



Transitioning Out of Sport for Collegiate Female Athletes: Individual and Organizational Implications

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Despite the growing literature on athlete identity and transition, less work has focused on how this intersects with body image and the implications this creates for sport managers. The purpose of this study is to understand the changes and challenges that retired female athletes endure as it pertains to body image and the supports they suggest are useful for a healthy transition away from sport. Twenty former female college athletes participated in semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed taking a break, navigating identity crisis, and relearning and rebuilding were salient challenges. In addition, participants felt a lack of organizational support present in their own transition and provided recommendations that can help address this. By understanding the lived experiences and recommendations put forth, sport managers, particularly those within intercollegiate athletic departments can be better equipped to serve, support and assist current and future college athletes in their transition away from sport at both the individual and organizational levels.

Keywords: college sports, athlete perceptions, female athletes, body image

The transition out of sport for elite athletes remains a prevalent area of inquiry with regard to both the important elements within the transition process, and the factors that influence associated outcomes (Knights et al., 2016; Park et al., 2013; Wylleman et al., 2004). Within sport, much of this robust conversation has been situated in the sport psychology literature with an emphasis on the individual experience of the transition process and particularly the negative outcomes associated with transition (Knights et al., 2016). There is a strong need for research in this area to grow in at least two important ways. First, all aspects of the transition literature need to better address how athletes can flourish in and after their transition period (e.g., Knights et al., 2016; Park et al., 2013; Wylleman et al., 2004). Second, focus needs to shift toward the organizational and managerial roles and obligations in the athlete transition process (Kelly & Dixon, 2012; Muratore & Earl, 2015). Increasing evidence suggests that healthy transitions into retirement are gradual and require support (Muratore & Earl, 2015; Stokowski et al., 2019). Such support and gradual transition processing eases stress, increases organizational reputation, and helps improve long-term relationships between individuals and the organizations they were members of (Knights et al., 2016; Muratore & Earl, 2015; Park et al., 2013; Schlossberg, 1981). Just as sport organizations provide ample support for transitioning into their organization, they would benefit from providing support for healthy transitioning through and out of their organization (Green, 2008; Kelly & Dixon, 2012). Clearly, athletes, coaches, sport managers, and scholars should have a vested interest in helping athletes function well mentally, socially, and physically not only during active participation, but also in the years following their elite participation careers.

One area of athlete transition that has received scholarly attention of late is that of body image. Body image is considered one's personal interpretation of an individual's body. This consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions that may be influenced by changes in situations, context, prevailing cultural norms, or new propagated body ideals in the media (de Bruin et al., 2011; Tiggemann, 2004). Body image is a broad and dynamic concept, with concerns that derive from negative feelings towards the perceived appearance (Varnes et al., 2013). Specifically, "body dissatisfaction occurs when there is a mismatch between an individual's image of his or her own body, particular body shape and weight, and the body perceived as ideal" (Kong & Harris, 2015, p. 142). Research focused on body image in the realm of college sport has increased over the last ten years (see Hardie et al., 2022; de Oliveira et al., 2017; Lauer et al., 2018; Riebock & Bae, 2013), however, this has mainly been in regards to preventative measures and experiences of adolescent and college aged female athletes rather than retired ones.

In a recent review, Buckley et al. (2019) examined studies of transitioning and retired female athletes, the various influences on their body image perceptions during and after their transitory period, and the outcomes of those influences on various aspects of their lives. This retirement transition is an important area of focus for several reasons. First, it is evident that elite athletes struggle with their body image during retirement. Second, while body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors may not manifest until after retirement, they likely began during the participants athletic career (Kong & Harris, 2015). However, Buckley et al. (2019) argued, "The current system of athletic support largely neglects what happens to athletes after they cease to compete, often ignoring the prolonged influence of sport on their lives." (p. 2). Focused inquiry into the body image perceptions of former female athletes and how that perception evolves throughout retirement, will be key to informing our understanding of the transition process, and to designing organizational supports that would be helpful to

athletes both during and after their athletic careers. Thus, the purpose of this research is to understand the changes and challenges that retired female athletes face as it pertains to body image, and the individual and organizational supports they suggest are useful for healthy transitions out of sport.

Literature Review

Adapting to Transitions

Schlossberg's (1981) defines a transition as "an event or nonevent [that] results in a change in assumption about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). How an individual adapts and reorganizes through a transition is influenced by a variety of aspects. First, an individual's perception of the transition can affect their adaptation. For example, do they view it as positive or negative, gradual or sudden, permanent or temporary, etc. Secondly, the characteristics of their environment before and after a transition may influence their ability to adapt. Aspects of the individual's environment that are most relevant may include their internal support systems (e.g., family, friends), institutional supports, and their physical setting. Finally, characteristics of the individual themselves can be largely influential to their adaptive response in a transition period. Characteristics such as psychosocial competence, age and life stage, socioeconomic status, value orientation, and many more can impact one's perceptions and actions in a particular transaction.

Goodman et al. (2006), later built on the work of Schlossberg (1981) and others, arguing that there were major sets of factors that influence a person's ability to deal with a transition: self, situation, social support, and strategies. An individual's experience of and resources (or lack thereof) in these four areas help determine how well the individual copes with the transition. The "self" factors are demographic, physical, and psychological characteristics. The "situation" factors include issues such as timing, volition, type and extent of change, and duration of the transition. The "social support" factors include relationships, community, family, proximal and distal social networks, and institutions. The "strategies" components (sometimes termed coping strategies) include factors that can change the situation itself, impact the meaning of the problem for the individual, and help manage and alleviate stress.

Ultimately, scholars have concluded that the concept of transition is complicated, personal, and dependent on a variety of situationally-specific factors (Goodman et al., 2006; Grove et al., 1997; Knights et al., 2016; Schlossberg, 1981). It is not always easy to identify starting and ending points, there are multiple dimensions to each transition (mental, physical, psychological, emotional), and the elements of the transition process (events and non-events) are inconsistent across individuals.

