



Renegotiating Identity: A Phenomenological Investigation of the College Transition for Former High School Athletes No Longer Engaged in Varsity Competition

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ABSTRACT

A breadth of research has examined the influence of athletic identity on college student-athlete experiences (e.g., Harrison et al., 2011; Lally & Kerr, 2005). In addition, scholars have investigated role transition among college student-athletes at the end of their eligibility (e.g., Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). However, despite that 97% of high school athletes will not participate collegiately (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2016), little attention has been paid to identity renegotiation among college students who discontinued sport participation after high school. The present study was designed to fill this gap by addressing the impact of sport disengagement on former high school athletes no longer engaged in varsity competition during the first year of college. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 university freshmen at three time points: the end of the first month, the end of the first semester, and the end of the first year. Commonalities among participants' transition experiences were identified. Findings yielded three major themes, *role transition*, *identity renegotiation*, and *reflection and projection*, each being facilitated by the building of camaraderie. Findings deepen current understanding of role transition and identity renegotiation and offer directions for future research related to sense of self during the college transition.

KEYWORDS

College; high school athletics; identity renegotiation; phenomenology; role transition

According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), more than three million American students aged 14 to 19 participate annually in high school athletics, fewer than 3% of whom will go on to participate in varsity sports at the intercollegiate level (NCAA, 2016). Despite that more than 97% of high school athletes will not participate at the intercollegiate level, very little scholarly work has examined the impact of athletes' discontinuation of sport participation during the transition to college. The present study is designed to fill this gap by addressing the impact of disengagement from sport on former high school athletes who are no longer engaged in varsity competition during the first year of college.

Interscholastic sport in the United States

Amateur sport in the United States is unique in that participation opportunities for adolescents and early adults are often linked to the educational system (e.g., *interscholastic* sports in high school and *intercollegiate* sports in college). According to recent data, more than three million adolescents participate annually in interscholastic athletics during high school (NCAA, 2016). In doing so, high

school athletes often spend 20 or more hours a week training and competing in sport. Adhering to this consistent and demanding role leads many adolescents to cultivate a salient athletic identity over the course of their high school careers. Moreover, these athletes often grow to be seen as more popular, develop more positive relationships with peers and faculty, and gain admittance to college at a higher rate than their nonathlete counterparts (Barron, Ewing, & Waddell, 2006). Despite these positive outcomes, fewer than 3% of high school athletes will go on to participate at the inter-collegiate level (NCAA, 2016). In light of this low probability, it is important to understand the role transition most adolescents experience when they discontinue sport participation during the first year of college.

Role transition

The transition to college is an adolescent milestone that is universally acknowledged as stressful and demanding (Arnett, 2015; Oppenheimer, 1984). Even though the experience is relatively normative among American adolescents, the transition is potentially more complicated for former high school athletes who will no longer participate in competitive athletics. Indeed, these students experience the same stressors related to increasing course work and accountability as well as perceived social upheaval as their nonathletic counterparts (Oppenheimer, 1984). However, research suggests that many of them also have a more difficult time adjusting to college than those who did not compete in high school or those who will compete in college (Lubker & Etzel, 2007). Specifically, high school athletes transitioning out of that role often experience feelings of loss and depression at the beginning of their college careers (Vickio, 1990), something that their nonathlete peers do not experience at as high a rate.

While gaining a sharper understanding of this role transition among former high school athletes has a number of practical implications, there are also institution-level concerns to address for colleges and universities. The successful transition to college is defined by many outcomes, such as student retention, academic success, overall well-being, and psychological independence (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Hoffman, 1984; Toews & Yazedjian, 2007). For most students, these outcomes serve as markers of a successful renegotiation of once-salient aspects of their identity, a process that can be difficult for former high school athletes discontinuing their sport participation during the first year of college.

Identity renegotiation

Psychologists and human development scholars have long been interested in the structure, content, and development of identity (e.g., Blasi, 1993; Erikson, 1968; Freud, 1962; Marcia, 1980; Moshman, 2011). As a global construct, identity can be viewed as a compilation of many selves. Indeed, research suggests that multiple aspects of one's identity remain salient during late adolescence (e.g., Marcia, 1966; Tanti, Stukas, Halloran, & Foddy, 2011). These multiple aspects are organized hierarchically, as individuals deliberately position certain "domains" of the self as more important than others (Blasi, 1993, 2004). In the sport literature, Brewer, Van Raalte, and Petitpas (2000) defined "athletic identity" as the degree to which individuals identify with the role of being an athlete. Unique to this domain of the self, athletic identity is often short-lived, as a very small percentage of athletes compete beyond the adolescent years. This necessary role transition often creates stress, as individuals are forced to engage in identity renegotiation at the conclusion of their sport careers (see Burke, 1991; Erikson, 1968).

