

AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF FEMALE STUDENT-  
ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT DURING ATHLETIC TRANSITIONS

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## Abstract

Limited research has explored student-athletes' experiences who ended university athletic participation with remaining eligibility, and limited research has explored student-athletes experiences of support while ending university athletic competition. It appears that no research has explored these experiences in union, nor from a female's perspective. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to explore seven female student-athletes experiences receiving formal (e.g., counselling, sports psychologist) and informal (e.g., social, family, coaching) support during their athletic transitions that occurred with remaining U Sport eligibility. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Findings were represented thematically and included one overarching theme: *An Ongoing Transition*. Three subordinate themes were identified: *Navigating a Decision*, *Growing the Self*, *Supporting the Journey*, along with six subthemes. The findings captured the participants' shared depiction of their experiences as an ongoing transition with salient decision-making and self-growth periods. Participants' reflections on how informal and formal support were experienced across the ongoing transition were further captured. Implications for practitioners wishing to support female student-athletes during athletic transitions are discussed. Avenues for future research are provided.

**Keywords:** *Athletic transition, decision-making, student-athlete, female-athlete*

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## **Dedication**

In loving memory of Patty Rigby – ‘AP.’ You are appreciated, celebrated, loved, and missed.

To Freya, Clara, Rowe, and Mae. You are loved.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Within the Canadian university athletic league, known as U Sport (formerly known as Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS)), eligible student-athletes are granted up to five years of competition. Once five years of competition have been used, a student-athlete is no longer considered 'eligible' to compete within the league. This finite period of eligibility makes the university student-athlete experience unique compared to other elite sports levels (e.g., professional, semi-professional, Olympic) (Fuller, 2014). For many female Canadian athletes, competition in the U Sport marks one of the highest competition levels. There are limited professional or semi-professional options for female sports in Canada. Thus, ending university athletic competition often means ending competition at the elite level for many female student-athletes.

Ending participation in elite sport is a phenomenon that has received substantial research attention. Over the years, this phenomenon has been referred to within literature as an athletic retirement (Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994), and more recently, referred to as an athletic transition (Wylleman et al., 2004), as conceptualized through Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981). Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) describes a transition as an "event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). An athletic transition is a transitional period in an athlete's life, often marked by significant life adjustments (Wylleman et al., 2004). A common taxonomy used within athletic transition literature distinguishes athletic transitions based on the transition's predictability and timing, categorizing athletic transitions as either normative, non-normative, or quasi-normative. Normative athletic transitions are considered generally predictable transitions that occur at a predictable time and can be anticipated in the planning and organization of an athlete's career (e.g., ending university sport after exhausting five-years of U Sport competition) (Debois et al., 2012). Non-normative athletic transition are considered transitions that result from unpredictable and unplanned events in the life of the individual, occur at an unpredictable time, and take place in an unforeseen and involuntary manner (e.g., career or season-ending injury, deselection, loss of a coach) (Debois et al., 2012). This taxonomy has been expanded more recently, and a third taxonomical category has been introduced within athletic transition literature. The category includes quasi-normative athletic transitions, which can be predicted for

certain groups of athletes, but not for all athletes. Such transitions may be expected, planned, and prepared for (Stambulova, 2017). Quasi-normative athletic transition is a new term and relatively unresearched. Research journals are calling for further exploration into this topic (Kiuppis & Stambulova, 2017).

Athletes are at risk of experiencing adjustment difficulties during athletic transitions (Park et al., 2013). Athletes who experience less predictable and less-autonomous athletic transitions (e.g., non- or quasi-normative athletic transitions) have an increased risk for adjustment difficulties (Park et al., 2013). Positive effects on adjustment difficulties during athletic transitions have been documented in cases where athletes utilize professional supports and support programs (Park et al., 2013). Despite the documented positive outcomes, it appears student-athletes are underutilizing available supports (e.g., mental health services) and support programs (Breslin et al., 2017; Watson, 2005; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). While negative attitudes towards support-seeking appear to be improving within student-athlete populations, support utilization does not appear to be increasing (Breslin et al., 2017; Moreland et al., 2018).

Limited qualitative research had explicitly explored student-athletes experiences of support during athletic transitions. Brown and colleagues (2018) examined professional athletes' social support experiences during athletic transitions. However, no studies were found that explored university student-athletes' experiences of formal (e.g., counsellor, sports psychologist) or informal (e.g., social, family, coaching) support during athletic transitions. Moreover, no studies were found exploring such experiences with student-athletes whose athletic transitions occurred with remaining eligibility or with female student-athletes specifically.

### **1.1 Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was two-fold. First, the study sought to explore female student-athletes' athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility in the U Sport League. Second, the research sought to explore female student-athletes' experiences of formal (e.g., counsellor, sports psychologist) or informal (e.g., social, family, coaching) support during athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility in the U Sport league. In order to achieve the research purpose, the study provided insights on the following research questions: (1) How do female student-athletes experience athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility? (2) How do female student-athletes experience formal (e.g., counselling, sports

psychologist) or informal (e.g., social, family, coaching) support during athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility?

## **1.2 Research Rationale and Implications for Practice**

I designed this study to fill a salient research gap. In my literature review, I found no research that had explicitly explored athletic transition experiences with student-athletes whose athletic transitions occurred with remaining eligibility. Curiously, I found no statistics that cited the number of student-athletes who ended university competition with remaining eligibility. As a former student-athlete who ended university competition with remaining eligibility, I believed ending university competition with remaining eligibility may be a salient factor in student-athletes athletic transitions. Thus, research exploring athletic transitions occurring with remaining eligibility in university leagues was a relevant research gap.

Moreover, I developed this study with the belief that those who had both ended university sport with remaining eligibility and had sought formal (e.g. counsellor, sports psychologist) or informal (e.g., social, family, coaching) support may hold unique experiential knowledge. I believed such knowledge could benefit practitioners and contribute to current literature. In my literature review, I found only one study that explicitly explored athletes' support experiences during athletic transitions. Brown and colleagues (2018) examined professional male and female Olympic athletes' social support experiences during athletic transitions. I found no research that explored university student-athletes' experiences with formal (e.g., counselling, sports psychologist) or informal (e.g., social, family, coaching) support during athletic transitions. Thus, research exploring university student-athletes' support experiences during athletic transitions was another relevant research gap.

I believed it valuable to explore gender-specific experiences. In their systemic review of studies on athletic transitions, Park and colleagues (2013) found that 19% of the 126 studies reviewed were conducted with female athletes, 30% completed with male athletes, 44% with both genders, and less than 1% with unspecified gender. There appears to be less research exploring gender-specific athletic-transition experiences; of such research, there is a disproportionate amount of research exploring male athletic transition experiences compared to female athletic transition experiences. As such, the current study responds to relevant gaps in the current literature.

In addition to addressing relevant research gaps, this study has clinical value, as it has the potential to help inform those who work with student-athletes during athletic transitions. To provide treatments to support a specific population's needs, practitioners must better understand what those needs are and then explore their treatments' efficacy to support such needs. Since limited research has explored student-athletes experiences of support or experiences of athletic transition that have occurred with remaining eligibility, practitioners have little research to help inform them on this population's needs. Exploratory analysis, such as this study, is a logical place to start gathering a deeper understanding of this population's needs and understanding how this population has experienced previous support. Qualitative research may foster a more diverse and inclusive knowledge of lived-experience, which may, in turn, assist practitioners in serving this population better (Poucher et al., 2019).

Current literature has captured prevalent barriers and facilitators to student-athlete mental health support-seeking and support utilization (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019; Moreland et al., 2018). However, limited research has explored student-athletes' lived experience of support. Studying lived-experiences of support might assist researchers and practitioners in better understanding what empowers student-athlete support-seeking and support utilization, which, in turn, might enable practitioners to provide ever more accessible support. Furthermore, research that explores student-athletes experiences of support during athletic transitions may inherently validate and normalize the use of support during this time, which could help develop an athletic culture that acknowledges and normalizes difficulties experienced in athletic transitions. In turn, such research may assist in breaking down the stigma associated with support-seeking and support utilization within athletic communities.

Much of the traditional literature has focused on understanding athletic transitions through a positivist and postpositivist epistemology (Ronkainen, Kavoura, et al., 2016; Ronkainen, Watkins, et al., 2016). Meaning, a significant amount of athletic transition research has been grounded in objectivity. Consequently, less research has explored athletes' subjective experiences, providing less opportunity for a wide range of student-athletes to see themselves and their experiences within the literature. Research that captures a range of subjective experiences may provide athletes with more possibilities to see themselves and others in different ways; which, may help athletes adapt to unexpected experiences and gain deeper understandings of others (Ronkainen, Kavoura, et al., 2016; Ronkainen, Watkins, et al., 2016).

By exploring an understudied population using a research methodology that emphasizes subjective experiences, the present study can be valuable for student-athletes, practitioners, and researchers.

### **1.3 The Researcher**

My interest in this research topic stems from my background as a former university student-athlete and a graduate student in a helping profession. Nearly a decade ago, I was a student-athlete within the U Sport League. I competed in multiple sports. I played hockey and ran cross-country and track-and-field, and I ended my university competition with remaining eligibility. Over these past ten years, I have observed teammates, friends, and acquaintances go through their athletic transitions. Unfortunately, over this time, I have observed how little attention is given to the phenomenon of athletic transitions. I have observed how few student-athletes discuss their athletic transitions. Furthermore, I have observed how few student-athletes talk about accessing support, either formal or informal, during athletic transitions.

When I speak with other former student-athletes, I often inquire into their athletic transition experiences. I almost always have a very vibrant and engaging response. It seems that people are impacted by their athletic transitions and do want to discuss them. However, I have been struck by the number of former student-athletes who share that they have not discussed their athletic transition experience with others, including teammates, friends, family, or professional supports. It seems that many people navigate this experience alone. I have become increasingly curious about athletic transitions. I have become curious about those student-athletes' who end university competition with remaining eligibility and curious about this specific population's support needs.

When exploring the literature on athletic transitions, I found a substantial amount of literature documenting the factors found to impact athletic transition outcomes (e.g., athletic identity, the voluntariness of the transition, support programme utilization) (Park et al., 2013). It seemed a large portion of athletic transition literature had focused on identifying the factors that influence athletic transition outcomes. The voluntariness of athletic transition and support programme utilization are two salient factors impacting athletic transition outcomes (Park et al., 2013). However, I found no qualitative research that explicitly explored student-athletes' experiences of support during athletic transitions or studies explicitly exploring student-athletes'

athletic transitions with remaining eligibility. Research exploring subjective experiences of support during athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility was missing.

Additionally, I found a dearth of research that captured a wide range of female student-athletes' voices. For example, I found female-specific research on athletic transitions in sports such as dance, gymnastics, and swimming. However, I noticed a relative shortage of research exploring a more extensive breadth of female sports. Therefore, I decided to explore the athletic transition experiences of Canadian female student-athletes who played in a variety of sports and who had remaining eligibility.

