easier for me that he helped me, and he listened to me. He trusts me, so that’s make me feel great. At some point he demonstrated that he wanted me here in that team. He thinks that I’m good for the team so that’s good for me. And I know that if I have a problem I can go and talk to him because he’s like my dad here.

Elizabeth mentioned her coach was not only supportive of her athletically but felt her coach cared about her as a person. She stated,

I think the coach is a great support. First of all, I really appreciate what coach does, he is a human being, and he listens to us. I can tell him “Coach I need a day off. I need to finish something,” and he would not even question that. He would not tell me to make up for any practice I miss. I think just knowing that is a great support. Also, because you can always walk into his office and just chat with him...He is there, he is just there for us. I feel like he tries to see us succeed. For him it’s not about sports, it’s about us being well and what we are doing and being happy with what we are doing. He shows that 100% all the time

The support of coaches during the season was crucial for these athletes as they transitioned through college. Coaches were able to provide emotional support and assist the participants in navigating their new environment.

Faculty served as an additional support system. The words of the participants described faculty as supportive of their demanding athletic schedules, understanding of language barriers, and faculty demonstrated interest in the athletic contests and achievements of their students. As long as Jane communicated with faculty in advance, Jane felt faculty were very understanding. She stated the faculty were “definitely pretty understanding about tournaments and extensions. If you communicate with them, they are supportive.”

Sally recalled having great support from some of her faculty members. She remarked,

Professors have been great. One of them knew I was having some type of difficulty because of the transition in the course so she always tells me most of the things that she doesn’t even tell other students. She read my papers, told me what I needed to do, and she also told me to contact another Indian girl who also studies here so she did not reply, but she tried to help.

Liam also had positive interactions with his faculty. He discussed,

If I’m struggling in some classes, my professors have been like there for me. They were really understanding and helpful when I have some language barrier, or we had to miss classes. I remember one of my professors were just like asking about our schedule and how did we play, and with who, and what was the result, and how was it, when is our next match and stuff like that.

*Academics.* Being a collegiate athlete at the Division II level was filled with positive aspects and challenges. The academic portion of the athletes’ lives was challenging at times;

however, the majority of the participants were happy with their studies and felt supported by faculty.

Eddy said that faculty in the US were more supportive than the instructors in his home country. He commented, “They [faculty] are always here if you need something or are struggling with something. That is a very big difference from where I live.” Sarah agreed that faculty were supportive, which was important to her because of her view on her education. She remarked, “my academics are really important.”

Kyle was happy that he had the opportunity to be a business major. He described the cross disciplinary nature of his major as, “simple, easy, and I can do a lot of things with it.” Kyle felt that,

Some classes are kind of so easy and I don’t have classes that are hard yet. But I like it, though there are some classes that I will never like to use in my life. So, I guess it’s pretty fun and it was just easy. I am getting by.

Michael chose to major in exercise science because it is “interesting for me, not sure what I am going to do in the future.” Michael noted that there were differences between his university and the education system in his home country. He commented, “I think in [name of home country] we do more memorizing and tests but here there is more writing essays and making presentations.” Although there were differences in the educational system, Michael felt he easily acclimated to the American model.

Not every athlete felt that their academic program was easy. Claire discussed feeling overwhelmed because of her classwork as well as the challenge of trying to balance her athletic and academic obligations. She conveyed that,

Some professors think that we only have their class that’s why they give so much to do. I feel like most of them are like that. I have this one professor; she gives so much stuff to do. I not only have her in one class, but in two. I am trying to focus on it, but it is so much. It’s new stuff that I have never done. It’s in marketing. I just started management, you know, if you tell me something management it’s so much easier for me. I was doing digital analytics like I [have] never done a landing page or created a website and it’s all due Monday. Like mind blown. So yes, a lot of stress from school.

Andrew also felt that school was challenging. He stated he was “stressed about the grades. I would say, yeah, yes, about failing classes and like having that the best grades. That’s probably the most stress would be.”

*Comradery.* Eddy spoke about his teammates as a source of happiness and positivity throughout his collegiate experience. He stated,

The atmosphere is really good. Especially last semester when I played for the clinch for one match. It’s crazy a story, but it was a crazy point even if it was a really bad point everyone was screaming. And that’s the feeling that I never, never felt before. Oh yeah, for me, this is really cool.