Athletes who prioritize their athletic identity above other domains of the self typically experience lower global self-esteem and lower self-efficacy in relation to career decision making (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000). In fact, failure to explore alternative roles during adolescence has been associated with delayed career development, especially for athletes in revenue-producing sports (i.e., football and basketball; Murphy, Pepitas, & Brewer, 1996). Surprisingly, despite the low

percentage of athletes who are afforded an opportunity to compete in intercollegiate athletics, high school athletes have been shown to explore their identities outside of the confines of their sport less than their non-sport-playing peers (Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raalte, & Mahar, 1993). In light of this, there is a need to better understand how the transition to college and disengagement from sport impacts former high school athletes.

The present study

The present study is designed to address the impact of disengagement from sport on former high school athletes who are no longer engaged in varsity competition in the first year of college (see Figure 1 for the heuristic model being examined in this study).

Two areas of literature that may support efforts to understand high school athletes' disengagement from sport are related to injury and retirement. Within the sport literature, athletic identity has often been referred to as the "Achilles heel" of an athlete, due to the intense impact identity can have on an athlete's developmental outcomes during times of transition and adversity (Brewer, 1991; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Sparkes, 1998). In light of this, much of the literature related to athletic injury and retirement acknowledges aspects of role transition and identity renegotiation.

Research related to athletes' career-ending injuries suggests that athletes often experience a sense of loss and a disjointed sense of self in the wake of disengagement from sport due to injury (e.g., Leddy, Lambert, & Ogles, 1994; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). While this research primarily describes those transitioning out of elite sport (i.e., college, Olympic, and professional), it is suggested that findings are generalizable to a wide range of athletes who are forced into "retirement" (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). Therefore, it is surprising that the developmental and sport literatures have largely failed to consider high school athletes who report salient athletic identities and are forced to undergo role transition and identity renegotiation during the first year of college.

A second area of research that informs the present study is focused on athlete retirement (e.g., Baillie, 1993; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Within this literature, findings suggest that former athletes who voluntarily leave their athletic role after a successful career experience less stress and a less daunting transitional experience when compared to those who are forced into a nonathletic role (i.e., "injured" or "cut"; Brady, 1988; Delaney & Madigan, 2009). Similarly, Harrison and Lawrence (2003) discussed an individual's ability to reflect on career transitions, while projecting on other facets of the identity (e.g., the importance of family), as an important predictor of a successful transition out of sport. Although Delaney and Madigan (2009) suggested that support and feelings of belonging help athletes with

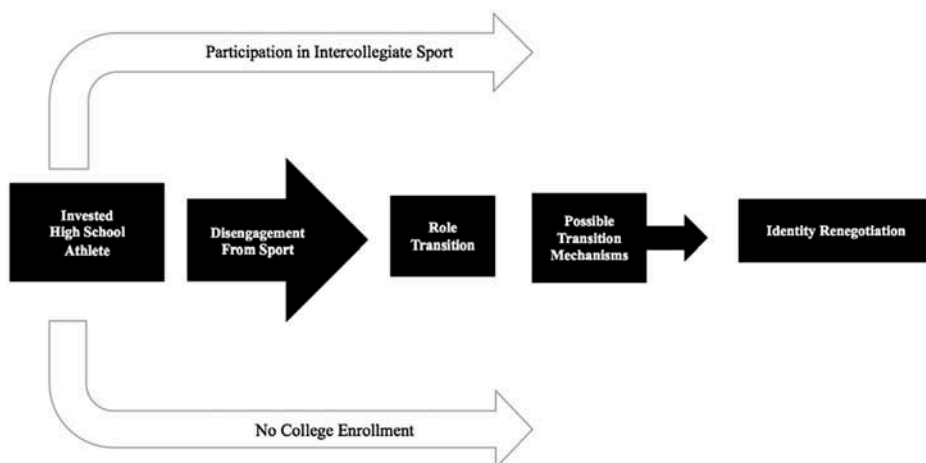


Figure 1. Heuristic model being examined in the present study.

role transition and identity renegotiation, other empirical evidence suggests that maintaining an identity linked to multiple facets of one’s life (e.g., academics, athletics, social relationships, career path) will lead an individual to experience less negative affect at the conclusion of her or his athletic career (Pearson & Petipas, 1990; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001).

In light of the present gap in the literature, pursuing a deeper understanding of high school athletes’ disengagement from sport during the first year in college represents a fruitful research endeavor. Indeed, the present study has the potential to extend the existing identity transition literature, which has yet to examine the large population of high school athletes who do not go on to participate in varsity athletics at the intercollegiate level. Research on identity during this developmental period is an important area to pursue because role transition and identity renegotiation are salient and sensitive processes that occur during late adolescence. In targeting this phenomenon, our ultimate goal is to gain a sharper understanding of one relatively common aspect of the college transition by highlighting the individual and collective experiences of our participants as they renegotiate their respective identities across the first year of college.

Method

Participants

First-year students attending a large public university in the Southwest United States participated in the study. Participants were first-year students who were at least 18 years old, reported dedicating 20 or more hours a week to high school athletics while in season, and were not presently participating in varsity athletics at the intercollegiate level. Ultimately, 13 students who fit these inclusion criteria agreed to participate in the study. These participants ($n = 10$ male; $n = 3$ female) ranged in age from 18 to 22 years and reported having participated in a range of high school athletics, with most identifying as two- or three-sport varsity athletes. Over half of the sample ($n = 8$) consisted of students who attended college in the same U.S. state as their high school. The sample was diverse racially, as five identified as White American, three as multiracial, two as Latino, and one each as Asian American, African American, and Pacific Islander. Across the sample, 11 academic majors and seven colleges within the university were represented. Students were not compensated for their participation. Please see Table 1 for key participant demographics.

