Changes in Fame and Fortune: A Phenomenological Study of Professional Athletes Entering Retirement

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Changes in Fame and Fortune:
A Phenomenological Study of Professional Athletes Entering Retirement

by

M. Nichole Kovall Rens

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS, MINNESOTA

Changes in Fame and Fortune:  
A Phenomenological Study of Professional Athletes Entering Retirement

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

Dissertation Committee

Sarah J. Noonan, EdD, Committee Chair

Thomas Fish, EdD, Committee Member

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March 28, 2017
Final Approval Date
ABSTRACT

This phenomenological qualitative research study investigated the experiences of professional athletes as they ended their athletic careers, transitioned to retirement, and resumed their life as private citizens. The purpose of this study was to expose the hidden side of a professional athletic career, and describe what happens after athletes leave “fame and fortune” and return to a more private life. Eight retired professional athletes participated in this study. Athletes described their dream of playing a professional sport from childhood, and the reality they experienced once they became professional athletes. Athletes quickly learned the business side of professional sports, including their value to the team as a “commodity.” Athletes led a regimented lifestyle to prepare for and participate in professional sports. This lifestyle affected them during their athletic career, and in their initial adjustment to retirement. Athletes struggled to find time to prepare for retirement. Those with a plan fared better than others. The circumstances concerning the end of a professional athletic career influenced the transition to a new life. Injuries ended the career of six of the participants’ careers, one participant was cut from a team and another chose to end his career. Those injured learned the cost of professional athletics well into their retirement. Role exit theory (Ebaugh, 1988) explained how circumstances concerning retirement (voluntary or involuntary) affected the adjustment to retirement. To retire successfully, a professional athlete must create a new identity (Burke & Stets, 2009) as a private citizen.

Keywords: Professional athletes, retirement, role exit, identity
DEDICATION

In memory of my father, Frederick A. Kovall, who taught me the power of asking the question. He will always be my Great Tree.

When Great Trees Fall
Maya Angelou

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.

When great trees fall
in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their sense
eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly.
Our eyes, briefly,
see with a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines,
gnaws on kind words unsaid,
promised walks
never taken.

Great souls die
and our reality, bound to them, takes leave of us.
Our souls,
dependent upon their nurture,
now shrink, wizened.
Our minds, formed
and informed by their radiance, fall away.
We are not so much maddened
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of dark, cold caves.

And when great souls die
after a period peace blooms,
Slowly and always
Irregularly. Spaces fill
with kind of
soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and
be better. For they existed.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A sincere thank you to the faculty and staff at the University of St. Thomas. Throughout this journey they have supported and guided my growth as a leader. Thank you to my dissertation committee members, Dr. Fish and Dr. Crim, for your support, guidance, and encouragement. Thank you to Dr. Noonan, my advisor and committee chair, for your counsel. I appreciate your patience and guidance throughout my studies, research, and writing.

This leadership journey was a winding path. Cohort 24 provided me wisdom, challenge, friendship, and encouragement. To my classmate, colleague, and friend Dr. Aura Wharton-Beck. Without your support I am not sure how this journey may have ended. Thank you for your unwavering faith in me.

Unending gratitude to my parents who taught me the power of education. I learned from you both that education is the great equalizer. Thank you for the lifetime of support you provided me. You made me who I am today. To my father, my great tree, thank you for teaching me to “ask the question.” This is for you Dad. I know you are looking down on me with a smile on your face.

To my brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, aunt and uncle. An unending thank you for helping me become the person I am today. To my in-laws, Sandi and Dennis Rens. You have always been there to take care of children, support my studies, help recruit participants, and offer encouragement; thank you. To Troy and Christi, thank you for your interest, encouragement, and support throughout this journey.

To my husband Todd and children Ethan and Linnea. For so many years you have endured my hours of studying and writing. You gave me the time and the space to
fulfill my dream. Todd, your on-going encouragement, hours of editing, and patience have made this all possible. Thank you for supporting my dream.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My study concerns the experiences of professional athletes as they end their careers and enter retirement. As a professional educator in K-12 public schools, I met many young students, particularly young boys, who set their sights on becoming professional athletes. Each time the students told me about their ambition, I knew their chance of achieving this dream was highly unlikely. The students’ statements concerned me because their chances of becoming professional athletes seem nearly unattainable, and so often becoming professional athletes is the only dream they possessed.

Young students, and perhaps the general public, may lack knowledge regarding the opportunities, benefits, and risks associated with an athletic profession. On average, only one in every 3,000 high school athletes will become a professional athlete (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). I decided to investigate the dream and reality of the end of professional athletes’ careers because the public life associated with the vocation ends with retirement, and athletes enter a new reality. Their retirement life usually remains hidden from public view.

Becoming a professional athlete means being one of the best players in the world in a particular sport. The glamour of this career affects young people. When I heard students talk about becoming professional athletes, the focus was often on the lifestyle of professional athletes with enormous wealth. This included ownership of expensive cars and huge homes. Students wanted this wealth and hoped to buy their family a home, and give them everything they need. I listened their dreams and often wished they thought about something they might more realistically achieve. As an educator I felt concerned about how narrowly students viewed their opportunities for success in life, their single-
minded focus on becoming professional athletes, and their lack of knowledge about the “costs” of this lifestyle.

As role models for students, professional athletes affected my students because of their success, lifestyle, and larger than life public image. My students did not see the post-retirement crash experienced by too many professional athletes (Torre, 2009). They saw the first-round draft signing bonuses and the multi-million dollar endorsement contracts. The life of the professional athlete seemed perfect.

In recent years, I noticed an increasing number of stories related to professional athletes facing a financial crisis within four years of retirement (Torre, 2009). I wondered why this happened and how this type of crisis affected athletes who achieved fame and fortune in their careers. I felt curious regarding what happens in the lives of professional athletes to cause a financial “crash” shortly after their retirement. I wondered how the “rags to riches” experience and sports culture affected professional athletes, their families, and the generations of students pinning their dreams on this type of career. I thought focusing my study on athletes at the end of their careers might tell a story often left out of the media – namely, what happens when the career ends and professional athletes return to “real” life.

My study involved learning how professional athletes experience the transition from the role of professional athletes to their next roles in life as private citizens. I interviewed retired professional athletes to learn how they experienced the transition into their post-career roles in life. I studied how professional athletes experienced the transition into retirement with the hope of helping my students see a more realistic picture of the “total” professional athlete’s experience.
Problem Statement, Purpose, and Significance

Professional athletics appears at the top of the list of dream jobs for many young boys (Phillip, 2012). In addition to being the dream job of young children, American society lifts the role of professional athlete to an icon (Jones & Schumann, 2000). Each season numerous news stories appear regarding the athletes who secure multimillion-dollar contracts to play with various professional athletic teams. However, the high percentage of athletes in financial crisis after retirement (Torre, 2009) raises an important issue in sports and also raises questions about the athletes’ academic and non-athletic career preparation.

While many people think of the glamorous lifestyle, the endorsement money, and the multi-million dollar contracts athletes sign, they do not think about the 78% of National Football League (NFL) players in financial crisis within two years of retirement, or the 60% of National Basketball Association (NBA) players in financial crisis within five years of retirement (Torre, 2009, ¶ 9). Unfortunately, many professional athletes earn large sums of money while playing a sport, and then the money quickly disappears when their athletic careers end (Reinhold, 2000).

Only a small percentage of athletes actually make it to the level of professional athletics. However, many youth, high school and college students spend a significant amount of time developing their athletic skills and talents with the hope of reaching the professional level (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). An immense amount of time and preparation goes in to becoming a professional athlete. Youth seeking this career path may become solely focused on the sport and spend the majority of their time on the field, court, or training facility instead of studying.
Some high school teachers use the carrot of reminding athletes of their need to remain eligible to play sports instead of emphasizing academic success for its own rewards (Dawkins, Braddock & Celaya, 2008). Students who spend the vast majority of their time in athletic preparation complete academic work to merely maintain a grade point average, increasing educational inequities for students (Dawkins, et al., 2008). Education is viewed as necessary, but imposed, serving as an obstacle to overcome if the goal of reaching athletic stardom is to be realized. Academic engagement is ‘forced’ and the aspirations for success in education are limited to achieving the goal of maintaining eligibility to participate in sports. (2008, p. 55)

Family members, teachers, and coaches should emphasize the importance of education to young athletes prior to the student reaching high school, and encourage students to remain engaged in an academic experience for the purpose of personal educational development and not just to remain eligible to play a sport (Dawkins, et al., 2008; Hodge, Harrison, Burden & Dixson, 2008).

Teachers know high school athletes seldom become professional athletes, yet their attempt to motivate them to do well in school to maintain eligibility emphasizes athletics, not academics (Harrison, 2002). As young athletes focus their attention solely on athletic development to become professional athletes, they do not develop other skill sets necessary for more achievable career goals (Harrison, 2002).

The literature identifies the importance of professional athletes to some African American males. A disproportionate number of African American male athletes hold unrealistic beliefs in becoming professional athletes (Beamon, 2010). In a study conducted by Beamon and Bell (2002), 84% of the Black Division I football players had some expectation of becoming professional athletes, and 70% reported the “strongest
certainty” they would have a professional career (p. 185). In contrast, only 41% of the White players in the study expected a professional athletic career and only 31% had the “strongest certainty” of a professional athletic career (Beamon & Bell, 2002, p. 185).

The Black community highly values the development of athletic skills (Edwards, 2000; Harris, 1994; Oliver, 1980). According to Edwards (2000), “Black families have been inclined to push their children toward sports career aspirations, often to the neglect and detriment of other critically important areas of personal and cultural development” (p. 9). African American male athletes “are socialized into sports in a [more] deliberate and intensive manner than are their White counterparts” (Beamon & Bell, 2002, p. 181).

While this preparation for sports may lead the youth to college, African American athletes do not graduate at the same rate as their White counterparts (NCAA, 2013). According to the NCAA, while the graduation rate for African American basketball players is increasing, there is still a 17-percentage point gap between the graduation rates of White and African American basketball players (2013). There is a 20-percentage point gap between White and African American football players (NCAA, 2013).

Gaston (1986) argued a generation of African American males is at risk because they have inappropriately focused on athletics at the cost of their education and do not have the necessary skills to be productive citizens. The undue emphasis placed on professional athletes affects their future chances in other careers. These findings regarding the attraction of diverse students may apply to other students sharing the same circumstances. Clearly, some students viewed an athletic career as a way to serve their families and a path out of poverty.
I wished to learn about the price of athletic fame and fortune and to provide a more accurate picture of the experience from the viewpoint of a professional athlete entering retirement. The public life ends, and a private life hidden from public view begins. My study describes how professional athletes entered the retirement process and the meaning they assigned to their experience leaving the “fame and fortune” associated with their lives as professional athletes. It illustrates the retirement experience of professional athletes.

Educators, parents, and coaches may use this information to paint for students a more realistic picture of the difference between the dream and the reality of professional athletics. The study explores the experiences of eight professional athletes as they entered retirement. Their experiences identified the potential costs and benefits associated with participation in professional sports as revealed at the end of their professional careers and their transition into retirement.

**Research Questions**

How do professional athletes experience and make meaning of the retirement process as they exit from their professional athletic career and enter retirement? How do professional athletes manage the shift from the fame and fortune associated with an active career to changes in identity and loss of resources occurring in retirement?

**Overview of Chapters**

I described how professional athletes influence the vocational aspirations of children and teens, and the need to provide a more realistic view of the athletes perceived glamorous lifestyles. My goal: to help young people more realistically assess the potential and value of a professional career in athletics. Because the transition to
retirement remains hidden from public view, I investigated the careers of eight professional athletes and their retirement experiences.

I also introduce the research topic in chapter one, and explain my educational concerns leading me to conduct this study to better inform young students of the realities and risks associated with professional athletics. I presented the research questions and explained how parents, teachers, and coaches might use the information to provide more realistic career advice to young developing athletes.

A summary of my findings from a review of the literature associated with my questions appears in the second chapter. I found three main themes in the literature. First, how an athletic career end, and how the reasons for ending a career affect their transition into retirement. Second, I found literature showing how the retirement experience for athletes involves a process and should not be viewed as a singular event. Third, I describe studies regarding how athletes develop a new sense of identity in retirement. I use several theories to interpret my review findings, including Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory and Burke and Stets’ (2009) identity theory.

In chapter three I explain the methodology utilized in this study. I describe why I used a phenomenological qualitative study approach to research the retirement experience of professional athletes. I describe how I recruited participants and collected and analyzed the data. The chapter ends with identifying the study’s ethical considerations.

The data chapters include chapters four through seven. Chapter four focuses on athletes coming to terms with being a commodity as well as the lasting effect of the regimented lifestyle of professional athletes. Professional athletes are business capital. They make millions of dollars annually for team owners. As a commodity, coaches
scheduled and monitored their lives. The chapter also describes the effects a regimented lifestyle exerts on athletes’ lives, even into retirement.

In chapter five, I describe how athletes balance performing at a high level with the knowledge their professional athletic careers will be relatively short-lived. Some players’ associations encourage athletes to prepare for retirement. However, coaches and team management expect athletes to be 100% focused on their athletic careers. I also identify the value of a college degree in easing the transition into retirement. The chapter ends with a description of the pain some athletes endure to persevere through and extend their athletic careers.

I explore the initial transition from professional athlete to the next stage in their lives in chapter six. Professional athletic careers end due to injury, age, deselection, or choice. The reason for retirement affected the initial transition into retirement. The chapter recounts the way the participants’ careers ended and how it affected their transitions.

Chapter seven presents the findings regarding how athletes established their new roles and lifestyles in retirement. Three themes explain their experiences: adjustment to a new career, change in fame, and the residual physical effects of professional athletics. The chapter explores how the skill sets of professional athletes apply to other careers. The way athletes experienced changes in fame varied. Some participants effectively used their former role as professional athletes to develop their careers following retirement from professional athletics. Other participants used their fame to benefit non-profit organizations, essentially lending their fame to the organization and also retaining some
level of fame for themselves. Finally, the last section of the chapter describes the athletes’ experiences with lingering physical effects of professional athletics.

I use Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory, Burke and Stets’ (2009) identity theory, and Cummings (2010) coming to grips with loss theory grounded theory to analyze the retirement experiences of professional athletes in chapter eight. Role exit theory explores the residual effects of being a professional athlete on the establishment of a new role in retirement. Identity theory analyzes how the professional athletes created new identities following their retirement from professional sports. Coming to grips with loss theory studies how people experience loss. The final chapter provides a summary of the study. It also includes recommendations for parents, teachers, and coaches regarding how to support the development of young athletes. One recommendation involves providing a more realistic picture about professional sports as a “vocational choice.” This includes the benefits and liabilities. I also recommend continued support for injured players well after their careers end.
DEFINITION OF TERMS

I adopted the following terms to conduct my study:

**Collective Bargaining Agreement:** The contract that governs the employment circumstances, benefits, and salary of professional athletes.

**Players’ Associations:** the organization within each professional league/association that negotiates the Collective Bargaining Agreement for the athletes.

**Professional athlete:** male athletes who participated in the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), or National Hockey League (NHL).

**Retirement:** the process of disengaging and ending a professional athletic career.

**Management:** the coaching staff and general managers of professional athletic Teams.

**Owner:** the person(s) who owns a professional athletic team.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I conducted a review of literature to locate scholarly research pertaining to my research questions: How do professional athletes experience and make meaning of the retirement process as they exit from their professional athletic career and enter retirement? How do professional athletes manage the shift from the fame and fortune associated with an active career to changes in identity and loss of resources occurring in retirement? I identified the following key themes in scholarly literature related to professional athletes’ experiences and end of career transition: (1) retirement as a process, (2) the athlete’s sense of identity, and (3) the reasons for retirement. Much of the scholarly literature concentrated on how elite athletes (college, Olympic, and professional) experienced retirement. My review begins with a description of retirement as a process. No matter when or how an athletic career begins, athletes know at some point the demanding physical nature of sport and the athlete’s inevitable declining performance will affect their retirement date.

Retirement as a Process

A significant amount of literature related to the need to view retirement from a professional sport as a process rather than a singular life event (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Entwined within the theme of viewing retirement as a process involved the discussion of the term retirement and its applicability to the end of career transition an athlete experiences when leaving athletics (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Fernandez, Stephan, & Fouquereau, 2006). The terminology used to describe the end of a professional athletic career shows differences between typical retirement and retirement from professional athletics.
According to Blinde and Greendorfer (1985), the term retirement has a connotation of old age and is not an appropriate descriptor for an athlete ending a career. Blinde and Greendorfer’s research focused on the athletes’ experience of what they term “desocialization from sport” (p. 87). Athletes retire from their sports an average of 20 years earlier than people who retire from other occupations (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). Because athletes are significantly younger than other retirees, they do not enter a stage of life in which they are beginning to withdraw from social interactions and surrendering roles they held during their careers. At the end of their professional athletic career, athletes enter into a new stage of life that often requires development of a new skill set. An athlete’s retirement does not end their need for a career (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Fernandez et al., 2006; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).

The importance of an athlete’s view of the retirement event was a significant finding in the literature. Researchers found athletes who viewed the retirement experience as a process rather than an event had a more positive experience with the transition (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Cecić Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004; Stephan & Demulier, 2008). Viewing retirement as a process allowed athletes to prepare for the unavoidable retirement. Drahota and Eitzen’s (1998) research included interviews of 27 former professional football, basketball, baseball players and skiers. The athletes involved in the study articulated a clear process as they experienced retirement. Viewing retirement from athletics as a process rather than an event is important because the transitions the athletes experience in mid-life require them to make life changes to successfully experience the remainder of their lives (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998). In addition, viewing retirement from athletics as a process rather than a singular life event
makes the transition into retirement successful (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Drahota & Eitzen, 1998; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

When athletes view retirement as a transition rather than an event, they are process oriented (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998). Athletes who view retirement from athletics as a singular event are problem oriented because they focus on the finality of retirement, rather than on the transition to a new career. Drahota and Eitzen cited the work of Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) to illustrate the difference in process versus event/problem. They identified four differences between seeing a change as a process and an event. The first, viewing retirement as a process, focused on how athletic career behaviors may be continued with modification rather than ended. Second, the athletes viewed change from competitive athlete to non-competitive athlete as a process. Third, their interests shifted gradually rather than being a drastic occurrence. The fourth difference identified change as not sweeping nor immediate, but as an adjustment to a new life (as cited in Drahota & Eitzen, 1998).

Athletes who viewed retirement as a process enjoyed a more positive experience as they transitioned into retirement (Petitpas, 2009). Athletes who viewed retirement as a transition did not experience significant upheaval in their lives (Stier, 2007). Viewing retirement as a process also allowed the athlete to make the appropriate preparations for the transition. According to Stephan and Demulier (2008), the way athletes prepared for retirement had an effect on how they experienced the transition into life after athletics. In addition, athletes who prepared for retirement had a more positive transition into their second careers (Stephan & Demulier, 2008; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998).
In their study of retired professional athletes, Drahota and Eitzen (1998) found athletes prepared for retirement at various levels. Coaches did not encourage preparation for retirement. They expected athletes to focus on the present, the current season. According to Drahota and Eitzen, “They [professional athletes] are not encouraged to look ahead but rather to live (and play) for the moment” (p. 277). While some of the former professional athletes interviewed identified the need to begin developing skills for a second career while still playing professional athletics, others only focused on their current roles as professional athletes and did not prepare for a second career (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998).

The Athletes’ Sense of Identity

A contributing factor to how an athlete experienced retirement is how the athlete defined his or her own self-identity (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Petitpas, 2009; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Parents and coaches place such a significant emphasis on the development of athletic skills that some young athletes do not experience non-athletic activities; therefore, their sense of identity is not being fully developed (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). This emphasis on athletics can cause the athletes to develop a sense of identity limited to athletics. Therefore, when they retire from a sport, the athletes have lost their sense of self-worth and cannot rely on other aspects of their identity (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Within the area of identity and the athlete lie the questions: Are athletes encouraged to develop non-athletic identities, and, do they receive support in developing a broader self-identity? Does the added support facilitate the athletes’ development of a larger identity (beyond athletics) and facilitate their transition into retirement?
The Cost of Self-Identity

Athletes’ sense of identity comes at a cost of the development of a broader sense of self (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Various authors raised the concern regarding the amount of time athletes spend developing their athletic skills. Because so much of their focus is on athletics, they do not spend time exploring other interests and developing additional aspects of their self-identity (Lally, 2007; Miller, & Kerr, 2002; Petitpas, 2009). “Student-athletes seem to be particularly at risk because the demands of high-level competition discourage their exploration of diverse roles” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p. 143).

According to Pearson and Petitpas (1990), college is an opportunity for students to explore and begin to develop their self-identities. However, according to Miller and Kerr (2002), when students only identify as athletes they do not explore other identity options. Student-athletes do not have the same opportunities for exploration. Devoting so much time to developing athletic skills prevents athletes from developing a well-rounded self-identity (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). According to Lally (2007), a college athlete spends approximately 30 hours per week focused on athletic development. However, according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) bylaws, “During the playing season, a student-athlete cannot engage in more than 20 hours of athletics-related activity (see by-law 17.02.1) per week, with no more than four hours of such activity in any one day” (NCAA Bylaws Appendix B, p.118). Athletes experience what Miller and Kerr (2002) defined as “identity foreclosure” due to the time spent on their sport (p.143). Students accept a role identity without determining if the role was the best choice for them. Student-athletes lack time to experiment with various roles because of the demands placed on them by coaches and athletic departments (Miller & Kerr, 2002).
Identity Changes

Drahota and Eitzen (1998) explained the difficulties in making a transition into retirement was linked to a loss of, “the primary sources of their identities” (p. 263). They compared the work of Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory to the transitions experienced by professional athletes. Drahota and Eitzen modified Ebaugh’s theory because they found professional athletes continued to hold their identity as professional athletes even after retirement. This is called “role residual (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998). “Role residual” refers to maintaining a past identity as a professional athlete, while simultaneously developing a new identity.

Petitpas’ (2009) research found similar information related to the athlete’s sense of identity. For multiple years—typically throughout adolescence, college and possibly beyond—elite level athletes self-identified solely as athletes. When their athletic careers ended, the athletes struggled to identify themselves (Petitpas, 2009). Drahota and Eitzen (1998) found that because athletes begin the development of an athletic identity at such a young age, often as early as fifth grade, they experience difficulty in developing a new self-identity because of the length of time they identified as athletes. The struggle to deal with retirement may also be amplified for athletes because they lose the friendship of teammates (Antoun, 2011; Drahota & Eitzen, 1998), adoration from fans (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998), and possible celebrity status (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998; Steir, 2007).

A study conducted by Webb, Nasco, Riley, and Headrick (1998), found athletic identity “holds a unique status among other situated identities” (p. 339). Webb et al. (1998) identified two reasons why the athletic identity is unique. First, it is unique because of how early in life the identity is formed. Because athletic talents are often
recognized in elementary school, the development of athletic talents becomes a focus for the students and families throughout the athletes’ developmental and adolescent years (Webb et al., 1998). During these developmental years, students experience a focus on the development of athletic skills, and lack exposure to other experiences (McGillivary, Fearn, & McIntosh, 2005; Webb et al., 1998). Second, athletic identities are unique due to the public roles of athletes. Athletes developed reputations within communities, gained notoriety, and realized their “identity is joined to a larger community (team, hometown, state, and country). The athlete further realizes that the collective esteem of this larger community rises and falls as a result of his/her athletic performance” (Webb et al., 1998, p. 340).

Their sense of identity was a significant contributing factor to how athletes experienced retirement because they spent so much of their developmental years perfecting their athletic skills, and neglected to develop other skills with the potential to influence their sense of identity (Van Raalte & Anderson, 2007). According to Cosh (2013), the transition out of athletics caused athletes to redefine themselves, and the process of redefinition may lead to adjustment issues. Athletes struggle if they do not initially develop a diverse self-identity, and only develop a self-identity relating to their role as an athlete (Cosh, 2013).

Miller and Kerr (2002) identified programs designed to help athletes develop a self-identity not solely focused on athletics. Programs by the NCAA, such as CHAMPS/Life Skills Program, and other programs offered by athletic departments at colleges and universities are designed to help the athletes develop academic, personal, athletic, and career skills.
The development and maintenance of self-identity involves an ongoing process. The identity change occurring in a retirement exerts a significant effect on the athlete (Cosh, 2013; Petitpas, 2009). In the next section I review the reasons athletes retire and how those reasons affect their retirement experience.

**Reasons for Retirement**

Researchers identified the reasons for an athlete’s retirement as another theme in the retirement experience (Cockerill, 2005; Cosh, 2013; Petitpas, 2009). According to Stephan and Demulier (2008) and Webb et al., (1998), the reason for retirement most influenced how the athlete experiences retirement. Historically, researchers identified four main reasons for athlete retirement: deselection, age, injury, and choice (Cockerill, 2005; Stephan & Demulier, 2008; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). More contemporary researchers described the factors influencing retirement using various methods to recognize the complexity involved this experience (Fernandez et al., 2006; Stephan & Demulier, 2008). I describe these differences next.

**Deselection**

The first reason for retirement is deselection (Kearl, 1986, Stephan & Demulier, 2008; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Deselection occurs when players are “cut” from a team because they no longer meet the performance expectations of the team’s management. Deselection was also identified as an involuntary exit (Kearl, 1986). Players who retired due to deselection often felt stigmatized because they were no longer able to perform (Kearl, 1986). According to Webb et al. (1998), being cut or deselected from a team gave the athlete an “esteem-damaging message that they weren’t good enough” (p.342). Deselected athletes realized they no longer possessed the ability to perform at the
expected level. This realization caused athletes to struggle with their transition into retirement (Webb et al., 1998). According to Kearl (1986), a hierarchy of reasons for retirement exists and being involuntarily deselected from the team earns the least desirable rating.

Athletic performances are highly competitive (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Athletes who perform the best continue to receive attention. Deselected players struggled with this change in status and the adverse psychological effects associated with their retirement due to their “deselection” (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). The lack of control of a life event created a negative experience, and predicts the subsequent problems with regard to the psychological adjustment required in retirement (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985).

**Aging and Decreases in Performance**

A decrease in performance due to chronological age is the second reason athletes retire (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Age closely connects to an athlete’s ability to compete at the top level. As athletes age, their physical abilities decrease (Allison & Meyer, 1988). While extensive training slows the aging process for athletes and may allow athletes to continue to compete at older ages, eventually their extensive physical training cannot combat the influence of age (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

In addition to deterioration of their physical bodies due to age, as athletes age they may become less driven to compete at elite levels (Allison & Meyer, 1988). Once athletes attain specific goals, they may experience a decrease in their sense of competition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Allison and Meyer (1988) found some athletes,
after competing for a number of years, sought a “sense of normalcy and stability not available while on the circuit,” and this desire caused their retirement (p. 220).

**Injury**

The third reason for athletic retirement is injury (Cosh, 2013; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Injury caused most transitional challenges for retired athletes (Cosh, 2013; Rosetti, 2012; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Webb et al., 1998). Like deselection, retirement through injury caused athletes to lose their sense of control of life events (Cosh, 2013). This loss of control exerts detrimental effects on an athlete (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Webb et al. (1998) identified “psychological control...as the extent to which one believes he has influence over his/her own life outcomes [and it] is a critical aspect of an individual’s ability to effectively deal with short-term negative events” (Webb et al., 1998, p. 341).

A career ending injury may cause athletes to lose their sense of control and adversely affects their transition into retirement (Stephan & Demulier, 2008; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Athletes who experienced the end of their career through injury reported a higher level of “disillusionment and acute distress” (Rosetti, 2012, p. 59). Because injuries are unplanned, they can cause athletes to feel a lack of control. Webb et al. (1998) found feeling a lack of control led to increased difficulty transitioning into retirement. However, the relationship between sustaining a career-ending injury and lack of control did not have as strong a connection as did the inability to compete at a higher level of competition and a lack of control (Webb et al., 1998). Athletes fare better when their careers end due to injury rather than being deselected. While injured athletes
struggle with the transition into retirement, their struggle is less than athletes whose
retirement results from deselection.

Webb et al. (1998) also found a connection between athletes’ self-identities and
how they reacted to a career-ending injury. Their study found athletes with strong
athletic identities struggled even more than predicted with career-ending injuries. Webb
et al. presented two possible reasons for this increased struggle experienced by athletes.
The first proposed reason concerned the unpredictability of injuries and athletes not being
able to prepare for the end of their career. The second reason involved the way athletes
responded to their injuries. Injuries may not be viewed as a career ending injury.
Typically, athletes spend a significant amount of time rehabilitating the injury with the
belief they will play again following an injury. Webb et al. theorized that “during this
period [rehabilitation], athletic identity is not simply maintained, but is perhaps even
strengthened as a way of summoning the discipline and dedication needed to endure an
extended painful physical rehabilitation” (Webb et al., 1998, p. 356).