Athlete Transitions

Regarding athletes specifically, Knights et al. (2016) argued that there are two basic types of transitions that athletes will experience throughout their athletic career, including: (a) predictable and anticipated or "normative" transitions, or (b) non-normative transitions. A normative transition is one where the athlete typically exits one life stage and enters another stage (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). An example of a normative transition is moving from high school to college athletics (Kelly & Dixon, 2012; Schlossberg, 1981). Conversely, non-normative transitions are characterized by unpredictability, and can also be involuntary (Schlossberg, 1981). Non-normative transitions can also include what Schlossberg terms

nonevents, which are events that an athlete expected, but did not occur. Commonly in sport, this could include a season-ending injury (Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018), being cut from a team, or even a global pandemic.

While the eventual transition out of college athletics is predictable and seemingly normative for some, there are also countless cases of non-normative transitions. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a clear example of a non-normative transition that impacted thousands of collegiate athletes. As a result, over the years, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has increased their efforts to provide preventative educational resources to assist athletes in their transition away from college sport. Smith and Hardin (2018) shed light on two ways the NCAA has done so: 1) The NCAA Innovation and Research Grant Fund, which provides funding for research related to mental health and athlete transition, and 2) The NCAA's partnership with the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A) to create programming in the student-athlete development space.

Nevertheless, when it comes to body image, life transitions introduce a complex and not well-understood process for athletes – and nuance that has remained generally unaccounted for in relevant resources. Amidst the other transitional elements (mental, psychological, structural), they often also experience changes in their training (e.g., beginning to exercise independently; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007), regulating nutrition, and weight fluctuations (Griffiths et al., 2016) that influence their body image perceptions. Understanding each of these factors relative to athlete transitions, with a particular focus on bodily transitions and body image perceptions is warranted and will help inform the athlete transition literature. In particular, we need in-depth responses grounded in the lived experiences of athletes to unpack the nuances of this complex phenomenon and action steps that can be implemented to address this.

Athletic Identity

Athletic identity can be defined as “the degree to which an individual identifies with their athletic role” (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 273). Previous research suggests that athletes dedicate inordinate amounts of time to their sport and often place their self-worth and importance in their athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019). Furthermore, the extent to which an individual identifies with their athletic role impacts their transition (Schlossberg, 1981) and adapting to life after sports (Stokowski et al., 2019). Athletes with a strong and more exclusive athlete identity struggle the most with their transition (Grove et al., 1997). Several studies have captured the physical and emotional challenges this presents college athletes in their transition out of sport specifically (Lally, 2007; Wylleman et al., 2004). This can stem from a multitude of factors such as social support that remain in athletics (Grove et al., 1997), neglecting other identities (Kidd et al., 2018), divisional differences within the NCAA (Smith & Hardin, 2020) and more. On the contrary, the transition for athletes with broader or weaker athletic identities can be easier (Stokowski et al., 2019) due in part to the support systems they maintain outside of sport (Grove et al., 1997; Stoltenburg et al., 2011). Thus, in a recent study Matz et al. (2022) contend that, “athletes who have strong athletic identities may have higher aptitudes to experiencing difficulties before, during, and after their transition out of sport.” (p. 7).

Body Image

To date, there has been extensive research conducted on the body image of adolescent and collegiate female athletes (de Oliveira et al., 2017; Lauer et al., 2018; Riebock & Bae, 2013;

Varnes et al., 2013). However, a significant gap remains in our understanding of female athlete experiences as they transition in and through retirement phases. Buckley and colleagues (2019) conducted a systematic review of sixteen studies exploring compensatory behaviors and body change amongst retired athletes. Their review revealed one's continuing athletic identity is a key driver of poor relationship with food and reduced chance of body acceptance in retired athletes. In turn, identity is complex specifically for retired athletes and body acceptance was particularly difficult for athletes who experienced grief or loss of their athletic body (Buckley et al., 2019). Often times that perception of grief and/or loss comes as a result of setting unrealistic expectations for one's identity or body in the transition process (Greenleaf, 2002; Papatomas et al., 2018). While we understand how athletic identity can inform athlete retirement, less is known about the specific lifestyle changes and challenges former female athletes encounter during and after their transition away from collegiate athletics (Hardie et al., 2022). In addition, fewer studies have addressed how athletes assimilate back into exercise, adjust their eating patterns, and how we can support these athletes moving forward (Buckley et al., 2019). In this study, we aim to fill this gap in the literature by seeking to answer two research questions: 1) What are the life-style changes, and challenges former female athletes encounter during and after they transition away from collegiate athletics?, and 2) What organizational resources, information, or access to support would be beneficial to assist current college female athletes in their future transition from collegiate athletics?

Method

Given that the purpose of this study is to better understand the lived experiences, changes, and challenges of post-career female athletes, researchers took an interpretive phenomenological approach (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Consistent with the purpose of interpretive phenomenological research, questions were designed to better understand how "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" and "develop subjective meanings of their experiences" (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). The commonly shared experience of these participants being their retirement from collegiate athletics, and the evolution of the influences to, and results of their body image evolution after competitive sport. Interview questions not only focused on what participants experienced but how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2018).

Positionality Statement

The research team was composed of three former collegiate, female athletes, who have experienced personal transitions away from their respective sports. The topic of body image and mental health in the post-career phase was something the researchers have all been exposed to, and these informal conversations became the starting point for participant recruitment. Multiple research steps were taken to ensure that researchers' biases were minimized throughout the process (discussed below). That said, from the interviews it became clear that being an in-group member who could relate to the topic was something that allowed participants to further open up about their experience and proved to be advantageous for the process.

Participants

The participants for this study consisted of 20 post-career female athletes. Purposeful criterion sampling was used in this study, starting with the researchers' network and snowball

sampling as needed (Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002). Heterogeneity of the sample was a focus, although limitations were faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and participant response rates. Participants had to meet specific predetermined criteria to be eligible for the study, including the following: (a) having once played on a collegiate women's team, (b) retiring from NCAA competition between 2010 and 2020, and (c) not continuing with competitive athletics after college. The timeline 10 years (at the time of data collection) was specified in order to explore the experience for women at different times of the post-career phase, without extending so long that divergence in factors such as aging, family status, and generational would overshadow or distort the understanding of more recent experiences in the post-career phase.