Conceptual lens

In the present study, we adopted a humanistic lens in an effort to offer rich interpretation of participants’ lived experiences (Hill, 2001; Patton, 2002). An important facet of this lens is

Table 1. Participant demographic information ($N = 13$).

Pseudonym	Racial identification(s)	Primary sport	Secondary sport(s)
<i>One interview</i>			
Kai	Pacific Islander	Cross-country	Golf, track
Lucas	White American	Lacrosse	Football
Sofia	Latino	Volleyball	Cross-country
<i>Two interviews</i>			
Angelo	White American, Italian	Football	Soccer, basketball
Sarah	White American	Soccer	Rowing
Antonio	Latino	Basketball	Football
<i>Three interviews</i>			
Ethan	Chinese, Vietnamese	Wrestling	Football
Adrian	White American	Baseball	Basketball, soccer
Kyle	African American	Basketball	Football
Shaun	Native American	Baseball	Football, basketball
Daniel	White American	Football	Soccer, baseball
Isabella	White American	Volleyball	Softball
Michael	African American, White American	Football	Baseball

acknowledging that each participant possesses a unique understanding of her or his experience and therefore a distinct perception of the phenomenon under investigation. Rather than view this subjectivity as a limitation, we framed each participant as an expert of her or his understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002; Plummer, 2005).

In line with Hill (2001), three primary characteristics defined our research process: genuineness, empathy, and nonjudgment. We sought genuineness by being truthful and authentic and conveying an authentic interest in the participants throughout the research process. We articulated empathy by expressing compassion for the lives and experiences of each participant. Finally, we strived to demonstrate nonjudgment by showcasing an egalitarian and uncensored attitude toward our participants and their experiences. Attending to these characteristics fostered an environment in which participants were more comfortable and willing to disclose sensitive and/or personal information (see Hill, 2001). Therefore, by establishing researcher–participant relationships based on genuineness, empathy, and nonjudgment, we sought to glean a more accurate and detailed description of participants’ role transition and identity renegotiation during the first year of college.

Methodology

Research on the college transition has historically been quantitative in nature, addressing retention rates and student well-being (e.g., DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004). These studies, however, often do not attempt to unpack the nuances of individuals’ experiences or to identify potential mechanisms at play during the transition. To address this gap, the present study employed a phenomenological approach (Groenewald, 2004; Van Manen, 2016). The strength of framing the present work in this tradition of qualitative research lies in the leveraging of the experiences of multiple individuals to better understand the phenomenon of high school athletes’ disengagement from sport (see Creswell, 2007). Given our research aim, a phenomenological approach was appropriate because this transitional experience has yet to be fully documented in past research. It is therefore important to understand the phenomenon based on the words and experiences of the participants themselves.

As a methodology, phenomenology emerged from existential philosophy, which seeks to address the “essence” of what it means to be human (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Valle & King, 1978). The seminal writings of philosophers such as Husserl and Heidegger provide the basis for the principles and traditions that inform contemporary phenomenology (see Giorgi, 1983; Kerry & Armour, 2000; Thinès 1977). In drawing from these philosophical—as well as more contemporary methodological—writings, the purpose of phenomenological inquiry becomes clear: to attain a focused understanding of a shared human experience, in context. In pursuing this aim, we sought to employ a holistic perspective that represented participants’ descriptions of disengagement from sport as it was experienced by the participants themselves. The utility of employing this approach was manifest in our ability to combine and interpret multiple individuals’ experiences and understandings. Specifically, by asking multiple participants to describe the phenomenon, we were able to document the way participants’ role transitions and identity renegotiations were influenced by significant others, contexts, and their own interpretations. Participant experiences yielded a great deal of overlap, however, and it is these common themes and understandings that enable researchers to interpret the essence of a given phenomenon (Sadala & Adorno, 2002).

Procedure

Subsequent to approval by an institutional review board for the protection of human subjects, participants were recruited through campus Listservs and flyers in freshmen dorms and via an in-class announcement during the introductory course Sport and Society. One-on-one interviews were conducted with consenting participants at three time points: (1) the end of the first month of school, (2) the end of the student’s first semester, and (3) the end of the first full academic year. All 13 participants completed the first interview, 10 completed the first *and* second interviews, and 7

completed *all three* interviews. The first interview lasted approximately one hour, while subsequent interviews ranged from 25 to 30 minutes in length. During each interview, participants were asked to reflect upon their past athletic experiences, their current level of comfort and sense of place on campus, and their academic and social experiences in college. All interviews were conducted in-person at a mutually agreed upon location on campus. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and cross-checked for accuracy prior to analysis.