Jane also discussed the comradery and support of her team as well as teammates. She expressed that her transition to school and through the program “was fairly easy for me. I was

living with one of the seniors. So, I was like roommates with her so she showed me everything.” Living with one of her teammates aided her in understanding team culture and campus life.

John was in a comparable situation to Jane. He remarked,

Most of my friends are on the team. I have a French guy, he started with me in January. I’m always with him, I all other things that I do are with him. He is my suit mate. We are still living on campus. Then I have a friend in the girls tennis team. She helped me a lot. She’s like my mom here because she takes me to Walmart when I need. Sometimes we meet in in her house, and she cooks and everything. And I have, the tennis, the boys on the team, I have a good relationship with everyone.

Similarly, Claire was thankful for her teammates. She contended that,

I just like the whole experience of playing in a team. You just feel like accountable and that you you’re not alone and you have like an actual purpose in whatever you do. It’s like not only affecting you, but it’s affecting the other people around you.

For Claire, the team atmosphere was helpful as she felt supported. Clair also indicated that she admired her teammates and did not want to let them down.

*Being Homesick.* Several participants described missing their friends and family abroad. Initially, Eddy was homesick but utilized technology to help him stay connected. He said,

To make it better, I was calling my parents on Whatsapp on video. It’s better than having them only on the phone, just to hear their voice. But yeah, now, now I feel like I call them less than before, and I know more people. And I know how it works. For sure now, it helped me a lot.

Eddy went on to discuss the advice his parents provided,

Enjoy my life here, it’s a good life, and it’s only for four years so I have to enjoy it. I think one of the things that I think about when I’m homesick is really to think that there is a big chance to be here and that I have to take it.

Like Eddy, George also relied to technology to stay connected, reaching out to his “parents a lot via facetime.”

Michael also experienced feelings of homesickness while at his current university. To cope, he would call family and friends back home in order to “speak [name of home language].” That connection was important to him and speaking in his native language provided Michael with a sense of comfort.

John discussed missing his family and girlfriend back in his home country. He stated,

I miss home. I was far from my family, but then we make facetimes or call them. Or with my girlfriend, because I have a girlfriend there, and it’s hard a long relationship but we talk every day. That helps me and makes the things easier.

When Sally started college, she was homesick. However, speaking with one of her family members helped her feel better. She recalled,

I did feel homesick for two weeks and then I was completely fine. That is because I started talking to my aunt, she's really good at handling me. She is a good mentor, she knows how to handle me, so she told me to stop crying, give yourself some pep-talks, talk to people, approach people, give people positive vibes...I was fine and then it was on my birthday when I got homesick again. That was for like only a day because my family made a wonderful 10 minutes video of me. So only birthdays, festivals, just on those days. Not really every day.

Throughout the data, the several participants expressed feelings of homesickness. However, the participants described being able to overcome the feeling of being homesick by staying connected with family and friends in their home country.

### *Impact of COVID*

The final theme dealt with the challenges athletes felt due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. While all athletes stated they were impacted by the pandemic, the statements athletes made indicated that they felt the pandemic brought both positive as well as negative components to their ability to transition and adapt to life in the US.

COVID made Kyle reassess whether or not he wanted to come to the US. He ultimately migrated to the US, but he decided to go to a "different college than a year before."

For George, his hardship with the pandemic "was really harsh for a few months, because we were in the red line [more than 100 COVID cases per 100,000 people]. So, there were a lot of restrictions we couldn't play tennis, so we had to play tennis like in a secret place."

Andrew had a hard time staying on task, academically, during the pandemic. When "everything was online," Andrew returned to his home country. Andrew went on to talk about the pandemic,

Was pretty hard. I was working in the supermarket, and then I had to go home and do classes online. So, it was really like different and complicated, especially with like nine hour difference with California. So no Zoom classes for me, because I literally couldn't like, I had no time for that, and the schedule would have been like really so much complicated.

Claire viewed the break from being on campus due to COVID as a positive. She asserted,

I loved it to be honest because it was a big struggle being a college athlete then going to like five different classes every week. I feel bad for the normal people like the freshmen just because they didn't get to experience it, like how college is. But I liked it. I like the fact that we have more time for ourselves, I had like the fact that I can actually not be stressing about tests all the time or like assignments. It's just like you manage your time better.

Like Claire, Jane does not know a collegiate experience in a pre-pandemic environment. Jane explained,

By the time I got here, everything mostly passed. The fall we did a lot less and it was more chill, I want to say. Coach was pretty chill.