The participant background information is displayed in Table 1, showing information most relevant to the study. Sport, age, and race were all determined in the first round of demographic data collection. Self-reported maladaptive behaviors that occurred during and after the initial transition period, as well as experiencing pregnancy/childbirth were reported during the interview process. About a third of participants reported experiencing mild to severe maladaptive exercise and/or eating behaviors during their transitory process.

Table 1
Participant Background Information

Pseudonym	Sport	Age	Race	Self-Reported Maladaptive Behavior(s)	Experienced Pregnancy/Childbirth
Christina	Tennis	33	White	No	No
Vanessa	Soccer	24	White	Yes	No
Peyton	Rowing	23	White	No	No
Lauren	Rowing	23	White	No	No
Nadia	Soccer	31	White	Yes	No
E	Tennis	33	White	No	No
Harper	Softball	29	White	No	No
Emerald	Rowing	24	White	No	No
G	Tennis	26	Latina	No	No
Rebecca	Soccer	28	White	Yes	No
Maggie	Volleyball	31	White	No	No
Megan	Soccer	31	White	Yes	Yes
Charlotte	Softball	32	White	Yes	No
Aggie	Tennis	26	White	No	No
Jasmine	Softball	29	Black	No	Yes
Grace	Track & Field	24	White	Yes	No
Jordan	Softball	29	Black/White	No	Yes
Katie	Swimming	30	White	No	Yes
Emily	Track & Field	25	White	No	No
Kristine	Soccer	29	White	Yes	No

Instrument and Procedure

This study consisted of two rounds of data collection. First, a brief background questionnaire was administered via Qualtrics to build rapport and collect basic demographic, educational, and athletic information. In the demographic data collection, the research team took note of sport, race, age, player achievements, current living location, and marital and familial status. Participants were given the opportunity to select a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. This pseudonym was coded and used to label the participant's respective files for the remaining rounds of data collection as well as when referencing the individual and their associated narrative in this manuscript. Participants were recruited via email, that included an informational document, IRB approval, and the hyperlinked Qualtrics survey. Upon completion of the survey, interviews were scheduled.

In the second round of data collection, participants engaged in a semi-structured interview. In its simplest form, the qualitative interview is understood to be an active, collaborative process between two or more people (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Two interviewers split the participant list, and continued to split the list evenly as the list grew, discussing emergent themes as they arose. The interviewers worked as a subjective instrument that can sort out salient elements and inquire more about them as elements emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Early on, to ensure researcher bias was minimized, each interviewer listened to two audio recordings of the others' interviews and provided feedback - only very minor interview adjustments were noted. In this approach, researchers utilized an incomplete script (e.g., interview guide) with open-ended questions used to guide the course of the interview (Myers & Newman, 2007; Patton, 2002).

Interviews lasted between 1-2 hours, and were conducted via video call. Because "greater fidelity can be obtained using audio or video recording" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 241), audio recordings were taken from the video calls in addition to field notes. Audio recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai. Accuracy was ensured by audio play-back while researchers made adjustments to any technical errors. The transcribed document was then cross-referenced with the investigators field notes, and comments in the margins. These two rounds of data collection will help to ensure credibility as triangulation of data sources (Lather, 1986).

The interview guide focused on three specific aspects of the phenomena. First, questions focused on participants' sustained athlete identity and their experience transitioning away from their sport. The second section of prompts asked questions about the points of comparison women focus on when evaluating their own bodies, as well as which factors positively and negatively influence their body image. Finally, participants were asked about what resources and/or council they received regarding their mental and physical health when transitioning out of their sport, what resources they believe would have been beneficial, and what advice they would give to future transitioning athletes on the subject.

Analysis

Following protocol outlined by Hesse-Biber (2017), the researchers used thematic analysis, consistent with the inductive approach, to allow for natural segmentation of data units to emerge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Consistent with approaches specifically regarding phenomenology (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994), the authors first discussed their personal experiences with the phenomena, then began to thoroughly read through transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data. They then began to identify and develop a list of significant statements related to the phenomena. Next, the statements were clustered and grouped them into themes,

removing repetitive statements. Following this, the authors analyzed *what* and *how* participants experienced in relation to the phenomena, and used emergent themes to create a composite description of the phenomena that conveyed an exhaustive description of the phenomena.

Preliminary coding was done iteratively with routine meetings regarding emergent themes. Once saturation was reached, each researcher coded the other researcher's set of interview transcripts, and together we began to discuss thematic findings until reaching intercoder agreement (Creswell, 2018). The final step of analysis consisted of looking for any relationships between themes and participants of the same sport, sport-type, age, NCAA division, race, marital and family status, player accolades, and/or current living location.

Findings and Discussion

In response to research question one, participants noted a plethora of lifestyle changes and challenges that they endured during and after their transition away from collegiate athletics. For most, navigating this new reality was a long and continuous journey as said challenges manifested in different ways and at different times. The three salient themes that emerged from our analysis were *taking a break*, *navigating identity crisis*, and *relearning and rebuilding*.

Taking a Break

The women in this study highlighted the challenge surrounding their initial transition away from college athletics. Furthermore, they articulated that taking a break from sport and physical activity altogether was one of the biggest changes that occurred during this time. Egan (2019) argues that when considering academic and athletic obligations the time demands for college athletes can be equated to balancing two full-time jobs. Thus, adjusting to life without sport can be a trying task. Harper, a former softball player, captured this well in saying, “You go from four years of nonstop, go-go-go, weights, conditioning, travel...four years of intensified focus, organization and overall energy towards something. And then you transition out of that, and you have choices.”