Data analysis

Driven by our methodological approach, we sought to keep the context of the phenomenon (disengagement from sport) intact across participants (Hycner, 1999); data were explicated using this lens prior to interpretation. In addition to the shared experiences related to each individual's understanding of the phenomenon, we also sought to highlight significant differences among participants' experiences. In explicating each interview, we sought to highlight participants' unique perspectives regarding relevant aspects of participants' college transition. The first interview largely targeted participant insights related to the role transition that was occurring as students morphed from high school athlete to nonparticipating college freshman. The second interview was designed to understand this transition more fully, specifically with regard to students' identity renegotiation. In the third interview, participants were asked to reflect and project in an effort to gain broader insight into students' role transition and identity negotiation and how they envisioned establishing a new identity moving forward. In analyzing each set of interviews, we felt it important to delineate the longitudinal results temporally. Ultimately, we felt this would afford a more developmental understanding of participants' experiences as they occurred over the first year of college.

Prior to coding the data, the first and second authors read and listened to the interviews in an effort to gain a holistic grasp—or a sense of the completeness—of the phenomenon. The first and second authors then coded each interview independently based on the principles of open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As a first step, open coding was used to generate initial codes that reflected reoccurring themes within the transcriptions. Following open coding, a consensus meeting was held to finalize the list of codes. Axial coding was then used to draw out connections between recurring and related themes and place them deductively within three broad categories, a coding hierarchy that was subsequently refined by the entire research team. Finally, selective coding was employed to focus the phenomenological analysis on a central essence of the phenomenon. Using this central essence, *camaraderie*, we created a narrative related to three processes: *role transition*, *identity renegotiation*, and *reflection and projection*. A pictorial model was generated in an effort to highlight the phenomenon as our participants experienced it during the first year of college.

Quality criteria

To address the quality of the present study, we adopted the relativistic criteria set forth by Sparkes and Smith (2009). Of importance, interviews were structured in a format that allowed the authors to build an understanding of the phenomenon via the individual experiences of participants while also being relevant to the primary research question and the methodological underpinnings of phenomenological research. The longitudinal nature of the project also allowed the researchers to become familiar with all participants, in that they interacted with them on a number of occasions. Multiple interactions allowed the researchers to establish rapport, which often enhances the quality of information shared by participants. Analyses were conducted independently by the first and second authors and were then shared with the third author, who served as a critical friend (Hill, 2002). When applicable, this individual questioned the initial coding structure to determine whether the interpretations were trustworthy. These discussions afforded interpretive triangulation among researchers, thus helping to eliminate potential biases inherent in qualitative analyses (Finlay, 2002).

Results

While the individual experiences of our participants offer unique perspectives related to the process of identity renegotiation during the college transition, there were key similarities captured across participant experiences of the phenomenon (see [Figure 2](#)). During the initial transition to college, participants described having maintained a great deal of athletic investment during high school. In reflecting on this investment, participants described the formation and maintenance of strong athletic relationships. This made it difficult in many cases to dissolve their athletic identity upon making the decision to discontinue competitive sport participation. During the freshman year, participants discussed a burgeoning identity renegotiation as they began to reengage in sport or physical activity opportunities on campus. This reengagement led participants to seek and find new social networks of friends and companions. Near the end of participants' freshman year, they reflected on the process of accepting their new identity. Specifically, students sought and found experiences that allowed them to assume a "new" college identity. As a result, they described adjusting positively to college life and each reported planning to return for their sophomore year. In evaluating these shared characteristics, a central tenet of camaraderie emerged. In the sections below, we explicate the phenomenon via participants' experiences as they occurred over the first year of college matriculation. As such, the sections offer a developmental understanding of identity renegotiation during the college transition for students who are no longer competing in varsity athletics. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

Role transition

The first set of interviews took place during the first month of college and was aimed at gaining insight into each participant's high school athletic experiences and the role transition that occurred as a result of sport disengagement. The first theme that emerged in these interviews was related to participants' athletic investment during high school. Each participant defined himself or herself as an