Personal Choice

The fourth reason athletes retired concerns a personal choice. Personal choice
differs from age; athletes who choose to retire typically make that decision based solely
on their own desires. This third reason differs from the category of age because while
age may be a contributing factor for some athletes choosing retirement, others choose
retirement at the pinnacle of their careers (Kearl, 1986; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

Personal choice is at the top of the hierarchy of reasons for retirement (Taylor &
Ogilvie, 1994). Athletes who made the personal choice to retire enjoyed a more positive
experience with the transitions into retirement (Young, Pearce, Kane, & Pane, 2006). In
his research regarding retirement from sports, Kearl (1986) found athletes preferred choosing to retire rather than being seen as “washed out” in their sport (p. 293). According to Kearl, retirement at the height of an athlete’s career often “enhances one’s immortality” (p. 293). Athletes may continue to hold their status of an elite athlete if they chose to retire while they were still able to play. Players who wait too long to retire are seen more negatively by their fans, and the negative response from fans may cause a more difficult transition into retirement.

**Pre-Condition Factors**

Another method of analyzing the factors for athletic retirement is through Stephan and Demulier’s (2008) method of pre-condition and transitional factors, and the interaction between these two factors. The pre-condition factors influenced how an athlete reacts and adapts to retirement. Pre-condition factors may include pre-retirement planning, predominate athletic identity, and nationality. The transitional factors happen during the process of transitioning from active athlete to retirement (Stephan & Demulier, 2008). Changes in their bodies, societal status and competency in new roles are some of the transitional factors identified by Stephan and Demulier (2008). According to Stephan and Demulier (2008), “pre-conditions could influence athletes’ adaptation, through the transitional factors. The general assumption is that retirement from elite sport causes changes in psychological well-being and that these activate adaptive mechanisms that seek to reduce the impact of this event” (p. 180).

**Overlapping Issues**

While much of the research focused on the four main reasons previously described, other researchers claimed reasons for retirement, such as age, injury,
deselection, and personal choice, failed to provide the full scope of why athletes retire, and may over-simplify a complex situation (Fernandez et al., 2006; Stephan & Demulier, 2008). Fernandez et al. (2006) claimed often overlapping issues involved in an athlete’s retirement affect athletes, and no single issue explains the decision to retire. Factors related to retirement are similar to a chaos theory model, namely “numerous, varied and cumulative” factors and events affect retirement (p. 408).

Using Mullet, Dej, Lemaire, Raiff, and Barthorpe’s approach to analyze retirement decisions, Fernandez et al. (2006) analyzed and described decisions to retire as a balance between push, anti-push, pull, anti-pull factors. For example, retirement from athletics due to an injury serves as an example of a push factor. An example of a pull factor might concern family obligations. An anti-push factor may involve the athlete’s belief in his or her ability to perform at the desired and expected levels. An anti-pull example might involve the unknown of life after retirement (Fernandez et al., 2006). Viewing retirement through the push and pull factors provides a better developed explanation of why certain experiences in combination may cause athletes to retire (Fernandez et al., 2006).

**Summary, Gaps, and Tensions in the Literature**

I found three key themes regarding athletic retirement. The first and most significant theme described athletic retirement as a process rather than a singular event in athletes’ lives (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). The second theme concerned the importance of athletics to a core identity, and the effects on athletes’ sense of identity in their transition to retirement (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Petitpas, 2009; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). The third theme involved
the reasons for retirement and their effect on how athletes view and experience retirement (Cockerill, 2005; Cosh, 2013; Petitpas, 2009). When careers ended due to injury or deselection, athletes experienced more difficult transitions into retirement than those who voluntarily ended their careers (Stephan & Demulier, 2008; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

After I conducted my review of literature, I noticed several gaps in the existing research. One gap concerned the reasons why athletes retire, and the complexity of this decision. While much of the research focused on the four main reasons previously described, other researchers claimed reasons for retirement, such as age, injury, deselection, and personal choice over-simplify a complex situation (Fernandez et al., 2006; Stephan & Demulier, 2008). My study allowed me to explore the complexity of the retirement process through qualitative research.

Another gap concerned studies of the transition experience of athletes—a predictably difficult phase in the lives of athletes. Many studies examined the reasons for retirement, but not the actual experience of retirement. My study regarding how athletes experience and make meaning of the retirement process sheds light on how athletes manage this process and also their reflections on the costs and benefits of their career choice. I next present the four theories I utilized to review the literature regarding the retirement transition for professional athletes.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

I initially adopted four theories to applicable to the retirement experience of professional athletes. I used Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) conceptual model of the retirement process as an overarching theory and framework because the model illustrates the steps or stages typically found in athletic retirement. The theory uses concepts from
several disciplines as well as findings from empirical studies. Three other theories concern different aspects of the retirement process.

Role exit theory (Ebaugh, 1988) identifies the stages people transition through as they exit one role and begin to determine their next role in life. The theory can be applied to the review findings on how athletes exit from the role of professional athlete, cope with being former professional athletes, and begin to identify a new role for themselves.

I used the theory of liminality (Turner, 1967) to shed light on the period between one stage and another. Regarding my findings, this theory explained how athletes experienced the transitional stage from being a professional athlete into a new role following their athletic career. I adopted this theory to examine the “betwixt and between” stage of the athlete’s career and life transition (Turner, 1967, p.97). Turner’s (1967) theory of liminality helped me interpret the psychological and personal difficulties encountered in the retirement experience. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) helped me interpret the changes occurring after athletes experience the transition into retirement, and what they learned from their previous experience to create a new role in their post-athletic career lives. After conducting my study, I adopted Burke and Stets’s (2009) identity theory to analyze how athletes’ identities were affected by retirement. Additionally I adopted Cummings’s (2010) coming to grips with loss grounded theory to analyze how retired athletes processed the loss of their professional athletic career.

The section begins with a description of Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) conceptual model of retirement.
A Conceptual Model of Athletic Retirement

Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) developed a conceptual model to analyze the retirement process of professional athletes. Taylor, a former associate professor of psychology at Nova University, and Ogilvie, a sports psychologist, determined the previous research regarding retirement from athletics demonstrated a “divergence between conceptual and empirical development” (p. 2). The previous application of theories unrelated to athletics did not allow for a full examination of the athletic retirement process because it did not accurately address the various elements unique to that process (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) developed the conceptual model of athletic retirement to specifically address the retirement process of athletes.

Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) conceptual model of athletic retirement adopted some elements of previously applied theories to create “a detailed and comprehensive model that addresses the entire course of the athletic retirement process” (p. 4). Their conceptual model identified five steps to analyze the retirement process: (1) causes of retirement among athletes, (2) factors related to adaptation to retirement, (3) available resources for retirement adaptation, (4) quality of adaptation to athletic retirement, and (5) intervention for athletic retirement difficulties.

Step 1: Causes for Retirement

Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) described four main reasons for retirement, including chronological age, deselection, injury, and free choice. The age of the athlete and the athletes’ decline in physical performance represented the most common cause for
Age had “physiological, psychological, and social implications” for retirement (p. 4).

**Step 2: Factors Related to Adaptation to Retirement.**

The second stage of Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) conceptual model concerned the factors affecting how athletes adapt to retirement. The researchers noted significant changes in multiple aspects of the retiring athletes’ lives. According to Taylor and Ogilvie, the extent of the various factors, combined with how the athletes perceived the changes, affected how they experienced retirement. They identified the related factors also affecting retirement, such as developmental contributors, self-identity, perceptions of control, social identity, and tertiary contributing factors. The developmental contributors to retirement include how family members of the athlete supported the development of the athlete’s identity beyond athletics. Athletes whose childhood and/or adolescent development was primarily focused on athletics have a greater struggle in transitioning into retirement. The self-identity factor relates to how the athlete developed his self-identity beyond athletics. Similar to developmental factors, athletes with a self-identity singularly focused on athletics experienced a greater sense of loss in retirement. Perceptions of control factor relates to the cause of the athlete’s retirement. Athletes who retired due to deselection or injury had a low perception of control; therefore experiencing emotional struggle during their transition into retirement. The athlete’s social identity, or level of fame, caused him to struggle with “self-worth.” If the athlete was dependent on their social identity and did not have a diverse sense of identity, the loss of fame was a factor in how he experienced retirement (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).
Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) identified “tertiary” factors, - socioeconomic status, race, gender, health, marital status, and age - affecting retirement. When analyzing athletes’ retirement experiences, these factors also affected the retirement experience (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

**Step 3: Available Resources for Retirement Adaptation.**

Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) model included analyzing the athletes’ coping skills, social support, and pre-retirement planning. How athletes adapt to retirement depended on their ability to cope with change. Because athletes received so much social support from their teams, finding appropriate social support during retirement, in the absence of the team support, served as a significant factor to a positive transition into retirement. The resources identified by Taylor and Ogilvie involved pre-retirement planning. Pre-retirement planning influenced all the other factors related to how an athlete experienced retirement. Planning for retirement allowed athletes to have a greater sense of control, to increase their social network, develop a sense of identity, and prepare financially for the transition into retirement (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

**Step 4: Quality of Adaptation to Athletic Retirement.**

According to Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) conceptual model, how the athletes experienced retirement depended on how they experienced the previous three steps of the model. The overall experience of athletic retirement became apparent based on the way athletes experienced the first three steps. Steps one through three predict the outcome of step four. While the number of athletes experiencing a negative transition into retirement might be disputed, the reason why some fared poorly involved their identity (Taylor &
Ogilvie). Professional and elite-amateur athletes struggled more with the transition because athletics dominated their sense of identity.

**Step 5: Intervention for Athletic Retirement Difficulties.**

The fifth step of the model recognized athletic retirement involved various elements of stress experienced by athletes (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). They encouraged the use of sport psychologists to help athletes navigate through the retirement process. Athletes may need social, emotional, psychological, and behavioral support. Sports psychologists may help athletes prepare for retirement by helping them develop a broader sense of identity, understand their new social identities, and broaden their social support systems.

Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among athletes presented another way to analyze the athletic retirement process. Because these researchers developed the model specifically to analyze the athletic retirement process, it requires no modification as compared to other non-athletic theories. The use of the five steps helped me identify the factors affecting a positive or negative transition into retirement.

Taylor & Ogilvie’s (1994) conceptual model provides a method to analyze the retirement process, as well as the various changes athletes experience in the transition into retirement. The model was created especially for the athletic retirement process and therefore accounts for the unique experiences of athletes. While Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) conceptual model covers the entire retirement process, I also chose three other theories to examine particular aspects of the retirement process of professional athletes:

**Role Exit**

Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory accounts for the process of retirement and the change of identity. Ebaugh identified four stages people experienced as they transitioned from one role to another: doubting their current role, seeking alternatives, making a decision, and creating the ex-role. The first stage of role exit theory, occurred when people began to question their commitment to their current roles or careers. During stage two, people sought alternatives and planned for future roles prior to the current role ending.

The turning point, the third stage of role exit theory, came after individuals considered the various options, and finally decided to either exit or remain in their current role (Ebaugh, 1988). Five types of turning points affect this decision, including “specific events”, “the last straw”, “time-related factors”, “excuses”, and “either-or alternatives” (Ebaugh, 1988, p.125). “Specific events” turning points are meaningful events such as a death or end of relationship, or that hold a more symbolic meaning to the individual (Ebaugh, 1988, pp. 125-128). The “last straw” turning point occurs after multiple small events accumulate and then a situation occurs that causes the individual to make a decision. The final situation may not have been significant, but the accumulation of the preceding events accompanied with the final event caused the person to make the decision (Ebaugh, 1998, pp. 128-129). Ebaugh’s (1988) third turning point, “time-related factors”, is an event that is tied to time, such as age, time-sensitive opportunities, or a specified internship/training period (pp.129-130). “Excuses”, the fourth type of turning
point, is defined as “an incident that provided excuses or justifications for the need to leave a given role…some event or authority figure made it clear that an exit was necessary for the well-being of the individual” (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 130). The final turning point, the “either/or alternative” occurs when people realize they must leave a situation or experience a possible loss, such as an alcoholic entering treatment or losing his job (Ebaugh, 1988, p 132-134).

In addition, role exit may be voluntary or involuntary. People who have a choice in their exit experience voluntary role exit. Others people who do not have a choice experience involuntary role exit. Ebaugh (1988) noted people who exit involuntarily do not experience the first two role exit stages.

The fourth stage in role exit theory involved creating the ex-role (Ebaugh, 1988). “In a very real sense, the process of becoming an ex involves tension between one’s past, present, and future. One’s previous role identification has to be taken into account and incorporated into a future identity” (p. 149). Ebaugh stressed the importance of acknowledging the individual’s previous role; it was vital that the person determined how to incorporate the old role into the new role, identified as a “hang-over identity” (p. 149). In addition to the importance of recognizing the “role-residual”, how society and social support systems of family and friends reacted to the new role were significant factors within the stage of creating the ex-role (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 156).

Role exit theory applies to the retirement experience of professional athletes. Drahota and Eitzen (1998) as well as Stier (2007) used Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory to analyze athletes’ retirement experience. Stier identified first doubts in athletes as they experienced injuries, loss in rankings [for tennis players], and increased poor
performance in competitions. While Drahota and Eitzen identified this stage in their research of retired professional athletes, they modified the first doubt stage to account for the temporary nature of professional athletics.

In their research, Drahota and Eitzen (1998) modified the first doubt stage to include what they named “original doubts.” They identified original doubts as the doubts athletes experienced prior to becoming professional athletes. The original doubts stage took into account the athletes who entered professional sports knew their roles would be temporary, and therefore already started to make plans for their lives after their sport careers ended. Whether athletes entered the profession with original doubts, as in Drahota and Eitzen’s research, or experienced first doubts as in Stier’s (2007) research, Ebaugh’s (1988) first stage proved useful in explaining how athletes experienced retirement.

According to Drahota and Eitzen (1998), “Seeking alternatives appears to be the most critical stage for athletes” (p. 271). For some athletes, this second stage happened prior to entering professional athletics if the athlete recognized the temporary nature of the career. Other athletes acknowledged the temporary nature of professional athletics, but neglected to plan for their lives after professional sports. The third type of athlete never planned for the future (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998).

Drahota and Eitzen (1998) modified Ebaugh’s (1988) third stage to relate to the experience of professional athletes. Drahota and Eitzen noted athletes should be aware of the temporary nature of their roles, and, therefore, even an athlete who exited involuntarily may have experienced the first two stages of role exit. The researchers also identified the type of involuntary exit as a factor in how an athlete experienced the role
exit. Athletes experience involuntary exits because they experienced an injury deselection from the team. Involuntary exit due to deselection could influence how negatively the athletes viewed their role exits. Deselection may cause athletes to view themselves as failures. Role-exit due to injury may allow for the athlete to leave in a more positive manner because their careers ended while the athletes were able to compete (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998).

Drahota and Eitzen (1998) found evidence of Ebaugh’s (1988) fourth stage in their research. They found role-residual served as a significant factor affecting retiring athletes. Athletes who never entirely exited the role of professional athletics needed to determine how to develop a new role while incorporating a significant amount of the old role. The researchers also found how society and family responded to the new role to be noteworthy for professional athletes (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998). Stier’s (2007) research found “this was not merely a withdrawal process in social space, but one of giving up significant sources of self-identity and redefining one’s self-concept” (p. 107).

An element not noted in the fourth stage by Ebaugh (1988), but identified by Drahota and Eitzen (1998) involved the factor of “addiction” to the game. Some athletes experienced this, requiring withdrawal from this state. Drahota and Eitzen identified five types of withdrawal experienced by athletes. Athletes first experienced the physical withdrawal from the game as they no longer exercised or performed as they once did. Secondly, athletes felt a sense of emotional withdrawal from no longer being part of a team or interacting with fans. Third, athletes experienced a financial withdrawal as they adjusted to a new type of lifestyle and frequently a change in salary. The fourth factor involved the chemical withdrawal athletes experienced because they no longer received
an adrenaline rush while playing a game. The final factor concerned the mental withdrawal athletes experienced as they adjusted to a less intense lifestyle and role (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998).

Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory shows how athletes leave their previous careers and enter retirement with changes in their identity. I next show how liminality theory (Turner, 1967) provides a framework for understanding for the next stage in their life—the in between. Recent research clearly states athletic retirement needs to be viewed as a process, not an event (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Drahota & Eitzen, 1998; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). While the research is not conclusive on how negative an effect retirement has on professional athletes, studies conducted on the process show retirement represents a significant transition (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Coakley, 1983; McPherson, 1980; Petitpas, 2009).

Liminality theory (Turner, 1967) addresses the way athletes experience the transitional phase—no longer being a professional athlete and trying to determine their next role in life.

Liminality

The theory of liminality originated with Turner’s (1967) anthropological studies of African tribes. Turner explained liminality as a time of transition during rites of passage when individuals were no longer what they had been and not yet what they were about to become. Turner referred to puberty rites of the African tribes when the boys and girls were no longer seen as children, yet were not viewed as adults. People in a liminal state are not solely in either stage but hold status in each stage. Turner stated that people in a liminal state are “neither this nor that, but both” (p. 99).
In his research, Turner (1967) also identified that strong relationships developed among people experiencing a liminal state. Because people in a liminal state held no status, they did not have to play the roles usually required in a situation based on hierarchical status. Thus, relationships developed during times of liminality were strong, based on their true personalities, and often lasted for the rest of the individuals’ lives (Turner, 1967). The crux of the theory recognizes people in a liminal state hold some of the qualities of the previous stage and some qualities of the forthcoming stage; they are neither solely in one stage nor the other, but both stages (Turner, 1967).

Since the development of Turner’s (1967) study of liminality, the theory has been applied to various situations analyzing the experiences of people living between stages (Bettis & Mills, 2006). Bettis and Mills (2006) conducted a qualitative research study analyzing how faculty members experienced and made sense of the reorganization of departments at a university. The researchers used liminality theory to “make sense of the dynamic interaction between individual faculty members’ responses to changes in their work lives and identities and the changing political, economic, and social landscape of higher education” (p. 61). The theory allowed Bettis and Mills to analyze the change effects on the micro and macro levels.

Liminality theory provided a method for me to garner information from the literature regarding how athletes experience the transition from a high-profile role into what may be a less notable lifestyle. The theory allowed for investigation into how athletes felt in the transitory stage, their adjustment to leaving behind a valued identity, and how they accepted these changes after retirement. In addition, liminality theory
allowed me to analyze how society influences the experience of being in between stages and making sense of a new stage.

Application of liminality theory allowed me to analyze how retired athletes experienced the transitory stage during retirement and the societal influence on the experience. No studies focused on how athletes experience the “betwixt and between” stage while transitioning from active professional athletes to retired professional athletes and how societal influences and norms affected the stage of liminality (Turner, 1967, p.97). Turner (1967) explained the structure of liminality as individuals being “withdrawn from their structural positions and consequently from the values, norms, sentiments, and techniques associated with those positions…[they] are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the power that generate and sustain them” (p.105). The application of liminality theory to the literature allowed me to study the impact of the social changes athletes experienced during the transition to retirement.

In addition to using liminality theory, transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) offered another lens through which to view how an athlete learns from a life-changing experience of retirement and develops a new frame of reference with a new self-identity. In the following section I explain how transformative learning theory is applicable to the literature regarding the retirement process of professional athletes.

**Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning theory centers on the learning experience of adults. The focus in transformative learning theory is “on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically
assimilated from others” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). According to Mezirow (1997),
“transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference” (p. 5).
People develop their frames of reference through life experiences and they then use their frames of reference to explain their world.

Transformational learning requires learners to examine their current knowledge, how they gained the knowledge, and the values they hold based on the knowledge.

Following reflection and discourse of their knowledge, Mezirow (2000) stated:

Transformational learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspective, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (pp. 7-8)

Only by understanding how one gains knowledge and develops frames of reference can authentic learning and change occur (Mezirow, 2000).

Prior to acquiring new knowledge, a person must become “critically reflective” of an event, experience, or problem in order to question its validity (Mezirow, 2000, p. 20).

In order to define the process people experience in transformational learning, Mezirow (2000) identified ten phases of transformational learning:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumption
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective (p. 22)
Mezirow (2000) did not state all individuals experiencing transformational learning must experience all of the previously stated stages. He recognized there might be some modifications to the phases, but most people experienced some form of the ten phases (Mezirow, 2000).

Transformational learning theory contains some concepts compatible with other theories used by researchers to analyze the retirement experience of professional athletes. For example, as stated previously Drahota and Eitzen’s (1998) research focused approaching retirement from athletics as a process rather than an event. Viewing retirement as a process may be compared to Mezirow’s (2000) ten phases of transformational learning experienced by others during a life-changing event. Drahota and Eitzen’s (1998) research did not include looking at how the athletes’ learned from the event. The use of transformational learning theory allowed me to view the experience through the lens of personal (and potentially transformational) change occurring in the lives or retiring athletes. Some difficulties experienced by athletes may become the source of significant personal learning, potentially causing permanent changes in identity and ways of being in the world.

Mezirow’s (2000) ten phases provides a framework to study the literature of retirement experiences as well as a method to examine how the athletes create new meaning in their lives after retirement. Transformational learning theory allows focus on the changes in the retired athletes’ frames of reference and their development of a new perspective towards life (Mezirow, 2000). I used transformative learning theory, during my review of literature to gain insight into how athletes access previous experiences in order to create a new role for themselves following their professional athletic careers.
The theory facilitated the understanding of learning arising from a situation of personal change. Application of this theory helped me analyze the literature regarding how the athlete experiences retirement and transforms as they transition into a new stage in life.

**Identity Theory**

After conducting the study and analyzing the data I determined to apply identity theory to my study. According to Burke and Stets (2009):

Identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person. (p. 3)

The purpose of identity theory is to determine the meaning of the various identities a person may hold and their interrelated hierarchical status. Identity theory also helps explain how identities interrelate, affect a person socially and emotionally, and affect how people are connected to society (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Burke and Stets (2009) identify four factors of an identity: identity standard, input, comparator, and output (p. 62). These factors work as a continuous cycle attempting to verify identities. The identity standard is how a person defines a particular identity. There are often common identity standards within a culture. However, individuals also personalize identity standards. The input is how a person perceives the environment. People attempt to match their perceptions to their identity standards. The ability to match the identity standard to the input varies for each person due to individualized identity standards. The comparator is the component that compares the input perceptions to the identity standards. It provides information regarding the alignment between the input and identity standard. If there is a significant discrepancy, the comparator sends an “error signal” in an attempt to change the behaviors to better
align with the identity standards (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 66). The fourth component, the output, is the behavior that is demonstrated based on the information provided by the comparator. If there is a discrepancy between the input and the identity standard, the comparator will signal a need for a change in behaviors so that the new behaviors, or output, are better aligned to the identity standard.

People strive to keep their perceptions in alignment with their identity standards. However, there are times when they are unaligned and output behaviors are not able to change the environment enough to create a new alignment. Burke and Stets (2009) refer to this experience as a “failure in identity verification” (p. 76). When this failure occurs, people experience various levels of stress and the identity verification process is interrupted, causing a person to “find ways of reestablishing the normal identity process, or else find new identities” (p.77).

There are three ways identities are developed according to Burke and Stets’ (2009) identity theory. The first method is social learning. Social learning involves the environment where people are raised, the books they read and the experimentation with different roles through play, learning, and interactions. The second method is direct socialization. This method involves specific training, education, or orientation to “act correctly” in regards to the identity (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 194). Reflected appraisal is the third method of developing identities. In this method, the way people view their identities is based on the feedback they receive from others.

**Identity Verification Interruption**

There are four ways the identification process may be interrupted. The first, the broken loop, occurs when the input and identity standard can not be aligned, often due to
significant life events such as death, divorce, or change of careers. The second interruption Burke and Stets (2009) refer to as “interference from other identities” (p. 78). Each person holds multiple identities, such as wife, teacher, mother. When there is a conflict between two or more of the identities, the identity verification process is interrupted. If the two identities cannot be aligned, “verifying one identity puts the other in jeopardy” (p. 78). The third interruption is “over-controlled identity.” This interruption occurs when there is a specific identity that has dominated the other identities and “requires more attention and resources to monitor potential discrepancies” (p. 78). The domination may then lead to poor maintenance of the other identities. The person experiences heightened stress to maintain the dominant identity and additional stress due to the neglected identities. The fourth type of interruption is “episodic identities” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 79). The maintenance of multiple identities causes an inherent stress. The on-going interruptions of the identities heighten the stress of managing multiple identities.

**Reasons for Identity Change**

When identities cannot be verified, they will reluctantly change. Burke and Stets (2009) identified four reasons for identities to change. The first is a change in situation. When the meaning of the situation changes, there is a conflict between the identity standard and the situational meaning. Change occurs when a person is not able to change the situation to align with the identity standard. The second change is identity conflict. As people develop new identities throughout their lives, there can be conflict between the identities. This conflict can cause identities to change in order to coexist. The third change occurs when there is conflict between the identity standard and a person’s
behaviors. According to Burke and Stets (2009), there are times when the behavior a person chooses is in not aligned with their identity standard. The change in behavior over time can cause changes in the identity standard. The final type of change results from “negotiation and the presence of others” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p.185). This change happens when people are able to see themselves from the viewpoint of others and make changes to their identity based on how others see them.

Situational change is the primary type of identity change for the participants in this study. While the reasons for their change in situations varied, they all experienced an identity change when the end of the professional athletic careers caused a situational meaning change to their identities. According to Burke and Stets (2009) identities change as a result of situational changes that conflict with the identity standard and cannot be resolved. The first reaction is to “restore the situational meanings to match the identity-standard meanings.” When that cannot happen, the identity standard must be changed to meet the new situational meaning. Burke and Stets (2009) state when the identity standard changes to meet the new situational meaning, the identity is no longer strained.

**Coming to Grips with Loss Theory**

In her research regarding how people experience alcohol and drug addiction, Cummings (2010) developed the grounded theory called “Coming to Grips with Loss.” According to Cummings (2010) coming to grips with loss is the “core variable” of the loss process (p. 16). People experience loss, even the same loss, in many ways. Cummings’s (2010) loss theory provided a framework to understand why people who share a common loss, experience the loss in different ways. The theory is based on a
four-part loss cycle. First people discover the loss from either external or internal sources. They then assess the level of loss to determine its significance, scope, and predicted length. Third, people move between mourning and coping as they process the loss. During the fourth stage, people develop various strategies to cope with the loss. People may continuously negotiate various phases, and even repeat the cycle until they fully process the loss.

According to Cummings (2010), people discover loss in various ways. The loss may be discovered through an internal process, such as identifying changes in a relationship, faith, or personal health. For example, Cummings identified a seminary student who questioned his belief in God. His internal process of recognizing the loss began a cycle of “coming to grips with loss”. The identification of loss can also be an external process. Another example from Cummings research is the unexpected loss of a job. The person is often shocked at the loss and feels powerless. An external source of loss often causes an increased level of stress because individuals cannot prepare for the loss. External sources of loss can be surprising and cause “intense emotional reactions of powerlessness, anger, or feeling victimized” (p. 29).

The second stage is assessing the loss (Cummings, 2010). During this stage, people determine the severity of the loss based on the impact the loss on their lives. The assessment includes “personal life experiences, possible consequences, impact, scope, and expected duration of the loss” (Cummings, 2010, p. 17). The various life experience people have influences how they assess the level of loss. The value of a loss is “based on their priorities, hopes, plans, and expectations for themselves or others” (p. 31).

Cummings described a woman who experienced a car break-in and subsequently
struggled to cope with safety concerns. She continues to “come to grips with her loss” because of the value she placed on her personal safety. According to Cummings, personal experiences exert the greatest influence on the loss process, and may be an important factor in determining the length of time people experiences the loss process.

The third stage of the cycle involves mourning (Cummings, 2010). During this stage people experience the various emotions tied to the loss. The intensity of their feelings related to loss depends on the “level of perceived importance ascribed to the loss, scope, available resources, and expected duration of the loss” (p. 18). The process in the mourning stages progresses from “the initial reaction, to ongoing responses, to the evolving situation” (p. 34). People’s initial reactions are often extreme and overwhelming. They report feeling numb and in disbelief. The ongoing responses vary. People may float in and out of feelings in a transient manner” (p. 37). People in mourning experience anger, denial, and depression. Cummings identified a participant who became paralyzed in an accident. Hope allowed him to survive the accident. “This stage of the process ends when impact of recalling the loss “has a decreasing level of emotional disruption” (p. 18).

The final stage of coming to grips with loss is coping (Cummings, 2010). During this stage people use various approaches to cope with their feelings of loss. Effective coping strategies help loss survivors move more easily through the cycle, while others with less successful coping strategies may take longer to conclude the cycle. One coping strategy people may use when the loss is overwhelming is to delay their process of coming to grips with the loss. Another coping strategy is to resolve the loss. The resolving coping strategy involves people using their various resources available to them,
and planning to process through the loss. The coping stage is cyclical and occurs simultaneously to assessing and mourning a loss (Cummings, 2010).

**Summary**

I initially chose four theories as a framework for the literature regarding the retirement experience of professional athletes. The first theory, Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) conceptual model of athletic retirement, provided an overview of the retirement process of athletes. The second theory, Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory as modified by Drahota and Eitzen (1998) provided a lens to analyze how being a former professional athlete influences the development of the athlete’s new role following retirement. The third theory, liminality (Turner, 1967), applied to the study of transitional stage of athletes when they are no longer professional athletes, yet have not determined their next role. Finally, transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000) provided a framework to interpret how an athlete could use the retirement experience to develop a new self-identity. These theories helped me interpret my content review findings.