While many noted that taking a break was part of their journey, the reasons that informed this differed - ranging from more recreational and fun things like travel, trying new sports, or taking time to rest, to heavier reasons such as burnout, trauma, or injury. Burnout includes emotional and physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and devaluing the sport experience (Raedeke & Smith, 2001). Rebecca, a former soccer player spoke to this as she shared, “Once I graduated I completely stopped playing sports. I wanted a complete break, I wanted to detox. I honestly didn't even routinely workout, I was just mentally physically drained and kind of over it.” For Kristine, who also played soccer in college, her burnout induced break contributed to weight gain and prompted unsatisfactory feelings related to body image:

I kind of let go, I was just so tired, my body just needs to be completely in rest mode. I didn't feel like working out, I burned out. I was probably working out once or twice a week, if that, and sort of watching what I ate. I just took a vacation from all of that and I gained weight. And I was not happy. I was like, ‘oh my gosh, I don't like the way I feel.’

Athlete burnout and the negative outcomes associated with this (i.e., extreme exhaustion, performance decrement, negative affective response, and withdrawal) are seen as a serious problem, particularly as it increases in sports (Gustafsson et al., 2018).

For others like Charlotte, sport specific trauma prompted her to hang up her cleats for good. After enduring an unideal college career with physical and psychological repercussions she expressed, “I didn't have the best experience, it just wasn't the right fit for me. I really stopped playing softball after I was done at [school name removed]. I didn't even want to look at a softball.” Moreover, this decision to take a break from softball was not a short-term fix but rather one that lasted nearly a decade. “I get asked to play coed softball here in town and I'm like, ‘I am an absolute last resort. If you can't find another girl, fine.’ But I got to play in a tournament recently and I loved it.” Charlotte shared regarding her return to softball after not playing since 2011. This is noteworthy as it illuminates how the changes and challenges endured in the initial transition away from college athletics has an ongoing impact for some participants.

Finally, injuries (lingering and new) informed former female athletes' decision to take a break from sport and physical activity in their initial transition away from college athletics. Aggie, who played tennis in college, spoke to this sentiment saying:

The biggest challenge for me at first was that I stopped completely. I was really injured actually. And so I was pretty much burnt out completely at the end of my senior year. The last month I was playing, I just don't know what happened. I was just super, super, tired and I did not like it. I always had a positive attitude and gave my best but I wasn't myself anymore. So I just dropped the racket.

For Aggie, burnout coupled with injury during her transition away from sport created a harsh new reality, physically and mentally.

Consistent with previous literature on transition (Buckley et al., 2019; Knights et al., 2016; Park et al., 2013; Wylleman et al., 2004), the emerging theme of taking a break from physical activity and/or sport for participants in this study is important because it can serve as a point of disruption, an opportunity to explore something new, or a time to pivot and adjust to a new normal. In this transition period away from college sport, participants also pointed to challenging endeavors such as experiencing identity crisis, and having to relearn and rebuild who they are outside of the athletic realm. For participants like Aggie, this break also promoted critical thoughts on body image, “Once I stopped sports, that was the first time I started looking at myself from the mirror from a body image standpoint, which was very, very, not a good feeling to me” she shared. It is evident that while these themes are presented in isolation, they intersect and inform each other too. We will continue to interrogate this moving forward.

Navigating Identity Crisis

Being faced with an identity crisis was a salient theme that emerged from the data. Much work has been done to better understand this phenomenon (Kidd et al., 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2018, Stokowski et al., 2019), yet, it remains a pressing issue in college sport. According to Stokowski and colleagues (2019), “If an individual's sense of self-worth is consumed in being an athlete, it further inhibits one's ability to adapt to new experiences beyond sport” (p. 406). This was also evident in our findings. Additionally, participants shared how this identity crisis manifests in distinct ways. For instance, feelings of uncertainty, reprioritizing/adjusting to a new lifestyle, and coping with the loss of community were sub-themes that emerged.

Feelings of Uncertainty. First, the feelings of uncertainty sub-theme captured the internal struggle participants faced to figure out their next steps in life and discover who they are beyond their athlete identity. Maggie, a former volleyball player, spoke to the former as she

warned, “You just think you're invincible. You're graduating college and you're gonna do all these things. And you're like, ‘wow, I really don't know what I'm gonna do.’ And that sets in.” For Maggie, these feelings of uncertainty related to not only grappling with who you are but also what you are going to do next. Meanwhile, for Lauren this doubt ran deep and led her to reevaluate her life's purpose:

The part that's mentally been hardest from the transition is just figuring out my identity, rowing and athletics, and being at [school name removed]. That was who I was. And so that's the bigger challenge, just figuring out what I want my life to be defined by now...like what I want my life's purpose to be.

Adjusting to a New Lifestyle. Second, adjusting to a new lifestyle was a sub-theme that emerged as participants transitioned away from hyper-structured student-athlete life. For example, Megan who played soccer stated “I had a really hard time transitioning without the set structure.” Kylie added, “Switching gears from being scheduled and finding things to do with your empty time was hard just because you're so not used to it.” While autonomy and free time could be viewed as a positive thing, this was unfamiliar territory that caused discomfort for many in this study. In adjusting to new lifestyles, participants also noted reevaluating priorities as difficult, yet, necessary tasks. This was most evident for those who went straight from college to a 9AM - 5 PM desk job. For example, Kylie, who is only two years out of college shared:

Now I work a nine to five desk job. And that was really strange for me, because now I'm sitting down in meetings all day, which is not what I used to do. So I think for me, I don't love sitting at a desk and to be honest, it's just not me.

Lauren, a 2020 graduate and former rower, expressed a similar sentiment as she said:

I work nine hours a day now just looking at my computer. So that's been a big adjustment to going from practicing for about three hours a day to maybe working out for 45 minutes and trying to fit it in after work and before dinner...it's a different type of stress.

While most participants struggled to adapt to these initial lifestyle changes, others were able to eventually become more accepting of change overtime. For example, Maggie, a 2012 graduate, highlighted her journey to understanding and accepting her shifting priorities and lifestyle changes, stating “My priorities are different now. I've established that my priorities are more career based whereas in college, my priority was school and volleyball.”