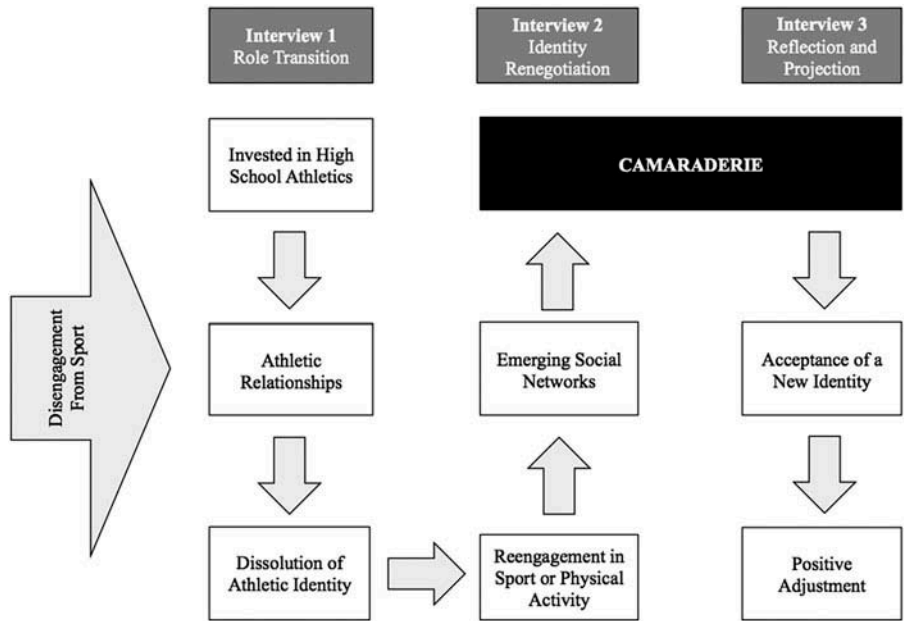


Figure 2. A pictorial model of identity renegotiation during the college transition for students no longer participating in competitive athletics.

invested athlete, one who spent copious amounts of time at practice as well as competing in their respective sports. As a result, many individuals reported lacking a social life outside of the team setting. While some reported having less of a social life because of their demanding athletic schedules, some attributed a subdued social life to the norms of their team culture. For example, Daniel, a former high school football player, said:

I would say up until probably halfway through my junior year I didn't have much of a social schedule outside of that [sport participation]. Maybe on weekends I would hang out with some friends or spend the night at their house and stuff. But I wasn't into partying and all that especially because our football team was so strongly against drinking and smoking and all of that.

Isabella, a former high school volleyball player, explicitly described sport as being her singular social outlet, noting that her friends and activities revolved around her high school athletic participation. In her words:

I always was playing sports. And when we wouldn't play sports, for example, like after, we'd sleep all in the gym, like before a competition. And at night instead of—I don't know, watching movies or something—we'd bring down the basketball hoops and we'd shoot baskets or we'd put up a volleyball net and we'd play volleyball. I was constantly, either, like playing, like more intramural sports or recreational sports.

Another female participant, Sofia, a multisport high school athlete, echoed a similar sentiment:

I mean, sports, it kind of was my social life, so those were a lot of my friends. I mean, I did have other friends but usually that was when I would hang out with them, you'd be tired after the week or weekend, so it did and it didn't impact me, you know, it kind of evened out, so it wasn't too bad. It wasn't too bad at all.

A second theme that emerged during the first set of interviews had to do with how participants' respective high school athletic experiences led to the formation of strong athletic relationships. Even though they didn't have time to participate in weekend social activities because of practices or competitions, being a high school varsity athlete made them popular within the high school community and usually meant that their best friends were also invested athletes. Michael, a former high school football player, described how athletics impacted his social life by sharing, "I don't think I really would be where I am unless it was for football. I mean people knew [me] because of it." While another, former football player, noted that being a varsity athlete "... didn't hinder [my social life] too much and it was helpful actually because you kind of meet people throughout sports."

Of importance, most participants reported their best friends to be individuals they met through their sport participation. Many responded with a single answer of "sports" or "they were on my teams" when asked how they met their closest friends in high school. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that participants remained closest to those who had been high school teammates. As stated by Sofia, "my best friends I've made were in cross country and I'm still friends with them." In further support of this assertion, participants also reported drifting away from high school friends with whom they *had not* played on teams. This highlights the importance of those relationships but also of the salient bond that teammates create throughout their participation in high school athletics. A former high school basketball player, Kyle, summarized:

Pretty much all of my friends are from sports. I mean that was kind of my bond with my team and we always hung out. All my closest friends now that I talk to play sports, so I mean memories were just going to practice, having fun. Then we got more serious in high school. It's like it's fun but you had to work together as a team and we lost together and won together. So there is good times and bad times with all of that.

The third theme that emerged during the first set of interviews related to autonomy in participants' decisions to discontinue their athletic participation. Surprisingly, 11 out of the 13 participants reported having decided before attending college that they would not be participating in intercollegiate sports even though recruiters had scouted them. While 2 participants explicitly reported still wanting to try out for collegiate teams, the remaining 11—an overwhelming majority—reported that they were more focused on their academic careers and that they had not seriously considered

competing in intercollegiate athletics. This suggests that some former high school student athletes may be more influenced by their academic identities than by their athletic identities.

Despite that the majority of participants had entered college with an understanding that their days as competitive athletes were behind them, they still expressed a sense of loss related to that piece of their identity. Indeed, many expressed difficulty related to managing the transition out of sport. Angelo, a former high school football player, shared:

It's hard to transition because I was always the sports guy. I never have been the guy to just lay back and now I'm laying back and it's like "Now what?" in my life. I never thought beyond sport because I was so into it.

Adrian, a former high school baseball player who did report wanting a future in intercollegiate sport, expressed feelings of forfeiture while discussing his athletic identity:

It especially hit me really bad since I got a taste of it and everything, like for two weeks with baseball and everything. When we'd be working out and you could see the football team, golf, and women's basketball. Everybody would be in the weight room, and—just being on the field and everything and just knowing that I'm a part of something, a part of the team. I'm not just one out of 30,000 or something like that.