Emily mentioned that COVID only had a minor impact on her athletic schedule. According to Emily, “my season never got cancelled because of COVID. Last season we had less matches which I do appreciate honesty.” Overall, some of the participants spoke of COVID and the impact the pandemic played in their ability to fully immerse themselves in their campus culture.

## Discussion

Previous studies have investigated the migration patterns and motivations that entice international students to participate in intercollegiate sport in the US (e.g., Butler et al., 2019; Love & Kim, 2011; Perrish et al. 2020; Ridpath et al., 2019). As demonstrated in Parrish et al. (2020) data, the majority of Division I international tennis athletes migrated from Spain. The participants in the present study represented nine different countries, and none of the participants were from Spain. Perhaps the migration patterns of tennis athletes at the Division II level are different than those competing at the Division I level.

International students represent a vast amount of collegiate tennis athletes at Division II institutions (NCAA, 2021b). Upon international students leaving their hometown, the initial transition begins (Ryba et al., 2015). However, the transition often proves difficult for international college athletes (e.g., Gallagher, 2013; Pierce et al., 2011; Turick et al., 2020). Utilizing Schlossberg’s (1981) model, the purpose of this study was to explore Division II international tennis college athletes’ perceptions of transitioning to an institution of higher learning in the US. From the data, four main themes emerged: reason for coming to the US to play sports, transition to the US, transition through college, and impact of COVID.

### *Reason for Coming to Play Sports*

Among the global population, educational opportunities often serve as an enticement to migrate (Sage, 2010). International college athletes come to the US for various reasons; however, studies (e.g., Butler et al., 2019; Love & Kim, 2011; Ridpath et al., 2019) have demonstrated that the prestige of attending American universities and the opportunity to earn a degree as determining factor(s). International college athletes also tend to place less emphasis on their sport when compared to their domestic counterparts (Pierce et al., 2011). Most of the participants in the present study discussed ‘Gaining an Education’ as a major factor in their decision. The finding in the present study appear to be in line with previous work (e.g., Butler et al., 2019; Love & Kim, 2011; Pierce et al., 2011; Ridpath et al., 2019). It should be noted that previous work has failed to look at college athletes participating within the Division II classification (Williams et al., 2020). Perhaps the results of the present study add to the literature in that Division II tennis players motivations for migrating to the US for educational offerings is similar to their Division I (e.g., Love & Kim, 2011; Ridpath et al., 2019) and Junior College (Butler et al., 2019) peers.

In addition to migrating to the US for educational opportunities, the participants shared their excitement (and curiosity) for the American sports model of athletics intertwined within educational settings. Specifically, the participants demonstrated an affinity for tennis and relished in the opportunity to continue to participate in the sport of tennis in the US. Ridpath et al. (2019) noted that the American model is distinctive. The international college athletes in

Ridpath et al. (2019) study enjoyed the American model due to the opportunities (both athletic and academic) it provided. All of the participants in the present study mentioned that their home country did not offer collegiate tennis. Studies (Love & Kim, 2011; Ridpath et al., 2019) revealed that international college athletes value the educational opportunities, competition, training, and facilities within the American model. Based on the responses of the participants as well as previous work, it would appear that the American model for sport is attractive to international college athletes.

### *Transition*

Pierce et al. (2011) suggested that international college athletes usually learn about athletic related opportunities in the US through family, friends, and/or coaches. In the present study, many of the participants indicated that they had the support of their friends and family in their native countries. Andrew shared that his family was very supportive of the opportunity he had to participate in tennis. Sally explained that her father was not only provided emotional support but supported her financially as well. Most of the participants felt that the encouragement and support of friends as well as family members assisted this population in the initial transition process. Such findings are similar to those reported by Manwell et al. (2021) study of international Hispanic college athletes in which the participants described the support they received from their family as vital to their experience.

Throughout their initial transition, international college athletes often experience difficulties adapting to culture, language barriers, and feelings of being homesick (Gallagher, 2013; Turick et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2011). Although the participants in the present study shared similar experiences to international college athletics in previous works, along with language difficulties and culture shock, the participants in the present study discussed weather as a challenge. Institutional support is crucial to assist international college athletes in acclimating to life in the US (Manwell et al., 2021; Popp et al., 2010).