Loss of Community. Third, under the umbrella of identity crisis was loss of community sub-theme. This is profound because it speaks to the fact that when an athlete's career comes to an end, in addition to losing their athletic identity, they also lose their team and support system. Jasmine, a former softball athlete, highlighted the challenge this presents, socially, “Now, not playing, I have to search for those relationships. I have to kind of have to put myself out there more because I don't have practice to go to or peers or whatever it may be.” Jasmine also mentioned that the loss of community impacted her motivation to partake in fitness and exercise, stating “I don't have that coach behind me, I don't have that teammate behind me, pushing me on a consistent basis...that's the most challenging.” Other participants also struggled finding motivation to exercise once retiring. Lauren talked about missing the enjoyment of the group fitness environment she was familiar with in college:

I think I'm gonna break down and buy a gym membership because I don't think I can work out by myself anymore, which I think is because I used to work out with 70 girls around me, and now it's just me and my bedroom.

In sum, the aforementioned sub-themes speak to the complexity of the identity crisis that participants endured in their transition away from college athletics. Not only was it mentally taxing but in the midst of drastic lifestyle changes that many felt as if they had to navigate alone as loss of community presented additional challenges. Similar to the *Break* theme, identity crisis was not confined to the initial transition but something that some participants continue to grapple with for years. For example, 7 years after her retirement, Rebecca shared:

I still am known as the soccer player, which I'm sure most of my friends are known as too. Were known as the soccer players. Now and still to this day, and so it's kind of an identity crisis trying to figure out who you are. I still don't know who the fuck I am.

This was the biggest challenge participants noted in response to research question one.

Relearning and Rebuilding

The final theme that materialized was the need to relearn and rebuild. The participants felt that because their self-worth and lifestyle largely revolved around their athlete identity, there was a need to re-establish themselves in various facets of their life, such as physical fitness, and nutrition. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting female athletes struggle to regulate nutrition and exercise independently once their athletic careers are over (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Together, this identity transition presented a big change and challenge for women in this study.

In terms of physical fitness participants noted the difficulty of relearning how to incorporate physical activity and exercise into their lives (e.g., establishing a workout routine, finding new types of exercise). For Lauren, this started with understanding new baselines as she asserted, "Now it's just trying to even figure out, like a baseline and what I need to do to get fitter, because I don't have anyone telling me what to do." She elaborated her frustration of never learning how to make her own workouts, and difficulty discovering a new normal fitness level.

Beyond relearning new norms and expectations, simply figuring out an enjoyable workout regime was a new experience, and challenging for Vanessa, a former soccer player, who stated, "I had a harder time figuring out what I enjoyed in the gym, how I enjoyed training. It took me a year to get comfortable in what I was doing and find a routine that worked for me overall."

While this period of rebuilding and relearning in regards to body image and physical activity occurred organically for most, for others this was catalyzed by fear of falling out of shape and losing their college athlete body image. For example, Vanessa responded:

I took retirement extremely hard. So going on the body image aspect of it, I was always so afraid. You see all these college athletes being super thin going into retirement and no longer playing that competitive sport, you start to obviously gain weight if you're not doing what you used to do, or if you don't adjust anything. I had that fear. When I was transitioning out I didn't want to be one of those stigma of if you stop playing sports, your

body changed kind of thing. So I took the other extreme of just working out constantly and trying to still find my identity within something active.

For Vanessa, the fear of “letting herself go” in the transition away from college athletics weighed so heavy that it informed her decision to rebuild her identity around being active. Emerald echoed this claim as she commented:

I'm very conscious of the way I look. I'm very conscious of staying in shape because it's something that's important to me. It's something I focused on and made sure that I didn't revert back to something that I didn't want, because I knew it would make me unhappy.

Seeking to relearn expectations was also evident for Aggie, who highlighted adapting to physical changes in regards to body image:

It's a huge challenge finding the ideal happy weight, not even how I look but how I feel. And finding that balance like it's okay if you don't work out five hours per day, if you're not as fit, and don't look like you're just an athlete.

Aggie's focus on relearning was rooted in finding a new ideal weight and balance in her life.

In addition to physical activity and body image, relearning and rebuilding eating habits also emerged from the data. Similarly, this was informed by many interconnected factors including, but not limited to, change in workout routine and calorie expenditure, absence of insight regarding nutrition, and general lifestyle changes. In Kristine's case, relearning meant redefining what eating is for. “The whole eating thing changed because before you're eating because you're burning so many calories every day. You intake so much to fuel your body. But now you're just eating to be sustainable. It's not a fuel thing.” she shared. For others, while their physical activity levels changed, their eating habits did not, which was tough to understand. Harper illuminated a number of challenges presented in the initial transition away from sport:

I got into some personal training but it was very difficult because my eating habits did not change. I felt I got away those four years with eating whatever I want. And I quickly saw the repercussions of that in my first year out...I remember that year was a very tough year for lifestyle specifically because of those eating habits.

Despite the diverse experiences participants shared regarding their transition away from college athletics - taking a *break*, navigating an *identity crisis*, and *relearning and rebuilding* their norms and identity beyond sports were the most salient changes and challenges that the participants shared. Moreover, the women in this study pointed to the physical and mental toll of navigating this reality in the short-term and long-term as some (both who experienced recent and decade-old transitions) are still trying to figure it out.

Next, we present the themes for research question two. First, we discuss participants' perceptions of the lack of organizational support present in their own lived experiences. Second, we provide recommendations for relevant resources that participants feel would assist current college female athletes in their future transition from collegiate athletics. This includes access to a psychologist or therapy, communication/network of support, educational resources, transition planning sessions, and motivational speakers.

Perceived Lack of Organizational Support

Across the board, participants felt as if there was a general lack of organizational support provided in their transition away from college sport. And the few who had access to or an awareness of resources present said they were largely ineffective. “It was a half assed effort, like maybe there was a pamphlet or something” recalled Nadia who played college soccer. For the vast majority of participants in this study no institutional support was provided in their transition process:

I took my transition out of college athletics into normal life completely alone. The only resources were former teammates that had graduated and went through it themselves. But otherwise, I didn't get help from my head coach. She kind of dropped us and said, ‘adios.’

shared Vanessa. This was also evident in Rebecca’s journey as she asserted, “There wasn't really anything it was just, ‘hey, thanks for playing. Peace out.’”