Angelo, when probed to reflect on the camaraderie of being on a team versus his present feelings of losing his athletic identity, shared "It's ... more just that experience, really, like the role of being an athlete and stuff really doesn't matter that much. It's just—the experience, it's just really fun getting up in the morning and practicing with them." The majority of participants supported this viewpoint; the overarching theme was that they missed the team camaraderie and the being a part of something bigger than themselves. As a former football player, Daniel described, "I miss ... seeing the guy across from you." This experience is imbued in the central tenet of camaraderie, as the majority of participants described a team as something bigger than themselves.

Identity renegotiation

The second interview took place at the end of students' first semester on campus and targeted participants' identity renegotiation. In this sense, the interviewers placed a diminished emphasis on participants' high school athletic experiences and a greater emphasis on their current processes of change. The major issues addressed within the interviews were related to how participants were adjusting to their collegiate experiences and what efforts were being made to expand their social networks and adjust to their new life without competitive athletics. Participants shared a variety of experiences in terms of how they were making friends, and two themes emerged that cut across participants' experiences.

The first theme that emerged was related to reengaging in sport or physical activity opportunities. More than half of the participants reported finding some form of activity to replace the competitive activities that were now missing during their college transition. This ranged from organized participation—as with Sarah, a former soccer player who joined a kickboxing gym—to unorganized athletic participation—as with Shaun, a former baseball player who talked about playing pickup basketball games with some of his dormmates. Most of the participants discussed a single activity they had been participating in over the year. However, a handful discussed multiple activities they had engaged in over their collegiate transition. Daniel, a former football player, was one who discussed multiple activities he was engaged in throughout the year; he is quoted here: "I play a lot of racquetball ... I went to the ultimate frisbee tryouts ... I went to the club men's volleyball tryouts ... and then we also play wallyball [a student-created game] a lot. We started a wallyball Facebook group and we've just been adding kids to it." While discussing these activities, he and additional participants discussed how these opportunities help them to stay fit and active and also introduced them to other disengaging high school athletes.

The second theme that emerged during the second set of interviews was related to participants' emerging social networks. The participants who reported high levels of happiness and adjustment

also discussed their new friendships as well as the activities in which they had been actively participating. While the specific extracurricular opportunities varied by participant, they all described finding a general camaraderie within these newly formed social networks. Of interest, a few of the participants discussed becoming friends with other former athletes who were also now disengaged from competitive sport. Michael, a former high school football player, said, “They know where I’m coming from. They know what it’s like. They even want to play—we’re watching the game together and we’re like ‘Oh come on’—it’s just the football player instinct.” These comments suggest that our participants bonded over past experiences as high school athletes. Despite that every one of the former athletes reported a sense of loss that accompanied their respective transitions out of competitive sport, the majority of the participants described the transition as a generally positive experience of building camaraderie by making new friends and creating new bonds.

Reflection and projection

The final round of interviews took place at the end of participants’ first academic year and targeted participants’ *reflections* on the transitional year as well as *projections* toward their future as an individual no longer participating in competitive athletics. Although one participant described feelings of insignificance as they negotiated the transition to college, the other five shared general feelings of a positive sense of self. Indeed, the first theme that emerged during the third set of interviews was participants’ acceptance of their new identity. Specifically, while students wrestled with the loss of their athletic identities, they also sought and found influences that allowed them to assume a “new” college identity. Michael, a former high school football player, exemplified this dualistic experience in stating:

I mean[,] I’m in the middle. I’m a little depressed, because I’m not a part of anything that I used to be or that’s who I am, when I watch football games I think to myself I want to be—that should be me out there. I gave that dream or I had that opportunity to play football and I gave it up and sometimes I think to myself like why did I do that, like I regret doing that but in the end of the day, I look at—really after class I’ll sit [on the mall], I look at the palm trees, I look at the mountains and I’m like, this was the right track.

Michael went on to describe how aspects of his identity that were not related to sport buffered his positive outlook.

The second theme that emerged during the final interviews related to participants’ positive adjustment to college life. The transition to a “new” college identity seemed nearly ubiquitous across the study sample, and most participants reported seeing themselves not only as disengaged athletes but also now as students. Daniel, a former football player, was quoted saying, “I think the combination of athlete and scholar was my identity,” when asked whether being an athlete was a part of his high school identity. The majority of participants reported excellent high school grade point averages (GPAs)—an average of 3.7 overall—indicating that these students were motivated to do well academically during their high school careers. When considering their collegiate GPAs, the majority of the sample earned commendable scores as well, with 12 of the 13 reporting first semester GPAs greater than 3.3. One facet of the transition that may have bolstered participants’ academic identities may be that a large majority of the participants also received academic scholarships as first-year college students. Indeed, most of these students reported being able to successfully adjust and transition to college because they identified as “good students”—an identity most had maintained throughout high school and were able to further develop throughout their freshman year. One participant, Sofia, specifically noted that academics provided a “buffer” that allowed her to focus on her studies instead of her lack of sport participation opportunities.