After collecting and analyzing my data, I used Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory (1988), Burke and Stets (2009) identity theory to explain the personal and professional changed experienced by athletes. Because quite a few participants ended their careers due to injury and deselection, I adopted, Cummings’ (2010) “coming to grips with loss” to analyze their experience of grieving and loss due to the abrupt end to their career. In the next chapter I describe the methods used to study how professional athletes experience and make meaning of their retirement transition.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

I selected qualitative research, and specifically phenomenology as an approach within qualitative research (Creswell, 2013) to understand how professional athletes experience and make meaning of their retirement. I studied how athletes experienced the shift from the fame and fortune associated with the active athletic career to changes in identity and potential loss of resources in retirement. In this chapter I first describe qualitative research and explain why I adopted this method to investigate my research question. I then describe phenomenology as a tradition within qualitative research and my reasons for selecting this approach.

After describing general theories and assumptions pertaining to qualitative research and phenomenology, I offer a detailed description of the research process, including the procedure used to obtain permission to conduct my study, recruitment of participants, procedures followed in human subjects research, and methods used in data collection and analysis. I conclude with a discussion of reliability and validity of data in qualitative research, and the ethical guidelines adopted in my study.

**Qualitative Research**

At the center of this research question is the need to understand how professional athletes experience retirement. I adopted the qualitative research methodology because the goal of qualitative research is “to better understand human behavior and experience” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 43). In addition, qualitative research allows “the meaning, for participants in the study, for the events, situation, experience, and action they are involved with or engaged in” to be more readily accessed (Maxwell, 2013, p. 30). Qualitative research allowed me to examine the retirement experiences from the athletes’
point of view to better understand how they made meaning of the experiences. In this particular study, the qualitative method provided athletes the opportunity to voice their personal narratives regarding their retirement experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative research provides a framework to research and analyze how people experience their world (Bazeley, 2013). This method focuses on how factors influence and interact to affect experience, rather than the quantitative approach focused on causal relationships between variables (Maxwell, 2013). In addition to focusing on the experience and the meaning of an event, researchers use qualitative research to understand the connectivity of people, events, and situations.

Maxwell (2013) identified five intellectual goals used to identify whether a qualitative research facilitates the research design. These include:

1. Understanding the meaning, for participants in the study of the events, situations, experiences and action they are involved with or engaged in…
2. Understanding the particular contexts within which the participants act, and the influence this context has on their actions…
3. Understanding the process by which events and actions take place…
4. Identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences, and generating new, “grounded” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) theories about the latter…
5. Developing causal explanations (p. 30)

Three of Maxwell’s (2013) five intellectual goals apply to my study. Maxwell’s first goal, understanding meaning, involves the central question of my study concerning how athletes experience the transition to retirement. The second goal, understanding the context, concerns the culture of professional athletics and how it affects aspiring and employed athletes. This may also include the larger societal context “pushing” and “pulling” young men into careers as professional athletes.
My study clearly involved Maxwell’s (2013) third goal – the process leading to certain events; this concerns the retirement process and its effects on individuals. The process involved steps taken or not taken by athletes in preparing for retirement and their experiences of this process.

Qualitative research allowed me to consider multiple factors involved in the retirement process. Bazeley (2013) identified several factors involved in qualitative research, including the investigation of issues with “multiple layers,” typically involving peoples’ stories. The retirement experience of professional athletes included multiple facets and involved an emergent approach. Qualitative research provided the framework to study the experiences of professional athletes to find meaning in their experiences, actions, and choices.

Philosophy is a significant component of qualitative research because it helps researchers develop questions and allows them to recognize the effect their personal position has on the research (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell, “philosophical assumptions are typically the first ideas and beliefs that inform our research” (p. 16). Qualitative research is shaped by four philosophical assumptions: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Creswell, 2013).

The ontological assumption refers to the reality of the situation. It takes into account that there may be multiple views of reality based on seeing reality from different perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Participants possess different views and experiences. Many factors may influence their experiences. The ontological assumption allowed me to recognize and value different perspectives athletes held on retirement and the reasons for these differences.
The topic of this research is personal to the athletes. Participant trust and the development of respectful relationships proved an essential imperative to access their retirement experiences and ascertain what participants learned from the process of transitioning. The epistemological assumption incorporates the relationships developed between the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2013). My lack of experience as a professional athlete posed a challenge and also an opportunity. I addressed the challenge by explaining the purpose of my study, my motivation as an educator, and the study’s importance to youth. I used my lack of athletic experience as an opportunity to develop trust. I could not compare their experiences to my own or make any judgments.

The axiological assumption incorporates the role of values in the research. It requires researchers to recognize the role of their values and beliefs in the research (Creswell, 2013). Identifying the axiological assumptions involved in this research question was important because of the high-profile participants. I examined my personal views regarding professional athletes. I questioned where I was a sports fanatic, and the degree to which I believe society appropriately promotes professional athletics. Identifying my values as a potential source of research bias and keeping an open mind to learning about the participant experience without judgment helped me limit bias.

This qualitative research study involved an exploration of how professional athletes experienced and made meaning of retirement. Participants shared their personal retirement experiences. Because these experiences were not identical, I adjusted interview questions and procedures to stay open to participants’ experiences and directions. The methodological assumptions allowed me the freedom to make necessary changes as data was collected and new information found (Creswell, 2013). I used the
phenomenological approach of qualitative research to conduct my study. In the next section I describe this approach and its applicability to my study.

**Phenomenological Approach**

I chose phenomenology as my primary research approach because my question concerned how the professional athletes experience and make meaning of retirement. Phenomenological studies attempt to identify “how” a participant makes meaning of a particular experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). According to Moustakas (1994), “the aim [of phenomenology] is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p.13). Van Manen (2014) added, “While natural science inclines to mathematics, phenomenology gravitates to meaning and reflectivity” (p. 17).

The phenomenological approach provided a method to study the experience of retirement within the context of each athlete’s life. Moustakas (1994) argued “understanding of meaningful concrete relations implicit in the original description of the experience *in the context of a particular* situation is the primary target of phenomenological knowledge” (p. 14). The phenomenological approach allows researchers to go beyond the basic facts and understand how people created meaning of their experience for themselves.

My study concerned the experience of eight retired professional athletes to determine the essence of their retirement experiences. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenology involves describing “the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (p.76). The researcher in a phenomenological study identifies an event (the phenomenon), solicits information from
people who have experienced that phenomenon, and then describes the core principles of the phenomenon the participants experienced. The description identifies both what was experienced as well as how the participants experienced it (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenological approach allowed me to analyze the various athletes’ experiences to discern a common meaning of the retirement experience.

Creswell (2013) identified seven characteristics of phenomenology. I describe each characteristic and then show how it applied to my study. First, the phenomenologist asks, is the topic worthy of study? The phenomenological researcher studies the experience in and of itself before any interpretation (Dukes, 1984; Van Manen, 2014). According to Moustakas (1994), “the challenge facing the human science researcher is to describe things in themselves, to permit what is before one to enter consciousness and be understood in its meanings and essences in the life of intuition and self-reflection” (p.27). Limited studies concerning how professional athletes experience retirement supported my research proposal. Collecting professional athletes’ stories of retirement and focusing on how they experienced the retirement transition provide understanding of the phenomenon of retirement from professional athletics. This understanding provides insight in how to better prepare young athletes for possible professional athletic careers.

The second characteristic is “the exploration of this phenomenon with a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). The study involved high-profile participants. Professional athletes in the United States acquire celebrity status; in fact their lives may be viewed as spectacle, and their retirement experience at the end of their career attracts curiosity among sports enthusiasts. The phenomenological method allowed me to recognize my assumptions
and consciously set aside my judgments to provide “a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by the customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p.41).

The third characteristic of a phenomenological study involves the “philosophical discussion about the basic ideas involved in conducting” this type of study (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). This incorporates both the objective and subjective experiences of the participant. Examining how professional athletes experience and make meaning of retirement provides the opportunity to identify both the objective and subjective retirement experiences of multiple athletes (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas (1994) discussed the noetic and noematic sides of an experience. “On the noematic side is the uncovering and explication, the unfolding and becoming distinct, the clearing of what is actually presented in consciousness. On the noetic sides is an explication of the intention processes themselves” (p.30). Phenomenology provided a framework for me to learn the noematic meanings athletes give to the retirement experience as well as an opportunity to discover noetic reasons for the noematic meanings. The interviews with the retired athletes helped me determine if there are relationships among athletes in how they identified noetic factors and their ascribed noematic meanings of retirement. For example, while retirement can be defined as the end of a career, what type of meaning, how the athletes perceive retirement, how they experience retirement provide additional meaning to what retirement means to the athletes.

The fourth characteristic of phenomenology concerns how researchers “bracket” themselves out of the research (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology focuses on looking at a
known experience in a new way. The bracketing process, also referred to as the époché, allows the researcher to “set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). Because my research question involved an area outside of my experience, I possessed a naïve view of retirement. However, I bracketed my thoughts and judgments regarding professional athletes and their retirement experiences, to ensure better methods in collecting in analyzing data.

Phenomenological methods allowed me to examine how I might be connected to the study, and then remove myself from it to adopt a more “objective” stance.

The fifth characteristic of phenomenology involves the data collection phase (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenological method provided a framework to collect data regarding athletes’ personal experiences through interviews. Interviews helped me identify unique experiences concerning athletes’ retirement, and therefore describe subjective, as well as objective experiences common among the participants. The interviews afforded an opportunity to explore the phenomenon of “how” athletes experience the process of retirement from professional athletics (Moustakas, 1994).

Data analysis moves from a small focus to a broader focus in the sixth characteristic of phenomenology (Creswell, 2013). At the center of my study is the idea of how athletes make meaning from their retirement experiences. The “what,” retirement from professional athletics, is superficially simple to identify. However, a phenomenological approach allowed me to look at retirement experiences in a new way, “as if to see them for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85).

Creswell’s (2013) seventh characteristic incorporates the “what” and “how” into a broader meaning. I chose to use a phenomenological approach to determine how
professional athletes experience and make meaning of their retirement. I determined commonalities among the athletes’ experiences. After data collection on the experience of retirement, I reflected on a possible broader meaning existing among the various retirement experiences (Van Manen, 2014). A phenomenological study allowed me to look at individual data and then compile my participants’ stories to determine “the essence of the experience for all the individuals” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76).

Phenomenology is a method focused on questioning to gain insight, not necessarily answers (Van Manen, 2014). The insights led to an understanding of the experience of retirement from professional athletics and how the preparation of young athletes may alter their retirement experiences. I next describe the steps involved in conducting my research.

**UST Institutional Review Board**

Prior to beginning any interviews, I gained approval of the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this study. The purpose of the IRB is to ensure the research is being conducted in an ethical manner, participants’ identities are kept confidential, and the rights of the study’s human participants are protected. I followed all IRB policies and completed the required application and accompanying forms regarding my study. I identified the proposed study, the research questions, how I planned to conduct the study, and how I ensured ethical treatment of the participants in my application.

The research followed the guidelines and procedures for informing voluntary participants of their rights within the research process. I informed all participants of the possible risks of participating in the study. I assigned all participants pseudonyms in the
study. I agreed to destroy all notes, transcripts, and recordings six months after the study’s completion. Prior to the interviews, I sent the participants a purpose statement regarding the research as well as a copy of the confidentiality agreement for the study. Before I started each interview, I reviewed the confidentiality agreement with the participant. I asked if the participant understood the confidentiality agreement, answered questions, or responded to items needing more clarification.

After answering any necessary questions and gaining verbal agreement to understanding the confidentiality agreement, I obtained the participant’s signature on two copies of the confidentiality agreement. After I signed the two copies, I gave one copy to the participant and I kept the other copy a secure location. (See Appendix A for Consent Form).

All participants recruited agreed to voluntarily participate in the study. Prior to conducting the interviews I ensured each participant understood the purpose of the study and the protections afforded to them. If at any time a participant appeared to be overwhelmed or upset, I offered to provide to provide a break from the interview. I informed participants they could voluntarily withdraw from the interview at any time, and any data collected before they withdrew would not be used in the study. No one withdrew from my study.

**Recruitment and Selection of Participants**

The participants for this study belonged to an exclusive group. Gaining access to this group of people proved challenging. I developed trusting relationships with the participants. I used purposive sampling since all participants had to be former professional athletes (Nardi, 2006). Participants played professional athletics for the
National Football League (NFL), the National Basketball Association (NBA), the Major League Baseball (MLB), and the National Hockey League (NHL), as shown in Table 1. I recruited members from these associations due to the level of the sports’ popularity in the United States and the significant salaries athletes earn in these various sports. I limited participants to athletes who played for at least one professional season in their sport.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Length of Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marshall Luther</td>
<td>NFL</td>
<td>6 seasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Miller</td>
<td>NFL</td>
<td>5 seasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew Jones</td>
<td>NFL</td>
<td>14 seasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Johansen</td>
<td>NFL</td>
<td>14 seasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Schulmann</td>
<td>MLB</td>
<td>11 seasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Wilson</td>
<td>NHL</td>
<td>13 seasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noah Wymann</td>
<td>NHL</td>
<td>13 seasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Kolman</td>
<td>NBA</td>
<td>6 seasons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I limited participants to male professional athletes for two reasons. Currently most female professional athletes do not make the same level of salaries as their male counterparts and do not hold the same type of social status as the male athletes. Because of the lower social status and significantly lower salaries, female athletes may not necessarily have similar experiences transitioning into retirement as male athletes. I examined retirement and explored changes in “fame and fortune” experienced by professional athletes to educate aspiring male youth athletes about the dreams and realities of professional sports.
Due to the exclusivity of the group and the challenges of gaining access to multiple members of the group, the sample size was relatively small. Eight retired athletes participated in the study. I began the study knowing two athletes who previously expressed interest in my topic and volunteered to participate.

I began the study planning to use the snowball method to recruit additional participants (Nardi, 2006). Due to the sensitive nature of the research problem and the exclusivity of the sample population, I believed the snowball method would provide me with the best access to appropriate participants and help establish trust with new participants (Sadler et al., 2010). I believed the method would also help me identify new participants based on the knowledge current participants possessed regarding the potential participants’ situations (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

I thought two originally identified participants might lead me to additional participants. However, the snowball method was not a successful method of recruitment for this study. At the end of the interview with each of my first two participants, I asked participants for contacts with other athletes who might be interested in participating in the study. Each participant stated he believed he knew others who might be interested. Approximately three days after the initial interviews, I followed up with both of the original two participants. The first two participants never helped me recruit new participants.

When I realized I could not solely rely on the snowball method to identify additional participants, I began using friends, family, co-workers, the Internet and social media to make connections. Whenever people asked me about my research, I asked them if they knew any retired professional athletes or new others with contacts. Others began
using their social and business networks to identify potential participants. Business and social connections and family and friends helped me recruit four additional participants. Using Twitter and the Internet, I contacted five retired professional athletes. I secured two participants from the five potential retirees.

At the end of each interview, I asked the participant if he knew of additional retired athletes who might be interested in participating in the study, hoping the snowball method may still work. Four of the participants casually named athletes they thought might participate without providing any contact information. I asked those participants to provide my contact information to potential participants. I contacted participants again, via phone or email regarding potential new participants. In one case, I did not receive a return call from my original participant. The other participants stated they shared my information with friends, and the friends would contact me if interested.

**Data Collection Methods**

I contacted participants via phone or email to arrange the interviews. I informed the participants that I anticipated the interview would last approximately 90 minutes. The participant and I determined a comfortable and non-threatening location. I met five of the participants in their workplaces for the interviews. I conducted the other three interviews by telephone. Two of the interviews took place by phone due to the location of participants. The third phone interview occurred due to scheduling conflicts - a phone interview was the only viable option.

I recorded all interviews. The participants were informed verbally that the interview would be recorded prior to the beginning of the interview. In addition, a statement regarding the audio recording of the interview was included in the
confidentiality agreement. I used a transcription service to transcribe five of the interviews; I transcribed the other three interviews. The transcription service signed a non-disclosure agreement (see Appendix B). I assigned pseudonyms to each participant. I kept all data, including a list of the pseudonyms, in a secured, password-protected file on my computer. Data will be kept for six months following the completion of the study.

The status of the participants added a layer of complexity to the interview process. Marshall and Rossman (2011) identified challenges occurring when interviewing people with an “elite” status (p. 156). Given that the athletes may have had some training on how to manage an interview, I monitored who was controlling the interview. I recognized participants might be reluctant to discuss certain aspects of their lives and careers (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). To compensate for their possible hesitation in answering questions, I assured participants I would keep their identities anonymous. None of the participants appeared to be reluctant to answer any of the questions and willingly provided elaboration when requested.

Following a phenomenological approach to interviewing, I asked open-ended interview questions. I followed Creswell’s (2013) guide to questions for phenomenological studies. The questions revolved around what the participants experienced during the initial phases of their retirement from professional athletics, and what things influenced how they made the adjustment to retirement. The questions allowed the participants to share their experiences as professional athletes and their transition experiences out of professional athletics.

The interviews centered on the “deep, lived meaning that events have for individuals” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 148). The goal of the phenomenological
interview is to understand how the participant experienced and made meaning of the phenomenon (Seidman, 2013). The interview process facilitated the participants making meaning of the experience. It was the process of “selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them that makes telling stories a meaning-making experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 7).

I began the interviews with biographical questions to gain some basic background information from the participant (Appendix C). Following the biographical questions, I moved into the “grand-tour” questions (McCracken, 1988, p. 35). These questions provided the participants the opportunity to share their experiences in a non-threatening manner. I started with an opening question, asking them to describe their initial experience with retirement and evaluated the amount of information the participant shared without prompting.

During the interview, I used “floating prompts” to gain clarification of the participant’s responses (McCracken, 1988, p. 35). I asked additional follow-up questions after posing the initial questions (e.g. Can you give me more detail about that? Could you please clarify what you meant by….?). I phrased the questions to focus the participants’ answers on describing what the experience was like, rather than their opinions regarding the experience (Van Manen, 2014). To remain true to the phenomenological approach, the questions must encourage the participant to “capture experiences as they are lived through” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 298).

I incorporated Bevan’s (2014) method of phenomenological interviewing. Bevan (2014) developed a structure for phenomenological interviewing that is comprised “of three main domains: contextualization….; apprehending the phenomenon….; and
clarifying the phenomenon…” (p.138). As shown in Table 2, I asked questions related to each of the three domains to collect data regarding how the athlete experienced and made meaning from his retirement.

Table 2
*Interview questions categorized by Bevan’s (2014) phenomenological interviewing methods (p. 138)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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| Contextualization | Provide an understanding of the phenomenon’s context | • How many years had you played prior to your retirement?  
• Was there a specific reason for your retirement?  
• Describe the moment when you realized your athletic career was over.  
• Describe your process of determining it was time to retire from professional (football, basketball, baseball, hockey) |
| Apprehending   | Exploration of the phenomenon using descriptive questioning | • Describe a typical day during the season  
• Describe a typical day during the off-season  
• Describe a typical day during retirement |
| Clarifying     | Use of “imaginative variation” to identify variant and invariant elements of the phenomenon | • How do you think your retirement experience would have differed if you had retired due to injury, deselection, or choice? (I will use the two options that do not apply to the specific applicant’s retirement cause) |
After following Bevan’s (2014) process, as outlined above, I then asked questions focusing on the athletes’ experiences with the processes and how they made meaning from them.

**Data Analysis**

My data analysis followed the steps identified by Bazeley (2013). I initially read each transcript from beginning to end without making any notes. I then reread the transcript a second time and made notes while I read. I labeled key points and made reflections about the data. After reading the transcripts I noted my new questions and reflections. I also added comments about my learning and new ideas gathered from this data.

The rereading of the transcripts also started the coding process. Codes, according to Bazeley (2013), are “a means of access to evidence; [coding] is a tool for querying data, for testing assumptions and conclusions” (p. 125). The first codes identified in the data, while vague, allowed me to begin organizing the data. These emergent codes then led to focused codes that provided a means for specific analysis. The codes functioned as a method to “manage [my] data; build ideas from [my] data; facilitate the asking of questions of [my] data” (Bazeley, 2013, p. 127).

I then organized the focused codes into a hierarchy identifying main themes and subordinate themes (Bazeley, 2013; Creswell, 2013). These themes allowed me to follow the steps outlined by Creswell (2013) and look for statements that “provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (p. 82). The analysis of themes in the data allowed me to identify common trends and draw
conclusions regarding the “essence” of the phenomenon of retirement from professional athletics (Creswell, 2013, p. 82).

Following the coding of the data and initial review of the data for common themes, I used three theories to further analyze the study’s findings. I first used Ebaugh’s role exit theory (1988) to explore the retirement experience of professional athletes. Role exit theory provided insight to the transition participants experienced as they left their roles as professional athletes and moved into new roles in their lives. The second theory I adopted was Burke and Stets (2009) identity theory. I adopted this theory after reviewing my data to analyze how the athletes’ identities developed, sometimes in a limited manner, and how retirement forced the athletes’ identities to change. I adopted a third theory, Coming to Grips with Loss, a grounded theory developed by Cummings (2010). Coming to grips with loss provided a context to explore how the retired athletes managed loss. A more thorough explanation of the application of these theories is located in chapter eight.

Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research

Maxwell (2013) identified the issue of validity in qualitative research as “controversial” because of its close association with quantitative research (p. 122). According to Maxwell (2013), some qualitative researchers have replaced validity with other terms “such as trustworthiness, authenticity, and quality” (p. 122). Maxwell (2013) agreed the term validity needed to be rethought when applied to qualitative research. The identification of validity in qualitative research “consists of your conceptualization of these threats and the strategies you use to discover if they are plausible in your actual research situation, and to deal with them if they are plausible” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 123). I
noted two validity threats identified by Maxwell in my study, namely researcher bias and reactivity.

Researcher bias accounts for the researcher’s role in this research. Totally removing the bias in the study was not possible, and, therefore, I identified how my “values and expectations may have influenced the conduct and conclusion of the study” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124). My biases in regards to this study included how I view athletes. As a non-athlete, I grew up believing the stereotype of the “dumb jock.” It was imperative that I remained mindful of this bias as I reviewed and analyzed the athletes’ responses and reactions to retirement. As the participants shared their scholastic experiences or sometimes lack thereof, I kept my preconceived stereotypes about the intelligence level of “jocks” out of my analysis of the data.

As a former high school teacher, I experienced multiple interactions with coaches who wanted me to pass failing students so that they would remain eligible to play sports. Again, I consciously noted how these experiences might affect how I viewed the athletes’ responses regarding their experiences as professional athletes transitioning to retirement. When a participant shared advantages he experienced as a student, I internally noted my personal bias. As I analyzed the data I reminded myself frequently of my bias and reviewed my notes for possible signs of it.

The second validity threat Maxwell (2013) identified is reactivity. Reactivity involves how researchers affect how the participants’ respond to the interview questions and the information they may choose to share. Maxwell (2013) stated “trying to minimize your influence is not a meaningful goal for qualitative research…what is important is to understand how you are influencing what the informant says, and how this
affects the validity of the inferences you can draw” (p. 125). The most significant factor is gender. Men dominate professional athletics. The fact that I am a woman may have influenced how participants interacted with me, and the information they provided. During each in-person interview, the participant sat behind a rather large desk and leaned back in his chair frequently. Those actions often reminded me of a king on a throne. During these times I was highly aware of the possible influence of gender roles on the interview.

Another factor is that I am not a member of an elite group of professional athletes. I did not want to appear as a doting fan, nor as someone trying to inflate my status by developing relationships with professional athletes. At the beginning of each interview, I stated I was not a sports fan. In addition I only knew of the participant because of my initial research in locating participants, and I actually knew very little about their particular sport. I believe this honesty helped establish a level of trust that allowed the participants to share “insider” information and experiences with me.

Maxwell (2013) developed a checklist of validity tests for qualitative research. This lists includes: (1) intensive, long-term involvement; (2) rich data; (3) respondent validation; (4) intervention; (5) searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases; (6) triangulation; (7) numbers; (8) comparison (pp. 126-128). In my study I emphasized rich data, respondent validation, and the search for discrepant evidence and negative cases to support the validity of my study.

Rich data includes the quality of the interview questions and the depth of responses offered by participants until I achieved saturation (no more is learned). Allowing the participants to review the interview transcripts provides a validity check of
respondent validation. Maxwell (2013) wrote that respondent validation is the “single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do” (p. 126). At the end of each interview I asked each participant if he would like me to send the transcripts to him for review and clarification. None of the participants expressed interest in reviewing the transcripts.

The third validity check I implemented was to look for discrepant evidence and negative cases (Maxwell, 2013). I reviewed my data looking for discrepant information that did not support my conclusions and determine if my conclusion required changing or modification. I did not identify significantly discrepant data. I present the information in this study to the reader to make his or her own conclusions based on the information.

**Ethical Considerations**

I consider many ethical factors in this study because the participants are public figures, and they may be easily identified by personal information and experiences. It was imperative to keep the players identities confidential. I did not use names or other identifying features, such as teams played for, positions, player numbers, or specific years played within the study. I used sport played and length of career in the study as those factors might exert influence on how athletes experienced the transition into retirement, and did not represent a large threat to confidentiality.

As I conducted an interview of a former NFL player for my pilot study, the issue of ethics became even more apparent to me. During the interview, he stated he shared information with me he never told his friends. He included information regarding illegal activities, such as gambling, prostitution, drug dealing, and point-shaving. He recounted many activities he witnessed happening on planes, buses, and in locker rooms. I realized
that I was becoming privy to information that was happening “behind the curtain” of professional sports. Being allowed to glimpse behind the curtain, even through another person’s retelling, reiterated to me the importance of keeping the athletes’ identities confidential.

It was imperative to the snowball sampling method to protect confidentiality and gain participant trust. I planned to rely on one athlete’s recommendation to lead me to another athlete. The first athlete needed to trust me enough to encourage his peers to also participate in the research. While the snowball method was unsuccessful in this study, I do not feel it was because of a lack of trust. My interpretation of the snowball method’s failure relates more to the athletes not realizing how dependent I was on their recommendations rather than a lack of trust between the participants and me.

The sample size of this study is small. Therefore, any generalizability is limited. I realize a sample size of eight participants prevents generalizations, but it does offer a window on the retirement process and experience.

**Reflexivity**

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher must be identified and explored. It is not possible to fully remove the influence of the researcher on the study. Therefore, qualitative researchers acknowledge their role in the research (Creswell, 2013). I have not been a professional athlete, nor have I been in a close relationship with one. However, that does not mean my beliefs regarding professional athletes may not factor into the study. As an educator I respond negatively to statements made by students regarding their desire to be professional athletes when they grow up. I know the odds are against them achieving their dream. I also believe student-athletes do not get the same
quality of education as non-athlete students receive, and hope they prepare themselves for other careers by choosing education.

It was important to be cognizant of how the participant viewed me (McCracken, 1988). While I wanted the participants to view me as a professional, I did not want to be too distant from them and appear to be cold, or untrustworthy. Factors such as gender, level of education, and socioeconomic status were involved in the interviews. While I presented myself professionally, I also shared with the participants my interest in understanding their experience and meaning, not my judgment of their experience.

Summary

I provided a detailed explanation of why qualitative research with a phenomenological approach served as the appropriate method to better understand how professional athletes experience and make meaning of their retirement experiences. I explained how I adhered to all IRB policies in regards to conducting research with humans by protecting their privacy, rights, and dignity. I also addressed considerations regarding reliability, validity, ethics, and confidentiality in conducting my study. The next four chapters present the main themes identified from the participant data. I begin with the stories told about the business side of professional sports, describing how athletes became commodities once they signed a contract. Becoming a professional athlete means agreeing to lead a regimented life, whether playing on the field, preparing for the next game, or staying in shape during the off season. Professional athletes feel programmed from the time they rise to the end of their day.
CHAPTER 4: A COMMODITY

Children grow up playing a sport, possibly dreaming of playing the sport into college, and some hold the lofty dream of playing a sport at the professional level. “Playing a sport” suggests fun, stress-free, casual participation. Those few young athletes who do manage to play at the professional level encounter a new reality. Playing a sport professionally is a business, in many cases a billion dollar business and their teams now control how the players live.

Within this chapter I discuss two subthemes related to athletes becoming commodities in the profitable business of professional athletics. The first subtheme is the regimented lifestyle athletes lived both during the season and in the off-season. The second subtheme is how athletes learned to understand the business aspect of their athletic careers.

Regimented Lifestyles

Professional athletes live extremely regimented lives during the season. Their teams’ management control their daily schedules to the minute. The athletes typically continue the tight structure during the off-seasons in preparation for the upcoming seasons. They can become dependent on a regimented lifestyle and continue to adhere to it throughout their lives.

A Typical Day During the Season

When asked to discuss a typical day during their seasons, each of the eight participants were able not only to explain a typical day, but could easily recall how each day was scheduled, to the hour. Even the athletes who had been retired more than ten years responded with an hour-by-hour explanation of schedules during their seasons.
There is little flexibility in the life of a professional athlete. Their lives become very regimented, almost military-like, and leaving that regimented life can be a difficult transition for some.