In addition to the lack of resources and general support within their respective college athletic departments participants also problematized the disposable way in which college athletes who have fully matriculated through the college sport system are often treated upon retirement. For the women in this study, this was apparent in dismissal of care and a lack of proactive intervention to assist in the transition away from sport. For example, Christina, who played tennis recalled her experience seeking out medical attention for an injury incurred her senior year, saying:

The doctor was like, ‘you're a senior, just do you for the rest of semester, you've obviously had this for a while, you're not my problem anymore.’ They don't give you anything after you graduate, you don't really benefit them at that point.

Former track and field athlete, Grace also spoke to the loss of accessibility to physical and mental health resources upon graduation (within the institution and athletic department). “You knew of different team doctors or psychologists and stuff, you could talk to them while you're an athlete but the second you were no longer an athlete, they really didn't care.” she said.

Jordan, a college softball player attributed this phenomenon to the institutionalized practices of the college sport system, and like many participants noted the gender injustice perceived by female athletes in a non-revenue generating sport. When asked about the resources she received in her transition away from college athletics, she replied:

That's cute. You know an athletic department in a college setting, it's a business really, it cares about what you can do for it right now. And when you're no longer valuable to that machine, especially as a female athlete, you know, you're not a revenue generating sport...it's even less of a care of ‘how can I make sure that you're a whole human after.’

G, a former tennis player, also stated that she often heard of the transition conversation happening with basketball and football players, regarding “what are they going to do if they don't go into a pro league?” But she said, “Very little do I think that conversation is had with females because people just stereotype or realize there are less opportunities for us.” She continued suggesting this taken-for-granted notion that “most of the time people just think females have it a little bit more figured out.”

The participants perceive that athletic departments are run like cut-throat businesses and tend to focus on revenue generating sports. In response to this notion, Nadia suggested that organizations and athletic departments should do the following:

Take advantage of an incredible opportunity to support people... like investing in your alumni, investing in those players. Doing something for [Alumni] would have a return for the program too. I don't feel super connected with my program community because they didn't really do anything.

To Nadia's point, there may be future benefits to the program itself, both financially and culturally, in providing more support for women during their transitory phase.

This perceived lack of organizational support is imperative to consider as it informs two issues. One, is that college sport organizations would benefit from capturing opportunities to build goodwill and organizational reputation in the way they treat athletes as whole people. Previous literature suggests that the retirement transition is an important place to communicate to prospective, current and former organizational members how much the organization values its members (Knights et al., 2016; Muratore & Earl, 2015; Park et al., 2013). Thus, even small investments in the healthy transitions of athletes would benefit not only the athletes, but also have a strong pay-off for organizations, especially over time.

Second, the perceived lack of support leads to the issue of helpful resources that colleges can provide. The most salient themes suggested by the participants include access to a psychologist or therapist, communication/network of support, educational resources, transitional planning sessions, and motivational speakers.

Access to a Psychologist or Therapist

There was strong consensus that having access to a psychologist or therapy is a vital resource for assisting current college female athletes in their transition out of college sport. "It would be lovely if more programs had access to that (sports psychologists) and cared about the mental health of their athletes." Jordan expressed. In addition, several participants spoke to the loss they experienced and how therapy could have assisted in making sense of lifestyle changes and challenges occurring personally and professionally. This shined through in Rebecca's story as she explained how therapy can help in talking things out and dealing with loss:

Some people are leaving their friends, some just lost something that they've done for their entire life (sport). And then now they're dealing with that, you have to pay your own bills, you have to yada yada yada, all this stuff. So I think that could be an additional resource that could be beneficial like an online counseling service.

Participants assert that regardless of how this is implemented (e.g., one-on-one or in group settings) simply having access to a psychologist or therapist would be an invaluable resource.

Community/Network of Support

Participants voiced that being plugged into a community/network of support is an important resource to consider. This can occur at the institutional level, such as building an alumni network of former female athletes. "I think having a network of alumni and just hearing their stories and being able to connect with them would have been helpful," Vanessa said. Other

participants envisioned this taking place in a more structured setting such as a panel discussion or a peer mentor system. “If I knew more about my teammates and what they went through we could support each other. And then do it on a larger scale, have a panel where past athletes talk about what they've gone through...how to transition,” Aggie suggested looking back on her experience. Moreover, after grappling with her recent transition away from rowing, Lauren envisioned a structured mentorship program where current and former athletes can connect to exchange experiential knowledge and navigational strategies:

Like a structured Mentor Program or something. To make it like a little more personal than a webinar...somehow creating a connection between people who have graduated and telling them what they've gone through. So at least you have an idea of how the transition is going to be.

Regardless of the design or how programming would be implemented it was clear that having the opportunity to connect and be plugged into a community/network of support is important.

Educational Resources

In the transition away from college sport one of the biggest challenges participants noted was relearning and rebuilding their self-worth and lifestyle as they adapted to life beyond sport. As such, it is not surprising that readable educational resources were frequently noted in response to research question 2. This included but was not limited to guidance on physical activity, diet, and nutrition. Emerald highlighted the oversight and guidance one is often provided as a college athlete:

Coaches always told us this is what we're going to lift today. Here's your max weight. It was never something that we had to do on our own. Then all of a sudden, you get thrown into this situation where you have to do it on your own. And you're like, I don't even know how to calculate it.

Furthermore, she explained that having a resource to help inform next steps can help to mitigate the intimidation factor that comes with navigating this new reality. Rebecca contended that resources related to diet and nutrition can also be of value and something she wished she had in her experience, “Something related to food and diet, how to cook for yourself, what foods you should eat, what foods are good for you. Different types of diets, not like a restricted diet, just your normal eating habit type of diet.” Finally, Kristine articulated how this information in the form of educational resources not only helps with the transition process provides direction in the midst of what is a trying and confusing time for many college athletes:

Transitioning out of that intense environment, you don't really know what to do. I've tried all these different less intense workouts, and I don't see the type of result that I want. I'm trying these different things to figure out where I enjoy being right and feel good being in. It's just a constant struggle all the time. I wish they could have told you some easier types of transition workouts or things to eat...You have a little bit to just go off of and just be like, okay, so I can start here and go from there.