Although multiple participants reported having a dual identity that allowed them to buffer the loss of their athletic identity, some participants bemoaned the loss of structure that had been previously provided by their sport participation. This was evidenced in participants’ reports of “time management” as an area that needed improvement in future semesters. They noted that in

high school their parents and coaches were the figures who structured their time, and without that structure it was now harder to get the amount of work done that was required of them.

As the participants looked forward to their respective sophomore years, each reported that they were planning on returning to campus in the fall. They described their individual goals as primarily related to maintaining or enhancing their respective GPAs as well as meeting new people and getting more involved in the campus community. In predicting how they envisioned sports to be involved in their futures on campus, the majority discussed the potential to coach (at the youth or high school level) and to remain involved in noncompetitive athletics (e.g., intramurals, adult recreational leagues). This suggests that while participants were forced to renegotiate their identities as disengaged athletes, they sought to maintain a piece of an athletic sense of self in the near term as well.

The essence of the phenomenon

In interpreting participants' shared experiences, it became evident that the central feature of participants' transition to college was the establishment of camaraderie. Indeed, most participants reflected on how new feelings of belonging and a sense of community were able to buffer the underlying feelings of dissolution and loss that resulted from their disengagement from competitive sport. Findings from the retirement literature suggest that when former athletes are able to emulate team camaraderie in new and challenging domains (e.g., business, academics), they are able to adjust and transition well into a new, nonathletic role (Delaney & Madigan, 2009). In our sample, those individuals who chose to get involved and attempted to emulate previous camaraderie (as demonstrated in their high school athletic careers) also reported levels of enjoyment and satisfaction in their college experience.

Discussion

The present study was designed to address the impact of disengagement from sport on former high school athletes who were no longer engaged in varsity competition during the first year of college. In adopting a phenomenological approach, we sought a participant-centered understanding of this experience from 13 former high school athletes across their first year of college.

Situating the findings

With regard to participants' shared experience of role transition, it was intriguing how each adjusted to the lack of structure and consistent discipline in college as compared to the rigidity of their high school athletic schedules. In high school, participants were motivated by sport eligibility (e.g., GPA, attendance). Indeed, even the participants who were strong academically reported having personal or parental expectations of excellence in the classroom. These expectations were not as motivating in college, in many cases due to the dissolution of participants' athletic identity. In discussing this phenomenon, Thomas and Ermler (1988) described the difficulty athletes often have leaving the "pampered" life provided for them by sport. This was echoed by our participants, many of whom suggested that the structure and support afforded by competitive sport helped them balance life, school, and athletics prior to their arrival on campus. While our participants no longer had to juggle the time and commitment of being a varsity high school athlete, they still faced losing their established support systems, which included teammates and coaches, an experience shown to be difficult for transitioning adolescents (Delaney & Madigan, 2009).

With regard to participants' shared experience of identity renegotiation, our findings yielded some interesting points of discussion. First, all of our participants reported some sense of loss when discussing their once-salient athletic identities. The majority of them shared stories of meaningful games and impactful teammates, both of which highlighted the salience of their

athletic identity in high school. These findings parallel results from the role-exit literature (e.g., Vickio, 1990) and suggest a difficult path forward for some adolescents as they transition out of salient roles. A second interesting point of discussion was that all of the participants cited camaraderie and support as huge factors in their experience of identity renegotiation. Specifically, a number of participants referenced making new friends who were also disengaging from high school athletics. The establishment of new social networks mirrors the findings of Delaney and Madigan (2009), who suggest that sport is both cause and consequence of social interaction. Over the course of the second set of interviews, it became clear that participants were engaging in identity renegotiation at their own pace and based on their own experiences; however, universally, participants discussed aspects of camaraderie as the most important catalyst that energized this process. While this extends the sense of community literature (e.g., Warner, Dixon, & Chalip, 2012; Warner & Leierer, 2015), it also creates an interesting launching point for future researchers to purposefully examine the underlying mechanisms that drive the establishment of camaraderie.

With regard to participants' reflection and projection, the majority of participants acknowledged that they envisioned that their athletic careers would end upon high school graduation. While the reasons for this decision varied across participants, it was clear that most of the students voluntarily foreclosed on their athletic identity prior to the college transition. These participants reported having more time to transition and began the identity renegotiation process very quickly upon arriving on campus. On the contrary, the few participants who reported sustaining career-ending injuries or who described a lack of recruitment by college programs reported a slower role transition and delayed identity renegotiation. Of interest, some also reported a future intent to try out for their respective sport's varsity team as walk-on athletes. While this experience was limited to a subset of participants, these findings align with past and present retirement literature and suggest that some college freshmen may struggle to adjust to life on campus as a nonathlete (Baillie, 1993; Tate, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001).