Marshall Luther played professional football in the National Football League for six seasons. When asked about his typical day during the football season, he easily recalled the entire schedule for the week, even though he has been retired for sixteen years. Mondays were film sessions starting at 11:00 a.m. Therefore, athletes started their day prior to 11:00 a.m. with a weightlifting session. The film session typically lasted four hours followed by light conditioning. Tuesdays, typically their days off, might include another weightlifting session. According to Luther, Wednesdays and Thursdays started with special teams, offensive/defensive teams, and position meetings lasting throughout the morning. Then, during a one-hour lunch break, the athletes ate on-site specific meals created to meet their nutritional requirements. The afternoons consisted of walk-throughs on the field, group practices, additional film study, treatments, and weightlifting. Their days typically ended by 6:00 p.m. Fridays consisted of the same morning activities as the previous days, but the practice day usually ended by noon. Saturdays differed depending on if the Sunday game was at home or away.

The day before home games, athletes attended a morning meeting and were on their own until 5:00 p.m. when they were expected to report to the team hotel. Coaches required all athletes to stay at their team hotel the night prior to a home game. This requirement allowed coaches to monitor the players the night before the game and to have additional team meetings. For away games, the athletes reported to the airport and
traveled with the team to the game city. Sundays, game days, according to Luther, were obviously “full days.”

Another former NFL player, Anthony Miller, recalled a similar schedule to Luther’s. Miller stated life during his five seasons in the NFL was very “non-glamorous,” consisting of weightlifting, meetings and practices. The regimented life surprised Miller. He stated, “Once you’re in it, you realize it’s not all glamour. It’s a lot of hard work, and it’s going to meetings and sitting through film sessions. It’s a lot different than maybe most people would expect.”

When Matthew Jones recalled his experiences in his career as a professional football player, he shared many of the same memories of a regimented life as Miller and Luther. Even after fifteen years of retirement, Jones could easily recall the daily, regimented routine of his fourteen-year NFL career. Similar to Luther, Jones recalled the set routine for players each day of the week. He added, “It’s all mapped out. You know at this time I am here, at this time I am here.” For Jones, his off time was also controlled by his coaches’ expectations. In addition to what Luther recalled, Jones also noted how players would be expected to take game film home to review and study. Jones stated that he had to know as much about his opponents as the coaches knew. For Jones, it was all about “learning your opponent, studying your opponent, so you knew what he was going to do even before he did it.” Throughout the season, week in and week out, the routine continued. Jones recalled, “Then it started all over again…for me that was my norm. I didn’t know anything else other than that.”

Sharing similar experiences, former NFL player William Johansen also recounted his daily schedule during his 14-season professional football career. Johansen described
the weekends during the season as “consumed with football.” Whether the team was playing at home or traveling, the schedule started at 7:00 a.m. for practice and meetings. The players then reported to the team hotel, even if they were playing at home.

Johansen, who also was a player representative for the NFL Players’ Association, stated that each week the teams were required to provide players a mandatory day off. However, after listening to his recollection, it did not appear to be a true day off. Johansen said, “Just because you have that day off doesn’t mean that most guys don’t go in. A lot of guys do. They’ll go in and get treatment on injuries, go in and get a workout in, then they go watch film, but it’s all voluntary. That’s all on your own.” Johansen described similar experiences to the other NFL players with daily meetings lasting for the majority of the mornings, lunch and then practices during the afternoon. According to Johansen, additional meetings followed most practices before players’ days ended at about 5:30 p.m.

A regimented life in professional sports was not only limited to players in the NFL. Michael Schulmann, former Major League Baseball (MLB) player also recalled a very regimented life during his 11 seasons. The schedule of a Major League Baseball player differed from that of a professional football player because of the frequency of the baseball games. There are 162 baseball games scheduled for each team during the regular MLB six-month season while there are only 16 games in the NFL regular season.

On a typical day during the season, players arrived at the ballpark about 1:30-1:45 p.m. Players started their day with any needed treatment for injuries. Following treatments, Schulmann participated in early batting practice. He then went back to the clubhouse for lunch, spent some time with the other athletes and then went to the field for
team batting practice. The schedule continued daily, changing only slightly to allow for travel from one city to another. Typically in baseball, the teams play a multiple game series in each location allowing players to remain in one location for multiple nights. Their games typically begin at 7:00 p.m., end after 10:00 pm, and players return to the hotel about midnight. Given the high number of games and necessary travel days, Schulmann stated that days off only occurred one time per month.

A regimented life was the norm in the National Hockey League (NHL) as well. In his 13-season NHL career Bill Wilson’s regimented life included not only his daily schedule, but his game day meals. According to Wilson, the level of speed and intensity in professional hockey required athletes to be highly conditioned for each game.

Wilson’s typical game day routine consisted of light skate for 30-60 minutes at about 10:00 a.m. for the home team and 11:30 a.m. for the visiting teams. Initially, he then went home and his wife cooked him a dinner of steak and potatoes. However, over time, he changed his routine game day menu to pasta, salad, and chicken or fish. He had his pre-game meal between 12:00-1:00 p.m. He did not like to eat much later than that if the game was at 7:00 p.m. He stated he felt sluggish if he ate any later in the day. Following his meal he rested for about an hour. Wilson stated he struggled to determine the right amount of afternoon rest. He wanted to be alert for the game and not feel tired but, “to me, that was one of the hardest things to regulate, knowing what to do because sometimes I didn’t get any sleep and I feel tired, brutal, but then played good. Then I got lots of sleep and I’m groggy.”

After resting, Wilson arrived at the rink about two hours prior to the game to get his sticks ready and attend a meeting to review strategies, take warm-up and then prepare
for the game to start. Being ready to play was vital for Wilson, “Hockey, if you’re not ready to play, if you’re not ready and alert, it’s a very dangerous game.”

Another former NHL player, Noah Wymann also recalled a regimented life during his hockey career. Wymann stated his schedule depended on whether it was a game day or a practice day. Wymann said he never did anything outside of his routine for the entire 13 years of his career, and his wife was there to help support his routine. On each game day, he completed a morning skate at the ice rink and then went home and his wife had the exact same meal on his plate — potatoes and spaghetti. He then took a nap, drank a pot of coffee and rode to the ice rink a few hours before the game. Wilson stated he would, “do the exact same thing before every game. Exact same thing.” He then added it was not a superstition; it was a ritual.

On non-game days Wilson rode a bike and lifted weights for strength training. He worked to get “all the energy back in your body” in order to be able to play the next game. In addition to the weightlifting and conditioning, the team was on the ice for about two hours per day. The players also participated in meetings and reviewed game tapes in order to prepare for upcoming games. Wilson stated, “It’s all encompassing, yeah, it’s all encompassing, there’s no, there’s nearly no, there’s nothing but it. That’s all there is.”

Life is very regimented according to Wilson, “You’re either focused on it and be ready for the game, or you don’t because you’re either so good you can play without doing that, or you’re not very good.”

Life as a professional basketball player in the National Basketball Association (NBA) also was regimented. Former NBA player, Daniel Kolman recalled following a very scheduled routine during his six seasons. His day started at 8:00 a.m. with a light
breakfast, followed by preparation for the day’s practice at the training facility. This preparation typically included getting ankles taped and working on extra shooting time with the coaching staff. By 10:00 a.m. the team started their warm-ups. Practice ended about noon each day. Coaches then told the athletes, “If you are playing more than 20 minutes, you are free to go, guys who are playing less than 20 minutes per game, you need to stay after practice to work with coaches and do more conditioning.”

After team practices, athletes typically spent an hour in the weight room. Any athletes who had injuries stayed after practice for additional treatments. Kolman added additional routines to his schedule, such as incorporating a massage therapist into his post-workout routine and sitting in the steam room. At the end of the day, he went home and “slept like a baby” until the next day.

Kolman also had game day routines. He arrived at the arena by 9:00 a.m. for extra shooting practice and then team walk-throughs of offensive plays and defensive sets for about an hour. After practice he went home and had his pre-game meal that never varied—penne pasta, sauce, and focaccia bread. He spent the rest of the afternoon having a light massage, showering and taking a nap until about 4:00 p.m. Coaches required athletes to be at the arena by 5:30pm, but Kolman always wanted to be the first player at the arena so he could shoot without any distractions. He always took 300 shots before each game, lifted weights, and got his ankles taped. For home games, the players headed to their own homes after the game. If it were an away game, they often showered, changed, and headed to the airport to fly to the next city.
Kolman commented on how the intensity of the schedule affected players. He stated a player might

play at home on Tuesday, in Denver on Wednesday, you come home, you practice on Thursday, to turn around and leave Thursday afternoon to go back to Portland. You play Portland on Friday, Sacramento on Saturday, fly home Sunday morning, practice Sunday afternoon, practice Monday morning, and then turn around and you play Cleveland at home on Tuesday night.

To support his routine, at the beginning of each season Kolman called ahead to all the hotels to have his meals and massages scheduled before he arrived in that city.

**The Off-Season Schedule**

The off-season for Luther was not nearly as long as it was for football fans. After players took four to six weeks off, the coaches expected players to lift weights and perform conditioning exercises four days a week for about three to four hours a day. This training lasted from February or March to July. Within that time period, players attended required mini-camps and other organized team activities (OTAs). While not all teams required players to stay in the area during their off-season, one team Luther played for did require the players to train at the team facility during the off-season. This allowed the coaches to monitor the players’ activities, even during off-season.

Jones recalled he did not approach the off-season like the majority of football players. In the off-season Jones stated, “It was time to do something else to get your mind off football.” However, he only allowed his body a two-week rest period before he started his training workouts in order to be ready for the next season. His off-season training consisted of morning weightlifting and aerobic workouts. The rest of the day was spent with family and doing charity work. Jones chose not to do his off-season training at the team facility until the team required players to return for mini-camps or
trainings. His job was to play football; Jones knew that he had to be in shape and ready
to play when the season started again. During the off-season and after the draft the team
held mini camps designed to meet the new players and to give them the new workout
they were expected to follow in the off-season.

By May, Jones stated, the workouts started to become more serious. He still had
time to be with family and friends, but according to Jones his “mind would start driving
to alright, I’m starting to think about what I was going to do against this team who we are
going to play the first day, so let’s start thinking about that.” To facilitate that thinking,
Jones watched game tapes of his upcoming opponents so he could start to prepare for the
new season. During June the team held another weeklong camp for all the players to
begin preparing for the new season. Players underwent their physicals in July and then
full training camp began. He recalled, “Football was what you did most of the time
because you had to be ready to go. The summers, were, yeah, they were fun, but they
ended when July rolled around and we knew it was all starting over.”

Being a long-time veteran of the game, Jones saw many changes in his 14 year
NFL career. He noted the off-seasons kept getting shorter and by the time he retired, he
did not feel there really was an off-season in the NFL. While some of the off-season
trainings were labeled as voluntary, Jones said the coaches made it quite clear that if
players did not attend the off-season voluntary trainings, there might not be a job for
them when they returned for the new season. Jones explained, “Most athletes are
competitive and are not going to give their job away. And those were the guys on the
bubble or they weren’t the starters. If you were secure and you just knew you could do
your job, and you would say hey, that’s my time off and I’m taking my time off.”
According to Jones he was a “bad guy” and did take his time off. Jones was highly competitive and continually trained on his own schedule. He was confident in his ability and knew the work he was putting into his performance. Players would have had to work hard to take his job. “I would tell people, you really got to beat me. You will have to literally drag me out of here if you want my job.” Jones attributed some of his long career to his ability to walk off the field and leave football behind, either after a game or after the season. “I always knew it was time to play, you play and when it’s not time for football then you gotta do other things.”

The Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) between the Players’ Association and the National Football League (NFL) controls activities during the off-season. As a former players’ representative, Johansen was well versed in the allowable off-season requirements for the players according to their CBA. Johansen stated that when he first started playing, the teams had required meetings and trainings in early March. Now the CBA allows for more downtime for the players between the end of one season and the beginning of the next season. The off time has been extended so that players are not required to attend Organized Team Activities (OTAs) until the beginning of April. The new season begins with a graduated training schedule of workouts four days per week. During the first few weeks preparing for the new season, players are not allowed to practice on the fields with the coaches. By the end of May and early June, practices with coaches begin. Johansen stated that teams are allowed specific numbers of OTAs each year prior to the beginning of training camps that start in late July.

The off-season in the MLB was similar to the off-season in the NFL. Schulmann reported he took approximately one month off each year, typically October, if his team
did not make it into the post-season. By November, Schulmann started his workouts again on his own. He lifted weights, ran and worked on getting his body stronger. By December, he started adding in speed and agility training to his routine. In January, Schulmann started working on catching and throwing one time per week and gradually increased the frequency throughout the month. By the middle of February, the team required players to report for spring training. Once spring training ended, the regular season started and the routine began again.

In addition to a regular routine of keeping fit during the off-season Wilson, like many of the other professional athletes, also recalled various charity events he participated in each year, such as softball tournaments hosted by his NHL team. It was important to him to return home during the off-season. The off-season provided time to spend time with his extended family during the summer months.

The off-season, according to Wymann, was more relaxed. He reported he typically took a month off, at least from the ice. He shared that early in his career he took less time off because he continually had to fight for his job. Wymann lost about 15 pounds every season so part of his off-season routine was working to put that weight back on. During the summer he lived at his cabin, skated at the local ice arena, taught a hockey camp and lifted weights. He even fished a bit each evening. However, there remained an edge of competition even during the off-season. Wymann stated, “I trained extremely hard, probably more so than anyone. I was always on that border of yeah, everyone on the team loves me, but if you can’t play, you can’t play, and so a guy like me had to, I trained really hard. I trained really hard.” His off-season training lasted about
three hours per day, which according to Wymann allowed for him to enjoy the day and get his “mind good again.”

Kolman also had a planned schedule for his off-season. He took the first six weeks off to spend with his family and did not touch a basketball or lift any weights. After this “rest” period, he gradually started lifting weights and riding an exercise bike, to “get my body back used to the grind.” By mid June he increased the rigor of his off-season workouts. He shot every day, played pick-up games at the gym, and lifted weights. Kolman called this phase one. He started phase two in August during which his trainings became more intense. He increased his running, weightlifting and speed. He continued to shoot everyday. Kolman said, “to be a professional, it’s a full-time job, it’s an eight hours a day.” In addition to his basketball workouts, Kolman also spent at least a couple of weeks each summer working with a renowned track coach focusing on speed, fluidity, flexibility and movement. Working with the track coach comprised about four hours a day during the off-season for Kolman.

In retrospect, Kolman stated he probably pushed his body too hard during the off-season. While he returned to training camp in prime shape-- his body fat about 6.5%, his active heart rate about 204 beats per minute and his resting heart rate 64 beats per minute--he typically had small injuries during training camp. Knowing what he knows now about physical training, he would train differently.

During the off-season, the NBA teams had various expectations for their players. Kolman stated he was fortunate to have a “love of the game clause” in his contract. This clause stated that if he were to get injured exercising or playing basketball during the off-season, the team’s insurance would cover his injuries. Team executives often checked on
players multiple times each summer to monitor their actions and off-season training routines. However, they usually visited Kolman only one day during the summer “because they knew that I was the type of person that was going to work hard and took a lot of pride in what I did.”

**Continuing a Regimented Life**

Living such a regimented life can make for a difficult transition when the athletic career ends. Luther described a difficulty with transitioning. He stated, “You are used to getting literally your entire life scheduled down to the minute. Down to the dress code, down to the very second of your day. You know where you are supposed to be. You get a playbook of what your assignments are…there is a struggle with life unstructured and figuring it out.” Luther added that professional athletes always have people telling them what to do in order to improve, to be successful. At the end of a career, “then you have to figure it out” for yourself.

Miller also described the transition from a living a regimented life—directed on what to do, wear, eat, and most significantly how to succeed—to a new life after retirement without a playbook giving specific strategies and actions regarding how to be successful. Without a detailed playbook in retirement, Miller had to “figure that [retirement] out a bit.” Once able to do that, he transferred his regimented lifestyle and work ethic into his post-football career of finance and found success.

A regimented life affected Wilson’s routines as well. Wilson stated he is not late, ever. As an athlete, being late and missing a flight meant being fined and missing a game. Wilson recalled having nightmares about being late for a game or a flight, “It’s really weird, things that were affecting you when you were flying all the time and playing
all the time; you’re late and the people and the crowds out there and your teammates, and you’re hurrying.” Likening professional hockey to the military Wilson stated, “It is like the military, because they tell you what to do and how to do it all the time.” He said it was hard because he felt as if the teams owned him. However, he loved the game so much that he accepted the feeling of being owned.

The Business of the Game

In addition to adjusting to living a regimented life, many of the participants discussed their experience coming to terms with the realization that the game they loved to play was a business; the team’s corporate office did not see it as just a game. As professional athletes, these men were forced to understand that the game they started playing out of love, they now played to make people wealthy.

Former NHL player Bill Wilson shared his experience understanding the business-side of playing hockey. Wilson stated that once he became a professional hockey player, it became a business, and his love of the game began to change. The business-side of the sport affected the athletes and how they experienced pressure to perform at the highest level every day.

I loved it at the beginning, but after a while you don’t win, or you do win but pressure and people are making money. Owners are paying big money and it a whole different game. Professionalism isn’t always what it’s meant to be, but if you love the sport then you do whatever it takes.

Wilson also explained how the trading aspect of athletes affected how the team performed. It was vital to have a strong general team manager. According to Wilson, “If you don’t have good GMs [general managers] and coaches then it can be really, really tough. We took three team pictures a year, had so many players coming in and going out of there.” He shared one of the regrets of his professional career was not being able to
play for a team that had good management. In Wilson’s tenure with his team he had more coaches than years played.

MLB player Michael Schulmann also shared his experience learning to understand the business aspect of playing the game he loved. Schulman played for a team for six years, and left as a free agent. He played one year with a new team and then was traded to a third team. This trade highlighted the business aspect of professional baseball for Schulmann. Up until his trade, he decided which team he played for. The trade, unexpected by Schulmann, was part of a bigger strategy of two teams and he was not a major factor in that plan. According to Schulmann, “All of a sudden they kind of looked at me more as a role player. That was the first time really I was…the first time that I was not part of somebody’s plans.” During his career Schulmann believed he worked to earn the level of his play, he earned his status. However, he was forced to share time with a rookie player who Schulmann did not feel had earned his playing time.

Schulmann felt that rookies playing time had been predetermined—that he was going to get playing time regardless of whether his performance warranted it.

Schulmann also experienced the business-side of playing professional sports after suffering an injury. After his injury the team’s management went into a “saving as much money as possible mode.” According to Schulmann the team sent him to experts all around the country, and then in the end did not want to pay for the medical expenses. Schulmann was forced to pay nearly half of the medical expenses out of his own pocket. He stated, “That was just bad business. Bad business...they screwed me out of money.”

The bitterness towards the business aspect of professional sports only worsened as Schulmann began his rehabilitation to return to professional baseball. He approached a
team with whom he had nearly a 15-year history in regards to using their training facility, and was initially denied access to the facility. “That one [denial] made me sad. That one hurt my feelings,” stated Schulmann. After being denied training facility access by another team with which he had a short history, Schulmann was then invited to train with a third team with whom he had no relationship. It was after this invitation that he returned to his initial team and asked again. Schulmann told the organization, “I’m not going to beg you. I’m pleading with you.” He was then given access to a remote field and allowed to train in their facilities.

During his rehabilitation time, Schulmann worked towards earning the opportunity to play for his national team in the spring World Baseball Classic games. Schulmann had already confirmed with the national team coaches that they would put the best players on the field for the games. Because of his 11 years of experience in the major leagues, Schulmann felt comfortable he would earn a spot on the team. He played the first three exhibition games and performed well; however, he was not in the line-up for the final game and never played during that game. Later he was told that there was a younger player whose MLB team had allowed him to participate on the National Team only if the National Team actually played him on the field. Since this younger player and Schulmann were vying for the same position and because of this agreement, Schulmann never played. After the games, the National Team coach apologized to Schulmann in the locker room. This experience also illustrated the business aspect of professional baseball for Schulmann. Schulmann followed his National Team experience by training with a fourth MLB team. He commented that this team, after having bad experiences with three previous teams, treated him well. “They treated me with respect. They respected what
I’ve done. They walked me through the process. They treated me like a human being,” rather than a commodity for a corporation.

Learning the business aspect of professional sports also occurred in the NFL. William Johansen shared his experiences coming to terms with being part of a billion dollar business. His most notable experience came when he was cut from a team. According to Johansen, he was cut not because of a lack of athletic ability, but because of his point of view. Johansen was a notable member of the team, the players’ representative in the union. The media also frequently interviewed him. These were not roles his team’s management staff believed were compatible with his position on the field. Johansen said the team wanted to get rid of him even though he was one of the most notable players in his position that season. It was situations like these that highlighted the business aspect of professional sports for Johansen; “There’s times where you’ll realize it’s a business and that it’s run like a business and that it’s not a fair business.” However, Johansen did find a positive aspect of learning the business side of professional sports. He stated it, “helped educate me as well and helped me to be ready for real life because sometimes life isn’t fair.”

Daniel Kolman also experienced learning about the business aspect of professional basketball. Being a member of an NBA team also meant he represented that team in all aspects of his life. Kolman stated he had to be, “very meticulous in your approach to your professionalism with how you carry yourself, but more importantly how you represent yourself in the team that you are playing for.” He had to learn that his actions were not only a reflection of his character, but also that of his team.
Kolman also experienced the business side of professional sports when he was traded. Kolman had expected to play a long career with the same team. However, he was traded without warning. It was this event that showed Kolman how the business of the NBA really worked. He said, “You have lofty dreams and expectations. You don’t really understand how life truly works until it smacks you right in the face. I didn’t realize that until I was cut from a team.” Kolman learned of his trade while watching ESPN. He said he was listening to the television and when they said his name it took him a second to realize that they were talking about him. It was not until after it was announced on television that Kolman received a call from his coach. Their conversation did not go well and ended with Kolman hanging up the phone on his coach. After the trade he had asked the coaches what he had done wrong, feeling that he had always worked his hardest, was respectful and was liked by his teammates. However, his coaches told him it had nothing to do with his ability, but that the team needed a player in a different position and he was part of that business deal. He stated it was then,

...when it smacked me in the face. It’s like you have to look out for yourself. This is a business. No matter how much they like you. No matter how much they care about you. They needed your salary to meet up with all this other stuff to get these players in…and that’s just what you were.

Kolman’s one regret of his professional basketball career is not understanding the business aspect of the sport, “The one thing that I do wish I would’ve had is not been so naïve to the business aspect of basketball. I never looked at it as a business. I just looked at is as the sport I played.”

Summary

As athletes transition into professional athletics they become a commodity for a multi-million dollar business. The commodification affects their lifestyles, both during
the season and off the season. The team’s management schedules the athletes’ lives to the minute. The control over their lives continues into the off-season when many athletes feel they must continue to train in order to make the team the following year. The effects of their regimented lives continue into their retirement. Retired professional athletes must adjust to less structured lives and begin to plan their own lives.

Commodification also requires professional athletes to understand the business aspect of the game—the game they started playing for love of the sport. They now must understand that their performance is directly tied to the revenue of the team. People own teams to make money and they expect the athletes to perform at a level that financially benefits the team. The athletes must learn the business side of the sport in order to continue their professional athletic careers.

In the following chapter I discuss how professional athletes start planning for retirement. Athletes recognize the brevity of their professional careers; however, they must balance this knowledge with their dedication to the sport. Athletes make differing decisions regarding their preparation for retirement.
CHAPTER 5: IMPENDING RETIREMENT

Many people in non-athletic careers look forward to retirement after decades of employment. Some may even receive employer-supported retirement funds, and perhaps have planned how to spend their retirement years. In contrast to the “average” American’s retirement planning, professional athletes are not encouraged by their employers to plan for the next phase of their life and, in fact for the most part, do not view retirement in a positive manner. On some level athletes know retirement is inevitable and they need to prepare for the next phase in their lives; however, professional athletes in my study report instead of taking a longer view of their career and life and planning for their future, they focused on the present to stay competitive.

Some preparation for retirement may occur throughout professional athletes’ careers in varying levels, but the majority of my study’s participants attempted to prolong their careers and avoid retirement even toward the end of their tenures as professional athletes. For example, many of the participants fought through injuries to prolong their careers, hoping to avoid retirement for another season.

In this section I describe three subthemes related to the process athletes experience leading to their retirement. First, some athletes actively prepared for retirement while they were still playing professional sports, others focused only on their athletic careers. The second subtheme concerns the role education played in how athletes view retirement. Lastly, some athletes chose to play with injuries in order to prolong their careers.
Mixed Messages

A dichotomy exists regarding professional athletes and retirement. In order for an athlete to perform at his highest level he must focus entirely on his sport. However, if his focus is only on the game, then he is not planning for his future. The participants demonstrated varying levels of preparation and discussed how they attempted to balance being totally engaged in their sport with trying to plan for the next phase in their lives. They discussed how the different players’ associations educate athletes regarding retirement and help prepare them for their futures. While preparation for retirement can be contrary to what the coaches tell the players, it is sometimes also contrary to what players feel personally about focusing on their current career as professional athletes.

Matthew Jones had a longer than average career in the NFL. He played professional football for 14 years, far longer than the average NFL career of approximately three years. Preparation for retirement caused Jones to juggle two varying viewpoints regarding his career as a professional athlete. On one hand, Jones viewed himself as unstoppable, “We all think we are invincible when we play sports and you never think about the day you are going to retire.” However, this view contradicted another strong belief Jones held. He was aware of the fact that his career would end some day and that he had to be prepared for the next stage in his life.

The career of an NFL player never has a predetermined length and often the end is not the athlete’s choice. For Jones, he learned early that his career could end at any moment and he needed to have a plan for when it did. During his rookie preseason training a coach continually yelled at him and criticized his every move. At one point the coach yelled at him on the field, loud enough for fans watching in the stands to hear, “I’m
going to give you an apple, a bus ticket and a road map.” Jones clearly recalled this moment, telling that he heard a fan in the stands comment that the coach had made this offer to Jones and how hard the fans laughed about the comment. The coach’s statement taught him that his athletic career could end at any moment, “I always have to be prepared because you never know when it is going to happen.”

Another NFL player, Marshall Luther, also had similar experiences to Jones in regards to preparation for a career after professional football. He never forgot what his father told him throughout his childhood, “No one cares how far you can throw the ball when you’re 35.” Luther always remembered those words and the message that his career would end at some point and he would need to be prepared for the next phase in life. He shared that if he could offer his 25 year-old self a piece of advice, it would be to spend the off-season interning with various companies. He stated that if he had interned during his professional football career, his resume would be more diverse and illustrate his skills in addition to athletics.

Each professional sport has a players’ association representing the professional athletes and providing training to the athletes regarding their eventual retirements. This study’s participants had varying experiences with their associations’ preparation programs.

Former NFL player William Johansen explained that the NFL Players’ Association encourages athletes to prepare for careers after their professional football career by advising athletes to participate in internships during the off-season and to finish their college degrees. The NFL Football Players’ Association has negotiated full tuition payment for players who want to return to college after their NFL careers end. The
Players’ Association also provides trainings for players to learn about broadcasting, acting, and entertainment careers. Luther stated that the Players’ Association did provide support for athletes in preparing for retirement, but he felt it was minimal support. He also suggested the training sessions should be mandatory for every athlete to attend.

When athletes start their NBA careers, they are required to attend a Rookie Transition Camp. Daniel Kolman shared that the topics covered in the camp focus on making “wise and conscientious financial decisions.” However, he said the camp’s main message should be: “One third of you this year are not going to play and 60% of you will be out of the league by year number three. Prepare yourself.” Kolman explained the rookie players needed to better understand that the career length for many players would be short.

According to Michael Schulmann, the MLB Players’ Association does not have a strong program to help its members’ transition into retirement. Schulmann stated there might be, “some weak attempts to look good on paper.” However, he does not believe the Association is solely to blame. The players have to be interested in attending trainings. Schulmann explained that the players are “big ego guys” who do not think they need any help transitioning into their careers after baseball. Luther shared similar statements regarding players taking ownership for their future. He stated that while the programs the NFL offers for transition are limited, it’s the responsibility of the player to take advantage of the programs available to them.

Players struggle to find a balance between planning for the future and staying focused on the present. Johansen discussed how professional football players are focused on the present and do not plan for life after football:
While you’re in it though, you think it’s going to last forever. Part of that is delusion and part of that is a must…you have to have unquestioned faith, belief in yourself and your abilities because someone is always going to be there to challenge you…I think because of that it leads to a lack of true awareness about the finality of your profession.

In order for a professional athlete to think about a career after the end of his athletic career, he must acknowledge his football career will not last forever. Johansen shared that allowing himself to have thoughts about the end of his career, “runs counter intuitive to everything you know you have to do mentally to be successful.”