Thus, while this may not be the end all be all educational resources were something participants felt could assist current female athletes in their transition after college sport.

Transition Planning Sessions

Participants noted how helpful it would have been to have an exit interview or targeted counseling session with a coach, therapist, or trusted advisor who would help them talk through what they are going to do next, some of the obstacles they may encounter, ways in which they can overcome those challenges, and potential resources available to them in and outside of the university. Katie, a former collegiate swimmer and four-year NCAA coach, said:

I think it helps to have people asking you questions. Like even this interview really gets me thinking, and a lot of people, at least I, didn't even realize I was going through something when I was going through it. So having an exit interview, where you can sit and reflect on the last four years and some of these topics may help.

As both a collegiate athlete and coach, Katie's comment highlights not only how helpful this resource could be, but also how feasible it is without re-allocating excessive resources. Another participant, Maggie, spoke about her desire to have a more official exit process. Maggie stated:

Universities should implement an exit interview process to just talk about how you feel about different things...It would have been good to have an exit conversation with someone who asks – How are you doing to fill this cup you lost? I really struggled, because I didn't realize how much [volleyball] was a part of my life until it was gone. Then I thought 'oh crap, what am I going to do now?' Maybe we should have been meeting with someone once per year to help guide us.

Motivational Speakers

Motivational speakers were a salient theme that emerged for research question two. Participants shared that the confusion they experienced specifically along the lines of athlete identity and body image was influenced by the lack of dialogue pertaining to this during their college athlete career. One participant, G, felt that having the ability to hear from a motivational speaker could have helped to better prepare her for life after sports:

Having someone to present every single issue and be completely transparent about it. A lot of people struggle with this afterwards. I don't remember ever having a conversation about an eating disorder or anything about body image. It was kind of talked about a little bit by nutrition, but not often enough for how prevalent and critical it is.

From Grace's perspective, having a former athlete (college or professional) come back and speak would be powerful as they are intimately familiar with all that comes with being an athlete and making the transition away from sport. She shared:

I think what would have been interesting would have been someone coming back, like an athlete who had gone through this or even like a professional athlete who had transitioned into normal life. Coming back telling you about their own transition and what they struggled with.

Additionally, Emily, a former track and field athlete argued that this could be expanded to a panel discussion with former athletes and sport professionals (e.g., sport psychologist) to be

more inclusive of diverse voices and perspectives on the transition experience. In sum, regardless of the design, participants assert that having access to a motivational speaker could help current female athletes better prepare them for life after sport.

The findings for research question two revealed that women in this study felt a lack of institutional support was present in their transition away from college sport. While problematic, this also provides an area of opportunity for improvement. MM suggests:

It is a lot of effort to figure out what the right material is but it could have a tremendously big impact and save people from a lot of hurt...if you can provide something and make it accessible, I think it could do a lot of good.

This claim is supported by the literature which suggests “preparing athletes and increasing resources can be beneficial in the transition process (Chow, 2001; Fuller, 2014; Lally, 2007)” (Stokowski et al., 2019, p. 408).

The women in this study offered thoughtful suggestions regarding resources and information that could help to assist current and future athletes in the transition. In reflecting on the implications this has for the well-being of individual athletes and institutions alike, Nadia expressed:

So much could be done. Take advantage of an incredible opportunity to support people...like investing in your alumni, like investing in these players and doing something for them has a return, right? I don't feel super connected with the [school name removed] community because they really didn't do anything.

Finally, participants seemed to agree that it's never too early to provide said resources and start having these conversations. Upon reflecting on her own journey in and through college sport, Aggie expressed, “Wow, this is such an important topic and nobody talked about it before I stopped sports.” In turn, these findings have implications for research and practice. We will unpack this in the next section.

Summary Discussion

This study utilized the theoretical frameworks of adapting to transitions and athlete identity to understand the elements of former female athletes' transition that informs the changes and challenges that retired female athletes endure as it pertains to body image. In addition, findings demonstrate novel perspectives from former female athletes regarding the supports they believe would be most helpful in making a healthy transition away from college sport. The findings from this study provide novel insight into the popularly studied topic of athlete transition, but for a historically underrepresented population—former female college athletes—illuminating both individual and organizational roles in the transition process. Most importantly, these findings highlight specific, tangible requests from former female athletes regarding the practical implications for coaches and administrators in collegiate athletics.

The salient themes for research question one – taking a break, navigating identity crisis, and relearning and rebuilding illustrate the lifestyle changes and challenges that participants encountered during and after their initial transition away from college athletics. Many of the themes align with those reviewed by Buckley et al. (2019), including the phased nature of transition, and the important role that athlete identity plays in the transition process in general (Hardie et al., 2022; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019), as well as specifically

related to body image (Grove et al., 1997). Clearly, the more athletes are able to embrace multiple and new identities beyond their athlete identity, the more likely they are to successfully transition and to experience less dissatisfaction in their body image. The theme *relearning and rebuilding* provides greater insight to previous research that emphasizes how learning from lived experience and adjusting to new (trained or learned) norms can impact the transition experience (Hardie et al., 2022). The themes *taking a break* and *navigating identity crisis* in particular, support the findings put forth in Smith and Hardin (2018) examining the lived experiences of 10 women athletes who had recently completed their college athletics eligibility. Specifically, the struggle to establish new health and fitness routines as well as an identity outside of being an athlete. Nevertheless, our findings extend this work by providing a more nuanced look into retired female athletes' initial – but also iterative and on-going transition through retirement. Most notably, this study is insightful in the emphasis on changes and challenges pertaining specifically to body image that exist and persist over an extended period of time.