Entering into this study with previous experience with athletic transitions, I was aware that I had specific assumptions and biases about this phenomenon under study. First, I accepted the phenomenon of ending university sport to be a meaningful experience, which I understood contained unique adjustment difficulties. Secondly, I understood the experience of ending university sport to be a transition (Schlossberg, 1981). I had conceptualized the phenomenon through the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory. The theory posits that an individual's ability to adapt to change is influenced by three categories of factors: the individual's perceptions of the particular transition (e.g., role change – gain or loss, affect – positive or negative, source – internal or external, timing – on-time or off-time, onset – gradual or sudden, duration – permanent, temporary, or uncertain, degree of stress), the characteristics of the pre-transition and post-transition environments (e.g., internal support systems – intimate relationships, family unit or network of friends, institutional supports, physical setting), and the characteristics of the individual (e.g., psychosocial competence, sex, age, state of health, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, value orientation, previous experience with transition of a similar nature) (Schlossberg, 1981). Accordingly, I anticipated that the perception of the student-athletes' particular transition, the characteristics of the student-athletes' environments, and individual characteristics might influence how student-athletes experience and adapt to an athletic transition. Thirdly, I expected the role support played in athletic transitions would vary depending on the type of support utilized (e.g., informal or formal) and would vary depending on when the support was used (e.g., during or after university competition). Lastly, I understood the phenomenon of athletic transitions to be complex and idiosyncratically experienced, and I believed research methodologies that capture nuance might be of value to my research endeavours. I hope this study can help capture varied and nuanced athletic transition experiences



and help encourage a culture that normalizes and validates difficulties inherent to transitions of all kinds.

#### **1.4 Thesis Organization**

In chapter two, I provide an overview of relevant literature. The chapter starts with a brief presentation of research as it relates to student-athlete well-being. Following this is an overview of athletic transition research. This section closes with an overview of athletic transition research directions. Next is a summary of research related to student-athlete support-seeking and research connected to student-athlete support needs during athletic transitions.

In chapter three, I review the methodological approach used for this study. I include a rationale for choosing a qualitative research paradigm and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as my research methodology. Following this, I outline the study particulars, including information on data generation, data analysis, the study's trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

In chapter four, I present the findings from the data analysis. I include a brief overview of each participant to provide context. The analysis findings are captured in an overarching theme structure and written narrative. The written narrative is grounded in verbatim extracts from the data.

In chapter five, I discuss the findings from the current study in the context of related research. A reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the study is provided. Following this, I provide my thoughts on relevant implications for practice and directions for future research. I close this chapter, and this thesis, with a researcher reflection.

## 1.5 Definition of Key Terms

**Athletic Identity:** The degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Wiechman & Williams, 1997).

**Athletic Transition:** A transitional time that is often a process of ending a competitive athletic ‘career’ and beginning a new era of one’s life (Park et al., 2013).

**Mental Health:** Mental health is conceptualized in various ways. For this thesis, a World Health Organization (WHO) definition of mental health is used. As per the WHO (2014), mental health is defined as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (World Health Organization, 2014, p. 1). A key component of this definition is that mental health consists of more than just the absence of disease or disorder and includes an emphasis on well-being and the realization of an individuals’ potential (World Health Organization, 2014). The positive dimensions of health are represented in this definition, and health is further defined as follows, “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization, 2014, p. 1).

**Normative Athletic Transitions:** An athletic transition that is generally predictable and can be anticipated in the planning and organization of the athlete's career (Debois et al., 2012; Wylleman et al., 2004).

**Non-normative Athletic Transition:** Athletic transition that results from important, unplanned events in the life of the individual, which take place in an unforeseen and involuntary manner (Debois et al., 2012). Such events can include a season-ending injury, the loss of a coach, awaiting desired events that do not occur (e.g., not being selected for a team).

**Student-Athlete:** In Canada, there are two main post-secondary athletic leagues, *U-Sports* (formerly called the Canadian Interuniversity Sports league (CIS)) and the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA). U-sport consists of most Canadian degree-granting universities, and the CCAA consists of Canadian colleges. Within this thesis, a student-athlete is operationally defined as someone who competes for a degree-earning university and is registered as a U-sport, formerly CIS, athlete.

**Transition:** Nancy Schlossberg defines a transition as “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles.” (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p.111)

**Quasi-normative Athletic Transition:** An athletic transition that is “predictable for a particular category of athletes” (Stambulova et al., 2020, p. 4). These are understood as athletic transitions that can be predicted for certain group of athletes, but not all athletes, and are transitions in which the athletes can prepare for in advance (Stambulova, 2016, 2017). Examples of quasi-normative athletic transitions currently include the following: cultural transitions (e.g., acculturation/cultural adaptation of migrant and immigrant athletes and coaches, cultural adaptation and transitions of transnational athletes who compete internationally), transitions to elite residential training centers (e.g., moving to elite training centers such as Olympic training facilities), and transitions relevant to important competitions (e.g., transition experiences after participation in specific competition, such as the Olympic games) (Stambulova, 2016). Other transitions are being considered quasi-normative athletic transitions, including motherhood transition of female athletes, athlete-to-coach transition, and sport-specific transitions caused by modification of competition rules (Kiuppis & Stambulova, 2020).

**Well-Being:** Well-being is defined as “the degree to which individuals are satisfied with various aspects of life” (Yannick, 2003, p. 354). Subjective well-being is understood to be enhanced by feelings of control, autonomy, and competence concerning valued goals (Yannick, 2003).

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The following chapter contains a summary of literature as it pertains to student-athletes' well-being, athletic transitions, and athlete support-seeking. The chapter begins by defining student-athletes and discussing stressors that impact student-athlete well-being. Following is a discussion on athletic transitions and future directions of athletic transition literature. Next is a discussion on student-athlete support-seeking and support needs as they relate to athletic transitions. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature review and an explanation of why the current study is pertinent.

The literature review search strategy was guided by recommendations made by a University librarian. The literature review was conducted using broad searches and keyword searches using search engines (e.g., USearch, Google Scholar) and databases, (e.g., APA PsycInfo, ProQuest Education Database, ProQuest Nursing and Allied Health Database). Written resources were used, and reports published by U Sport and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

### **2.1 Student-Athlete Well-Being**

In Canada, there are two main post-secondary athletic leagues, U Sports –formerly called Canadian Interuniversity Sports (CIS) – and the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA). The U Sports league consists of most Canadian degree-granting universities, and the CCAA consists of most Canadian colleges. Within this thesis, a student-athlete is operationally defined as someone who is, or was, registered as a U Sports (formerly CIS) athlete.

Student-athletes are considered a unique subpopulation of the university student population. Student-athletes experience the same inherent challenges most university students experience (e.g., new academic requirements, living in a new location, academic challenges) while also experiencing additional demands specific to the student-athlete experience (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Neal and colleagues (2015) reviewed literature and compiled a list of stressors unique to student-athletes. The stressors identified included: stressors of athletic participation (e.g., being cut from a team, dealing with an injury, performance challenges, mistakes in play, dealing with success, the pressure to overspecialize or overtrain, early termination from sport, competition for playing time and scholarships), physical stressors (e.g., physical conditioning, injuries, environmental conditions), mental stressors (e.g., game strategy, meeting coaches'

expectations, attention from media or fellow students, time spent in sport, community-service requirements, less time with family and friends), and academic stressors (e.g. classes, study time, projects, papers, examinations, attaining and maintaining required minimum grades to remain on team or earn academic scholarship). Balancing academic, athletic, and personal demands place significant pressure on student-athletes. Neal and colleagues (2015) note that, while many athletes are equipped to handle such physical and mental pressures, prolonged exposure to such stressors can trigger new psychological concerns, worsen existing concerns, or cause past concerns to resurface. These authors note that specific triggers can result in mental or emotional health concerns in addition to such stressors. Triggers these authors identified included: poor performance or perceived poor performance, conflicts with coaches or teammates, injury or illness resulting in loss of playing time or surgery, concussion, academic concerns, lack of playing time, family and relationship issues, changes in the importance of sport, violence, bullying or hazing, adapting to school schedules, lack of sleep, history of mental disorder, burnout, the sudden end of athletic career due to injury or medical condition, death of loved one, alcohol or drug abuse, significant dieting or weight loss, history of physical or sexual abuse and gambling problems (Neal, et al., 2015). Of these identified sources of additional stress, injury and sudden end to athletic career were highlighted as a significant source of stress and a significant psychological and mental health risk factor for elite athletes (Neal et al., 2015).

Adverse physiological, psychological, and emotional outcomes have been connected to student-athletes prolonged and continuous exposure to such stressors. The NCAA (NCAA, 2014) studied data from eight National College Health Assessment surveys that the American College Health Association (ACHA) had administered from 2008 through to 2012 with American college students. In total, the NCAA study included 19,733 student-athletes (e.g., had participated in college athletics at the varsity level within the last 12-months) and 171,601 non-athletes (e.g., had not in college athletics at the varsity level within the last 12-months). The study found that 21% of male and 28% of female student-athletes reported feeling depressed within the previous 12-months. Compared to 27% of male and 33% of female non-athletes.

Moreover, 31% of male and 48% of female student-athletes reported feeling anxiety within the last 12-months. Compared to 40% of male and 56% of female non-athletes. These findings indicate that student-athletes experience depression and anxiety. The authors found that student-athletes were less likely to report depression and anxiety than non-athlete peers. These

findings could be connected to a decreased prevalence of anxiety and depression in student-athlete populations or a reduced willingness of student-athletes to self-report anxiety and depression symptoms. Moreover, these authors found that female student-athletes and non-athletes reported a higher incidence of anxiety and depression compared to male student-athletes and non-athletes. Again, this could be connected to a higher incidence of anxiety and depression in female student-athlete and non-athlete populations or an increased willingness to self-report anxiety and depression symptoms in female populations compared to male populations.

An Australian study conducted by Gulliver and her colleagues (2015) collected mental health self-report data from 224 elite athletes (female=118, male=106). The study found that 53% of females and 39% of male participants reported mental health issues (depression=27.2%, eating disorder=22.8%, general psychological distress=16.5%, social anxiety=14.7%, generalized anxiety disorder=7.1%, and panic disorder=4.5%). Injured athletes reported higher levels of depression and generalized anxiety disorder, and female athletes reported higher general psychological distress scores than the general female Australian community. A study by Schaal and colleagues (2011) collected self-report data from 2,067 French elite athletes. After controlling for age, profession, and geographical location, the study found that female respondents were 1.3 times more likely to be diagnosed with psychopathology than male respondents and were found to be more susceptible to environmental factors compared to male elite athletes. Unfortunately, a comparative study exploring the mental health of Canadian student-athletes was not found, and there are limits to the generalizability of such epidemiological studies.