Luther also acknowledged the contradictory feelings in regards to dedication to football and preparation for life after football. While he was playing, Luther felt that any preparation for life after football would take away from his preparation as a football player: “Somehow it will distract me from my total focus and intention on this and somehow it will be a detriment to my ability to succeed as an athlete.” In his retirement, Luther does not feel that preparing for retirement would have been as detrimental to his athletic career as he originally thought, but he does feel that any “outside noise can be a distraction” to being the best athlete possible.

While he was playing professional football, the NFL did not provide any support to Jones for his retirement from professional football. According to Jones, the NFL wanted their players to focus on being the best athletes they could be and to not think about retirement until they were retired: “They just want you to play sports and when they are done with you, you figure it all out.” Jones believed it is a purposeful choice of the NFL to not support retirement planning for their athletes. He stated that as a professional athlete it is difficult to plan for a future without football and still be willing to “sacrifice everything” on the field. The teams did not want their players worrying
about how a potential injury may or may not affect their future career choices and options while they were expected to give 100% to the team each day.

Jones explained the expectation of giving everything a player had to the NFL team was a pervasive belief. He said his coaches publically stated football was not the most important priority in the players’ lives, but their public words did not align with their expectations for their athletes:

Faith, family and football…it’s basically just football. But that’s all they want you to do. It’s all they want you to know. It’s all they want you to do. If you are going to be playing at this high of a level you got to be thinking that all the time.

Jones worked to balance his preparation for retirement and the requirement to give still 100% to the game each day.

According to Johansen, coaches are happiest with players who are only focused on football, even if that focus means the athletes are not prepared for their retirement. Athletes’ commitment is in question if they start looking at the next steps in their lives. “Just the fact that they are diversifying…will leave teams and executives questioning whether or not they are totally committed to football,” stated Johansen.

For athletes, the message of being only focused on football can be contradictory to what their players’ associations are telling them. The differing messages from the coaches and the players’ associations are confusing to athletes. Johansen stated, “there’s always conflicting messages, both internally and externally” about what to do regarding preparing for life after football. He added:

There’s always this internal pull between “am I trying to please my coach because that’s going to determine whether or not I get another contract or I make the team, and trying to do what’s in the best interest of you and your long term life.”
Balancing the present and future is a struggle many of the athletes shared. Johansen also stated the coaches wanted players to be “singularly focused on football because that’s how they get the most out of you. They don’t want you being distracted. They don’t want you to be diversified in any way.”

The Value of a College Diploma

In addition to various levels of support from the players’ associations, two other factors helped prepare athletes for retirement. The first factor is a college education. Their degrees provided them with some assurance that they had training and skills in another career field. The second factor was the athletes’ experiences in careers either prior to becoming a professional athlete or during their athletic careers. Athletes who had one or both of these types of preparations had a higher level of assurance about their futures.

NFL player Matthew Jones knew he had to have an education in order to transition into a career after his athletic career ended. His college degree provided him with options once his athletic career ended. He stated he “always knew I could do something else. I had a backup plan if my career ended before I was ready for it to end because football isn’t going to be here forever.”

Similarly, Anthony Miller graduated from college before entering the NFL. His degree allowed him to feel some security for life after his football career. He knew that after his NFL career, “there would be no more use for my athletic skills, so that I had to make it on my own as far as my real world skills.” Having his college degree allowed Miller to focus on football during his career. During his off-seasons he continued to train for the next season rather than intern for business or attend camps offered by the Players’
Association. He was not as worried about his future because he believed his college degree would help him transition into a career after football.

A college degree also helped Marshall Luther transition into a second career after his NFL career ended. Having the degree was a benefit for Luther when his football career ended and he needed to start a new career. He did not have previous business experience on his resume, but his college degree provided him with some level of affirmation that he had knowledge and skills that would support him in the new phase of his life.

In addition to a college degree Johansen had career experience prior to becoming a professional football player. Two years prior to making a team in the NFL Johansen worked as a financial advisor while he continued to tryout for NFL teams. Johansen knew that the NFL was not a lifelong career and felt fortunate to have prior work experience. He shared that he entered the NFL knowing his career could be short, but that he had a back-up plan to rely on when his professional football career ended. Johansen said this prior experience “allowed me to go after my dreams without some of the pressure that some guys have” if they have not planned for a second career. He said he knew his family would have a house to live in and he would have a career to support his family.

Noah Wymann, former NHL player, also had a college degree and career experience. However, unlike Johansen whose experience came prior to his NFL career, Wymann’s was gained during his NHL career. Wymann’s NHL career included an extended players’ lockout by the owners. During the lockout, Wymann needed to financially support his family without his NHL paycheck. He was introduced to his
uncle’s friend who owned a small financial advising firm. Wymann started working part-time at the advising firm and had a few months’ experience in that career before the players’ lockout ended. During the off-seasons he returned to the same firm to work part-time. Wymann stated his work experience during the lockout helped prepare him for his transition into retirement. He learned another skill set and knew he could have a career after his hockey career ended.

Three participants did not earn college degrees prior to entering professional athletics. While a college degree did not ensure that an athlete would have a successful and easy transition into a new career after professional athletics, the degrees did provide a level of confidence for the players who had them. The players who did not already have their degrees were left to determine their path after retirement.

Former NHL player Bill Wilson did not have a college degree prior to becoming a professional athlete. As Wilson reflected on his NHL career he stated:

I think the guys back then, when we played, just threw caution to the wind and rode out their glory days. It was kind of like the gold rush, we go where there’s gold. When it’s over, where do we go?

During the summer months, Wilson spent time trying to learn about various careers, “just dabbling to see what I could get started or get into.” At this point in his life Wilson recognizes the value having a college degree may have held for him after his NHL career ended. He stated that hockey players struggle with being respected as intelligent people, “I’ve had the connotations as a hockey player that you’re a dummy or something. It’s just part of the deal.”

Schulmann also did not have a college degree to help him transition into retirement. Prior to retirement Schulmann told friends, “If everything else fails, I know I
can dig a ditch. I’m not afraid to work with my hands, so I know that I’ll be able to feed my family.” While Schulmann stated this was a joke he made, not having a college degree did make his future career path after professional baseball more uncertain.

Finding a balance between staying focused on his current athletic career and preparing for a new career was a struggle for NBA player Daniel Kolman. Kolman did not graduate from college prior to entering the NBA. In addition to not having a degree, Kolman felt he could not afford spending time preparing a new skill set for life after retirement during his NBA career because he was not assured an NBA contract each year. In regards to his basketball career Kolman stated: “I always had the mentality that someone’s trying to take my job. For me to get my next contract, I’ve got to keep working.” This drive to keep working had Kolman spending the majority of his off-season training rather than preparing for the next phase in his life.

**Fighting Through Injury**

While the athletes recognized their professional athletic careers were not going to last a lifetime, they also were not looking forward to their careers ending. Some of the participants took, what some may call, extreme steps to extend their careers. They played through significant injuries and spent months, sometimes years, in rehabilitation hoping to return to the game they loved.

Some of the participants experienced significant injuries, but these injuries did not immediately end their careers. They were injuries from which an athlete could potentially recover and return to the game. For five participants in this study rehabilitation time gave them false hope of being able to return from their injuries.
Marshall Luther played six full professional seasons in the NFL and returned for training camp in his seventh season. He had recently signed as a free agent with his hometown team and was anticipating the new season. He entered training camp confident in his skills and determined to perform successfully during training camp and in the preseason in order to earn his position on the team. Ten days into training camp Luther pulled his hamstring muscle. He recalled, “I had to make the team…I felt very confident I was going to win this job, but I still had to prove myself in the preseason game.” His need to prove himself drove him to participate in rigorous and accelerated rehabilitation for his hamstring injury. During this rehabilitation, Luther reinjured his hamstring and set his progress back three weeks. At that point the preseason was nearly over and Luther knew he was going to miss all of the preseason games and lose the opportunity to prove himself and earn a position on the team.

Luther was not ready to end his NFL career. He struggled not making the team, and losing “the chance to play for the hometown team was devastating…I still felt like I could physically play and I want to maximize and play as long as I can.” He continued to train on his own throughout the year in hopes of making a team the following year. “As time went on, it was hard. It was really hard because you obviously didn’t want to take it for granted; you want to play 100%. I wanted to play every day that I possibly can.” He stated, “I spent a full year working out by myself, waiting for the phone to ring.” There was interest in Luther from other teams and he was in contact with his agent throughout the year. The year was spent in anticipation: “I spent a whole year sort of waiting and hoping and it took that long.” Luther knew that after a year passed, new rookies would be trying out for teams and his odds of making a team dropped
significantly. It took a year for Luther to process the end of his career and come to terms with the idea he would not be returning to a team in the fall: “It was hard because you, you know, you just, I know physically I could have kept playing... but it wasn’t the end of the world.”

Former NFL player Anthony Miller also attempted to work through injuries to prolong his professional football career. Miller played five seasons in the NFL and developed chronic neck pain due to repeated hits received each season. In the last game of his fifth season Miller injured his already ailing neck. In retrospect, he now states he should have retired at that point. However, he was not ready to be done playing professional football, nor was he ready for the next step in his life. He stated, “You get used to the lifestyle, the money wasn’t like it is now, but it’s still pretty good money for someone in their early twenties. You try to extend that as long as you can.”

Miller knew his injuries were significant, but he was not ready to admit to his team the seriousness of the injuries. Pain came with every step Miller took. He had bulging discs in his neck causing his leg to feel numb. Knowing that the doctors would not let him play if he admitted the severity of his injuries, he did not tell them the extent of his neck pain and the radiating issues in his leg. “I wasn’t exactly honest with them about it because I knew if I said something about exactly what was going on, they wouldn’t have passed me on the physical,” explained Miller. When Miller started his sixth season of training camp, the medical staff told him he was cleared to play in the preseason as long as he was not experiencing significant pain.

Athletes must be 100% healthy to play at the required level of performance for professional sports. Miller knew that his neck injury was causing him to play less than
“I wasn’t playing at 100% because I was a little bit tentative. Then it affects how you play.” In his fifth season he had played 15 of the 16 NFL games. However, in training camp of his sixth season the team released him because he was not able to perform at the highest level.

Being cut from a team and having a significant neck injury was not enough reason for Miller to retire. He continued to hope to be picked up by a team, “I was trying to catch on with the team and went back the next year.” The desire to continue to play was paramount: “At the time you still want to be part of the whole deal. That’s why you do what you have to do to stay there.” There is also a culture in the NFL, according to Miller, that promotes players to play with injuries: “If you’re a tough guy you could power through this and you played through injury and you played through pain.”

The team did sign him for another year after he had been out with injuries the previous year. At that point Miller started to have second thoughts and began to worry about his long-term health. He was finally honest with the team’s medical staff and they did not pass him on the physical. Miller ended his professional football career after playing five full seasons and not being able to successfully return to the game due to injuries.

Like Miller and Luther, former NHL player Noah Wymann experienced an injury during the season ultimately leading to his retirement. Wymann was playing his last shift of the game when he was hit from behind injuring his shoulder. Initially when asked if there was a moment in his career when he knew it was time to retire, Wymann replied that after he was hit from behind and fell, injuring his shoulder, he knew he was done. However, after a quick pause during the interview, he stated that he did not know that his
career was done then. His change of answers led me to believe that he may have known his career was over when the injury occurred, but was not yet willing to accept it.

Following his injury, Wymann had surgery that took nerves from his ankle and placed them in his shoulder. The recovery was a long process. Six months after the surgery his shoulder was still not recovering well and he stated that knew he was not going to be able to return to the game. His change in answers, first originally stating he knew when he was hit that his career was over to not knowing it was over until after the unsuccessful rehabilitation, seems to illustrate Wymann’s desire to prolong his professional hockey career as long as possible.

Wymann was thirty-five years old. He had played hockey longer than he expected and finally accepted that he career was over. He stated he did not feel the need to continue to fight to return to the game because he had played longer than he ever expected: “I got more than I should have had”. Wymann’s humility about his hockey career may have been a factor in him not needing to prolong the career beyond his injury.

Michael Schulmann, former MLB player, also experienced an injury that ultimately was the end of his athletic career. Schulmann received a concussion during a mid-season baseball game. He did not play for two weeks following the concussion. He stated he tried to “push myself through the symptoms. All of a sudden I went from a symptomology of maybe 2 out of 10 to 9 out of 10.” Schulmann said the team did not believe his symptoms were as severe as they were and pushed him to return to the game. While he did return to baseball, he was not able to remain an active player that season, or the following season. In hindsight Schulmann stated the injury did not end his career: “A concussion wasn’t what ended my career, just trying to come back too early from a
concussion ended my career.” While Schulmann maintained the team pushed him to return to the game, he also stated they did not push him any harder than he pushed himself.

For two and half years following his concussion, Schulmann worked to return to playing professional baseball. He flew around the country visiting various medical specialists attempting to regain his ability to play baseball at the professional level. As he rehabilitated, he continued training. Finally he was asked to come to spring training and workout with a team. The team management knew of his medical history and had him spend a day with the team doctor. Towards the end of the day the doctor finally asked Schulmann:

Why are you doing this? Why do you want to play major league baseball? You played nine years. You’ve had a great career. You’ve made a lot of money. Why do you want to do this? I’ll be frank. I don’t want to be the doctor on the field who doesn’t know what’s going to happen if you get hit in the head again. You spent two and half years with this stuff. I don’t want to be the one to tell your wife we don’t know what’s going to happen to him.

The doctor’s words made Schulmann think about his decisions. The doctor had told Schulmann he would sign off and allow him to play. However, the doctor again told him he could not understand why Schulmann felt the need to take the risk. Schulmann stated this conversation caused him to start seriously considering retirement.

Former NHL player Bill Wilson also had a severe injury ultimately leading to the end of his athletic career. However, his injury was not hockey related. Wilson was in a serious car accident during the off-season. His arm was crushed and had critical nerve damage. After surgery and rehabilitation, Wilson regained the use of his arm, but was unable to play again in the NHL. Unwilling to accept the end of his hockey career,
Wilson found an agent that connected him to a European hockey team and he extended his professional hockey career in Europe.

**Summary**

The push and pull of staying focused on a professional athletic career and preparing for its eventual end is a struggle athletes face. They are challenged to both prepare for a new career, yet remain focused on their current athletic career. Given this struggle it becomes more evident why some professional athletes do not actively prepare for life after professional sports careers. It also provides insight as to why some attempt to prolong their careers even when it is not healthy to do so. Many players have such a desire to continue to play the game; they play with injuries or spend months rehabilitating from an injury with the hope of returning to the game. While having a college degree may provide assurance about a second career to some athletes, even they still attempted to remain on a team as long as possible.

The decision to retire is multi-faceted for athletes. In the next chapter I discuss the ways professional athletic careers end and the initial transition process athletes experience at the end of their careers.
CHAPTER 6: INITIAL TRANSITION INTO RETIREMENT

A professional athlete’s career typically ends due to one of four things: personal injury, age, being cut or released from a team, or choosing to leave the sport. My study participants’ ends of careers fell into a variation of three of these four categories.

Within this chapter I explore the experiences of athletes’ initial transitions into retirement. Three of the participants experienced injuries causing them not to be signed by a team. Three of the participants experienced injuries leading them to decide to end their careers. One participant was cut from a team, and the final participant chose to retire. Participants who shared similar causes for retirement had similar transitions into retirement.

Injuries Leading to an End

Three of the participants experienced injuries leading to the end of their careers. While the injuries themselves were treatable and not immediately career ending, they ultimately led to the players being cut based on their lessened ability or the teams’ lingering medical concerns. The manner in which the participants’ careers ended following their injuries had an effect on how they processed their initial transition into retirement.

As stated in the previous chapter Anthony Miller’s on-going neck injury ultimately ended his NFL career. According to Miller, a part of him knew he should not be playing with his neck injury, but it was too difficult for him to make that decision on his own. Miller had such a strong desire to continue playing football that he struggled to fully recognize and accept how the game was affecting his health. Miller stated, “At the
time you will want to be part of that whole deal. That’s why you do what you have to do to stay there.”

Miller stated that he needed the team’s medical staff to tell him he could no longer play. He recalled being young and feeling invincible. Having another person end his career made it easier for Miller. “You almost need somebody to tell you and say this is done.” In order for Miller to accept the end of his NFL career he stated, “It really took the [team] to fail me on the physical.” He added, “When they failed me on my physical, I really needed them to do that to walk away from it.” When Miller did not receive his medical clearance it gave him a way to walk away from the game without feeling like he quit. In hindsight Miller said, “My older self, of course, would tell my younger self, maybe you should walk away from this, but back then, you still want to play.”

Miller stated having the team end his career made the transition into retirement easier for him. It was easier to be told that he could no longer play due to an injury than to say he was done playing. He also discussed how he perceived other people viewed his retirement.

If it was me making that decision, then people are saying, “Well people give their left arms to play in the NFL, why are you walking away?” I don’t think people realize all the things that go into it, and the long-term health effects and things like that. It’s easy for them to say that, but in reality if they were in that position, they might make a different decision.

How others viewed the end of professional athletes’ careers was a factor in how Miller experienced the transition into retirement.

Even though Miller stated his transition into retirement was easier because the team told him he could no longer play, he still struggled with the feeling of loose ends. Miller’s goal had been to play football as long as he possibly could play, and he was not
sure he was totally finished playing, “I felt like there was unfinished business.” Miller had entered the NFL as a middle-round draft pick. His initial contract was not for millions of dollars each year. However, he had played nearly enough years to reach the point in the NFL players’ agreement where he transitioned into a higher level of pay. Signing one more contract would have provided Miller the next level of pay. “That was probably the toughest part, knowing that I could’ve made it to that next level and didn’t quite get there.”

Miller, on the one hand, was fortunate to begin his NFL career having already completed his college degree. He had already developed plans for a non-football related career when the opportunity of playing in the NFL arose. On the other hand, after being medically “discharged” from the NFL, the initial transition into a new career for Miller was difficult. He was 28 years old, but not qualified for anything except an entry-level position. Miller had to transition from being a veteran NFL player to being a rookie in his new career. “I had to go from a position where I was doing really well and playing in the NFL to now I’m behind everybody else that was my peer group.”

Similar to Miller, Marshall Luther’s NFL career ended due to the residual effects of an injury. When his injury led to being cut from the team, Luther spent the year rehabilitating and hoping to get picked up by a team for the next season. Luther waited for calls from his agent who never had any positive news for him. It was a year of waiting. “It was a little bit of a roller coaster of anticipation, waiting and then it was like, should I be retired?” After not being re-signed by an NFL team, Luther had to determine how to make the initial transition into retirement.
According to Luther, he had not always dreamed of being an NFL player and he felt it was not his lifelong dream; his transition was not as difficult as it may have been had being a football player been his only identity. Luther stated, “It is not like it was part of my identity. I never wanted it to be that way because I think that is what guys struggle with because it is their identity and they struggle transitioning.”

The retirement transition was difficult for Luther because he had to come to terms with the fact that he was now a player that no one wanted on their team. While his hamstring injury played a part in his retirement process it was not a career-ending injury. During his rehabilitation Luther watched NFL games on television. Seeing his friends and former teammates continue to play without him only strengthened his feelings of not being wanted. Luther was an unwanted player and was left early in retirement with what he calls a “question mark.” The early retirement for Luther left him asking himself questions such as “Can I still play?” and “Does anyone still want me?” Luther stated had he retired following an immediate career-ending injury it would have been easier because then he would know that there was nothing else he could do to still be playing football.

Similar to Miller, Luther also struggled with how others viewed the end of his career. He stated that people ask him why he “gave up football.” However, Luther never thought that he gave it up. He found himself defending the end of his career by explaining to people. “I didn’t quit playing. I quit playing because no one really wanted me anymore…I didn’t give it up, I try to explain it.”

His initial year transitioning into retirement was challenging both because of the uncertainty regarding the end of his football career and his struggle to determine what he should do in the next phase of his life. Luther stated the best thing about his transition
year was realizing that retirement was not as great as he expected it to be. “Your days become, the smallest thing becomes a big deal, you know—what are you going to do today? Well, wake-up, have some coffee, go to my work out, drop off some dry cleaning, get a haircut. That’s my whole day? That’s ridiculous,” Luther explained.

Luther’s social circle had also changed. His former teammates were no longer his close friends. His post NFL peer group did not go golfing on weekdays, they went to work from 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. His first year was lonely. He spent it waiting for his agent to call and trying to find a new peer group where he felt he belonged.

When it came time to find a new career, also like Miller, he did not have any work experience besides the NFL. Luther stated he was fortunate because he did have a college degree. However, it was still difficult because he also was only qualified for an entry-level position. As a 32 year-old he was being offered the same position as 22 year-old college graduates. “You had to take a big step back and a slice of humble pie and realize this is an entry level job,” he stated.

Noah Wymann, a former NHL player, also retired from his professional athletic career as a result of a lingering injury. Wymann’s decision to retire happened over time rather due to a specific event. After surgery and a six-month rehabilitation, Wymann accepted the fact that playing hockey at the professional level was no longer an option.

Retirement was not a difficult decision for Wymann because the length of his career was longer than he expected. He stated playing in the NHL is a “tiring job, very tiring job. It’s not just fun and games and playing down at a rink. It’s extremely, extremely tiring. Mentally, especially physically, but mentally it’s just hard.”
Throughout his career Wymann felt he played longer than he should have. “I did what I came to do and more than I hoped to do…I fooled them [coaches] for an awful long time. Why they kept me around, I don’t know.”

Initially after his retirement Wymann and his wife spent a few months at a family vacation home. However, after about six months his wife became impatient. Wymann recalled one morning when his wife said to him, “Are you going to go work or what?” With a smile on his face Wymann stated she was tired of having him around the house all of the time. That day Wymann answered a help-wanted advertisement in the newspaper and was hired immediately at a company.

**Injuries Leading to Choice**

While injuries sometimes end an athletes’ career either immediately or over time, some athletes choose to retire even after recovering from injuries. During the course of their rehabilitation, the participants in this section began to question if they truly wanted to continue their careers as professional athletes.

Daniel Kolman played six continuous seasons in the NBA. At the end of his sixth season he ruptured his patella tendon. After his injury, Kolman hoped only to be able to walk again without a limp; he hoped to be able to play with his children as they grew. His goal was not to return to basketball.

However, as he continued his rehabilitation, Kolman became stronger and the thought of being able to return to basketball was a realistic possibility. When his knee healed, Kolman returned to professional basketball in Europe, where he played two seasons. Following his two seasons in Europe, an NBA team invited Kolman to its training camp.
Kolman recalled the conversation with the team representative. The man had sent him a contract and all that he needed to do was, “Come in, make a few shots, and you’ll be just fine.” When the contract arrived, Kolman and his wife were sitting at the dining table in their home discussing their decision. His wife began listing all the things they needed to do when they moved to a new city. He clearly recalled the moment as he told his wife, “This is a surreal feeling for me.” She asked what he was talking about and he replied, “Closure. You know what? I can’t do this…and I don’t want to.” After his injury Kolman said he felt he was a “shell of myself.” He was no longer the same player that he used to be, and he was done playing professional basketball.

Kolman no longer had the desire to play professional basketball. He had started a new business and felt he was ready to make a transition into his new career. It was a significant decision and he was confident it was his time to make a change. Kolman told his wife, “I’m okay with it. You know what? I’ve started something that I feel passionate about and I refuse to let that fail.” Even though his wife did not agree to his new plans quickly, she is now happy that he retired when he did.

The end of his basketball career changed Kolman in a positive way. He stated that while he was playing he was, “Knife cutting and edgy, because that’s what you have to be. You got guys coming to take your job every year…there’s no guarantees.”

According to Kolman, he is a healthier person when he is not playing professional basketball and over time his wife has come to agree with him.

Kolman had previously started a foundation and a training center for youth basketball players. He believed that because he had the foundation and a career to transition into, retirement was an easier decision. In a moment of clarity he knew he was
ready to retire. He realized he had started a new career and was ready to make that change. Kolman knew he was ready for a new challenge, “This is a different kind of challenge…it’s made it better for me.”

Although he was ready to make the career change, Kolman stated it was still a significant adjustment to make in his life. “Even though I said I wasn’t going to play anymore, I was still very regimented in the times of the year of how I did things.” The regimentation experienced during his life in the NBA led him to develop a strong routine, schedule, and structure in his new career. Kolman’s wife told him he did not have to live in such a structured format, but he said even though he was not playing basketball anymore, he still needed a routine.

Former MLB athlete Michael Schulmann had an extended transition into this retirement. Schulmann stated that his two and a half years of rehabilitation from a concussion did help him transition into retirement. After a team’s doctor questioned his motivation for returning to the game knowing the possible risks, Schulmann stated a “seed was planted” regarding the possibility of retiring.

Schulmann continued to train with the team, hoping to make the roster. However, he started to have doubts about continuing his career as he interacted with some of the younger players. He was frustrated with a rookie player who complained about not getting a contract from Nike like he had hoped. Listening to this rookie caused Schulmann to question his future, “I’m like, do I want to deal with this for the next three years, four years?”

In addition to questioning his future, Schulmann had an experience during a game that caused him to make his final decision to retire. During a preseason game he dove for
a ball and recalled feeling “A little funny afterwards.” He stated that in that moment, the moment of feeling “a little funny” Schulmann knew he was done. With clarity he recalled the moment after diving for the ball and immediately thinking, “You know what, I’m done. I’m done. I just don’t want to deal with this.”

The culmination of years of rehabilitation, negative interactions with younger players, and having a reaction to diving for the ball let the seed the doctor planted take root. Schulmann credited his two and a half year rehabilitation period as helping him transition into retirement. He stated, “Then I was able to make the decision, you know what, I’m done. I’m not playing. I had a little transition period.” Being healthy was Schulmann’s goal after his injury. “When I was able to get that [healthy], it was kind of satisfaction with that. That really helped. Then it was like okay, now what?” he explained.

The initial focus during his retirement transition was not what he would do in his next career, but what did he need to do to stay healthy. The extended struggle with his concussion had been difficult. Fortunately, Schulmann had financial stability and did not need to work immediately following his retirement. He stated had he not had money, “I don’t know how that road would’ve ended…it just was not a good part of my life.” His goal for retirement was to be healthy enough to provide for his family. Schulmann had not planned for retirement during his baseball career. Prior to his concussion Schulmann joked, “If everything else fails, I know I can dig a ditch. I’m not afraid to work with my hands, so I know that I’ll be able to feed my family.”

Former NHL player Bill Wilson’s career ended as a result of injuries he sustained in a car accident. Though he was able to rehabilitate, he was not able to return to the elite
level of the NHL. However, he was able to return to playing hockey in Europe for four years. Playing in Europe was a transitional step for Wilson in leaving his professional hockey career.

As a young player Wilson was advised by a veteran player to play until no team wanted him. Wilson followed this advice. He had seen players who had quit the game when they were tired, hurt, or on losing teams. He had seen those players later regret their decisions and try to come back. Wilson had hope for what was yet to come. He thought that the future might hold a championship team, a Stanley Cup. He did not want to regret quitting too early. Wilson continued to play in Europe until “the phone stopped ringing. You get up and nobody’s calling.” Even though the end of Wilson’s career was because he was no longer wanted, he had consciously made the choice to play until that occurred. Unlike the athletes whose injuries led to them being cut from teams, Wilson chose to play until that point. After a four-year career in Europe, “the phone stopped ringing” and Wilson’s career ended.

Wilson’s initial transition was difficult. He struggled financially. Having entered the NHL at an early age, Wilson did not have a college degree. He struggled to cover his expenses, stating, “I would think how am I going to make that next payment or that child support, or the bill, my rent, what am I going to do?” Initially after his retirement Wilson worked various odd jobs as a sales representative for boats, doing sports commentating for local radio and television, and selling mortgages.

Like Kolman, Wilson also struggled with leaving the regimented life of professional athletics. He stated that even now he frequently has nightmares that revolve around him being late for meetings and events. He claimed that he is still never late for
any occasion. Wilson attributed being able to have a successful second career to strong family support. After his retirement from professional hockey, Wilson returned to his hometown and received support from his family to get started in a new career.

**Deselection**

The third way professional athletes’ careers end is being cut from a team. The cut may be dependent on their performance, the needs of the team, or how the team views the players’ presence as a help or hindrance to the team. It can be a difficult transition for the athlete because it is so personal. They are no longer wanted.

Johansen is the most recent retiree participant in this study. He is still not certain he is retired and may still be trying to prolong his NFL career. After playing professional football for fourteen years, Johansen was not signed by a team at the end of what was his final season. When I asked Johansen how he knew that it was time to retire he replied, “I didn’t. I still don’t.” He went on to add, “If somebody called me tomorrow and said, ‘Hey, we want you to come and play’ I would do it. That’s just kind of the way that it is.” While Johansen still has hope to play again, he also stated he had been preparing for his retirement since his career started. His experience with retirement highlights the struggle some players experience as they try to hold onto another year as a professional athlete. On one hand, he stated he has been preparing for it his entire career, while on the other he shared that he still is not certain that he has retired.

Johansen’s career did not end by choice or injury; it ended because an NFL team did not offer him a new contract. According to Johansen, when the NFL tells a player he is finished playing, most players are not ready to be done. “They [the NFL] close the door, and you’re done. Most guys don’t want to be done.” He noted that some players
choose to retire when their bodies are not able to manage the physical stress, or when they feel they have made enough money. In his situation, Johansen was no longer a commodity, no team wanted him, and the NFL ended their relationship with him before he was ready for it to be done.