In response to research question two about important resources, the themes—lack of organizational support, access to a psychologist or therapy, community/network of support, educational resources, transition planning sessions, and motivational speakers captured suggested supports that can be implemented for current and future college athletes to assist them in their transition process. These findings, again, are relevant for the general athlete transition, but specifically for supporting women as their bodies and body image evolve when they enter into the retirement phase. These findings also provide new insights in the athlete transition literature from a management perspective and help us transition the issue from an individual to an organizational level (e.g., Kelly & Dixon, 2012; Stokowski et al. 2019). Participants expressed that these specific types of support would not only make a critical difference in the way they prepare for (and navigate) their transition, but also how they perceive their institutions, head coaches, and programs' concern for athletes as people. The women made a point that these resources are not only a bare minimum, and seemingly logical resource to provide, but also feasible to implement at relatively low costs to the organizations. Many of these resources could be created and used across teams within the organization, and for those more individual resources like therapy or transition planning meetings with coaches, it is still a small resource allocation in comparison to the athletes' four years of dedication to a program. These timely recommendations align with recent calls put forth by sport management scholars for athletic departments to allocate resources and prioritize holistic development and mental health resources for current, former, and future college athletes (Hardie et al., 2022; Menaker et al., 2023; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019). Additionally, these findings have important implications for research and practice.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, the researchers reached out to a wide variety of former female college athletes. While diversity is reflected in regards to age and sport, having a more robust and heterogeneous sample (i.e., race, sport type, NCAA division) could enhance credibility and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and be inclusive of more diverse voices and experiences. This is important to consider as individual characteristics (e.g., age, race, ethnicity, sex, socioeconomic status) can influence one's experience and how they adapt in certain situations such as transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

Future Directions for Research and Practice

Future research should continue to explore the intersection of athlete transition, athletic identity, and body image as the findings reveal that this presented challenges in the initial transition and for up to a decade beyond for the participants in this study. While focused specifically on former female college athletes, this work could be extended to explore the lived experiences of former male college athletes too as scholars suggest, “males are also privy to body image concerns, although manifested in different ways” (Gaines & Burnett, 2014, p. 364). Another opportunity is to explore what types of interventions and/or resources are currently being provided by institutions to assist college athletes in their transition out of sport (Stokowski et al., 2019), particularly in regards to body image. This is imperative as research indicates that studies focused on college athletes’ career transitions have generally failed to examine what athletic departments are doing to assist and address this issue (Park et al., 2013). Our findings revealed that participants felt a lack of institutional support was present in their transition experiences. Thus, pursuing research in this line of work can help to understand what is currently being done and improve resources and support available for college athletes.

Next, the study illuminates the life-style changes and challenges that participants encounter during and after they transition away from collegiate athletics. Hardie et al.’s (2022) study with former female athletes highlights their perceptions of body image and how they adapt and cope with this in the post retirement phase. The findings revealed that a multi-level cocktail of factors present at the individual, institutional/community, and the socio-cultural level informed these perceptions. In turn, while this work has begun to address the *how* and *what* - for instance, how do former female college athletes feel about their current body image, post transition? And what influences these self-perceptions? Additional inquiry is necessary to provide a more holistic and extensive understanding of the relationship between athlete transition and body image in a developmental sense.

The findings also provide a number of practical implications for sport industry professionals. First, this research illuminates the relationship between body image and athlete transition away from college sport. G said, “I feel it’s a little bit of a taboo conversation to have, I think in part, because administration doesn’t necessarily want that on their plate.” This statement reflects the tension between what athletes perceive they need and want from sport organizations and what the sport organizations perceive as their responsibility toward the athletes. Dixon et al. (2022) suggests, “As the landscape of college athletics continues to evolve, it is imperative for administrators to recognize the importance of listening to voices of athletes” (p. 315). By centering on the lived experiences of former female college athletes, we begin to understand the challenges participants endured and the lack of perceived organizational support they felt once their playing careers came to a close, a lack that likely extended throughout their careers. This focus is important in normalizing these types of conversations between coaches and players, *and* between sport organizations and their managerial staff in putting forth a call to action to provide more support for college athletes in a transition phase.

In a recent study that examined the staffing of mental health professionals in intercollegiate athletic departments, Menaker and colleagues (2023) highlighted how the perceptions and preferences of athletic directors and administrators on staff had a direct influence on hiring different mental health professionals (MHP). Moreover, they contended that:

For mental health resources to be provided for athletes in athletic departments, athletic administrators must be aware of and openly acknowledge the psychosocial risks that

student-athletes commonly experience, as well as the benefits of staffing mental health and performance services” (Menaker et al., 2023, p. 27).

In turn, it could be advantageous to educate athletic directors, administrators, and support staff on the unique challenges former female college athletes endure as it pertains to body image and the supports they suggest are useful for a healthy transition away from sport. The findings put forth provide a step in the right direction. With this increased awareness, athletic directors and other stakeholders in positions of power can begin to understand and may be more willing to cater to the needs of their college athletes. This can also create structural change within athletics, as they have the power to serve as a catalyst for action, change, and creating opportunities for increased support in college athletes’ transition away from sport.

Second, the findings inform the ways in which athletic administrators, coaches, and support staff can offer more guidance and support for current and future college athletes. Informed from their lived experiences, the women in this study shared resources and information that could be beneficial to assist current and future female college athletes in their own transition, that is: Access to a psychologist or therapist, community/network of support, educational resources, transition planning sessions, and motivational speakers. This insight is invaluable as it provides key stakeholders with direction, and a diverse set of tangible resources that can be made available immediately. Furthermore, these recommendations are all fairly realistic and would require the knowledge and expertise of staff who are already likely employed by the university. As MM said, “It could have such a big impact for not a lot of effort.... And save people from so much hurt.” Moreover, athletic department personnel can continue to build upon these recommendations and tailor programming to fit the unique needs of their college athletes so hopefully one day this type of programming is the norm rather than the exception in college athletic departments. This can inform future research evaluating the effectiveness of said resources and opportunities for further development at institutional-level and throughout the NCAA. The findings from this research not only demonstrate a clear and present need for college sport managers to provide these resources, but an explicit call to action from former female athletes who have suffered at the expense of athletic department shortcomings. These women have articulated their experiences and struggles, what could have helped them, and why it would have been beneficial for making their transitions healthier. They have spoken – now it is time for sport managers to listen *and* act.

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