In light of contemporary motivational theory (self-determination theory; see Deci & Ryan, 2011, for a review) our findings highlight the importance of autonomy in one's decision to disengage from athletics. In a practical sense, this also foretells the importance of athletes (and their coaches and parents) understanding the limited number of participation opportunities at the collegiate and professional levels. As such, retirement and/or plans for sport dissolution should be discussed during childhood and early adolescence. According to Wylleman and Lavalle (2004), planning a career path outside of athletics is typically linked to a positive adjustment for elite athletes later in life, whether the athlete ultimately pursues that path or not. If high school students were encouraged by trusted others (e.g., parents, peers, coaches) to create a non-foreclosed, sport-related identity, they would be better able to successfully renegotiate a holistic identity in the midst of the transition to college. Indeed, participants in our sample who reported planning for their impending role transition described an easier transition to college. This did not mean that they did not experience a sense of grief during the transition; however, they did demonstrate the ability to successfully renegotiate their identity based on other personal goals and ambitions (e.g., academics, social activities). Overall, our findings suggest that if high school athletes and supportive significant others are more realistic about the probability and timing of athletes' transitions out of sport, first-year college students might be better equipped to establish more adaptive identities once on campus (see Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

The primary strength of the present work is its contribution toward a deeper understanding of how former high school athletes deal with role transition and subsequently identity renegotiation during the first year of college. While the transition to college is a relatively common experience

for American adolescents, the literature has largely neglected first-year college students who are experiencing a loss of athletic identity. Empirical research on disengagement from sport has largely focused on intercollegiate athletes and the postgraduate transition (e.g., Brady, 1988; Daniel, 2002; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) and elite athletes who retire due to injury or age (e.g., Allison & Meyer, 1988; Pearson & Petipas, 1990). The present research, therefore, makes an important contribution to this literature, while focusing on a more ubiquitous experience at the transition from high school to college. Indeed, the number of high school athletes who experience disengagement from sport each year is much greater than the number of athletes who will disengage after an intercollegiate or professional career. It is therefore valuable to recognize that cultivating camaraderie on campus may enhance the experiences of a large number of transitioning freshmen.

A second strength of the present research was the diversity represented across the relatively small study sample. Of the 13 participants, 5 identified as White American, 3 as multiracial, 2 as Latino, and 1 each as Asian American, African American, and Pacific Islander. Although a detailed discussion of the link between race and athletic identity remains beyond the scope of the present research, we believe it is important to acknowledge that race may play a role in understanding constructs such as role transition and identity renegotiation (see Harrison, Harrison, & Moore, 2002; Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper, 2011; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990). As such, future researchers should purposefully address the similarities and differences among diverse groups of college students based on factors such as culture, race, and socioeconomic status.

Despite these strengths, this study possesses limitations that should be acknowledged. First, participants were drawn from a single university in the Southwest United States. It is possible that sociocultural and/or familial expectations in this region or at this university contributed to students' generally successful transitions. Future work should be designed to assess role transition and identity renegotiation among disengaged high school athletes who attend a range of colleges and universities across the United States. In addition, university students from abroad could provide a unique perspective, as most other countries' youth and adolescent athletic opportunities are not inherently tied to the public education system. A second limitation was that participants identified themselves as being academically inclined in addition to having strong athletic identities. In this sense, they seemed to maintain a "diversified identity portfolio." Follow-up research should target former high school athletes with foreclosed athletic identities who are not *able* to participate in intercollegiate athletics either because of ability, injury, or academic standing. This would afford a greater understanding of a subgroup of individuals who may have a more difficult time successfully renegotiating identity during the college transition. A final limitation of the present research was that each of the seven participants who took part in the final interview reported experiencing a relatively positive transition by the end of their first year on campus. This could have been associated with an initial self-selection bias, whereby participants who expected to transition successfully chose to participate in, or remain in, the study. Indeed, 6 of the 13 participants who took part in the initial interview—although still enrolled in the university—did not take part in the third interview and therefore did not provide data at the end of the first year. As a result, while no systematic differences emerged in participants' initial role transition (as gleaned from the first interview), we cannot infer whether participants' identity negotiation and/or reflection and projection were as universally positive. Future work should be designed to target participants who are not transitioning successfully to the college setting. Ideally, researchers could partner with university offices for student wellness to locate and recruit these students.

Conclusions

The present study was designed to address the impact of disengagement from sport on former high school athletes who are no longer engaged in varsity competition. In pursuing this aim, the present research affords a foundational understanding of how former high school athletes deal with role transition and subsequently renegotiate their identity during the first year of college in the United

States. While the college transition can be ambiguous (Arnett, 2015), it seems that for our participants, cultivating a network of individuals and resources (i.e., developing camaraderie) helped them renegotiate their identities more successfully. These findings may be of importance to high school athletes in the United States, as well as their parents and coaches, each of whom would benefit from the young person's enhanced ability to successfully negotiate role transition and identity renegotiation. Moreover, other populations of adolescent athletes (e.g., those playing in club systems overseas) may find these results similar to their own experiences of role transition and identity renegotiation during their respective sport disengagement. Through a practical lens, these findings may also inform faculty advisors and student affairs professionals as they strive to better understand some of the potential barriers and concerns for first-year college students. Taken collectively, our results offer initial insight into how the establishment of camaraderie may enhance former high school athletes' role transition and identity renegotiation during the first year of college.

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