According to Popp et al. (2010) international college athletes' experiences often depend on the relationships they build with their coaches and teammates. This study supported the importance of relationships; finding athlete relationships with their coaches, teammates, and faculty helped shape a more positive transition. Liam said that his coach supported him in "every possible way." Elizabeth felt her coach exhibits active listening, trust, and made the athletes feel valued. The participants also spoke to the importance of their teammates and playing for their teammates. This appears to be a characteristic of international college athletes (Stokowski et al., 2013). The participants felt the administration, faculty, and coaches provided a caring, balanced atmosphere.

Division II focuses on athletes' experiences with the mantra "life is a balance," centering on developing students as well-rounded people beyond sports participation (NCAA, 2021). Although the participants described time management as different in the US then in their home countries, there did not appear to be any concerning comments in regard to the college athlete dual role. Division II is unique; however, it was intriguing that none of the participants alluded to being a division II athlete.

Humphrey (2000) found that college athletes experienced stress related to falling behind academically. In this study, the participants had two varying academic experiences. It was apparent that faculty support assisted this population in navigating academic demands with athletic expectations. These sentiments from faculty do not align with previous work. For example, Baucom and Lantz (2001) as well as Feezell (2013) studies on faculty at Division II institutions found that faculty generally had negative perceptions toward college athletes.



Overall, it appeared that the participants dealt with many initial barriers (e.g., language, culture, weather). The participants used technology to communicate with family and friends in their home countries. The encouragement participants received from their friends and family who supported their decision to come to the US provided international students with comfort while attending college in the US. Upon arriving on campus, the participants described the positive interaction with faculty, coaches, and their teammates. It appeared that institutional support assisted the participants with their initial transition.

### *Impact of COVID*

Although the interview protocol (see Appendix A) did not specifically ask about COVID, every participant discussed the pandemic. The participants explained that COVID positively and negatively impacted their experience(s). One of the participants mentioned it changed the outcome of his recruitment process. Parrish et al. (2020) article ended with a commentary related to COVID policies and the migration of Division I tennis college athletes. The commentary explained that due to COVID, international college athletes could experience visa issues or their sport could be cut all together due to budget constraints (Perrish et al., 2020; Solomon et al., 2022). Although the participants experienced a limited playing season, having to return to their home countries, and academic difficulties due to the pandemic, they did not report visa issues and their sport was not cut.

### *Transition Model*

Schlossberg's (1981) model indicates three factors that influence one's ability to adapt to transition (characteristics of the individual, characters of the environment, characteristics of the transition). Perceptions of the transition involve role change (gain, loss), affect (positive, negative), timing (on-time, off-time), onset, duration, and stress (Schlossberg, 1981). The participants viewed the role change as a gain, based on their decision to come to the US for athletic and academic opportunities. The transition appeared to be positive in regard to support, but the participants did report certain variables (culture, weather, language barriers) that were negative. The transition was a normative (or planned); however, the impact of COVID could be viewed as non-normative. The initial transition began as soon as the individuals left their home country. The participants experienced stress (e.g., academics).

The characteristics of the environment, which is contingent upon internal support systems, also dictate how an individual will respond to transition (Schlossberg, 1981). The participants described their relationship(s) with family and friends in their home countries, such individuals provided the participants with encouragement and support. Once on-campus, positive interaction with faculty, coaches, and teammates assisted the participants in adapting to their new environment.

Lastly, the characteristics of the individual (e.g., sex, age, race, values, socioeconomic status; see Table 1) influences the ability to adapt to transition. It is important to note that the participants have not previously experienced an initial transition and did not have any previous experience with a similar transition. The participants represented both men and women from nine different countries. Additionally, every transition is unique to the individual. Although experiences may be similar, they should not be compared.

Schlossberg's (1981) model can assist international student-athletes and those working with this population to better understand initial transition. However, rarely is this model applied in a practical setting (Navarro et al., 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019). The participants did not speak

of specific programming or resources provided by their institution. Although Division II institutions often lack adequate resources (Beattie & Turney, 2020; Nite, 2012), this special population of college athletes need effective programming to ensure a positive experience (e.g., Boucher, 2017; Newell, 2015; Manwell et al., 2021; Pierce et al., 2011).