In the three studies discussed (Gulliver et al., 2015; NCAA, 2014; Schaal et al., 2011) female student-athletes reported a higher incidence of mental health concerns or diagnosis. Taken together, these findings highlight that specific research is warranted to explore why female elite athletes might be reporting or being diagnosed with a higher incidence of mental health issues when compared to male elite athletes. There is a substantive body of sports science research aimed to explore student-athletes' physical health and athletic performance; however, there is a comparative shortage of research aimed to improve athletes' mental health and well-being (Bergeron et al., 2015). Athletic communities of all levels (e.g., Olympic, professional, amateur, post-secondary) have acknowledged the need for researchers and practitioners to

prioritizes elite athletes' mental health and well-being (Bergeron et al., 2015; NCAA, 2014; NCAA, 2014b; U Sport, 2020)

### ***2.1.1 Mental Health Best Practices***

In 2014 the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the United States College Athletic governing body, released two documents. One titled “Mind, Body, and Sport: Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness” (NCAA, 2014) and the second titled “Inter-Association Consensus Document: Best Practices for Understanding and Supporting Student-Athletes Mental Wellness (NCAA, 2014b). These documents were created in response to pressures from NCAA stakeholders and constituents on the NCAA chief medical officer to prioritize student-athlete mental health and wellness. The first document (NCAA, 2014) is a 120-page overview of student-athlete mental wellness. The follow-up document (NCAA, 2014b) is a 40-page document of recommended best practices for understanding and supporting student-athlete well-being. In 2020, U Sport – the Canadian University Athletic governing body – medical committee released a nine-page document titled “U Sport Mental Health: Best Practices 2020” (U Sport, 2020), which was adapted from the two NCAA documents. The U Sport document contains recommended best practices to support student-athlete mental health and well-being.

The nine-page U Sport document briefly outlines four recommendations for “appropriate management of student-athlete mental health” (p. 4). The four recommendations include: (1) Ensure access to qualified and licensed mental health practitioners, including comments on who is considered qualified practitioners and how to establish a multi-disciplinary mental wellness team to support student-athlete mental health. (2) Ensure proper procedures to identify student-athletes with mental health concerns and appropriate referral to relevant practitioners, including comments on Mental Health Emergency Action and Management Plans, referrals, and who should contribute to the development of mental wellness procedures for student-athletes. (3) Implement mental health screening into Pre-Participation examinations (PPE). (4) Encourage sporting environments that support mental wellness and resiliency, with comments on how to provide a supportive environment.

In addition to providing recommendations for how athletic departments can best support student-athletes during athletic competition, the U Sport (2020) document briefly highlights how

athletic departments should provide a transition of care plan should student-athletes leave the sports or school environment (U Sport, 2020). Within this document, U Sport states that “a plan should be implemented to outline who coordinates the transition of care should the athlete leave the sport environment and/or school environment, including interim medication management and referral to community mental health resources, if applicable” (U Sport, 2020, p. 8). Moreover, the document states that “there should be also be clear steps to help a student-athlete transition back to school and/or sport after they have been away from campus to seek care for mental health concerns. The document notes that “Student Affairs and Athletics Departments should outline any policies regarding financial awards and access to team services (gym, athletic therapy, etc.) for student-athletes who are unable to participate in their sport due to mental health issues.” (U Sport, 2020, p. 8). The document states that financial awards and supports should be provided to those who are suffering from or are unable to participate in their sport due to mental health issues.

Moreover, the USport (2020) document notes that Athletic Departments should create a plan for financially supporting student-athletes who may require mental health inpatient or outpatient care that is not covered by the provincial or school athletic health plan (U Sport, 2020). The document highlights that resources should be made available, and student-athletes should be encouraged to seek additional help. Student Disability Services offices are to put accommodations in place for student-athletes suffering from mental health issues. Athletic Departments should advertise any workshops or sessions held by university wellness centres to student-athletes (U Sport, 2020).

While historically, student-athlete mental health has received limited attention, it seems university and college governing bodies acknowledge the need to better support student-athletes' mental health and well-being during and after university competition. Since the U Sport 2020 document is so recent, there is no research following this document; this means no research has explored individual universities' Athletic Departments implementation of the recommended mental-health best practices to support student-athlete mental health and well-being. Likewise, the effectiveness of the recommended best practices for improving student-athletes' well-being has not been explored.



## **2.2 Athletic Transitions**

Over the past 30-years, literature has been collected that explores the phenomenon of ending or leaving competitive sport. The phenomenon of ending participation in competitive sport was traditionally referred to as an athletic retirement (Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994). More recently, researchers and practitioners have started to conceptualize this phenomenon as an athletic transition, as conceptualized through Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981).

### ***2.2.1 Transition Theory***

Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) describes a transition as an "event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). The theory defines an adaptation to transition as "a process during which an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with the transition to integrating the transition into his or her life (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 7). The theory posits that an individual's ability to adapt to such change is influenced by three categories of factors: the individual's perceptions of the particular transition (e.g., role change – gain or loss, affect – positive or negative, source – internal or external, timing – on-time or off-time, onset – gradual or sudden, duration – permanent, temporary, or uncertain, degree of stress), the characteristics of the pre-transition and post-transition environments (e.g., internal support systems – intimate relationships, family unit or network of friends, institutional supports, physical setting), and the characteristics of the individual (e.g., psychosocial competence, sex, age, state of health, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, value orientation, previous experience with transition of a similar nature) (Schlossberg, 1981).

The theory suggests that it is essential to explore the context, impact, and type of the transition to understand the meaning and impact it has on a person (Schlossberg, 1981). Context refers to an individual's relationship with the transition and the setting in which it takes place. The impact is determined by the degree to which the transition alters a person's life (Schlossberg, 1981). There are three types of transitions within the theory: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events. Anticipated transitions are events that occur predictably. For example, an anticipated transition could be a student applies to college, is accepted, and attends in the fall. Unanticipated transitions are events that are not predictable or scheduled. For example, the death of a loved one

or a divorce. Non-events are transitions that are expected to occur but do not occur. For example, a student applies to school and does not get accepted.

### ***2.2.2 Athletic Transition Taxonomy***

A significant amount of literature has applied Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a conceptual framework to explore the phenomenon of ending competitive sport. Using Transition Theory, over the past three decades, athletic transitions have been referred to using taxonomic categories distinguished based on the transition's predictability. This taxonomy has categorized athletic transitions as either normative or non-normative. More recently, a third category was added – quasi-normative athletic transitions. A normative athletic transition is considered a transition that corresponds to the predictable passage from one athletic stage to another and encompasses transitions that are generally predictable and anticipated in the planning and organization of an athlete's career (Debois et al., 2012; Stambulova, 2017; Wylleman et al., 2004). An example of a normative athletic transition would include the transition from a sport after competing for the full amount of eligibility (Stambulova, 2017; Wylleman et al., 2004). Non-normative athletic transitions are understood as athletic transitions that are unexpected and involuntary exits from a sport, which often result from unplanned events in the individual's life (Debois et al., 2012). An example of a non-normative transition would include the unexpected retirement from sport due to a season- or career-ending injury, the loss of a coach, or failure of selection (Stambulova, 2017; Wylleman et al., 2004).

A third taxonomic category has been developed more recently – quasi-normative athletic transitions, which are understood as athletic transitions that are “predictable for a particular category of athletes” (Stambulova et al., 2020, p. 4). These are understood as athletic transitions that can be predicted for a certain group of athletes, but not all athletes, and are transitions in which the athletes have the possibility to prepare for in advance (Stambulova, 2016, 2017). The conceptualization of quasi-normative athletic transitions is relatively unexplored and is being recognized as currently a main area of advancement in athletic transition literature (Stambulova 2016; Stambulova et al., 2020). Many new conceptualizations of athletic transitions or re-conceptualizations of what was previously referred to as ‘non-normative’ are now being considered ‘quasi-normative.’ Examples include the following: cultural transitions (e.g., acculturation/cultural adaptation of migrant and immigrant athletes and coaches, cultural adaptation and transitions of transnational athletes who compete internationally), transitions to

elite residential training centers (e.g., moving to elite training centers such as Olympic training facilities), and transitions relevant to important competitions (e.g., transition experiences after participation in a specific competition, such as the Olympic games) (Stambulova, 2016). Furthermore, new types of athletic transitions are now considered quasi-normative athletic transitions, including motherhood transition of female athletes, athlete-to-coach transition, and sport-specific transitions caused by modification of competition rules (Kiuppis & Stambulova, 2020).

Traditionally, athletic transitions have been referred to as being either a positive or a crisis transition. A positive transition has been defined as a transition that is navigated by athletes without particular assistance and is often associated with the autonomous decision to end athletic participation without involvement or influence from outside sources (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). A crisis transition has been defined as a transition where the athlete needs specific psychological support and may require aid from a sports psychologist, counsellor, coach, or social support and is often associated with the non-autonomous choice of the athlete (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Notably, within such definitions, there is the implication that seeking professional support while navigating an athletic transition categorizes the experience as a crisis transition and not a positive transition experience. As evidenced within these definitions, there appears to be a long-standing negative connotation connected to athlete support-seeking, as demonstrated in traditional research-based definitions likening support-seeking with a ‘crisis’ transition and, therefore, not a ‘positive’ transition. Traditional research has regularly classified autonomous athletic transitions as a positive transition and non-autonomous decision as a crisis transition. Such a dichotomous and static conceptualization of athletic transition experiences may not fully represent the complexity, nuance, and idiosyncrasy of individual athletic transition experiences (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Wylleman et al., 2004).

### ***2.2.3 Athletic Transition Risk and Protective Factors***

In their 2013 systematic review, Park and colleagues reviewed and synthesized a large body of athletic transition literature from 1968 to 2010 and presented factors impacting athletic transition outcomes. Within this review, a total of 139 studies met inclusion criteria, and 126 articles were evaluated and included. Slightly under half of the studies (55 out of 126) explored the psychological, emotional, social, and physical consequences of athletic transitions. The

remaining studies examined variables that influenced the quality of athletic transitions. Of the total participants, 11,332 participants (84%) had experienced termination from their sport, which could be considered a non-normative athletic transition. Of these, 1,768 participants (16%) reported adjustment difficulties or problems associated with their transition, and 86 of the 126 studies reported athletic transition difficulties or negative emotions (e.g., feelings of loss, identity crisis, distress) while the participants adjusted to life post-competitive sport. Within the 126 articles included in the review, 56 studied both genders, 38 studied male athletes, 24 studied female athletes, and eight studies did not specify gender. Of the 126 studies, 32 studied student-athletes, seven studied club athletes, 27 studied professional athletes, 50 studied Olympic-level athletes, six studied mixed-level athletes, two studied disabled athletes, and two studies did not identify the level of athlete examined. Lastly, 36 studied team sports, 26 studied individual sports, 59 explored a combination of individual and team sports, and five studies did not report the sport studied.

The authors identified 63 correlates related to the quality of the athletic transitions. These correlates were then categorized into 15 factors related to the quality of the athletic transition. Factors correlated to athletic transition adjustment included: athletic identity, demographic information (e.g., gender, age, social status, type of sport, race, marital status, competitive level, cultural or national factors), the voluntariness of athletic transition, injury or health problems, career and personal development, sports career achievement, educational status, financial status, self-perception (e.g., body image, self-confidence, self-worth), control of life (e.g., perceived autonomy, power over decisions while competing and during athletic transition processes), disengagement or drop-out from sport, time passed after athletic transition, relationship with a coach, life changes, and difficulty balancing of life while competing.

Within this review, the risk factors for ‘difficult’ or ‘crisis’ athletic transitions were found to include: exclusive or strong athletic identity, involuntary athletic transition, injuries and health problems, limitations to career and personal development, perceptions of lacking sports career achievement, negative implications on education or financial status, perceptions of lack of control (e.g., autonomy), disengagement and dropout from sport, negative relationships with a coach, lifestyle changes during athletic transitions, and difficulty balancing life demands during the athletic competition (Park et al., 2013).