Johansen is working through a significant struggle in his retirement—a change to his social circle. The locker room camaraderie, he stated, “can’t be replaced.” He had spent years playing with these men and then suddenly his world shifted. “For me, for five years my best friends were all the guys on the team. Those were the guys you did everything with,” explained Johansen. He shared that his teammates were his social circle both in the locker room and in the community. They were the people with whom he and his wife went to dinner. They were the friends with whom he golfed. Johansen at one time had been the player still on the team when his friends had been released; so, he knew what it was like socially when players were cut. “When you get released, it’s the end of that immediately. Because they go on with their lives and their team and their teammates, which I understand because I’ve been there when guys got released,” Johansen explained.

For Johansen the biggest change he experienced was the definitiveness of the end of his football career. Elaborating, Johansen stated, “I think the biggest shock to me was just how final it is. There’s such a finality when you get cut and you’re released from a team.” While Johansen stated that he was always preparing for his retirement and had a career prior to his professional football experience that he could return to, “No matter how much you prepare for it, or how much you’re ready for it, it’s going to be a shock to your system.”
Johansen attributes his understanding of life after his professional football career ended to work experience prior to entering the NFL. However, that career experience did not mean there was not a struggle to balance his focus between football and life after football. He stated that NFL athletes play a game, spend time in the locker room with friends, and collect a significant paycheck for playing that game. He stated when you are a professional athlete, “You don’t have a real good concept of reality, a good grasp on reality.”

**Leaving on His Own Terms**

The fourth way professional athletes eventually leave their sport is through personal choice. It is not the most common way athletes’ careers end, given the high number of injuries and the physical toll the game takes on the body. Making the personal choice to retire does have an effect on how the athlete experiences the transition.

Matthew Jones, former NFL player, had one of the longest professional careers of any of the participants. He was also the only athlete who truly chose to retire from his professional athletic career. Jones’ long career, as well as the ability to choose to retire from the NFL, made his initial transition into retirement slightly different than the other participants.

Jones’ lengthy tenure helped prepare him for the end of his career and stopped him from trying to play with injuries or prolong his career for another year. Jones stated that his career goal was to play ten years. He played a total of 14 years in the NFL. After he reached his goal of playing for 10 years, he told himself to listen to his body to determine when he was ready to retire. He explained that he asked himself the same questions during each off-season to determine if he would return the following season.
He asked, “Do you still love the game? Is it still fun? Are you doing it for the right reasons?” If he answered in the affirmative to all of those questions, then he knew to return for another season. If there came a time when he was only playing for a paycheck, or he lost the love of the game Jones knew to end his career. It was his goal to end his career in a positive manner. “I always said I was going to walk away when I still loved the game,” he said.

As a veteran player, Jones experienced playing with many different athletes and personalities. However, he began to struggle with the rookies who were joining his team. The new players on the team had different views towards the game. Jones explained that they:

Walked in the locker room like they were veterans and that didn’t fit right with me. And I did have some run-ins with some of them. One run in where it was not good…it was the first time I lost my temper with a teammate.

That run-in was followed by a struggle with a selfish rookie the next season. Jones was a team player and firmly believed that his team was only as strong as its weakest player. In Jones’ position, it was vital for all the athletes to being playing as one unit.

When what turned out to be his last season ended, Jones left the state where he was playing and returned home as he did every spring. He had been fortunate during his career. While his body did not heal as quickly as it did in his early career, none of his injuries were having a significant impact on his performance. He was also fortunate that he was still wanted by teams and had another season waiting for him the next fall. That spring Jones asked himself the three questions to determine if he should return for another season. This time he reached the point where he could no longer answer all the questions in the affirmative. He realized he was at risk for no longer loving the game.
When asked about how he realized it was time to retire, Jones shared a story about walking his dog. He said it was an early spring day when he was taking his dog for his walk and he told his dog “We’re not going back to ________. It’s time for me to quit. It’s time for me to walk away.” Jones finished the walk with his dog and returned home to tell his wife. He recalled the simple conversation with his wife. He told her:

I feel like retiring. I don’t think I want to play anymore. I still love it, but I don’t want to start dealing with all the young players to the point where I am going to be frustrated when I come home all the time. I’m ready to quit.

His wife simply replied, “Well if you are ready to quit, you need to call J [his agent].” Jones spoke with his agent who drafted a retirement letter. After Jones signed the letter, his agent sent it to the team and his retirement was official. Jones called his mother and his best friend to inform them of his decision. “I knew I was ready. I never looked back,” stated Jones.

There was only one moment that following summer when Jones had a second thought. He recalled that he was walking the dog with his nephew when he said he felt like he was suppose to be doing something at that moment. He finally made the connection that he should be at summer training camp. He told his nephew, “They’re doing 7 on 7 right now.” His nephew asked him why he was thinking about that and Jones replied that if he were not retired he would be doing that drill at that moment. When his nephew asked if he wanted to go watch the camp, Jones replied, “No. I can’t believe I’m thinking about that.” According to Jones, that was the only time he thought about playing again.

Jones recognized that his plan of when to end his career went against the advice that older players had given him throughout his career. Veteran players had told him to
“play until they get rid of you. Don’t ever walk away when you’re ready, you walk away when they say to.” Jones stated he was told if one team cut him, he should go find another team to take him on their roster and to continue that cycle until there was no team left who was interested in him. However, to Jones, “that’s no fun.” He had watched these veteran players sit in cold tubs after every game, struggle to walk, and have their bodies beaten and abused each week during the season. He was determined to end his career before he got to that point. He would not play football if it was no longer fun, and he was able to adhere to that belief even when it went against all advice he received.

The choice to retire is empowering for the athlete. He is able to leave the game on his own terms and feel confident in his decision. Jones had a predetermined plan to help him decide when retirement was appropriate. He also had a long career that allowed him to reach closure. Of the participants, Jones reported the least difficulty transitioning into his retirement.

**Summary**

The end of a professional athletic career occurs for different reasons. Each of the reasons can affect how the athlete processes his transition into retirement. The amount of control the athlete has in the decision-making process seems to positively correlate with how easily he makes that transition into retirement. The ideal reason for retirement is personal choice. Athletes who experience injuries that lead to a career end have a justifiable reason for their retirement, but still struggle with the feeling of unfinished business. Being cut leaves the athlete with significant feelings of shock and a lack of closure.
Once the athletes understand that the end of their career is unavoidable, they enter the retirement phase. In the next chapter I discuss how athletes experience retirement and find a new role in their lives once they process through the initial transition.
CHAPTER 7: RETIREMENT

After making the initial adjustments into a new phase in their lives, all participants in this study found new career paths and adjusted their lifestyles following their retirement from professional sports. For some, the path was clear based on how they had prepared for retirement. However, others spent time after retirement trying to determine their next steps in life. The participants in this study retired between the ages of 25 and 45 years old. While their professional athletic careers had been successful, none of them retired with the financial stability to not need a second career.

As the participants described their lives in retirement, four common themes emerged: First, their adjustments to these new careers, second, the changes in their social status or fame, third the physical effects of a professional athletic career, lastly, reflections as professional athletes on their careers.

Adjusting to a New Career

Throughout his NFL career Matthew Jones knew he had to have a plan for his life following retirement from football. He knew “football isn’t going to be here forever.” He had been purposeful in his off-seasons to create distance between himself and football. “They [coaches and teammates] always said that about me. They had a hard time finding me when it was not time to play football,” said Jones. He attributes this ability to separate football from the rest of his life to part of his successful transition to retirement.

When Jones started college he had a goal of working with children. Throughout his NFL career he spent his off-seasons working in schools, following his goal of helping children develop a love of reading. Because of the off-season time he had spent in
schools, when he retired from the NFL the temporary position he had in the school became a permanent position.

Jones needed a career following his NFL retirement more than just to give his life direction. Jones needed a new career in order to have medical insurance. During his NFL career, the players contract did not provide lifetime medical insurance for retired players. His contract provided medical insurance for an additional three years in retirement and then he was eligible to purchase another 18 months of insurance. His new career provides Jones with an opportunity to receive medical insurance without the cost of being self-insured.

Former NFL player Anthony Miller’s professional football career also lasted longer than the average three year NFL career. He played five full seasons and started training camp of his sixth season when he was not medically cleared to play. Though his career ended earlier than he had hoped, Miller had graduated from college prior to entering the NFL. He had a path already determined for his future.

Miller stated that the NFL taught him many skills he was able to transfer to his new career in financial planning. He learned how to manipulate the skills of goal setting, effort, and dedication and apply them in his new career. Miller said, “You got to figure out how that looks in a different type of setting and what you need to do and what goals you need to set.” The attributes of professional athletes are attractive to business recruiters according to Miller. “I think recruiters like athletes because they have that work ethic, and they come in from some sort of regimented thing where they have to set goals…I think that translates, the competitiveness,” he explained.
William Johansen is the most recent retiree. In fact his retirement from the NFL is recent enough in his life that he still is not sure he is completely retired. Johansen’s retirement was not by choice or injury; no team signed him on after being let go from his previous team.

After he realized he was not going to play another season, Johansen started working as a sports broadcaster. He explained that the transition into broadcasting helped him move on from being a football player and provided him with a new challenge. According to Johansen, “It was good that I had something to focus on rather than sitting around wondering what I am going to do with my life.”

Johansen explained that his new role as a broadcaster fit well with the regimented lifestyle he was accustomed to living as a professional athlete. He is obligated to be at certain places at specific times, yet when it is not the football season he has freedom in his life. Since he is new to retirement Johansen is still looking to determine what his future will hold. While he had prior experience in finance before his professional football career, he is now looking at opportunities to continue his education, investigating other types of jobs, looking for new opportunities, and spending time with his family.

Daniel Kolman transitioned into a life as a business owner in his new career following a career in the NBA. Prior to his retirement Kolman trained a small number of young basketball players. When he retired, he took his interest in cultivating young talent and opened a training facility for young athletes. Being a business owner and training young athletes present new, enjoyable challenges for Kolman.

After the initial transition into retirement following his 14-year professional hockey career Bill Wilson struggled to find a new career. His first job after retirement
was as a traveling salesman for a marine sports company. He then did sports commentating for television and radio stations. Wilson also spent a few years selling mortgages before he settled into his current and longest career in insurance sales. His current insurance career has lasted longer than his NHL career. Wilson never completed his college degree. He referenced the stereotypical description of dumb hockey players and a lack of a college degree as being challenges to establishing a new career. When he was looking for a new career Wilson said a college degree was expected. “It’s all tough that way [establishing a new career], no education doesn’t mean you’re dumb. They want to see where’s your degree,” explained Wilson. He was proud to share that he had held a Series 7 license, which allows him to sell individual securities, earlier in his career. Wilson joined his brothers and nephews in the insurance company. He enjoys working with family and staying connected to the hockey community.

Noah Wymann played 13 seasons in the NHL before his retirement. The help wanted advertisement he answered after he retired from hockey is the same job he holds 19 years later. He does credit his NHL career as one of the reasons he is now successful in his financial planning career. Wymann explained that it took a long time to build his business and have it be successful. In doing so, he had to rely on savings from his NHL career to help support his family. Wymann believes being a financial planner is “the hardest job in the world” due to the competitiveness and the financial capital needed to support the business. However, he did recognize that he benefits from being a former professional athlete as he attempts to develop new relationships with clients. He shared that he and his family had become accustomed to living a certain lifestyle, so he works long hours to continue to support this lifestyle for his family.
The discipline he learned as a professional athlete helped Wymann transition successfully into his next career. He stated, “An athlete has had the discipline that would carry them through anything they ever want to do in their life.” Using that discipline, an athlete should be able to learn any new skill needed for his next career, according to Wymann. Athletes make great employees because they have experienced and worked through failures and have a high level of discipline, he explained.

Michael Schulmann believed he was prepared for his business career after his career as a professional baseball player. Recognizing that professional athletes often have “big egos” Schulmann stated:

I thought I was a businessman when I played baseball. I thought I knew what it took to run a business. I thought I knew what it took to make money in the real world…I thought I knew a lot, but I didn’t know jack.

The drive to succeed and the thrill of excitement that make many professional athletes successful in their athletic careers can work against them in the business world, explained Schulmann.

Schulmann sold the first business he started after his retirement from professional baseball. He explained that he “jumped two feet into that business, doing stuff on a daily basis, and just being overwhelmed with that.” Now that he has retired for a second time, Schulmann stated he is more nervous about his current retirement status. “I’ll be frank, it’s a little anxiety producing. It’s more anxiety producing than my retirement from baseball,” explained Schulmann.

The experience of being a business owner taught Schulmann the stress of running a business, the dependence on other people, and the challenge to make a profit. He looks forward to determining his next steps in life. He knows what he does not want in his next
career. “I don’t want to be working 60 hours a week. I don’t want to be cleaning toilets. I don’t want to go through that whole process again of learning and losing money. I want my money to work for me.”

The participants in this study all have started a second career. Except for Johansen, who has only recently retired, all the participants have adjusted to their new career. Some of the athletes had a clear path to a new career. Those athletes had developed this path through experiences during their off-seasons or had earned a college degree prior to their careers in professional athletics. The athletes who did not have a college degree prior to their athletic careers, or did not spend time during the off-seasons developing new skill sets, experienced more struggle in identifying their careers following retirement from professional sports.

Change in Fame

Professional athletes are public figures and the participants in my study reported varying levels of fame in their careers. Some, after retirement, participated in charitable activities and other events allowing them continued recognition. Some of the participants’ new careers still benefit from their being retired professional athletes. Others have chosen to remove themselves from public life.

Anthony Miller stated that fame did not play a significant role in his life as an NFL player. He explained that athletes who played his low profile position frequently were not recognized in public. In his retirement he has had opportunities to participate in various charity events and celebrity golf tournaments, but he stated, “I shunned that whole thing. It wasn’t important for me to be out there and be in that limelight.” However, his former fame as an NFL player does work to his benefit in his new career as
a financial planner. Looking around Miller’s office there are photographs, game balls, trophies, and helmets decorating the space. Miller stated his former role is a “nice connector for people…something to talk about.” While his limelight may not have been as bright as some former athletes, his fame is beneficial in his new career.

During his NFL career Marshall Luther played on a high-profile team with players who were seen as celebrities. He met two presidents and played in the Super Bowl. He enjoyed the experiences, yet, “I almost felt like I am an imposter so I need to act like I’ve been there before and it’s not that big of a deal, but deep down I was like, this is incredible.” His transition into retirement was not affected by his changed societal status. Luther shared that some people still identify him as having been a former NFL player. They ask him a few questions about his career, but it is not a main area of interest. He explained that his former career is almost like another lifetime. He does not wear his Super Bowl ring or regularly talk about football. He did add that perhaps it would benefit his current career in sales if he were to talk about his professional football career more often.

In his retirement from the NBA Daniel Kolman said more fans approach him now than they did when he was a playing in the NBA. He believes his retirement made him more approachable. He explained, “Society treats athletes like they’re demigods, like they are on a pedestal, like they are untouchable.” During his career Kolman tried to take time to connect with fans, and he still enjoys it when fans approach him in his retirement.

His retirement has given him an opportunity to spend more time with his children and to have his type of fame change. He shared that now when he’s at his children’s
sporting events people say, “There goes Angie’s dad, there’s Donovan’s dad.” This change in fame is important to Kolman:

Because now I’m Donovan’s dad, Donovan is not Daniel Kolman’s son. To me, that’s more than anything...as a former athlete, that’s all we want for our kids, to be able to walk into a situation and be their own person.

Kolman is happy to have his children be the center of attention in his life and to be recognized as their father first and a former NBA player second.

Wilson experienced varying levels of fame during his NHL career. He was a high profile player who received many levels of recognition from different hockey associations. He is very close with his extended family and he believes those relationships helped keep him grounded as a player. In his retirement Wilson continues to be active in hockey organizations. Until two years ago he coached youth teams and helped train elite hockey players. He continues playing in charity and legends of hockey games. During the interview he pointed to a framed photograph of an aerial view of a hockey game in an outdoor stadium. With pride he explained it was an outdoor game that was attended by over 35,000 fans for an “old-timers game.” Within the world of hockey Wilson is still a high-profile athlete; however, he stated if he is at the store he is rarely recognized.

In his retirement, Jones is still recognized when he is in public. He enjoys talking with fans and hearing them recall their favorite sports memories about him. He stated he “could take the fame part if it was there and if it was not there it didn’t matter.” He explained his life of fame got quieter until he was nominated for high levels of recognition from his former college and the NFL. Jones said he did enjoy the new level of fame that came with these new recognitions. However, his wife had a different
opinion about his newly resurrected fame. He and his wife met in college and married while he was a rookie in the NFL. She has been with him through his fourteen years of professional football and, according to Jones their relationship remains strong in his retirement. However, after a year of Jones being honored in his retirement she told him, “Ok, all year long we have celebrated you and your [awards] and we are done celebrating you. We are done celebrating Matthew Jones and now we are back to normal.”

Throughout his professional football career and into retirement Jones has always looked for ways to do “something good” with his level of fame. In addition to his career in education, he and his wife now run a non-profit organization supporting students and area schools. He has turned his fame into a tool that allows his organization to give various types of support to students and schools near him.

The participants experienced change in their level of fame upon retirement. Some of them continue to use their status as a professional athlete to further their new careers. Others have settled into their new phase in life without much attention being drawn to their former status. However, a common theme for some is changing the focus of fame from centering on them to promoting a societal cause.

The Residual Physical Effects

Most of the athletes in this study all participated in sports that involved a significant amount of physical contact. The years of physical aggression take a toll on the human body that can eventually affect the quality of life for professional athletes. Some of the participants report suffering from residual effects of the game they played. For some, there is concern about what other effects are yet to arise in their lives. Others accept the damage to their bodies as part of the price they pay to play the game they love.
Matthew Jones had a significant amount of physical contact as an NFL player. His body is beaten and bruised, but Jones stated:

I just wish my body wasn’t as beaten up. It is a price you pay, it’s worth it. I would still do it again even with the aches and pains, the hands always hurting…I’d still do it again. Every ache is worth it.

After making the statement about his body being “beaten up,” Jones was able to recall each of his injuries—the play of the game when it happened, who the player was that caused the injury, and what was said between him and the other player when the injuries occurred. He showed me his injured fingers that were abnormally curled and would never again straighten correctly. He explained, with both a sigh of resignation and pride, how his knee aches on a regular basis: “Yeah, I remember every one [injuries]. I remember them all.”

Another NFL player, Anthony Miller, also has lasting repercussions of his career in football. He is proud of his opportunity to play in the NFL, but he recognized the toll it has taken on his body. Miller has had five knee surgeries, neck surgery, and shoulder surgery, yet he stated, “for the most part I am still functional.” His definition of “functional” included being able to exercise on a daily basis and be active with his children. However, he does have worries about his future. While he is fine with the physical state of his body today, Miller explained: “I’m okay with bad elbows and knees and everything, but the thing you don’t know about is that brain disease.” Throughout his career Miller received multiple concussions. He worries about his future and if he does suffer from brain disease he is not sure if his NFL career would then be worth it.
Given his current status Miller stated:

Knowing what I know now, I’d do it all over again. It’s the not knowing thing that down the road, what may transpire and quality of life and knowing your grandkids…certainly no matter how much money you made or the glory that you got is not worth it.

Yet at the end of that explanation Miller still reiterated that knowing what he knows now, he would “certainly do it again.”

Perhaps due to his shorter career, former NFL player, Marshall Luther does not have the significant lingering physical effects from football. He reported he is healthy currently and has healed from the hamstring injury that ultimately led to the end of his football career. Luther reported only minor physical effects from football and is able to do trail runs on the weekends, while some of his former teammates are unable to run a mile.

In contrast to Luther is the battery Bill Wilson’s body experienced during his NHL career. Perhaps in an attempt to minimize the effects hockey had on his body, Wilson merely stated it was “hard on his body.” Over the course of his career Wilson had 290 stitches from his neck up, a broken thumb and finger, three separated shoulders, two cracked vertebrae, stitches in his tongue, a nearly detached ear, multiple concussions, torn knee ligaments, and two elbow operations. After listing all of his injuries Wilson simply added, “Lucky it didn’t all happen in one year.” He reported that now his body aches and the weather can aggravate his pain. While he stated that he has body aches and pains he added, “I think my heart, lungs and everything healthy that you build being an athlete helps you extend your life and be active older.” Wilson considers himself fortunate to be in the physical condition he is in, noting his friends who are suffering from brain disease after years of playing in the NHL. His tone when speaking about
these friends led me to believe that he feels lucky that he still has full mental functioning and perhaps worries about what health concerns may be in his future.

The lasting physical effects of their sports are reminders of the prices the athletes pay for playing the game they loved. None of the study’s participants experienced injuries that significantly altered their quality of life in retirement. However, each evidenced a level of concern regarding mental effects that may yet arise.

**Looking Back on a Professional Athletic Career**

In reflecting on their professional athletic careers the participants shared positive experiences and memories. Their reflections tell of lessons they learned as professional athletes, and while some suggest they might second-guess choices they made during their athletic careers, the regrets they expressed are not significant. For these athletes professional sports provided opportunities they would not have had otherwise.

In hindsight, Jones would not change a thing about his professional football career. He shared that perhaps he should have sat out a game or a practice due to injury. However, he knows that if he were to do it all over again, he would make the same decisions. Football provided Jones a way out of his hometown. In regards to his youth he stated, “The only way to get out of town was either you were dead, you were arrested, or the military.” Football was Jones’ ticket out of town. He received an unexpected scholarship to play football at the state university. He viewed the scholarship as a better option than his previous plan to join the military. Football provided him with the opportunities to see places and visit other countries, things he never would have done otherwise. “I would have never left my hometown if it weren’t for football,” stated
Jones. In summarizing his career and how he thinks about football Jones stated, “Football afforded me this life that I have, so it was worth everything and more.”

The residual effects of an injury ended Luther’s career earlier than he hoped, and while he still felt he could continue to play even with the injuries. However, he does not regret his experience in the NFL. According to Luther the NFL is, “An amazing opportunity and I wouldn’t trade it for anything.” As his voice rose in excitement he recalled the thrill of catching a game winning touchdown and being part of a winning team. “When things are going well, the team’s winning and you’re succeeding, it’s tremendous…you’re all over Sports Center. It’s the best. Any person’s best day at work can’t compare.”

Luther shared the flipside to the exhilaration he felt as a professional football player. On the days when his team lost, or he missed a critical play, “it’s a brutal job,” he explained, adding that he typically does not share this opinion with others about the NFL. He described his views as, “It’s a stressful existence…I don’t usually have this conversation because it’s really hard to convey to people because it kind of falls on deaf ears, like you’ve got to be kidding me, you poor baby.” He explained that he had recently been asked to speak at his daughter’s preschool’s annual fathers’ breakfast. He attempted to explain the brutal aspect of his NFL career by comparing it to being an accountant who made a significant error, “but it [the error] wasn’t the end of the world.” However, Luther added that error was then broadcasted on every news program and was the topic of office conversations around the country for the next week. Further elaborating Luther said:
Imagine being in the last playoff game of the season, and imagine Bob the accountant screws up. The subsequent story is you know, the tax company needs to upgrade their work force next year and Bob is problem number one. They need to address it, they need to draft a better accountant to fill Bob’s role.

As a player in his early twenties, Luther said it was difficult to hear that type of criticism about his performance. However, as a professional athlete, “It’s part of the gig. You’ve got to take the criticism, but it was pretty, it was kind of rough,” he explained.

Reviewing his NFL career and where he is currently in his life, Luther has no regrets. Professional football was not a career he expected when he was young and so he felt he was “always on a little bit of borrowed time.” He still watches football on television, but does not miss it anymore. According to Luther, his time in the NFL, “was definitely way beyond my wildest dreams so I wouldn’t trade anything, the good or the bad.”

Looking back at his NFL career Johansen only has minor regrets. He left a team and signed with a new team only to have his former team win the Super Bowl that year. Winning the Super Bowl was the one career goal he was not able to reach. Johansen views his opportunity to play in the NFL as, “a blessing…the greatest opportunity it affords you is not necessarily financial but it gives you a platform.” Johansen is now trying to determine the purpose of his platform. He believes the platform will help give him purpose in the next phase of his life. As he reflected on his professional football career he stated, “It’s the greatest thing you can be a part of, to be on a team in the NFL.”

Kolman’s regrets while reflecting on his career as an NBA player were minimal. The NBA was not what he expected, but he stated, “It’s hard to tell a small town kid what real life is like.” As a professional athlete Kolman learned that sometimes he would be traded not because of his ability level, but because he was part of a trade deal that
addressed another need on his team. While he stated he does not have any regrets about his NBA career, he does wish he had had a better understanding of the business aspect of professional basketball.

As he found a new career after his NHL retirement, Wilson stayed focused on the positive things in his life. He shared that he, “Didn’t stop and pout or feel sorry for myself, and I kept saying to myself, am I lucky or what.” His regrets are limited. He explained that the team he played for the longest did not have an effective management system. According to him it was difficult for the team to succeed when the owners and management were so dysfunctional. “The fish rots from the head down in business and sports,” explained Wilson.

As he summarized his professional hockey career Wilson considered himself lucky to have his health. He is proud that he reached his goal of being an NHL player and surpassed that goal with the length of his career and awards and recognition he earned during the career. He added, “I’m able to do things and my family’s still around. I don’t really have much to complain about.”

As a financial planner Wymann is self-employed. Working on his own has been a transition for him. As he recalls his career, he shared that it is not the hockey games he misses, but rather the teammates. He explained that when he is at an event hosting retired NHL players, the stories the athletes share are about events that happened off the ice, outside of the game. “There’s nothing that everybody ever remembers about the game itself, unless you win the Stanley Cup…it’s about the teammates, it’s the environment. Because it’s the stories, if you don’t tell them, you forget them and they disappear,” described Wymann. He had to adjust to not having a teamwork environment in his post-
hockey career. Wymann looks for opportunities to mentor people entering his business field, but he recognized it is not the same type of camaraderie as he had in hockey.

Wymann is proud of his NHL career and the success he had as an athlete. His NHL career exceeded his expectations, and he defined himself as an “over-achiever.” “It’s been my story. It’s been over achieving, which I think is a lot easier than being an under-achiever.” He was satisfied with his athletic performance both on and off the ice. He defined his career as successful because he was never involved in any embarrassing or inappropriate actions damaging to his character. The one regret he does have has to do with his team’s victories and losses. After one strong season, his team made it to the Stanley Cup finals and lost the series. Wymann stated, “I would have loved to have had a win and it was a wonderful team to have do it on, because we were completely over-achievers, all of us, and so it was good. That’s sad, yet a great accomplishment.”

Schulmann reflected on his career as a professional baseball player and explained the unexpected aspects of being a professional athlete. In addition to performing on the baseball field, he had to manage the political and business aspects of being on a professional baseball team. Shulman became more involved with the business side of baseball during his years of rehabilitation from his concussion and his attempts to return to professional baseball. That experience altered his view of baseball. He explained, “I was a little bit bitter with that aspect of it…that was a little bit frustrating.” However, he also shared traveling the country and living in other cities were positive experiences for him and his family.

As he looks to his future, Schulmann is trying to find a way to help other athletes transition from professional sports into their retirements. He does not believe there is
enough support from the teams or players’ associations in transitioning. His experience as a professional athlete and the financial stability it provided him has allowed him the opportunity to take time to determine his future. It has also provided him with time to spend with his family. Near the end of our interview a small voice interrupted our conversation, “Can somebody come out with me? Dad, can you come out and play?” Schulmann is fortunate to have his health, his financial stability, and the ability to say yes to his son.

**Summary**

Professional athletes’ careers end at a much younger age than most Americans retire from their careers. When the athletes retire, they are transitioning from one role to another. During this transition they adjust to new careers, experience changes in their social status, manage the physical effects of playing their sport, and reflect upon their overall experiences as professional athletes. The athletes were able to apply the strong work ethic and goal orientation of professional athletics to their new careers. To varying degrees the participants experienced change in social status. Some sought opportunities to remain in the public eye, while others welcomed the opportunity to be out of the spotlight. Residual physical consequences of the sports affected all of the participants at varying levels. However, even with the consequences all the participants reflected positively on their careers as professional athletes and would do it again if given another chance.

In the following chapter I provide an analysis of the data using Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory and Burke and Stets’ (2009) identity. Both theories help explore how professional athletes transition into retirement and re-establish a life for themselves.
CHAPTER 8: ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I use Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory and Burke and Stets’ social identity theory (2009) to analyze how professional athletes transition into retirement. First, I summarize role exit theory and analyze the retirement transition of the professional athletes in this study. I then summarize identity theory and apply it to the data in this study. Finally, I analyze the grief and loss experienced by players at the conclusion of this chapter using Cummings (2010) “grief to loss theory.” I begin the analysis by illustrating how a change in role and later identity caught many retired players by surprise.