## Conclusion

### *Limitations*

As with any inquiry, limitations were observed throughout the course of this study. Due to the sampling technique and an effort to reach saturation, the participants were men and women of different college age representing nine different countries, enrolled in two different Division II smaller institutions located in the Southeastern US. Schlossberg's (1981) model indicates that the pre and post transitional environment as well as the characteristics of the individual influence the ability to adapt to transition. As such, the sample in the present study should be viewed as a limitation. Cultural barriers should also be viewed as a potential limitation. English was not the first language for the majority of the participants and although efforts were made to ensure the interview protocol was acceptable, the participants may have had a difficult time deciphering questions. Additionally, in many cultures it is considered impolite to speak negatively about someone. Thus, the true experiences of the participants may have been hindered. Although COVID-19 normalized virtual communication, conducting interviews on Zoom should be viewed as a limitation due to the inability to establish rapport or analyze nonverbal cues. Lastly, although the researchers tried to minimize potential bias, two of the researchers are former Division II tennis athletes. Moreover, the primary researcher was a Division II international tennis college athlete, which might have influenced this study.

### *Future Research*

The initial transition and overall adjustment of international college athletes is a topic that warrants further exploration. Future research on this population should span across the intercollegiate sport space (Division I, II, III, NAIA, JUCO). Researchers should consider examining international college athletes' transition to a life beyond sport. Based on the findings of the present study, it would be interesting to see if this population remained in the US or returned to their home countries. Future inquiry should also examine if the majors of international college athletes are in line with their career goals. To this end, the career majority as well as career construction of this population is warranted. Given amount of international college athletes migrating to the US, perhaps future research should be qualitative in nature which would allow for generalizability. Additional analysis would allow for comparison between groups (e.g., gender, sport affiliation, country of origin). The overall environment for international college athletes should also be investigated. This consists of understanding what resources and programming are in place to assist this population adjust to college and beyond. Additionally, the socialization among this population with faculty, coaches, administrators, students, and domestic athletes would provide a valuable insight into the experiences of this population.

### Implications

This study seeks to provide insight into the unique initial transition experiences of international tennis college athletes competing at the Division II level. The 12 international athletes that participated in this study had different reasons for coming to the US to play tennis, various challenges when arriving in the US, and varying experiences at their respective Division II institutions. While each athlete was ultimately pleased in their decision to participate in college tennis in the US, the participants offered advice for other international students considering coming to the US to participate in tennis. Specific suggestions included being proficient in English, connecting with the coach and team, asking for assistance when needed, and visiting the US prior to committing in an effort to “know what you are expecting.” Further, participants emphasized the need for international students to come to the US with an open mind, as “they [Americans] roll different.” Lastly, the participants encouraged international college athletes to relish in the experience and “enjoy your time.”

Ultimately, through the participants’ lived experiences, the data may provide those who interact with this sub-population of college athletes (e.g., administrators, coaches, parents) with an increased understanding of their transition process. Effective programming specifically catering to the Division II tennis population is needed to enhance the athletic experience (Navarro et al., 2020). The present study can assist athlete development specialists in designing programming to ensure international college athletes receive the support necessary to thrive in a new environment.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

### Characteristics of the individual:

- How old are you?
- What year are you in school?
- What is your major, and why did you pick your major?
- What is your gender?
- How would you describe your health?
- What is your race/ethnicity?
- Where are you from?
- Can you describe your upbringing and family structure? (trying to get to socioeconomic status)
- What do you value? (friends, family, team, sport, school)
- What sport do you play?
- When and why did you start playing your sport?
- What attracted you to an American college?
- Why did you come to the US to play sports?
- How is playing sports in the US different than in your home country?

### Perceptions of the transition:

- Can you describe what it was like for you when you arrived in the US?
- Can you describe any struggles that you encountered when you arrived at your University?
- What did you hope to gain by coming to the US?
- Can you describe your academic experience?
- How would you describe the effect coming to America had on you?
- What do you like about participating in your sport?
- Would you say your experience coming to America was positive or Negative? Why?
- Do you feel stressed? Why?
- Have you ever been injured playing your sport? What was that experience like?

### Characteristics of the environment

- In what ways did your family support your decision to come to the US?
- How does your family support you while you're in the US?
- In what ways did your friends in your home country support your decision to come to the US?
- How do your friends support you while you're in the US?
- Can you describe your relationship with your friends in the US?
- In what ways do you feel supported by the athletics department?
- In what ways do you feel supported by your coach?
- In what ways do you feel supported by your professors and the staff on campus?
- Do you feel safe on campus? Why?
- Are you glad you came to the US? Why?
- How has COVID 19 impacted your experience in the US?
- What can the University (including the athletic department) do to support you?
- What advice do you have for international students coming to play sports in the US?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience as an international student-athlete?