Out of the risk factors presented, athletic identity was one of the most strongly supported factors to impact athletic transition adjustment. Athletic identity is considered an athlete's self-identity within the sports domain (Brewer et al., 2000). Within their review, Park and colleagues (2013) found that 34 of 35 studies noting athletic identity found that strong athletic identity was negatively associated with quality of athletic career transitions. Participants who had strong athletic identities required more time for adjustment during athletic transitions. Identity loss has been captured as a particularly salient athletic transition outcome (Park et al., 2013).

Voluntariness of retirement decision, which was defined as the degree of control athletes have over their decision to retire, was another variable found to be strongly connected to athletic transition outcome (Park et al., 2013). This variable was examined in 21 studies, 18 of which found positive associations with the voluntariness of transition and the outcome. In the studies where the participants experienced forced retirement, it was noted that participants experienced high levels of negative emotions, which included fear of social death or dying, a sense of betrayal or social exclusion, and a loss of identity (Park et al., 2013).

Injuries or health problems during athletic transitions were found as another salient risk factor. Ten of 11 studies exploring injuries and health problems within the systematic review found positive associations connected to athletic transition difficulties (Park et al., 2013).

Negatively impacted educational achievement and financial status were found as another risk factor. Athletes whose athletic involvement negatively impacted educational attainment or financial stability were at risk of experiencing more difficult athletic transitions.

A perceived lack of control of life, which refers to athlete perceptions of autonomy and power over their decisions while competing and during the athletic transition process, was found to be a risk factor for negative athletic transition experiences. Park et al. (2013) found that perceptions of less control were associated with more negative emotions during athletic transition experiences in all seven studies. Some studies found that athletes attributed forced retirement and negative emotional experiences to "unbalanced power in their sporting systems" (Park et al., 2013, p. 36). Another risk factor presented was athletes' disengagement and drop-out from competitive sport. All seven studies that explored drop-out and disengagement from sport reported positive associations between disengagement and drop-out and negative athletic transition experiences.

Athletes' perceptions of negative relationships or conflict with a coach or coaches was a risk factor. All six studies that had explored relationships with coaches found positive associations between negative relationships, conflict, and negative emotions during athletic transition experiences. These studies indicated that unbalanced power between coaches and athletes and unpleasant coach-athlete relationships were associated with injury or disengagement from sport (Park et al., 2013). Lifestyle changes experienced during athletic transitions were considered a risk factor for adjustment difficulties. A lifestyle change was considered changes to daily routines as a result of exit from competitive sports. In all five studies that had discussed lifestyle changes, athletes reported feelings of anxiety connected to their new routines or reported feeling lost without athletic competition and training (Park et al., 2013).

Lastly, the final risk factor outlined in the Park et al. (2013) systematic review was negative perceptions of balance between athletic and non-athlete life during athletic competition. Three studies found that athletes who perceived less balance between their athletic and non-athletic lives reported more difficult athletic transition experiences. Balance and control over athletic experiences were found as salient factors in athletic transition experiences. In their case study, Butt and Molnar (2009) found that perceptions of lacking autonomy, control, and negative coaching relationships were connected to distress and factors in feelings of burn-out, disengagement, and drop-out from competitive sport.

Another piece of literature that reviewed factors impacting athletic transition experiences is a qualitative meta-synthesis by Fuller (2014). Fuller conducted a meta-synthesis of nine qualitative studies that explored university student-athletes experiences of athletic transitions. Fuller synthesized her findings into six themes that she felt depicted the experiences across the studies. These six themes included: identity, anticipation and preparation, branching out, satisfaction with athletic performance, loss of camaraderie, and support systems (Fuller, 2014). Fuller (2014) found student-athletes who described themselves as highly invested in their athletic selves (e.g., strong athletic identity) reported experiencing a strong sense of identity loss, feeling lost, confused, void of life, unproductive, and feeling as if they were “just existing.” (Fuller, 2014, p.3). The anticipation of and preparation for athletic transitions was a factor that played a role in the quality of athletic transitions. Fuller (2014) synthesized results that ranged from feelings of relief to feelings of being ‘cheated out of full’ university athletic experiences. Athletes who were able to mentally and emotionally prepare for their athletic transitions

experienced less mental and emotional difficulty during this process. Furthermore, those who were able to expand their identities to include other areas of their lives (e.g., social, academic), what Lally (2007) refers to as “branching out,” reported easier athletic transitions.

Satisfaction with athletic performance was another factor found to play a role in the quality of athletic transitions. The quality of the athletic transitions correlated with the participants’ perception of the quality of their athletic performance and feelings of satisfaction with their sports goals and aspirations. Those who felt satisfied with their performance and career reported feeling “full” and feeling like they had a “successful career.” In contrast, those with more difficult transitions often reported feelings of disappointment with their career, describing “unfinished or unresolved business,” regret about “not putting everything out,” and reflections on “what might have been” (Fuller, 2016, p. 5).

Loss of camaraderie marked another commonality among student-athletes' athletic transition experiences. Participants reported feeling a loss of belonging, and participants described a fear they might not find such connection or belonging in other areas of their lives. Similarly, support systems, or lack thereof, were identified as common factors influencing athletic transition experiences. Many of the participants expressed a need for support but reported they did not believe they received it. Participants reported not accessing support due to fear their athletic transition experience might not be understood and reported wanting to access support but not (Fuller, 2016).

Lastly, participants reported the strength of the relationship with their coaches, or lack thereof, significantly impacted their athletic transition experiences. Those who reported more difficult athletic transition experiences reported a lack of healthy relationships with coaches or athletic administration and reported feeling “discouraged by coach's words and actions” and feeling a “lack of support” from coaches (Fuller, 2016).

#### ***2.2.4 Athletic Identity and Athletic Transitions***

Identity is defined by Eric Erikson (1968) as a process that unites personality and connects an individual to the social world. Personal identity consists of our sense of placement within the world and the meaning we attach to ourselves within the broader context of human life (Wiechman & Williams, 1997). Athletic identity refers to one's personal identity in the sport domain and is the degree to which an individual identifies with the role of being an athlete

(Brewer, 1993; Wiechman & Williams, 1997). Athletic transition research widely suggests that athletes go through a period of identity change before, during, and after an athletic transition (Lally, 2007; Sparkes, 1998). The strength and exclusivity of athletic identity have been correlated to athletic transition outcomes, where a stronger athletic identity has been associated with an increased risk for emotional and psychological difficulties (Lally, 2007). As a result of the close relationship between athletic identity and transition outcomes, athletic identity has been commonly referred to as the “Achilles heel” of athletic transitions as stronger athletic identities have been associated with more difficult athletic transitions (Brewer, 1993; Sparkes, 1998). Strong athletic identity's potential risks have been closely tied to difficulties encountered in athletic transitions (Sparkes, 1998; Wiechman & Williams, 1997). Strong athletic identity has been connected to difficulty coping with stressful events within the athletic environment (e.g., losing season or injury) (Sparkes, 1998). Some student-athletes who identify solely with an athletic role, as opposed to other roles (e.g., student), express lower global self-esteem and self-efficacy concerning career decision making and overall athletic transition outcomes (Brown et al., 2000). Lastly, as mentioned above, a strong or exclusive athletic identity can pose a risk as individuals with a strong athletic identity may be less likely to explore other careers, education, and lifestyle options due to intensive involvement and commitment to sport (Sparkes, 1998; Lally, 2007). Such commitment to a singular dimension of one's identity can put student-athletes at risk of identity foreclosure, identity narrowing, and athletic identity exclusivity.

Identity foreclosure is understood as a premature commitment to a socially or parentally acceptable role (Marcia, 1966). Britton and colleagues (2017) suggest psychological and social dynamics within competitive sporting environments encourage identity foreclosure. They suggest that many young athletes are socialized into their athletic roles early in life before a young athlete has the opportunity to explore other dimensions of their identity. Some research findings have suggested that identity foreclosure decreases student-athletes adaptive psychological reactions to adversity, particularly student-athletes ability to adapt to adjustment adversity experiences during athletic transitions (Britton et al., 2017; Murphy et al., 2016). Identity foreclosure has been identified as a risk factor for difficult athletic transitions (Park et al., 2013).

Identity narrowing is understood to occur when one aspect of a person's identity becomes the dominant and ‘preferred lens’ in which a person views themselves (Lally, 2007). Identity



narrowing can cause a person to sacrifice exploration and investment of other available identities and roles. Early involvement in sport, reinforced by social support and personal successes in sport, can encourage identity narrowing, resulting in athletes focusing on their athletic identity without the exploration of other roles or identities (Baillie, 1993).

Identifying solely with one role has been referred to as identity exclusivity (Britton et al., 2017). Athlete identity exclusivity occurs when an athlete identifies exclusively with the part of an athlete instead of, or at the expense of, incorporating other roles (e.g., student) (Miller & Gretchen, 2003). The strength and exclusivity of athletic identity are correlated to a more challenging athletic transition outcome. A stronger athletic identity is associated with an increased risk for emotional and psychological difficulty during the athletic transition (Lally, 2007). Factors shown to impact athletic identity's strength and increase the potential for identity exclusivity include the structure and culture of university athletic environment, social isolation, early socialization into sport, performance demands, and extensive commitments to athletic training and practice (Parham, 1993). In their research, Houle et al. (2010) found that athletic identity strength increased as athletes moved from the earlier adolescent athletic competition (e.g., high school level competition) to university level competition. Suggesting university student-athletes may be at higher risk of difficulty during athletic transitions than high school student-athletes.

Developmental research has provided some explanation for the negative consequences of strong and exclusive athletic identity on athletic transition experiences. Identity development research has recognized that identity exploration is critical in identity formation, and high school and adolescent years are considered a crucial period for identity exploration (Erikson, 1968). Many elite athletes spend their childhood and adolescence heavily involved in sports and sport-oriented opportunities, spending many hours training, in competition, or travel. For many competitive athletes, much of their early socialization is within an athletic environment. Consequently, identity development is often closely connected to athletic participation (Sparks, 1998). Moreover, expectations placed on athletes are increasing. Athletes are experiencing increased expectations for performance, fitness, skill development, time commitment, and pressures to commit to one sport exclusively. As such, many athletes are encouraged to concentrate their efforts on one area of athletic competition, turning down other opportunities in sports, academics, and social domains. Specialized schools for athletes exist as early as

elementary school. It is not uncommon for athletes to leave homes to attend specialized athletic training schools or facilities as early as 13-years-old. It seems that our athletic culture has developed an expectation that, to excel in a sport, athletes should specialize in that sport early in life.

### ***2.2.5 Future Directions of Athletic Transition Research***

Quasi-normative athletic transitions is a relatively new term in sport psychology research. Subsequently, there is an underrepresentation of this type of athletic transition within current literature (Stambulova, 2017). Various researchers are calling for in-depth studies that explore quasi-normative athletic transitions and explore contextual and cultural factors that might influence athletic transition decisions and experiences (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Kuettel et al., 2017; Ryba et al., 2013; Ryba, 2017; Schinke et al., 2019).