Role Exit Theory

Role exit theory accounts for the process of ending a career or role and the change of identity related to that end. Ebaugh identified four stages people experienced as they transitioned from one role to another: doubting their current role, seeking alternatives, making a decision, and creating the ex-role (see Figure 1). The first stage of role exit theory, according to Ebaugh, occurs when people begin to question their commitment to their current roles or careers. The second stage begins when people seek alternatives and plan for future roles prior to the current role ending.

The turning point, the third stage of role exit theory, comes after the individuals have considered their various options and have finally decided to either exit or remain in their current roles. There are five types of turning points: specific events, the last straw, time-related factors, excuses, and either-or alternatives. In addition, role exit may be voluntary or involuntary. Ebaugh (1988) noted people who experienced involuntary role exit did not experience the first two stages of role exit.
The fourth and final stage in role exit theory is creating the ex-role (Ebaugh, 1988). According to Ebaugh, “In a very real sense, the process of becoming an ex involves tension between one’s past, present, and future. One’s previous role identification has to be taken into account and incorporated into a future identity” (p. 149). Ebaugh stresses the importance of acknowledging the individual’s previous role; it is vital that the person determines how to incorporate the old role into the new role, identified as a “hang-over identity” (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 149). In addition to the importance of recognizing the role-residual, the reaction of society and social support systems of family and friends to the new role are significant factors within the stage of creating the ex-role (Ebaugh, 1988).

Drahota and Eitzen (1998) made modifications to Ebaugh’s (1988) theory as it applies to the role exit of professional athletes. Ebaugh’s original theory, along with Drahota and Eitzen’s modifications are applicable to this study. In the following section I use role exit theory, with modifications from Drahota and Eitzen to analyze the retirement experience of the participants.
Original Doubts/First Doubts

Ebaugh’s (1988) original first stage, “first doubts,” requires modification when applied to the experience of professional athletes. As Drahota and Eitzen (1998) explain, professional athletes enter their careers knowing their careers have a limited duration. This prior knowledge adapts Ebaugh’s first stage to include what Drahota and Eitzen
refer to as “original doubts.” This adaptation recognizes that some athletes enter their professional careers accepting the limited career length and already planning for the next stage in their lives before their professional athletic careers even begin. In this study, both Ebaugh’s stage of first doubts and Drahota and Eitzen’s stage of original doubts are applicable.

Original doubts existed for my study’s participants (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998). In each interview the participants stated they knew their professional athletic careers would not last forever. Former NHL player Noah Wymann stated he felt he “got more than he should have” in regards to the length of his NHL career. Marshall Luther shared similar feelings as Wymann. His career was longer than he expected and he felt fortunate to be able to play in the NFL. Matthew Jones knew from the beginning of his NFL career that it would not last forever and that he needed a plan for the next part of his life. William Johansen had a financial career prior to his NFL career, and knew he needed a new role after his NFL career ended. Six of the eight participants shared experiencing original doubts regarding their professional athletic careers.

However, having original doubts did not stop the athletes from experiencing some level of first doubts as described by Ebaugh (1988). There are five conditions that lead to first doubts: “organizational changes, job burnout, disappointments and drastic changes in relationships, and specific events” (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 42). In regards to the retirement process of professional athletes it is difficult to isolate one category for the impetus of the athletes’ first doubts. However, their experiences do lend themselves to certain categories.
Organizational change leading to first doubts occurs in two ways (Ebaugh, 1988). The change either happens quickly and the member is not able to change as quickly as the organization requires, or the change is gradual but leads to a situation that no longer aligns to the needs of the member. The reason for Michael Schulmann’s retirement from professional baseball was multifaceted. However, quick organizational change did influence his retirement decision. Schulmann played seven seasons for his first MLB team. During the following four years he played for three different teams. The organization was literally changing for Schulmann and he was both unable and unwilling to make the necessary accommodations. During his trades, Schulmann was frustrated he had become a role player, only used to meet each new team’s needs, rather than to be an integral part of their plans.

Job burnout is a second category Ebaugh (1988) identified as leading to first doubts. Ebaugh defined burnout as “a negative response on the part of individuals to role-related stress” (p. 53). The response can appear as physical and/or emotional exhaustion, negative interactions towards others, and a negative view towards oneself (Ebaugh, 1988). Former NFL player Matthew Jones’s retirement experience can be categorized as job burnout. Jones was the only participant who chose to end his professional athletic career. At the end of each season, he reflected on his reasons for playing football and whether or not he should continue. He wanted to ensure he left football while he still loved the game. At the end of his fourteenth season, he was unable to answer his reflection questions affirmatively. He started to have difficulty with younger teammates, and he no longer had the same love of the game as when he started his career. He recognized he was at the point of burnout and decided to retire.
Ebaugh’s (1988) theory also identified disappointments and changes in relationships as a category of first doubts. For professional athletes the changes in relationships can be drastic and unforeseen. Former NFL player William Johansen’s career ended abruptly when he was cut from his current team and was not signed by a new team. Ebaugh stated disappointments occur when “an idealized image of the role did not materialize into reality” (p. 62). Johansen was in jeopardy of losing his ideal role of an NFL player. While he had known his NFL career would end at some point, and he had prepared for a career after football, being cut from a team caused him to realize his career may be over sooner than anticipated. He had to start a new career while he held on to hope that he might return to the game.

The remaining five participants experienced an event in their professional athletic careers causing them to question continuing their roles as professional athletes. Former NHL players Bill Wilson and Noah Wymann, former NBA player Daniel Kohlman, and former NFL players Marshall Luther and Anthony Miller all had injuries that eventually led to the end of their professional athletic careers. According to Ebaugh (1988), these events may have “triggered initial doubts about one’s role commitment” (p. 65).

The athletes’ injuries were not immediately career ending. However, they required extensive rehabilitation that allowed time for the athletes to develop first doubts and to question their futures. During his rehabilitation Kolman started developing a new company. When an offer came from a new team, he no longer wanted to play basketball. His commitment to the NBA had changed during his rehabilitation and he was ready to start a new role in life. Miller’s first doubts also led to questioning his commitment to the NFL. He played a full season with significant injuries and had lied to the team’s medical
staff about the pain he was enduring. At the beginning of his sixth season Miller’s first
doubts began. He started to question the long-term effects of his injuries and if remaining
in the NFL was the best option for him.

Rehabilitation from injury also allowed first doubts to develop for Luther, Wilson, and Wymann. Luther spent a year trying to sign on with a team after getting cut in the
preseason due to an injury. He stated he spent the year waiting for the phone to ring with
an offer. However, at the end of a year he knew that he would be replaced. His first
doubts had developed over the course of that year and he knew it was time for a new role.

Wilson’s injury was not hockey related, but resulted in him not being able to play at the
NHL level. Even though he was able to play hockey professionally in Europe, realizing
he could not play in the NHL started the first doubts for Wilson. Noah Wymann’s NHL
career ended after a shoulder injury. Wymann stated while he knew at that moment his
career was over, he rehabilitated for six months hoping to return to the NHL. His event
was an actual moment. It then required six months to accept the end of his NHL career
and prepare for a new role in life.

Seeking Alternatives

The second stage in role exit theory is seeking alternatives. According to Ebaugh
(1988) during this stage a person looks for new roles, either consciously or
subconsciously. Ebaugh also stated the transitions are most successful when individuals
seek alternatives prior to exiting their current role. Applying the seeking alternatives
stage to the role exit of professional athletes requires modification. Eitzen and Drahota
(1998) stated professional athletes experience this stage in various ways. Some athletes
prepare for a new role before they become professional athletes or prepare for the new
role while they are playing. A second group of athletes recognize the temporary nature of their roles, but do not prepare for a new role. The third group ignores the temporary state of being a professional athlete and do not plan for a new role.

Only one athlete in this study, Matthew Jones, meets Drahota and Eitzen’s (1998) first category criteria of athletes who recognized the temporary nature of the role and plan for the future. Jones spent time during his off-season exploring a new role as an educator. Throughout his career he stated the importance of a college education and having a plan for retirement.

Drahota and Eitzen’s (1998) second category is athletes who recognize the temporary nature of professional athletics, but do not actively prepare for their new roles. A factor not discussed in Drahota and Eitzen’s modification of Ebaugh’s (1988) theory is whether or not a college degree represents recognition of the temporary nature of professional athletics. For the purpose of this study, I include college degrees as recognition of the temporary nature of professional athletics. Five of the participants did recognize their professional athletic careers as temporary and did earn a college degree. Their educations provided a type of insurance policy for their futures, allowing them some level of preparation for their new roles. Their college degrees helped them transition into a new role with minimal struggle.

College degrees did not necessarily mean the athletes actively pursued new roles while they were professional athletes, however. Ebaugh (1988) stated the seeking alternatives stage begins when a “person admits dissatisfaction in a current role” (p. 87). Except for Jones, the participants did not experience dissatisfaction with professional athletic careers. Their transition process was due to outside influences such as injury or
being cut from a team. This lack of dissatisfaction may be connected to athletes’ lack of preparation for a new role after retirement.

The professional athletes’ viewpoint towards retirement also affected how they sought alternatives. In chapter five, I explored the conflicting messages professional athletes receive about preparing for retirement. The conflict regarding preparation for retirement makes it difficult for athletes to successfully transition through the seeking alternative stage of role exit as defined by Ebaugh (1988).

In fact, chapter five included data suggesting athletes felt exploring new careers would cause them to lose focus on their sports. If they focused only on their athletic careers, they probably would not have experienced a level of dissatisfaction causing them to actively seek alternatives to their current roles. Only Jones chose to actively explore new roles in his off-seasons. Wymann gained experience in financial planning during his hockey career. However, this experience was due to the players’ lockout, not as active preparation for a new career after the NHL. Wymann did not know when or if he would return to hockey and therefore sought a career to help provide for his family. Kolman’s exploration of his new role occurred during his rehabilitation from injury. He began to question if he would be able to return to the NBA. Seeking alternatives began as a necessity for both Kolman and Wymann rather than an early preparation for the inevitable end of their professional athletic careers.

In addition to a college degree, William Johansen also had a financial career prior to becoming a professional football player. As a professional athlete he knew he had a career that he could fall back on when his career ended. However, during his NFL career he did not actively seek alternatives for the next stage in his career. Knowing he had a
college degree and had a previous career as a financial planner allowed Johansen to focus solely on football during his career.

Michael Schulmann and Bill Wilson are two athletes who met Drahota and Eitzen’s (1998) third category of athletes who ignored the future. Neither Schulman nor Wilson had college degrees to rely on when their professional athletic careers ended. They also did not spend time during their careers seeking alternatives. Wilson played professional hockey until he was no longer signed to any team in the United States or Europe. Schulmann persevered for years through significant effects of a concussion while trying to return to professional baseball. Neither Schulmann nor Wilson began seeking alternatives until their professional athletic careers ended.

**The Turning Point**

The third stage of Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory is the turning point. She defined this stage as an event that occurs marking the end of a career that makes people aware of a level of dissatisfaction and offers a chance to make a change in their lives. Ebaugh identified five types of turning points: specific events, last straw, time-related factors, excuses, and either/or alternatives (p.125). Drahota and Eitzen (1998) modified Ebaugh’s fives types of turning points to align with the careers of professional athletes. According to Drahota and Eitzen the turning point for athletes is either voluntary, meaning the athlete chooses to leave the sport, or involuntary, meaning the decision is made for the athlete. Ebaugh (1988) stated her research was limited to people who experienced role exit with varying levels of voluntary choice. She believed those who involuntarily experienced role exit might experience the four stages of role exit differently (p.204-205). However, Drahota and Eitzen argued that because athletes
“should recognize that their professional career is tenuous at best,” the athletes do experience the stages in a modified manner and their turning point experiences focus on voluntary or involuntary exits.

Seven of the athletes in this study experienced some level of involuntary exit as their turning point in role exit. William Johansen experienced the most significant involuntary decision when he was cut from his team and not signed by a new team. This involuntary decision left him questioning if his football career was really over when a new season started without him on a team. Even though Johansen stated he was preparing for the role exit since his rookie year in the NFL, he still struggled with the finality of the involuntary decision of his role exit. Johansen stated, “No matter how much you prepare for it or how much you’re ready for it, it’s going to be a shock to your system.” The end of Wilson’s professional hockey career was also involuntary. He had determined he would play until no team wanted him. The other five participants who experienced involuntary decisions had injuries that eventually led to the end of their careers. While their decisions were involuntary, the perception of ending an athletic career due to injury rather than being cut from a team is more socially acceptable (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998).

Only one participant experienced a voluntary decision as a turning point. Matthew Jones chose to end his NFL career. After his fourteen-year football career Jones decided to retire. There was not a specific event that led to his decision, but an event Ebaugh (1988) would define as a last straw experience. According to Ebaugh the last straw turning point occurs after minor events happen that were “insignificant in themselves but were the culmination of a long process of doubting and evaluating
alternatives” (p.128). Jones’s minor events were a culmination of experiences struggling with younger teammates and the residual physical effects of playing football. Ultimately he determined it was time to retire.

While Drahota and Eitzen’s (1998) modifications of Ebaugh’s (1988) theory align to the voluntary/involuntary nature of turning points for professional athletes, some of Ebaugh’s five types of turning points were also applicable to some of the participants who experienced involuntary turning point decisions. Former NFL player Anthony Miller and MLB player Michael Schulmann both ended their careers as a result of injuries. Both athletes had been medically cleared to play. However, they weighed their either/or alternatives between continuing their careers, or risking their health and determined to retire from professional athletics. Kolman, Wymann, and Luther also experienced injuries that eventually led to the end of their careers. According to Ebaugh, an “excuses” turning point happens when “some event or authority figure made it clear that an exit was necessary for the well-being of the individual” (p. 130). Their injuries gave them a respectable reason to exit their roles. They attempted rehabilitation from their injuries, but in the end were no longer able to perform at a professional level.

Creating the Ex-Role

Ebaugh’s (1988) fourth stage of role exit is creating the ex-role. This stage is described as “a tension between one’s past, present, and future” (p. 149). The ex-role requires modifying the new role to include one’s previous role, creating what Ebaugh calls “role residual” (p. 150). According to Ebaugh, being an ex is different from never having been a member of a specific group and therefore it is impossible to ignore the existence of the prior role. “Non-members do not carry with them the ‘hangover identity’
of a previous role and therefore do not face the challenge of incorporating a previous role identity into a current self-concept” (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 149). Other factors related to creating an ex-role are the social changes that occur during and after the role exit. Drahota and Eitzen (1998) identified creating the ex-role as one of the most difficult exiting stages for professional athletes.

Role residual or the “hangover identity” is a significant factor for professional athletes (Ebaugh, 1988, p.149). Their struggle is “not how to finally be rid of their past identity but rather the challenge of learning how to live with it” (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998, p. 273). Ebaugh (1988) stated that role residual for famous people could be more difficult because society continues to remind the person of the former role (p. 175). Most of the participants have determined ways to merge their former role as professional athlete with their new roles. Wymann and Miller both discussed how they used their roles as former professional athletes in developing new client relationships. Both of their offices were decorated with sports memorabilia. They stated their former roles helped break the ice in new business relationships. While Marshall Luther does not display sports memorabilia in his office, his former NFL career is highlighted on his Linked-In page. He also stated that it would likely be good for his business if he drew more attention to his former role. Former NBA player Daniel Kolman continues to work in a sports related career. His role residual helps give him credibility as he develops his new roles. Like Kolman, Johansen uses his role residual of former NFL player to develop his career in sports broadcasting.

As former professional athletes, the social reaction to creating the ex-role is significant. Participants shared that their social circles were their teammates. They
developed strong relationships both on and off the field. The end of their athletic careers was also the end of these relationships. Johansen explained that the abrupt end to his NFL career also was the end of many of his friendships. He stated his closest friends were his teammates, but when they were no longer teammates, the friendships ended. Luther also shared similar experiences at the end of his NFL career. He did not have many friends outside of his teammates and it was difficult to develop new friendships as he transitioned into a new role. Kolman said his wife struggled with his decision to retire from the NBA. She was not ready for his career to be over, though she is now happy with the change in their lives.

**Identity Theory**

In this section I explain the components of the second theory applicable to this study, Burke and Stets’ (2009) identity theory, and then use the theory to analyze the identity changes experienced by the participants in the study. Burke and Stets (2009) define how the identity is developed, the ways the identification verification process is interrupted, and the reasons for identity change within their identity theory. The theory identifies four factors of identities: identity standard, input, comparator, and output (Burke & Stets, 2009, p 62). When the input aligns with the identity standard, the identity is stable. When there is an interruption between the input and the identity standard, the person works to align the two factors, or must find a new identity. In this section I use identity theory to analyze how professional athletes experience retirement.
Identity Development

There are three methods for identity development: social learning, direct socialization, and reflected appraisal (Burke & Stets, 2009). The identities of the professional athletes in this study developed mainly from direct socialization (Burke & Stets, 2009). “Direct socialization will assure that as people move into new positions and take on new identities, they have the correct standards from the beginning” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 194). The athletes in this study were highly trained for their athletic roles. They started playing their sports as children and continued training into adulthood in order to perform at an elite level. While their physical training prepared their bodies, their identities were also being directly socialized. Marshall Luther explained he was told what to wear, where to be, what to eat, and how to play. He said, “You get used to someone telling you what to do, how to do it, here are the steps to be successful.” Direct
socialization occurred for Jones in college. He explained his coaches expected his only focus to be football. When he went to the bookstore to buy his textbooks, they were waiting in a bag for him. He was not required to stand in line for course registration; his schedule was done for him. The direct socialization of the participants allowed them to succeed as athletes, but did not allow them to develop additional identities needed after their athletic careers.

**Identity Verification Interruption**

Burke and Stets (2009) identified four methods of identity interruption. The first interruption is the broken loop. It occurs after a significant event, such as a change of careers. The second interruption is “interruption from other identities (p. 78). People hold multiple identities, such as parent, accountant, spouse, when the multiple identities are misaligned, the identity cannot be verified. The person will either change behaviors to meet the identity standard, or change the identity. “Over-controlled identity”, the third method of identity interruption, occurs when one identity dominates the other identities (p. 78). The fourth interruption, “episodic identities”, results from the stress of managing multiple identities (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 79). The participants in this study experienced the broken loop, interference from other identities, and over-controlled identity.

William Johansen experienced an identity interruption due to the broken loop. His identity as a professional football player was abruptly ended when he was cut from his team and not signed by a new team. It was impossible for his identity cycle to continue because he was not able to make the necessary input changes to align with his identity standard of a professional football player. Although Johansen questioned if he
was actually retired, alluding to a possible attempt to realign input and identity standard, he also spoke with an acceptance of the change in identity. Johansen referenced the finality of his identity as an athlete and how it shocked him. The loop was broken when he was released from his team. He stated, “it’s the end of that immediately.” The sudden loss of his identity as a professional athlete caused Johansen to look further at developing other identities as well as to question changing the input to again align with the identity standard of a professional football player.

Jones’s identity interruption can be categorized as what Burke and Stets (2009) define as “interference from other identities” (p. 78). Jones’s NFL career was the longest professional athletic career in this study. He explained at the end of each season he reflected on why he played football. His identity was interrupted when he realized that while he still loved the game, he was ready to decrease his input on his professional athlete identity and was ready to increase his input on his other identities.

The other six participants experienced an identity interruption due to an “over-controlled identity” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 78). An over-controlled identity is highly sensitive. Discrepancies between the input and identity standard must be minimal. According to Burke and Stets (2009) “a tightly controlled system requires more sensitivity to error, …and it requires more attention and resources to monitor potential discrepancies, which may draw away resources used to maintain other identities” (p. 78).

All of the participants in this study referred to the regimented life they were required to live during their professional athletic careers. The systems they lived in were highly controlled and led to developing identities that were highly controlled. Former NHL player Noah Wyman stated he followed the exact game day routine for 13 years,
including the meal he ate prior to the game. Former NBA player Daniel Kolman explained at the beginning of each season he called each hotel he would be staying in to order his meals. The same tight regiment was also in professional baseball. Michael Schulmann shared that he followed the exact pre-game regimen every day for eight months during the baseball season. Luther referred to change from his regimented life to life after football and said, “Everything’s sort of very structured for years and years and then you have to figure it out”.

Burke and Stets (2009) stated that it is difficult for people with over-controlled identities to develop their other identities because they focus solely on the main identity. This neglect of other identities also adds stress because they recognize the neglect. In chapter five I discussed the challenge the participants experienced as they struggled to focus on their sports and also recognize the brevity of their athletic careers and the need to prepare for a new career. The attempt to balance their athletic careers as well as to prepare for their futures was a stress on their identity development.

**Reasons for Identity Change**

Identities change when they cannot be verified. The change may be due to situational change, identity conflict, conflict between identity and behaviors, and “negotiation and the presence of others (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 185). The majority of the participants’ identities changed due to changes in their situation.

Seven of the participants initially attempted to restore their situational meanings when they struggled with injuries or were released from teams. Schulmann, Luther, Kolman, Wilson, Wymann, and Miller all attempted to return to their sports after an injury. They participated in extensive rehabilitation trying to restore their situational
meanings to their identity standard of a professional athlete. Miller hid the extent of his injuries from the team’s medical staff in attempt to restore his situational meaning. Wilson played hockey in Europe when his situational meaning changed and he could not play in the NHL. When their rehabilitation was not successful, they each had to create new identity standards. The participants who had prepared for retirement were able to develop new identity standards because they had allowed themselves to tend to those identities prior to the end of their athletic careers.

**Coming to Grips with Loss Theory**

Cummings (2010) developed the “coming to grips with loss,” a grounded theory, to analyze how people who experienced similar types of loss process the loss differently. Her theory is comprised of a four-stage cycle (see Figure 3). In this section I use coming to grips with loss theory to analyze how participants experienced loss as they transitioned into retirement from professional athletics.

*Figure 3. Coming to Grips with Loss Theory, Cummings (2010).*
Discovering Loss

The first phase of the cycle is discovering loss. According to Cummings (2010) loss can be discovered from an external or internal source. People who are informed of a loss experience an external source of loss. The level of awareness of an impending loss provides an opportunity for people to prepare for the actual loss. According to Cummings (2010), the significance of loss can be decreased when people are aware of an approaching loss. Recognizing an impending loss allows people to begin the loss and coping process, “prior to the loss, thereby reducing some of the stress or feeling of powerlessness” (Cummings, 2010, p. 28). The internal method of discovering loss is a “recognition that people perceive from within themselves” (Cummings, 2010, p. 30). Typically people who experience an internal source of loss “acknowledge that they are living or behaving outside the norms of a group in which they associate” (Cummings, 2010, p. 30). The source of loss can affect the level of emotion people experience regarding the loss. The majority of the participants discovered the loss from an external source. Only one participant experienced an internal source of loss.

**External source.** Team coaches and medical staff were the primary source of external loss experienced by this study’s participants. Former NFL players, Anthony Miller, Marshall Luther, and NHL player Noah Wymann experience external loss based on their injuries that eventually led to the end of their careers. Injuries that led to career end are examples of external source. Each of the athletes experienced an injury, attempted to rehabilitate from the injury and in the end were not signed by a new team.

Anthony Miller stated he knew that he should not continue to play with his neck injury, but struggled to make the decision retire on his own. He explained he needed to
be told by the medical staff that he was no longer able to play football. Noah Wymann’s NHL career also ended from the external source of a medical diagnosis. After six months of rehabilitation Wymann came to accept the end of his NHL career. According to Cummings, “clues prior to the loss may give people time to start the mourning and coping processes prior to the actual loss” (p. 28). Injuries were clues that signaled an impending career end for Miller and Wymann.

However, the external source did not ease Marshall Luther’s transition into retirement. His career ended following a hamstring injury. He spent month rehabilitating and waiting for a call from his agent. The end of his career left with him questioning his self-worth and if he could still play football. He stated he knew that his career was not going to last forever, but he did not expect it to end as abruptly as it did.

The external source loss of the previously mentioned athletes was based on injuries that led to the end of careers. The end of career for Daniel Kolman, Michael Schulmann and Bill Wilson was by choice, but was initiated by the external source of an injury. For these athletes, they had time to process their retirement and eventually choose to retire. After returning from months of rehabilitation, Schulmann accepted the loss and stated he was done with his baseball career. As Kolman was preparing to sign a new NBA contract, he realized he was ready for a new phase in life. Wilson chose to play until he was no longer wanted. He had prepared his entire career to play until “the phone stopped ringing” and once that happened he accepted the loss of his career.

Former NFL player William Johansen experienced an external source of loss when he was cut unexpectedly from his team. Johansen did not expect his career to end
and the loss was significant enough that he was not able to initially accept the end of his career. He stated that if a team were to call him, he would be playing again.

**Internal source.** Matthew Jones was the only participant who experienced an internal method of discovering his loss. Jones had self-reflectaced at the end of each NFL season to determine if he should return for the following season. After 14 seasons Jones determined that he was ready to retire. Jones shared that he was struggling with younger players and the team dynamics were changing. His norms no longer aligned with his teammates and he decided to retire. He did not experience “shame or alienation” as Cummings (2010) found in her study.

**Assessing Loss**

Assessing loss is the second stage in the coming to grips with loss cycle. During this stage people recognize the loss and determine how significant the loss is in their lives. Cummings (2010) states, “the scope or severity of loss may be determined by whom or what is affected, tangible and intangible consequences, expected recovery time, available resources, and resulting changes in circumstances that may come from loss” (p. 31). In addition, people attribute different levels of value to the loss and its assessment can be connected to the “importance associated with the loss” (Cummings, 2010, p. 31).

The participants experienced varying levels of loss and attributed different levels of value to the loss. Professional athletes recognize the brevity of their careers and accept that brevity at varying levels. The assessed level of loss may be connected to the how prepared an athlete was for retirement. The six athletes who had college degrees or had career experience prior to retiring from professional athletics experienced a less stressful transition to retirement. Schulmann and Wilson were the two participants who did not
have college degrees or career preparation. Their stressful transition into retirement could be attributed to the assessed value of their professional athletic careers. Neither had made transition plans and struggled to adjust to their new lives following retirement.

**Mourning**

Mourning is the third stage in the coming to grips with loss cycle. After the level of loss is assessed, the individual can experience various emotions ranging from sadness to anger. According to Cummings (2010), people experience a range of emotions associated with grief based on the type and the level of importance of the loss. Within the mourning phase, people experience an “initial reaction”, “ongoing response”, “reminiscing”, and “coming to grips” (Cummings, 2010, p. 118). Cummings explains an ongoing response as a period of time when the level of emotions may vary in intensity as they process the loss. Cummings (2010) describes one of the ongoing responses as “going through the motions” (p. 37). The final of mourning often leaves people feeling hopeful about future possibilities (Cummings, 2010).

The participants did not report an initial reaction to the loss of their professional athletic careers that aligned to the stage in Cummings theory (2010). The athletes had some level of awareness that their careers could end without notice and likely that is why they did not report demonstrating significant initial responses. Johansen, the only player to be deselected, stated he was surprised at the finality of the end of his career, but did not state experiencing “intense” emotions that Cummings (2010) attributes to an initial reaction (p. 35).

The participants did report experiencing various emotions attributed to Cummings’ ongoing response stage. Marshall Luther shared how during his year first
year of retirement he did not have a new social circle and his days were comprised of menial events such as going to the dry cleaners and getting a haircut. Depression is another response attributed to ongoing response. Wymann reported that after months of doing nothing in his retirement his wife finally asked him if he was going to get a job. All of the participants shared various experiences with integrating their feelings of loss developing a new routine in their lives following their professional athletic careers. To varying extents the participants have all incorporated their previous roles as professional athletes into their new lives. Some, like Kolman and Johansen, established new sports-related careers. Others, such as Miller, Luther, Wilson, and Wymann, use their professional athletic careers to make connections that promote their new finance-related careers. Jones incorporates his former role to promote his non-profit work in the community. Being able to develop a new role provided the participants with a “sense of hope” regarding the next stage in their lives (Cummings, 2010, p. 42).

**Coping**

Coping is the fourth stage in the coming to grips with loss cycle. Cummings (2010) states, “the coping process is a cyclical course of actions that operates concurrently with the assessing and mourning process and response to feelings associated with loss” (p. 44). The methods people use to cope varying based on the individual and the assessed value attributed to the loss. Cummings (2010) identifies delaying and resolving as the two “tracks” people follow as they cope with the loss. A strategy of the delaying track is “façade maintenance” (p. 50). This strategy allows the person to continue their “normal routines or fulfill expectations from others” (p. 50). Another strategy used on Cummings’s (2010) delaying track is “circumventing” (p. 49).
Resolving, the second track people follow, helps people develop “increased resiliency, positive perspectives on the loss, and hope for the future” (Cummings, 2010, p. 57). Participants in this study experienced both the delaying and resolving tracks.

The participants most frequently utilized the delaying track. Athletes such as Miller, who played through extensive injuries, or Schulmann who spent months in rehabilitation, or Wilson who played in Europe utilized delaying as a coping strategy. They strived to maintain their façade as a professional athlete. William Johansen, who was cut from a team, expressed a lack of acceptance of his retirement during his interview when he stated he was not sure he had retired yet. He was holding onto hope that he may be asked to join a new team. Maintaining a level of hope allowed Johansen to ignore the emotions of loss.