Cultural Sport Psychology (CSP) is a term that has grown since the release of The International Society of Sport Psychology Position Stand on Culturally Competent Research and Practice in Sport and Exercise Psychology (Ryba et al., 2013). The CSP field's goal is to create more inclusive sport and exercise psychology research and practice, creating a space that allows for research and practice to include marginalized topics and various cultural identities (Schinke & McGannon, 2015). Athletic transition research rooted in a CSP approach has grown out of the criticism that traditional sport psychology literature tends to view athletic transitions through an oversimplified lens (Schinke & McGannon, 2015). Researchers recognize there is a need for more culturally competent research and practice. Some researchers acknowledge that the more we capture the complexity of athlete development and transition experiences, the more gaps within the literature become visible (Stambulova et al., 2020).

Athletic cultures that do not foster the safe expression of an individuals' multiple identities can be unhealthy, disempowering, and can affect the development of a positive identity (Ryba et al., 2013). The International Society of Sport Psychology Position Stand on Athlete Mental Health (Schinke et al., 2018) highlights the importance of inclusive and culturally responsive athletic transition research. These authors underscore how negative impacts on psychological wellness can occur when an athlete feels unable or unsafe expressing unique aspects of their identity (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, education, socio-economic status) (Schinke et al., 2018). For example, Krane (2016) highlighted that

athletes who feel they must conceal their sexual identity might also experience feelings of isolation, frustration, and emotional depletion. These athletes are at risk of becoming depressed, experiencing low self-esteem, and increased risk for self-medicating through alcohol or drugs (Krane, 2016). Krane (2016) highlights that increased stress levels associated with athletes concealing ones' sexual identity may suppress the immune system and increase susceptibility to injury and illness. Transgender athletes may also experience additional stressors. Such as the possibility of needing to compete in separate leagues or teams based on sex and experiencing criticism from competitors, coaches, parents, and fans, about stereotypes of transgender athletes having an 'unfair advantage' (e.g., transgender male competing on a female team) (Krane, 2016). Thus, non-inclusive athletic environments may increase mental, physical, and social stressors that can interfere with athletic performance and overall well-being (Krane, 2016).

Ryba and Wright (2012) point out that cultural stressors exist on top of student-athletes' general stressors. Blodgett and Schinke (2015) found unique challenges faced by cultural minority student-athletes included: a lack of cultural understanding by coaches and teammates, little opportunity to express cultural identity in athletic environments, and overt and subvert aggressions (e.g., racism). Stressors associated with non-inclusive and unsafe sporting environments as factors in athletic transitions are underrepresented in current literature. There is a growing emphasis on the need for such research, including research exploring identity intersectionality (Fisher & Larsen, 2016; Krane, 2016). Research of this sort can help professionals better engage with and support athletes' holistic development during and after athletic competition (Schinke et al., 2019).

A systematic review by Ronkainen, Kavoura, et al. (2016) outlines several articles and books calling for the 'rethinking of athletic identity' through various epistemological philosophies. Much of the traditional sport psychology and athletic transition research focuses on understandings of sports experiences and performance through a positivist and postpositivist lens (Ronkainen, Kavoura, et al., 2016; Ronkainen, Watkins, et al., 2016). Meaning much of the current literature explores athletic transitions through the lens of objectivity. A lack of research exploring athletes' subjective experiences can endanger athletes' well-being, as it provides less opportunity for athletes to see themselves and their experiences within the literature. Research capturing varied athlete experiences may provide athletes with more possibilities to see themselves and others in different ways, which can help athletes adapt to unexpected experiences

and increase understandings of others (Ronkainen, Kavoura, et al., 2016; Ronkainen, Watkins, et al., 2016).

## **2.3 Student-Athlete Support-Seeking**

As presented above, sports psychology research has acknowledged that student-athletes are at risk for negatively impacted well-being, psychological distress, and mental health difficulties during athletic transitions. Despite the increased risk, student-athletes appear to be underutilizing supports (Breslin et al., 2017). Why are student-athletes not utilizing mental health supports?

### ***2.3.1 Barriers and Facilitators***

Using the Attitudes Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale, Watson (2005) conducted a study exploring differences between students and student-athletes' attitudes towards seeking professional supports. The study found that student-athletes had less favourable attitudes toward support seeking when compared to non-athletes. Student-athletes were uncomfortable seeking counselling support outside of athletic departments due to a fear that service providers may not understand the concerns, needs, and pressures unique to student-athletes (Watson, 2005). Like Watson (2005), a more recent study by Barnard (2016) exploring student-athletes attitudes toward support-seeking also found that student-athletes had less favourable attitudes towards support-seeking than their non-athlete counterparts. However, Barnard found that the student-athletes who participated in their study were more willing to seek professional support than the athletes who participated in Watson's (2005) study. Findings from a systematic review by Moreland and colleagues (2018) further supported this trend. In their systematic review of 21 articles published between 2005 and 2016 that explored university student-athletes' mental health support utilization, Moreland and colleagues found student-athletes willingness to utilize professional supports had increased between 2005 and 2016. These findings suggest that student-athletes are reporting an increased willingness to access professional supports. However, while negative attitudes towards support-seeking appear to be improving within student-athlete populations, actual support utilization does not appear to be increasing (Breslin et al., 2017; Moreland et al., 2018). If negative attitudes towards support-

seeking are decreasing, why are student-athletes not utilizing supports? Are supports available to student-athletes across the U Sport league?

Moreland and colleagues' (2018) systematic review found that while student-athletes appear to be willing to seek professional support for mental health concerns, there were salient personal, interpersonal, and environmental barriers preventing athletes from accessing support. Barriers included gender (e.g., males less likely to seek support), perceived stigma, lacking peer norms for support utilization, negative coaching attitudes towards support seeking, lack of support service availability, and lack of referral process for mental health support within athletic departments (Moreland et al., 2018). Facilitators included gender (e.g., females more likely to seek support), coaches and athletic trainers' positive experiences with professional supports and positive attitudes towards support seeking, and coaches and athletic trainers' willingness to refer student-athletes to professional supports.

Gulliver and colleagues (2012) conducted a qualitative study using focus groups to explore the perceived barriers and support-seeking facilitators. Focus groups were held with 15 (nine male, six female) athletes, ranging in age from 16-23 years-old, training with the Australian Institute of Sport (e.g., Olympic training facility) in a team or individual sport. Notable barriers to support-seeking included lack of mental health literacy, negative past experiences of support-seeking, and stigma. Stigma was the most significant barrier found in this study. Facilitators to support-seeking included encouragement from others, having an established relationship with a support provider, pleasant previous interactions with a support provider, positive attitudes of others towards support-seeking, and access to the internet. In the study, Gulliver and colleagues (2012) emphasized that coaches' positive attitudes towards support-seeking were a particularly salient facilitator of athlete support-seeking behaviour.

Castaldelli-Maia and colleagues (2019) further emphasize the findings of Gulliver et al. (2012) and Moreland and colleagues (2018) in their results from a systematic review of 52 studies exploring barriers to athletes' support-seeking. Like the other studies, this systematic review found barriers including stigma, low mental health literacy, negative past experiences with mental health treatment-seeking, busy schedules, and hypermasculinity. Like Moreland and colleagues' (2018) and Gulliver and colleagues (2012) findings, Castaldelli-Maia and colleagues (2019) found and reported the importance of a coaches' roles in elite athletes' ability to seek out and access mental health support.

Mental health literacy appears to be a salient factor influencing student-athlete support seeking. Lacking mental health literacy and misperceptions about mental health and support-seeking are salient barriers to support seeking. In their review, Moreland et al. (2018) found that athletes' and athlete stakeholders (e.g., coaches, athletic trainers, athletic departments) had significant variations on how they conceptualized and operationalized the terms 'mental health' and 'mental health support.' It seems there is still much confusion about what mental health and mental health support are, who can access support, and who can provide support. Athletes appear to be unsure of whom they can reach out to for help, and athletic administrators, coaches, and support staff seem to be unclear about who they refer their student-athletes to (Moreland et al., 2018). There appears to be confusion about which professionals provide what services, with specific uncertainty about the particular roles of sports psychologists compared to counsellors compared to psychologists when considering support provision for athletes (Moreland et al., 2018).

Watson and Kissinger (2007) found a common misperception within the student-athlete population is the belief that counselling services are only suitable and available to those who have experienced severe emotional disturbances (e.g., significant loss or trauma). Student-athletes do not see difficulties experienced during athletic competition or athletic transition to be severe enough to warrant counselling support. Moreover, student-athletes appear to be hesitant to access counselling supports. Watson and Kissinger (2007) found that participants, who were student-athletes, felt doubtful that counsellors outside of athletic settings would understand student-athletes' unique needs. Consequently, student-athletes appear to be overlooking professional counselling support as a viable support option. Athletic stakeholders (e.g., coaches, support staff, and administration) may hold similar beliefs. Hence, misperceptions and low mental health literacy of both athletes and athletic stakeholders (e.g., coaches, support staff, administration) may negatively impact student-athlete support-seeking behaviour (Moreland et al., 2018; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Researchers are reporting the importance of coaches' influence on student-athletes' support-seeking across multiple studies and systematic reviews. There appears to be a striking connection between coaches' mental health literacy and student-athlete support seeking. Thus, mental health awareness and additional mental health training for coaches may be equally important as mental health training for student-athletes when considering athlete support-seeking behaviour.

### ***2.3.2 Stigma and Mental Toughness***

Researchers are reporting the impact of stigma on student-athletes' support-seeking across multiple studies and systematic reviews. Elite athletes appear to report high rates of stigma connected to mental health support-seeking (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019; Gullivier et al., 2012; Moreland et al., 2018). Student-athletes and elite athletes are reporting a fear that seeking support would suggest they are 'weak' and would negatively impact athletic careers and athletic reputation (Breslin et al., 2017; Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019). Traditionally, sports have celebrated a culture of performance and competition where mental 'toughness' and 'strength' are celebrated and where psychological distress and accessing supports are often seen as 'weakness' (Bauman, 2016; Breslin et al., 2017). Many athletic circles still perpetuate this cultural mindset. Douglas and Carless (2015) believe that messaging within sporting communities, media, and the general public reinforces the perception that athletes must overcome weakness and pursue inordinately high-performance levels at any cost. A lack of dialogue on mental health, well-being, and challenges characteristic to athletic competition and transition can make a personal struggle, psychological distress, and mental illness seem less acceptable or less prevalent within this population. Such a perception may be contributing to silencing current and former student-athletes in need of support (Carless & Douglas, 2008). Similarly, Watson (2005) believes that glorified 'toughness' perpetuates the stigma of showing 'weakness,' which may impede athletes' support-seeking. Watson (2005) suggests that a fear of being perceived as 'weak' may cause athletes to wait until mental health concerns become more severe before seeking-support or may impede support-seeking altogether. Research that helps to normalize support-seeking and captures underrepresented aspects of athletic competition and transitions might reduce the stigma associated with accessing support during athletic competition and transitions.

### **2.4 Support Needs During Athletic Transitions**

Support is a broad term. Formal support can be understood as support one receives from a mental health professional. Such as a counsellor or sports psychologist. Informal support can be understood as more broad support, such as social support, which can be support provided by friends and family (Brown et al., 2018). Forms of support received during athletic transitions can include: emotional support (e.g., displays of intimacy and encouragement), informational support (e.g., advice, guidance, and suggestions), esteem support (e.g., help to strengthen an individual's

sense of competence), and tangible support (e.g., concrete assistance such as financial support) (Brown et al., 2018; Grove et al., Gordon, 1997; Park et al., 2013).

I found only one study that explored student-athletes experiences of support during athletic transitions. The research was qualitative, an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of eight former British elite athletes (e.g., professional and Olympic athletes) experiences of social support during athletic transitions (Brown et al., 2018). The study found that social support needs during athletic transitions included a need to feel cared for and understood by family, mentors, and peers within the participants' sporting community, redefining athletic identity, and assisting accessing new and existing social networks (Brown et al., 2018). The participants described experiencing difficulty asking for support, especially concerning mental health issues, shame, embarrassment, and beliefs that athletic transition struggles did not justify accessing professional supports. Moreover, participants noted feeling like other athletes were doing 'better' than them during their athletic transitions (e.g., seeing more success), which presented another salient barrier to support-seeking. Brown and colleagues (2018) provided reasons for participants' difficulty seeking professional support. Such reasons included: stigma, perceptions of support-seeking as being 'mentally weak,' and cultural norms related to mental toughness as a salient part of athletic identity. Brown and colleagues (2018) found that social support helped professional athletes adjust to life after sport and provided a sense of feeling supported, which played a crucial role in the professional athletes' adjustment process.

Feeling supported during athletic transitions has been connected to easier adjustment experiences (Brown et al., 2018; Park et al., 2013). However, there is significant variability in the type and consistency of support that athletes can access. For example, access to supports may vary depending on the level of athletic competition (e.g., Olympic, national, or university level). While there is some research exploring professional athletes' experience of social support (Brown et al., 2018), there appears to be no research exploring student-athletes experiences of support. It is important to explore student-athletes' experiences of support during athletics as this athletic population experience stressors related to athletic competitions and academics (Neal et al., 2015; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). The additional stressors associated with being a student-athlete, including the finite period of eligible play, make the university student-athlete experience unique compared to other elite sports levels (e.g., professional, Olympic) (Fuller, 2014). Furthermore, potential stressors associated with ending university sport with remaining



eligibility remain seemingly unexplored. Further research exploring student-athletes experiences of formal and informal support during athletic transitions that occur with remaining eligibility is warranted.

## **2.5 Summary**

There is substantial research focused on athletic transitions. Within this body of research, a taxonomy was created for categorizing various types of athletic transitions (e.g., normative, non-normative, quasi-normative), and multiple factors have been identified to influence athletic transition outcomes. Athletic transition literature has found that involuntary athletic transitions present a higher risk for difficulties and a higher need for support.

Limited research has explored quasi-normative athletic transitions, nor experiences of support during such transitions. Brown and colleagues (2018) examined professional athletes' social support experiences during athletic transition experiences. However, no studies were found exploring student-athletes' experiences of formal (e.g., counselling, sports psychology) or informal support (e.g., family, social, coaching) support. To my knowledge, no research has explored athletic transition experiences with student-athletes who ended university athletic competition with remaining eligibility, nor with exclusively female student-athletes. Research that explores female student-athletes' experiences of support during athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility contributes to a salient research gap and can capture experiential knowledge that can assist practitioners and other student-athletes.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The following section will outline the rationale for using qualitative inquiry and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the methodological approach to explore female student-athletes' athletic transition and support experiences. A discussion on qualitative inquiry and IPA methodology is provided. The chapter contains detail on the research design, including participant selection, data generation, and data analysis. The chapter closes with a discussion on research trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

### 3.1 Research Design

Researchers need to situate themselves within a philosophical tradition, clearly outlining and acknowledging the lens through which they conceptualize their research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Haverkamp and Young (2007) state that it is the intersection of a research rationale and philosophical beliefs that lead researchers to establish a research purpose and research questions. As such, I will discuss the research paradigm and tradition within which this study has been grounded.

#### 3.1.1 *Qualitative Inquiry*

Qualitative inquiry is an approach to research that explores a phenomenon or research topic within context. This approach to research places value on subjectivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Qualitative research is generally concerned with exploring how people make sense of and experience the world and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Typically, qualitative research seeks to gather new knowledge and understandings about a phenomenon set within a particular context (Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). The purpose of this research was two-fold. First, the study sought to explore female student-athletes' athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility in the U Sport league. Second, the research sought to explore female student-athletes' experiences of formal (e.g., counsellor, sports psychologist) or informal (e.g., social, family, coaching) support during athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility in the U Sport league. A qualitative research approach was suitable for these research purposes. It allowed for exploring what meaning the participants made of their experience within this specific context.

This qualitative research study is situated within a constructivist epistemological paradigm, which suggests there is no universal or objective truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Instead, constructivist research assumes that multiple contexts, perspectives, and subjective voices constitute ‘truth’ (Ponterotto, 2005). I did not seek to provide objective answers within this study, determine causal relationships, or deliver quantitative data. My goal was to explore and create interpretations of female student-athletes' subjective meanings made of their athletic transition and support experiences.

### ***3.1.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis***

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the methodology used for this study. IPA is an approach to qualitative, experiential, and psychological research. It is concerned with the in-depth examination of lived experience (Smith, 2011). IPA is informed mainly by three philosophical knowledge areas: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology is the first philosophical underpinning of IPA. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience (Hays & Singh, 2012). Phenomenologists have taken different angles when approaching the study of experience. However, one commonality is the shared interest in exploring our lived world (Smith et al., 2009). IPA research strives to explore participants' lived world and lived experience (Hays & Singh, 2012; Shinebourne, 2011). Phenomenology has been primarily influenced by the ideas of the following philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre.

Husserl's contribution to IPA was his approach to understanding human experience. He was interested in how someone might come to know their own experiences and emphasized the content of consciousness and the process of reflection as factors in knowledge creation. Husserl underscored the belief that humans can be quick to “fit ‘things’ within our pre-existing categorization system” and emphasized the importance of focusing “on each and every particular thing in its own right.” (Smith et al., 2009, p.12). Husserl's work contributed to IPA the notion of a phenomenological attitude. This notion suggests that to examine our perceptions of the world reflexively, we must first “step outside” of our everyday experience or “taken-for-granted” ways of living (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). IPA has also adopted Husserl's notion of bracketing, which is the act of setting aside “taken for granted” approaches of understanding, perceiving, and experiencing the world (Smith et al., 2009, p. 13).

Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre's took a "more interpretive" approach to the study of human experience (Smith 2009, p.21). These philosophers' ideas contributed to IPA through their shared views of human experience as "embedded and immersed" in context (Smith et al., 2009, p.21). Heidegger's work emphasized the idea that our experiencing is always subject to context, objects, relationships, language, time, and place (Larkin et al., 2006). Merleau-Ponty's work emphasized the involvement of the body in experience, stressing the idea that our body is not just an object within the world, but rather our means of communicating and experiencing within the world (Smith et al., 2009). Sartre's work emphasized the idea that humans are developmental, and we are in a state of constant growth; we are "always becoming ourselves" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). All four of these philosophers' work have contributed to IPA, bringing the complexity of the study of lived experience into focus.

Hermeneutics is the second theoretical underpinning of IPA. Hermeneutics is considered the "theory of interpretation" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21). Hermeneutics has been primarily influenced by the ideas of the philosophers Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer. Schleiermacher focused on a holistic view of the interpretive process, whereas Heidegger focused more on how previous experiences and assumptions impacted interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger described the notion of prior experiences as 'fore-structure' and believed that priority should always be given to new objects rather than one's preconceptions made from previous experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

Similarly, Gadamer focused on the influence of history and tradition on the interpretive process (Smith et al., 2009). Two main ideas in hermeneutics that have influenced IPA are the following concepts: the hermeneutic circle and double hermeneutics. The hermeneutic circle emphasizes the cyclical relationship between a part and a whole (Smith et al., 2009). The premise is that to understand the individual parts of something, you need to understand the whole. To understand the whole of something, you need to understand the individual parts (Smith et al., 2009). IPA also involves a process of double hermeneutics. A process where the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their experience (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). The concepts of the hermeneutic circle and double hermeneutics largely influence IPA methodology.

Idiography is the third theoretical underpinning of IPA and is a significant theoretical influence on IPA methodology (Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). Idiography is the study of the

particular. It is a study into one's individual experience, emphasizing unique detail (Smith et al., p. 29). IPA research is idiographic; there is a deep focus on an in-depth and detailed exploration into individual cases before moving on to making more general claims for the larger group (Smith et al., 2009). I aimed to honour IPA's idiographic nature within my written product by striving to be thorough and thoughtful in my individual analysis and descriptive and detailed about individual cases within my written product. I attempted to capture the participants' unique experiences within my more general interpretation of the group's experience as a whole (Ponterotto, 2005; Smith, 2016; Smith et al., 2009).

IPA research aims to discover and describe the meaning participants make of lived experience (Hays & Singh, 2012). This in-depth and empathetic approach to research appealed to me as it provides the researcher with the opportunity to hear and appreciate “the innermost deliberation of the lived experiences’ of research participants” (Alase, 2017, p. 9). IPA research aims to create the opportunity for research participants to express themselves and their reflections on their lived experiences in whichever way they wish (Alase, 2017). This methodology was suitable for the research purpose because it opened up space to explore new meanings and understandings rather than describing or categorizing participants' experiences through a predefined category or system (Smith et al., 2009).

## **3.2 Data Generation**

### ***3.2.1 Sampling Criteria***

An IPA sampling framework was used to conduct an in-depth exploration of female student-athletes athletic transition and support experiences (Alase, 2017; Larkin et al., 2006; Smith, 2017). Sampling criteria were established to collect a sample that was able to provide insights to answer the research questions and achieve the research purpose (Smith et al., 2009). Specific factors that would create homogeneity in the sample were identified. The identified factors included: level of athletic competition, gender, and length of career (e.g., remaining eligibility or exhausted eligibility). Sampling criteria were created with these factors in mind. The sampling criteria for participant selection was as follows:

- Participants were female
- participants were formerly registered as a university student-athlete (e.g., U Sport/CIS, NCAA)

- participants ended university competition with remaining eligibility (e.g., less than five years in U Sport/CIS)
- participants utilized a form of support (e.g., social, family, coaching, counselling) during or after university athletic competition
- participants found their experiences ending university athletic sport meaningful and were willing and able to discuss their experiences in-depth
- participants were willing to participate in and freely consent to an initial screening meeting and one 90-minute interview
- participants were 18-years of age or older

Generally, within a phenomenological research tradition, the sample size can range between two to 25 (Alase, 2017; Shinebourne, 2011). Within IPA, however, there is no universally agreed upon sample size set as a research standard (Smith, & Osborne, 2015). IPA research aims to provide a detailed account of participants' lived experience; thus, the emphasis is primarily on the quality of data, not quantity (Smith et al., 2009). Generally, an IPA study will determine the sample size based on the individual cases' richness (Smith et al., 2009). After completing seven rich and detailed interviews, it was concluded that the collection of data was sufficient to allow for a thorough examination of the convergence and divergence of the participants' experiences.