Matthew Jones was the only participant to followed Cummings (2010) “resolving track” (p. 57). Because Jones chose to retire and had made long-term plans for a new career following his retirement from the NFL, he was confident entering retirement (Cummings, 2010). Jones’s control to choose retirement allowed him to experience.

**Summary**

Role exit theory (Ebaugh, 1988), identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009), and coming to grips with loss (Cummings, 2010) contributed to the analysis of my study. Role exit theory provided a framework for understanding how the participants viewed their roles as professional athletes and their struggle in determining how to develop new roles, while also managing their “role residual” from professional athletics (Ebaugh, 1988). Role residual is a factor all of the athletes continue to manage. For some, like Kolman and Johansen, the role residual helped support them accessing new sports-related
careers. The role residual for other athletes has a lesser impact on the other athletes’ lives, but at some level is present for all of the participants. Most have managed to leverage their reputation earned in their athletic role into their new careers. Wymann, Miller, Wilson, Schulmann, and Luther all used their role residuals to promote their new roles. Jones, the only athlete in this study who chose to retire, is the one participant whose new career role does not incorporate his previous role as a professional athlete. However, his role residual is present in his on-going charity work.

The importance of the identity athletes held and how they developed their identity can be analyzed using identity theory. The retirement process for the athletes caused them to focus on secondary identities. These “other” identities were not the focus of their attention during their professional athletic career. The regimented and demanding professional athletic careers resulted in over-controlled identities, often beginning in adolescences. This valued identity proved difficult to leave. The use of the two theories allowed analysis of both a role and how athletes exited from their role, as well as how an identity is developed and changed.

Cummings’s (2010) coming to grips with loss theory is applicable to the retirement experience of professional athletes. It provided a framework for analyzing how the participants experienced the emotions attributed to the loss of their athletic careers. However, because the athletes knew their careers would be relatively brief, they had some level of preparation for the loss. This prior knowledge may have influenced how they experienced the stages of loss.
In the next chapter I summarize my findings, and provide possible implications of my findings for athletes, coaches, and parents. I then explain the limitations of my study as well as propose areas for further research based on the findings of the study.
CHAPTER NINE: SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I studied how events in the lives of professional athletes affected their retirement experiences. I identified four common stages in their experiences: becoming a commodity, impending retirement, initial transition into retirement, and retirement. In this chapter I describe my findings and identify implications for preparing professional athletes for their careers and retirement. I then identify limitations of this research and make recommendations for further research. For review, my research question and additional supporting question were:

1. How do professional athletes experience and make meaning of the retirement process as they exit from their professional athletic careers and enter retirement?
2. How do professional athletes manage the shift from fame and fortune associated with an active career to changes in identity and loss of resources occurring in retirement?

Next I review my findings and make recommendations regarding support for professional athletes in preparation for and during the retirement process.

Understanding the Role of a Commodity

The participants shared their experiences learning their role as a commodity within the world of professional athletics. They learned they were business capital that allowed the world of professional athletics to make millions of dollars each year, while their salaries were only a fraction of the teams’ profits. As a commodity, their lives were scheduled to the minute during the seasons. They were told what to eat and wear, when to arrive at various places, and the exact training routines they would follow to make their team a winning team. Their off-season lives were also monitored and most of the participants used the off-season time to prepare for the upcoming seasons. The participants also learned that the games they loved to play now involves a multi-million-
dollar business. Expected to perform at elite levels or risk the chance of being traded or cut from their teams, players quickly learned the personal cost of professional athletics. I describe the subthemes related to athletes as commodities, and make recommendations based on my findings.

**Regimented Lifestyle**

Participants described the regimented lifestyle affecting their experience in professional athletes. Whether the participant had retired within the past two years, or decades ago, each recalled their daily schedules, some to the minute, during their athletic careers. They shared their struggle transitioning into a lifestyle where they controlled their schedule, instead of following the expectations of others. The participants experienced challenges establishing their new lives after retirement due to the lack of structure in their new post-professional athletic lives.

To players’ associations and team management I recommend retiring athletes receive support from their associations and teams in redefining their lives in retirement. Athletes may not realize the effect a change in routine can have on their lives and productivity. The participants shared their struggles attempting to find structure in their new lives. Establishing a new routine proved difficult after following strict schedules and routines for years. Providing athletes with transition sessions focusing on the change in routine and strategies to develop a schedule and routines in their new lives may support athletes’ transition experiences. Figure 4 illustrates the recommendations for players’ associations.
Figure 4. Recommendations for Players Associations

- Provide transition support to retiring athletes regarding change in lifestyles
- Improve rookie program focusing on business aspects of professional athletics
- Arrange internships for professional athletes during the off-season
- Support athletes developing new career skills during the off-season
- Provide athletes with factual information regarding long-term effects of injuries
- Provide transitional support programs to athletes, including counseling, career guidance, and applicability of professional athletic skills set to other careers
- Support retiring athletes in how to positively capitalize their professional athletic career in their new careers
- Provide transitional support programs to athletes, including counseling, career guidance, and applicability of professional athletic skills set to other careers

Business Aspect of Professional Athletics

Athletes begin playing sports as children. For most, it is their passion, something they love to do. However, when they become professional athletes, they now are part of a business. They are expected to perform at high levels in order to make their team
owners’ financially successful. My findings revealed the need to prepare athletes for the business aspect of professional sports. The participants struggled with understanding their role in the business plan. Some were traded or cut without any preparation or warning.

It would be beneficial for athletes to receive more preparation in high school and college for the transition to the business of professional athletics. High school and college athletes understand the need to perform at high levels and to have winning records. However, they do not experience trade deals with other teams during the season in order improve performance, nor is their salary dependent on their performance. It is important that as they dream of “making it” at the professional level, they understand that while they make a significant salary, the team’s owner will make millions of dollars based on their performance. They are allowed to continue playing as long as they create revenue for the team. Once they are no longer productive, they will be cut or traded. As I illustrated in Figure 5, I recommend to youth coaches, and teachers, to educate their student-athletes about the business aspect of professional athletics. Coaches should counsel their student-athletes about becoming a commodity.
It is vital for young athletes’ long-term success to understand that the purpose of professional athletics is to make money for the owner. Teams are owned. The athletes are commodities that are bought, sold, traded, and cut in order for the owner to make money. Educating young athletes about the business aspect of professional sports and
highlighting the millions of dollars owners make based on athletes’ performances provide a clearer picture of young athletes’ potential futures. I recommend the players’ associations and team management provide a stronger preparation program for rookie professional athletes to educate them on the business aspects of playing the game they love at a professional level.

**Impending Retirement**

Retirement was not an experience that the participants of this study positively anticipated. While for many Americans retirement is often viewed in a positive manner and they make plans both financially and socially, professional athletes are not encouraged to prepare for their retirement life. I identified three subthemes regarding impending retirement: preparation for retirement, the role of education, and choosing to play with injuries to prolong athletic careers. The following section reviews the subthemes and identifies recommendations related to preparing athletes for retirement.

**Mixed Messages**

This study found that professional athletes receive mixed messages regarding retirement preparation. On one side the coaches expect the athletes to be solely focused on their sport, while on the other side the players’ associations attempt to encourage athletes to prepare for their retirement. The coaches and team ownership send the message to athletes that any attention paid to future careers is a lack of attention to their current athletic careers. They question the athlete’s dedication. The players’ associations attempt to provide workshops where athletes can develop skills in broadcasting, acting, and entertainment careers. However, attendance at workshops is voluntary. The athletes themselves voiced their personal struggle in determining where to focus their efforts
They were left to determine how to best live in the moment yet attempt to prepare for their futures.

I recommend coaches and players’ associations provide professional athletes the opportunity to prepare for their next careers during the off-seasons. The development opportunities could include internships at types of businesses, mentor programs in areas of their interest, and summer courses to help finish college degrees. Athletes recognize their careers are short. Most recognize that they will need another career after their retirement from professional athletics.

If team management and players’ associations provided ongoing opportunities during the off-season for players to attend development programs, it would send the message that the athletes have valuable skills beyond athletics. Young athletes spend hundreds of hours during their childhood and adolescence developing their athletic skills with the goal of being professional athletes. They are not always as dedicated toward developing academic skills as athletic skills. Highlighting career development programs during the off-season also would demonstrate to young athletes that academic skills are also important and valued in life.

The Value of a College Diploma

This study identified the role that having a college degree or a career prior to or during a professional athletic career played in how athletes prepared for their retirement from professional athletics. The five participants who had either a college degree and/or career experience beyond professional athletics demonstrated a higher level of certainty about their futures after their athletic careers ended and reported less difficulty transitioning into retirement. The three participants who did not have college degrees or
career experiences had to determine their futures after their athletic careers ended rather than having a college degree or career experience to ease the transition.

I recommend that teachers and youth coaches impress the importance of a quality education and a college degree to young athletes at every opportunity during their adolescence. I listed recommendations for teachers in Figure 6. Some young athletes view college as way to continue playing sports and possibly as a transition into professional athletics. It is imperative that coaches, teachers, parents, and mentors stress that an athletic scholarship provides them an opportunity to earn a college education. College is not a means to play sports; it is a venue for education. The athletics must be secondary to the education.
In addition, I recommend that schools ensure quality academic support is provided to high school and college athletes who may be struggling academically. As a former high school teacher, I saw teachers give student-athletes passing grades so they would remain eligible to play sports. Frequently there are reports of college athletes
having their classwork completed by tutors. When student athletes are given grades rather than expected to earn grades, as educators we are doing a disservice to our student athletes. If a student-athlete happens to be one of the very few who do make it at a professional athletic level, his career will eventually end and he will need an education to rely on as he transitions into his next stage in life.

**Fighting Through Injury**

The dread of retirement was strong enough for some athletes that they played through significant injuries in order to prolong their careers. Some of the athletes hid the extent of injuries from their team doctors. Others spent months or years in rehabilitation following injuries just hoping for another chance to play. Yet another participant went to Europe to extend his hockey career when an injury left him unable to play at the professional level in the NHL. The desire to play outweighed their personal health, and for some left them with lifelong effects from injuries.

I recommend to team management that athletes receive quality health care and a working environment where they do not feel pressured to hide their injuries for fear of losing their jobs. I listed recommendations for team management in Figure 7. Although coaches and owners view athletes as commodities, they would benefit from an environment that allowed athletes to be honest about their injuries. Athletes who play with injuries do not perform at their highest level. Athletes must be able to be honest about the extent of their injuries and be able to receive appropriate care. Professional athletics has a high performance standard. Athletes train their bodies for years in order to reach that standard and often their bodies receive on-going abuse due to their athletic
careers. While injuries can be expected, the athletes must be able to be honest about them and receive appropriate care without risking their jobs.

*Figure 7. Recommendations for Team Management*
In addition, to youth coaches I recommend preparing athletes for retirement by emphasizing the importance of all levels of education. A college diploma eased the professional athletes’ transitions into retirement by providing them with a skills and knowledge to begin a new career after professional athletics. Team management and players’ associations should encourage professional athletes to earn college degrees, and attending off-season educational sessions can ease their transition into retirement. If an athlete develops career skills in addition to their athletic skills, they will have an easier transition into retirement.

**Initial Transition into Retirement**

Athletic careers typically end by injury, being released/cut from a team, or by athlete’s choice. This study identified a relationship between the way professional athletes’ careers end and their transition into retirement. The participants in this study represented all three end-of-career methods. The following section is a review of the three ways athletic careers end. I then make recommendations related to supporting athletes at the end of their careers.

**Injuries’ Effects on End of Careers**

While none of the participants had injuries that immediately ended their athletic careers, three had injuries that led to the end of their careers. Some of these athletes experienced difficulty transitioning into retirement because they felt they still had the ability to play. They spent extensive time and energy rehabilitating, just to be told they were no longer good enough. Athletes in this end of career category expressed a feeling of failure. They felt they were no longer wanted and that they had unfinished business.
However, for others the team doctor declaring them ineligible to play made it easier to walk away. The decision was made for them.

Two participants had injuries that led them to choose retirement. They had successful rehabilitation following their injuries, but rather than return to their sport, they chose to retire. One athlete had started exploring new career options, and rather than sign with a new team, he determined it was time to retire. The other athlete chose to retire after a conversation with a team doctor about his desire to return to the sport. He chose his long-term health over baseball. Following a car accident, a third participant chose to play hockey in Europe until his retirement.

In addition to the previously recommended emphasis on education and off-season educational programs, I recommend that players’ associations provide support for athletes regarding injuries and the long-term effect of playing with chronic injuries.

**Deselection**

Being cut from a team can be a difficult transition into retirement for athletes. The team no longer needs the athlete. He is no longer good enough to play. Athletes are at the mercy of team management during their careers. They are cut due to issues related to performance, character, and relationships with teammates and management. Being cut from a team ended the career of one participant in this study. Because the abrupt end was unforeseen, the participant struggled to accept the end of his career. Even in his retirement he stated he was still ready to play for any team who might call.

I recommend players’ associations provide transitional support to players who are cut from teams. Being cut from teams causes athletes to struggle with anger, low self-esteem, and depression. Athletes are not prepared for their careers to end when they are
cut from teams. Counseling and career guidance would provide transitional assistance to athletes. It would provide support and skills as they enter a new role.

**Athlete’s Choice to End Career**

Some athletes choose to end their careers. One participant in this study chose this route. He did not struggle transitioning into retirement because it happened on his own terms. Throughout his career he monitored his engagement and desire to continue his career. When his love for the game and passion to play began to lessen, he knew it was time to retire.

It is not realistic to expect all athletes will be able to choose when they end their careers. Athletes who choose to retire have prepared for the transition and are ready to start a new role in their lives. Providing opportunities for athletes to develop new skills and prepare for new careers makes the choice to leave the sport less daunting. Athletes who are not prepared for their next stage in life will not choose to retire. They will continue playing until their careers end due because they are either cut or injured. I again recommend to players’ associations and team management to provide and support ongoing opportunities to develop career skills so athletes feel they can safely choose to retire knowing they have skills for a new career following athletics.

**Retirement**

Upon retirement there were four themes that athletes noted regarding their retirement. First, they adjusted their experiences as professional athletes to support their new careers. Second, past societal status as professional athletes affected their new careers. Lingering physical effects of playing professional sports was the third theme. Finally, the athletes were reflective of their professional athletic careers. In the following
section I summarize the four themes and provide recommendations of how to support professional athletes in their new careers.

**Adjusting to a New Career**

The level of preparation for a career following professional sports affected the athletes’ adjustment to new careers. Athletes who had earned a college degree and/or who had prepared for new careers during their off-seasons, transitioned easier into their new careers. The athletes noted their level of work ethic, structure, and goal-orientation was transferrable to their new roles and raised their level of success. The participants were able to modify the skills that made them successful as athletes and apply the same skills to their next careers.

Professional athletes are disciplined and goal-oriented. They strive to win all competitions. The participants found goal-orientation to be a trait that was sought after in employees, especially the participants who entered finance-related careers. The participants also cited high-level of discipline as favorable in their new careers. Athletes work through failure and persist until reaching success, a beneficial trait in any career.

To players’ associations I recommend a transitional course for athletes retiring from athletics. According to the participants, the associations or team management did not provide this type of support. Professional athletes have many favorable traits beneficial to various careers. However, athletes may not recognize how to translate the skills that made them successful as professional athletes into new careers. First identifying their skill sets of goal orientation, thriving within structure, and a strong work ethic and then illustrating how those skills apply to various careers would provide athletes the confidence needed to begin a new career field.
In addition, to teachers and youth coaches I recommend developing the skills listed above in young athletes. It takes more than physical skills to succeed at an elite athletic level. Identifying how these skills translate into their lives beyond athletics, both educationally and socially, would benefit young athletes.

**Change in Fame**

During retirement, athletes adjusted to a new life outside of the public view. Some of the participants utilized their former roles as professional athletes to further their new careers. They noted their athletic careers provided ways to connect with people and develop relationships. Notoriety continues to play an important role for some of the participants. They remain active in charitable associations and other venues for public recognition. While they enjoy their continued public role, they have adapted it to new careers. One participant used his level of fame to start his own non-profit organization that supports education and provides opportunities for youth to support their communities.

I recommend that players’ associations provide support for their retiring members as they transition into retirement. As part of the previously recommended transition course, the associations should provide opportunities for athletes to learn how to positively capitalize their public status in their new careers. Connecting athletes with non-profit associations is beneficial to both parties. The athletes have a venue for remaining a public figure and the charity has a celebrity to highlight their cause.

**Residual Physical Effects and Career Reflections**

Professional athletics is taxing on the human body. Athletes spend years honing their bodies to play at an elite level. They endure countless injuries and repeated blows.
The culminating effects of this physical beating the body endures can last a lifetime. The participants have lingering physical effects from their years as professional athletes. Some also expressed concern related to effects that may not have occurred yet, such as brain injuries. While professional athletes may make a significant salary, it often comes at the cost of their physical well-being.

Although the participants experienced repeated injuries and most have lingering effects of their professional athletic careers, none expressed any regret about their athletic careers. Professional athletics provided opportunities to attend college, see the world, and meet people they never would have otherwise. They developed life skills that have supported them into their next careers.

I recommend that team management and players’ associations continue to provide professional athletes on-going, high quality medical care during their professional careers and retirement. The athletes make millions of dollars each year for their teams. In return the teams should provide medical support to players that is in the best interest of the player’s long-term health, not the best interest of the team. Young athletes experience injuries in sports as well. It is important for them to learn how to care for their bodies, tend to medical needs when they arise rather than play through them, and recognize the potential long-term effects from injuries.

**Supporting Students**

As educators we want to help our students reach their dreams. We teach them to reach for the sky, to dream without limit. However, it is also our role to prepare our students for their dreams, once they are attained. Many students do dream of being
professional athletes. It is not our role to shatter that dream, but to provide them with appropriate skills and knowledge, whether they “make it pro” or not.

The research identifies that athletes need to develop a multifaceted identity. When their whole life depends on the game and when they do not develop other identities, they struggle when their athletic identity is lost. Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) identified developmental contributors as a factor in how professional athletes transition into retirement. It is imperative that children and adolescents develop multiple identities and do not see their only talent or skill as athletics. While teachers support children’s athletic skills, I recommend that they also help them develop other identities so when the students’ athletic careers end, at whatever age, they have other talents and skills on which to rely.

As educators we must support our students’ athletic dreams by educating them about the various vocations related to professional sports. Students should be exposed to careers in marketing, sports management, athletic training, communications, and business. Helping students develop the skill sets necessary for these careers, while also supporting their athletic activities, provides them with multiple sports related options as adults. We must encourage them to do well in school, not just to remain eligible to play sports, but to learn and develop their skill sets beyond athletics.

Students should also be educated about the realities of professional athletics. What is the business side of professional athletics? What does it feel like to be traded or cut? What do coaches and owners really expect of players? What does it feel like when the game he loves to play becomes his career? While young athletes see the fame and fortune of professional athletics, it is imperative that we teach them the full picture of
professional sports and allow them the opportunity to explore all of their talents and
develop a multifaceted identity.

**Limitations and Further Research**

There are limitations to this study. The sample size was limited to eight
participants. Athletes were limited to professional levels of football, basketball, hockey,
and baseball. The participants’ span of careers was nearly 40 years and all of the
participants were male. In this section I explain the limitations of the study and identify
areas for further research.

Professional athletes are an elite societal group that is challenging to access. The
number of participants was limited due to difficulty connecting with additional athletes.
Personal relationships and connections through colleagues, friends and family provided
access to the participants. Enlarging the participant group would provide additional data
to better understand the retirement experience of professional athletes.

The study included professional football, basketball, baseball, and hockey
athletes. Narrowing a study to only one sport may identify sport-specific retirements
experiences. Commonalities of experience in one sport could then be better addressed
through the leagues’ preparation camps as well as supported by the players’ associations.
There are also a number of sports excluded from this study. Expanding the scope of
sports involved may also provide data identifying common experiences of a larger variety
of athletes.

The athletes’ careers in this study spanned from 1976-2015. Over the course of
39 years society’s view towards professional athletes has changed. The average salary of
professional athletes has also significantly increased. Narrowing the span of participants’
career years may identify commonalities of athletes’ experiences during a particular time period. Recent retirees have a more elite status in society leading to a more significant impact of the change in fame on their retirement status than athletes who retired in the 1980-1990s.

Only male professional athletes participated in this study. Female professional athletes typically make significantly less money and have a less elite societal status. However, conducting a similar study focused on female athletes would provide information regarding their retirement experience and identify commonalities and differences between the genders.

In summary, professional athletes experience an elite status in mainstream American society. The retirement experience of athletes is becoming more noted as some are experiencing significant financial crisis and/or struggling with residual physical effects of their sports. This study was an attempt to learn more about how professional athletes experience retirement and to use that information to better prepare young athletes as they pursue their athletic dreams.

The four themes identified in this study were: athletes come to terms with being a commodity, retirement is impending, the initial transition into retirement, and finally establishing a new role in life. Young athletes can be better prepared for athletics and life in general based on professional athletes’ experiences transitioning into retirement.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
IRB Log number: 676261-1

Professional Athletes Entering Retirement: Changes in Fame and Fortune

I am conducting a study about how professional athletes experience retirement. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a retired professional athlete. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Nichole Rens (University of St. Thomas doctoral student)

Background Information:

The purpose of this research is to explore the phenomenon of how professional athletes experience and make meaning from retirement from athletics. Previous research has been conducted regarding the relationship between why professional athletes retired and how they experience retirement. However, the research that focuses on the athletes experience of retirement is limited.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: participate in an interview, preferably in person, for about 60 to 90 minutes. The interview will take place in a mutually agreed upon location. I will request to record and transcribe the interview to ensure an accurate account.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Minimal risks for participants exist. I will make every attempt to safeguard confidentiality. Any identifying information such as, team(s) played for, length of career, years played, position(s) played, jersey number, will be removed from the data. Participation in the study is voluntary.

There are no direct benefits.

Compensation:
There will be no compensation for the participants.
Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept confidential. I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way in any published materials. Any identifying information, such as teams played for, years played, length of career, jersey number, and position(s) played will be removed from the data. The types of records I will create include recordings of our interview, transcripts of the interview, and computer records of analyzed and coded data from the interview. I will store all digital records on my personal computer. I will have sole access and will destroy the audio recordings following transcription. Hard copies of any data will be stored in locked file cabinet in my home. I will have sole access to these files. Any hard copies of data will be destroyed by December 31, 2016.

This signed consent form will be kept in a secured file cabinet for at least three years, according to federal policy.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until May 1, 2015. To withdraw from the study, please contact me to submit a written statement stating your wish to withdraw from the study. Should you decide to withdraw data already collected about you may be used in the study. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Nichole Rens. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 763-670-2730. You may also contact my study’s chairperson, Dr. Sarah Noonan, at 651-962-4897. The University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board can be reached at 651) 962-6035 with any questions or concerns you may have.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give consent to have the interview audiotaped.

_____________________________  ____________________________
Signature of Study Participant     Date

_____________________________
Print Name of Study Participant

_____________________________  ____________________________
Signature of Researcher     Date
APPENDIX B

CLIENT NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

This CLIENT NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT, effective as of the date last set forth below (this "Agreement"), between the undersigned actual or potential client ("Client") and Rev.com, Inc. ("Rev.com") is made to confirm the understanding and agreement of the parties hereto with respect to certain proprietary information being provided to Rev.com for the purpose of performing translation, transcription and other document-related services (the "Rev.com Services"). In consideration for the mutual agreements contained herein and the other provisions of this Agreement, the parties hereto agree as follows:

1. Scope of Confidential Information
   1.1. "Confidential Information" means, subject to the exceptions set forth in Section 1.2 hereof, any documents, video files or other related media or text supplied by Client to Rev.com for the purpose of performing the Rev.com Services.

   1.2. Confidential Information does not include information that: (i) was available to Rev.com prior to disclosure of such information by Client and free of any confidentiality obligation in favor of Client known to Rev.com at the time of disclosure; (ii) is made available to Rev.com from a third party not known by Rev.com at the time of such availability to be subject to a confidentiality obligation in favor of Client; (iii) is made available to third parties by Client without restriction on the disclosure of such information; (iv) is or becomes available to the public other than as a result of disclosure by Rev.com prohibited by this Agreement; or (v) is developed independently by Rev.com or Rev.com's directors, officers, members, partners, employees, consultants, contractors, agents, representatives or affiliated entities (collectively, "Associated Persons").

2. Use and Disclosure of Confidential Information
   2.1. Rev.com will keep secret and will not disclose to anyone any of the Confidential Information, other than furnishing the Confidential Information to Associated Persons; provided that such Associated Persons are bound by agreements respecting confidential information. Rev.com will not use any of the Confidential Information for any purpose other than performing the Rev.com Services on Client's behalf. Rev.com will use reasonable care and adequate measures to protect the security of the Confidential Information and to attempt to prevent any Confidential Information from being disclosed or otherwise made available to unauthorized persons or used in violation of the foregoing.

   2.2. Notwithstanding anything to the contrary herein, Rev.com is free to make, and this Agreement does not restrict, disclosure of any Confidential Information in a judicial, legislative or administrative investigation or proceeding or to a government or other regulatory agency; provided that, if permitted by law, Rev.com provides to Client prior notice of the intended disclosure and permits Client to intervene therein to protect its interests in the Confidential Information, and cooperate and assist Client in seeking to obtain such protection.

3. Certain Rights and Limitations
   3.1. All Confidential Information will remain the property of Client.

   3.2. This Agreement imposes no obligations on either party to purchase, sell, license, transfer or otherwise transact in any products, services or technology.

4. Termination
   4.1. Upon Client's written request, Rev.com agrees to use good faith efforts to return promptly to Client any Confidential Information that is in writing and in the possession of Rev.com and to certify the return or destruction of all Confidential Information; provided that Rev.com may retain a summary description of Confidential Information for archival purposes.

   4.2. The rights and obligations of the parties hereto contained in Sections 2 (Use and Disclosure of Confidential Information) (subject to Section 2.1), 3 (Certain Rights and Limitations), 4 (Termination), and 5 (Miscellaneous) will survive the return of any tangible embodiments of Confidential Information and any termination of this Agreement.

5. Miscellaneous
   5.1. Client and Rev.com are independent contractors and will so represent themselves in all regards. Nothing in this Agreement will be construed to make either party the agent or legal representative of the other or to make the parties partners or joint venturers, and neither party may bind the other in any way. This Agreement will be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of the State of California governing such agreements, without regard to conflicts-of-law principles. The sole and exclusive jurisdiction and venue for any litigation arising out of this Agreement shall be an appropriate federal or state court located in the State of California, and the parties agree not to raise, and waive, any objections or defenses based upon venue or forum non
conveniences. This Agreement (together with any agreement for the Rev.com Services) contains the complete and exclusive agreement of the parties with respect to the subject matter hereof and supersedes all prior agreements and understandings with respect thereto, whether written or oral, express or implied. If any provision of this Agreement is held invalid, illegal or unenforceable by a court of competent jurisdiction, such will not affect any other provision of this Agreement, which will remain in full force and effect. No amendment or alteration of the terms of this Agreement will be effective unless made in writing and executed by both parties hereto. A failure or delay in exercising any right in respect to this Agreement will not be presumed to operate as a waiver, and a single or partial exercise of any right will not be presumed to preclude any subsequent or further exercise of that right or the exercise of any other right. Any modification or waiver of any provision of this Agreement will not be effective unless made in writing. Any such waiver will be effective only in the specific instance and for the purpose given.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties have caused this Agreement to be executed below by their duly authorized signatories.

CLIENT

Print Name: M. Nichole K. Rens
By: M. Nichole K. Rens
Title: Researcher
Date: 6/1/16

Address for notices to Client:

REV.COM, INC.

By: Cheryl Brown
Name: Cheryl Brown
Title: Account Manager
Date: June 1, 2016

Address for notices to Rev.com, Inc.:

251 Kearny St, FL 8
San Francisco, CA 94108
APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

1. How many years had you played (football, baseball, basketball, hockey) prior to your retirement?

2. At what age did you start planning to become a professional athlete?

3. At what age did you realize that plan could likely come true?

4. Describe a typical day during the season.

5. Describe a typical day during the off-season.

6. Many people might describe the life of professional athletes as being full of fame and fortune. How did you experience fame and fortune as a professional athlete?

7. Was there a specific reason for your retirement?

8. Was there a moment when you knew your athletic career was over?

9. Describe your process of determining it was time to retire from professional (football, basketball, baseball, hockey)

10. Describe a typical day during retirement.

11. How do you think your retirement experience would have differed if you had retired due to injury, deselection, or choice? (I will use the two options that do not apply to the specific applicant’s retirement cause.)

12. How did you process your retirement decision?

13. Earlier you discussed how fame and fortune was present in your life as a professional athlete. How did your experience with retirement change or influence your life of fame and fortune?

14. Once you made the decisions to retire how did you feel about the decision-making experience? How did you feel about your overall experience as a professional athlete?

15. What were your hesitations? Your apprehensions?

16. In hindsight, how did your professional athletic career compare to how you expected your life to be as a professional athlete?