Recruitment was conducted using online advertisements posted on the University of Saskatchewan online bulletin and paper advertisements placed in strategic locations around the University of Saskatchewan. Each participant was given a research poster if they were interested in sharing recruitment materials with others. All interested participants contacted the researcher through e-mail, and each participant freely consented to a brief telephone screening conversation. During the screening call, each participant went through an eligibility screen using an initial screening guide (see Appendix A). All participants who participated in a telephone screening conversation met the criteria and participated in the study. No participants dropped out of the study.

### ***3.2.2 In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews***

Smith et al. (2009) note that both the interviewer and interviewee in IPA interviewing are active in the interview process. The interviewer supports the participants' talking and reflection

through a process of active listening and empathic responding. Because this type of interviewing is primarily focused on the participant providing an in-depth reflection on their experiences, it is important to create rapport within the interview process. Care was taken before the interviews began to ensure that participants felt comfortable and willing to discuss their experiences. Smith and colleagues (2009) recommend letting participants know that there are no right or wrong answers at the beginning of each interview. This was emphasized to the participants. At the start of each interview, I made sure to let each participant know they were in charge of the interview. It was noted that the researcher had open-ended questions with prompts to encourage conversation. I let the participants know they could talk as much or as little about any area, and they could pass on any or all questions asked. I also let participants know they could end the interview at any time. Participants were asked a second time if the researcher had permission to record the interviews, and it was emphasized that the audio recordings could be turned off at any time.

The open-ended questions and probes that made up the interview guide were created to explore the research purposes. Section one of the interview guide was designed to build rapport with the participants and explore their university athletic experiences. Open-ended questions were asked to explore the details of the participants' athletic involvement (e.g., sport played, number of years played, sport history) as they wished to share, and open-ended questions eliciting dialogue about the meaning sport has for them. The second section explored the participants' athletic transition experience, with open-ended questions stimulating dialogue about challenges or successes they faced. The third section explored the participants' experiences of support across their athletic transition experiences, with open-ended questions about what supports were used and how they were experienced.

The researcher's role in IPA interviews is to facilitate and guide rather than determine the direction of the interview (Smith et al., 2009). As such, the interview guide (see Appendix B) was used as a reference but was not followed precisely or in the same sequence with each participant, nor was each question asked within each interview (Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). In many of the interviews, I asked the first question in the interview guide (e.g., "Please tell me about your university athletic experiences"). From this point on, most participants led the interview. For most interviews, I only asked questions to clarify points or if the participant appeared to be lost for ideas and wanted a question to spark further reflection. Interestingly,

many of the participants naturally touched on thoughts connected with my open-ended questions and probes within my interview guide without asking them; this was encouraging and helped me establish confidence in my interview guide.

Three areas were discussed within the interviews that surprised me. Topics that I had not included in my literature review. The first area that surprised me was the participants' reflection on their decision-making process to end participation in university sport. All participants emphasized the significance of deciding to end university athletic competition, and for some, deciding to return to university athletic competition. The second surprising finding was that most participants labelled their exit from university sport as either 'quitting' or 'finishing.' The third unexpected finding was the significance of identifying or not identifying as an alumnus of the participants' university athletic program. The first three participants interviewed all reflected on the significance of being able or unable to identify as an alumnus to their university athletic program. To be reflexive to this finding, for the final four interviews, if the participants did not naturally touch on the topic of university athletic alumnus, I would inquire into this through the following question: "Do you identify as a university athletic alumnus?" Followed by the prompt, "Can you tell me more about that?"

As Smith et al. (2009) note, unexpected findings are valuable for two reasons. First, surprising results share something that may be unknown about the phenomenon. Second, if sharings initially present as unprompted, they may be of particular importance to the participants' experiences. IPA allows for reflexive interviewing; this means interviewers can adapt interview schedules to encourage a deeper dive into participants' sharings. Such reflexivity resulted in participants discussing powerful details of their experiences. Details that may have been left unexplored using a more rigid interviewing approach (e.g., research approaches that do not allow interviewers to explore unexpected topics that come up in data collection). I believe unforeseen and unanticipated findings emphasize that participants are indeed the experts on their own experiences, not the researcher (Smith et al., 2009).

Individual interviews ranged from 50-minutes to 90-minutes in length and took place at a private and confidential location. Six interviews took place in a seminar room at the University of Saskatchewan, and at the request of the participant, one interview took place at the participant's home.



### 3.3 Data Analysis

IPA data analysis is not a linear process. It is an iterative and multi-directional process that flexibly follows certain principles, processes, and strategies (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Smith and colleagues (2009) highlight that there is not a rigid or linear way that a researcher will work through IPA data analysis. Instead, it requires multiple layers of analysis, revision, flexible thinking, reduction, expansion, and creativity (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA data analysis's core principles are that there should be a commitment to understanding the participant's point of view and a focus on the participant's meaning-making within a particular context (Smith et al., 2009). Data analysis should aim to work from specific experiences to shared experiences and from description to interpretive (Smith et al., 2009). In some qualitative inquiry approaches, participants are asked to review the research findings to check the findings' accuracy and increase the study's credibility and trustworthiness. Such techniques are not part of the IPA analysis. The result of IPA analysis is an account of the researcher's interpretations. Thus, IPA interpretations are always subjective. IPA findings are not attempting to provide 'answers' nor claim to hold any absolute 'truth.' Instead, IPA aims to offer a range of provisional and subjective meanings (Smith et al., 2009).

While IPA data analysis does not follow a rigid formula, it is recommended that researchers new to IPA outline a general data analysis framework that is to be flexibly followed throughout data analysis. The data analysis framework that was used for this study is outlined below. Steps one through four were completed with one individual transcript before moving on and completing each of the four steps with the next transcript.

In stage one, I listened to the audio recording while simultaneously reading through the interview transcript. During this time, I wrote down any initial thoughts or reflections from the interview. These exploratory notes were documented in the transcripts' right-hand margin, and the transcripts were printed with ample margins for such notations.

Stage two consisted of three readings of the transcript. In the first reading, I underlined segments, phrases, and quotes related to the study phenomenon and made descriptive comments in blue pen in the right-hand margin of the transcript. In the second read-through, I underlined and circled specific use of language and commented on the use of speech (e.g., metaphor, repetition, hesitation, clear or unclear articulate) in black pen in the right-hand margin of the transcript. During this read-through, I revisited the interview audio recording multiple times. In

the third read-through, I made conceptual comments in red pen throughout the transcript. At this point, I utilized theoretical and psychological concepts to help communicate my conceptual understanding of each participant's experience (Eatough & Smith, 2006). This step was the beginning of a 'dialogue' between my coded data and my interpretations using my psychological knowledge (Smith et al., 2009). For example, I commented on psychological constructs such as 'burn out,' 'stigma,' 'identity,' 'loss.' I made these interpretive notes in red.

In step three, I began the creative process of exploring emerging patterns (e.g., emergent themes) within the individual case (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The emergent themes I established reflected the participants' words, as well as my interpretations. At this point, I typed out all of the emergent themes from the transcript into a theme table, including relevant page numbers for emergent themes. I ended each individual analysis with around 30-40 emergent themes per interview.

In stage four, I looked for connections across the emergent themes established in step three. During this stage, as Smith and colleagues (2009) recommend, I copied all of the typed-out emergent themes onto a word document and organized them into related clusters. I compiled and reduced emergent themes into theme clusters through strategies such as abstraction (e.g., looking for similarities between themes), polarization (e.g., looking for differences between themes), and subsumption (e.g., creating larger themes to bring together a series of related themes). I provided a descriptive label that I believed conveyed each cluster's conceptual nature (Eatough & Smith, 2006; Shinebourne, 2011). Once each cluster had a descriptive label, I considered it a theme. All themes were recorded in a theme chart. The themes I established reflected the participants' words, as well as my interpretations. Each individual case analysis ended with around 10-15 themes for each transcript.

The fifth step in the individual-case analysis was finishing the individual analysis of that participant's transcript and moving on to the next participant's analysis. In keeping with IPA's idiographic commitment, I completed the four steps for each transcript before beginning the same four-steps with the next participant's transcript (Smith et al., 2009).

After individual case analysis was done for each of the seven participants, I began a cross-case analysis. As Smith and colleagues (2009) recommend, all themes were printed and cut out into separate paper pieces to start my cross-case analysis. Next, I spread out the themes across a table and began looking for connections across the cases. This point of the data analysis

process was iterative and required considerable time (Smith et al., 2009). During this process, I frequently referred back to the original transcripts to make sure I was grounding my interpretations in the participants' words and reflecting on the context in which the words were taken. It was easy to see how some themes related, and these themes were amalgamated together rather quickly. However, I had many themes remaining after this initial merger. After multiple iterations, I was able to map together themes into larger order concepts to create subordinate themes. Subordinate themes were then mapped together through larger order concepts creating superordinate themes. Superordinate themes were organized under an overarching theme. After the thematic structure was established, I began to write up a narrative description of the overarching theme, superordinate themes, subordinate themes, and themes. During the writing process, I continued to merge and adjust the location of the themes within the thematic structure. I altered the descriptive labels of my themes to capture my interpretations better. I used verbatim quotes and extracts from the participants' transcripts to ground my interpretations in the participants' words. Chapter four includes the final thematic representation and written narrative of the data analysis.

### **3.4 Trustworthiness**

In a quantitative study, research quality is measured by assessing if the study meets set standards for validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In qualitative inquiry, this principle applies, but due to the richness and complexity involved, a simple definition of validity is not enough (Smith et al., 2009). Trustworthiness is often used to describe the validity and quality of qualitative research and is defined as the overall believability and quality of research (Marshal & Rossman, 2011). A robust qualitative research study must communicate how the researcher aims to meet paradigm-specific quality and trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005; Yardley, 2000). Morrow (2005) described four criteria necessary for achieving trustworthiness in counselling psychology constructivist research: social validity, subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data, and interpretation adequacy. Morrow's (2005) criteria were followed to establish trustworthiness in this research study.

#### ***3.4.1 Social Validity***

Qualitative research should demonstrate social validity. A study has social validity if it positively benefits a population, creates positive social change, and incorporates prevention,

positive psychology, and social justice (Morrow, 2005). The main reasons for athletic transition research for athletes ending participation in sport are ageing out, career-ending injury, deselection, or disengagement/drop-out. There is a shortage of athletic transition research that explores other more-varied reasons for ending participation in university sport (e.g., bullying, oppression, unsafe sporting environment, mental health, jeopardized well-being). Moreover, there is a shortage of research exploring the meaning student-athletes make of their experiences ending university sport. Research that explores student-athletes experiences ending participation in university sport in-depth and values subjectivity and meaning ascribed to such experiences has social validity. It provides the opportunity for participants to communicate how they make sense of their experiences.

### ***3.4.2 Subjectivity and Reflexivity***

An IPA researcher must demonstrate subjectivity and reflexivity throughout the research process. To demonstrate subjectivity and reflexivity, Morrow (2005) emphasizes the importance of Husserl's bracketing concept – becoming aware of and setting aside predispositions and assumptions. While I believe it is impossible to completely 'bracket' all emerging ideas and concepts while conducting research, I sincerely endeavoured to bracket as much as possible. I strived to look at each case with a 'fresh' and humble perspective to capture the individuality of each participant's experience. To be respectful of the research process and to each participant, I devoted considerable time to data analysis and engaged in conscious and continual reflection.

### ***3.4.3 Adequacy of Data***

Morrow (2005) deems that sampling and interviewing procedures have more influence on data adequacy than the number of participants; how data is captured is seemingly more critical to the data's adequacy than the sheer volume of participants. Finding participants who can meaningfully contribute to the research purpose and having integrity and transparency in how you interview them is essential to the study's overall trustworthiness. The study utilized purposive and criterion-based sampling to find a group of participants who were willing to speak in-depth on the topic of inquiry (Hays & Singh, 2012). The seven participants in this study were passionate about the topic being researched and eager to share their experiences. Semi-structured interviews were used to capture their experiences. The interviews were participant-led and followed the interview schedule reflexively, meaning that the interview guide was modified, and

at times deviated from, following the participants' lead. Taken together, these willing and eager participants and the reflexive interviewing approach promoted adequacy in the data. The participants were able to focus on areas of importance to them and describe their experiences on their terms (Smith et al., 2009).

#### ***3.4.4 Adequacy of Interpretation***

Adequacy of interpretation includes the data analysis process's trustworthiness, including data interpretation and the findings written presentation (Morrow, 2005). To demonstrate adequacy in my analysis process, I systematically followed each step in my data analysis framework (Morrow, 2005; Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, I took care to repeatedly refer back to the participants' transcripts to confirm I was grounding my interpretations in the participants' words (Smith et al., 2009). When necessary, I revisited earlier steps to ensure I was capturing depth, nuance, and psychological knowledge within my interpretations, before moving on to the next case. Within the final written product, I drew heavily from participants' verbatim extracts to help communicate my interpretations. Moreover, I contextualized the data to provide the reader with a context for my interpretations (Smith et al., 2009).

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

Research conducted at the University of Saskatchewan must meet approval from the Behavioral Sciences Research Ethics Board. The current research study involved human participants and followed the guidelines and requirements set out in the: Canadian Institute of Health Research, Natural Science and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) (Government of Canada, 2014). An application for ethical approval was submitted to the Behavioural Sciences Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) and approved on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (BEH approval #1684). The information included in the ethics application included a project overview, duration and location of data collection events, risks and benefits, participant recruitment and informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, data security, and appropriate storage and destruction of data. Included as additional documents with this application were: an online bulletin advertisement and recruitment poster, initial screening guide, informed consent form, interview schedule, debrief form including a list

of therapeutic resources, and a certificate of completion of a course on ethical conduct for research involving humans (TCPS-2).

After ethical approval was received on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020, participant recruitment began. As per the recruitment strategy outlined above, an online PAWS bulletin was posted advertising for study participants. The first two PAWS bulletin posts received no participant interest. As such, a request for an ethical amendment was made. The amendment requested to expand the study recruitment area, expand selection criteria, and expand data collection to include telephone interviews in the case participants were not successfully recruited using the original recruitment area, selection criteria, and data collection methods. The amendment requested to the ethical application (BEH #1684) was approved on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020. However, it should be noted that all interviews were conducted in person. The expanded recruitment area and selection criteria were not required for the recruitment of the seven participants. All participants met the requirements outlined in the initial ethical application approved on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

I will provide some rationale as to why I believe the amendment was not needed. The first two posts elicited no response, and the final three posts elicited responses. Out of the five identical posts, the time of day and year was the changing variable, not the content. The first two posts were made within the first three weeks of winter term at the University of Saskatchewan, posted around 12:00 pm and 2:00 pm. These posts received no participant interest. The final three posts were made during mid-term evaluations at the University of Saskatchewan, around 8:00 am, 2:30 pm, and 3:30 pm. All three posts received positive participant interest. Hence, it appears the time of day and year may have had an impact on recruitment success. Posts made during mid-term evaluations (e.g., high traffic flow to online platforms) received drastically increased engagement. Six of the seven participants noted they became aware of the study directly through the PAWS bulletin postings, and one participant became aware of the study through word-of-mouth. All seven participants contacted the student investigator through the e-mail provided on the recruitment materials.

An informed consent form was reviewed and provided to each participant before the individual interview. Informed consent included research purpose, research procedures, confidentiality, funding declaration, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality, anonymity, data storage, and rights to withdraw. Each participant was asked for permission for the interviews to be audio-recorded and transcribed by either myself or through the Social Science Research Lab

(SSRL) at the University of Saskatchewan. Each participant was provided with a small compensation to thank them for their time.

A verbal debrief was conducted following each interview. Each participant was further provided with a written debrief form outlining the research purpose and provided a list of mental health resources. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw interview data up until the dissemination of the results.

### ***3.5.1 Participant Welfare***

A core principle of participant welfare is the respect for human dignity, which includes respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice (Government of Canada, 2014). To protect participant welfare and human dignity, I evaluated and communicated any potential risks and possible benefits associated with involvement in this research study. Moreover, I considered participant welfare and justice when designing the study, especially when considering appropriate inclusion, exclusion, and the equitable distribution of research benefits (Government of Canada, 2014). Substantial research has been conducted on athletic transitions; however, to my knowledge, no study has been done to explore the in-depth experiences of support during athletic transitions with female student-athletes who have remaining eligibility. As such, this research was intended to benefit an under-researched and at-risk population.

To protect participant well-being, I conducted a verbal check-in after each interview and provided a written debriefing letter. The formal debrief letter outlined the research purpose and available therapeutic services that could be accessed by each participant should they require any additional support following the interview.

### ***3.5.2 Informed Consent***

Participants must freely choose to participate in research, without any form of undue influence or coercion (Government of Canada, 2014). I communicated to participants that they have the right to withdraw their participation in the research without any consequence. To ensure appropriate boundaries and show respect for my participants, I reminded all participants that they had the freedom to share with me to the extent of their comfort and independent judgement.

Informed consent consisted of a clear verbal and written explanation of the research purpose and objectives, procedures, declaration of funding, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality, compensation, an outline of storage of the data, rights to withdraw from the study

and withdraw their data from the study, limitations to their rights to withdraw data, and contact information for myself, the principal investigator, and the University of Saskatchewan REB.

### ***3.5.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity***

It was an ethical duty to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity. As such, in going through the data, I took steps to protect each participant's anonymity. In doing so, each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and all potentially identifying information was removed within the data. Each participant was asked if they would like their sport name removed from the data, and each participant consented to their sport being named. However, even with consent to name the participants' sports, I chose to remove all sporting particulars regardless, to protect the participants' anonymity further. Within the data, I removed all sports names, locations and dates of U Sport involvement, names and identifying details of support providers, coaches, support staff, and any other identifying information such as training facilities, names of athletic equipment, and particulars of training or competition. While removing all of these particulars made some extracts less clear and, at times, less powerful, I felt it was essential to protect the participants' anonymity further.



## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The following chapter presents the findings of seven female student-athletes experiences of support during athletic transitions that occurred with remaining U Sport eligibility. The two research questions that led the current study were: (1) How do female student-athletes experience athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility? (2) How do female student-athletes experience formal (e.g., counselling, sports psychologist) or informal (e.g., social, family, coaching) support during athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility?

Seven participants shared their experiences in interviews that ranged from 50- to 90-minutes in length. With each participants' permission, interviews were recorded and transcribed. All transcripts were de-identified to protect the anonymity of the participants. All transcript extracts have been edited to protect participants' anonymity. Ellipses (...) were used where non-essential dialogue (e.g., not related to the phenomenon) has been removed. Double quotation marks (") and indentation indicates direct extracts from the participants' transcripts, and single quotation marks (') indicate dialogue within the interview transcripts. Words that have been added to the extracts to provide coherency are indicated using square brackets [.] All participants were assigned a pseudonym, and all potentially identifying information was removed from the data. Potentially identifying information was replaced with the name of the identifying information within brackets. For example, 'soccer/hockey/track' would be replaced with '(sport name),' 'U of X' would be replaced with '(university name),' '(team name)' was used instead of naming a 'specific team mascot,' 'track/rink/gym/court/field' would be replaced with '(training location),' and sport particulars such 'race/time/weight class/game/fight/rally' would be replaced with '(sport detail).' Ages and years since competition are written as an approximation to protect participants' anonymity further.

Each transcript was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the participants' experiences of support while they transitioned from university sport. The presentation of the findings opens with an introduction to each participant who contributed their experiences to this study. The themes that were identified through the analysis are presented in a thematic representation, including an overarching theme, three superordinate themes, and six subthemes. I provide a narrative of the study findings, grounding my writing in participant quotations.

## **4.1 Contextualizing the Data**

The participants were seven women, ranging in age from early-twenties to early-thirties. The seven participants interviewed played university sport across Canada. All participants played with various Canadian universities within the U Sport league – which grants five years of available play. The seven participants competed at four different universities across Canada. Four of the seven participants competed in an individual sport, and three competed in a team sport. The amount of time since university athletic competition ranged from less than one year to around ten years. The years since the participants' competition are written as an approximation to protect participants' anonymity.

Two participants competed for two periods of university competition. Meaning they had competed with their university team, took a break from university competition, and then returned to university competition for a second time. These two participants presented their reasons for ending university competition the first time to include a combination of the following factors: jeopardized mental health, coaching turnover, completing a degree, and a need for a break from university competition; both participants ending university competition for the second time because they finished a degree. For the remaining five participants, the reasons provided for ending university competition included: jeopardized physical and mental health, unsafe sporting environment (e.g., bullying, harassment, abuse), coaching turnover, lack of opportunity or playing time, neglect from coaching and support staff, and general disengagement from university competition. I provide a brief overview of each of the seven participants' cases below.

### ***4.1.1 Skyler***

Skyler was the first participant to be interviewed. Skyler had been out of university competition for around three years. She was in her mid-20's and was enrolled in a professional university program. Growing up, Skyler participated in multiple sports. She began to focus her efforts on her sport of choice, which was an individual sport, during high-school. She was recruited to a Canadian university during her final year of high school, which involved her moving away from her home-town soon after high-school. During university competition, Skyler competed through chronic physical injuries and mental health challenges. Skyler did not disclose the specifics of her mental health challenges; however, she described mental health issues as one of her main reasons for ending her university competition.

During university competition, Skyler felt that she “wasn’t performing well.” She explained, “I wasn’t competing like a university athlete, I guess. I was dealing with a lot of mental health issues from all of the pressure.” Skyler described how her performance difficulties left her feeling “constantly disappointed in myself” for “not managing myself well enough to compete.” Skyler described feeling like she was also disappointing her home town.

In her third year of competition, Skyler decided to “take a bit of a break from the sport.” She described her experience:

It was like a relief, but it wasn’t a relief. I always wanted - while I was competing and doing bad it was like, ‘The next (competition detail) will be better, that’s when I’m gonna come back and all the hard work is gonna be worth it.’ So, it kind of feels like I gave up a little bit. So, that’s disappointing, but at the same time I don’t know that it would’ve gotten better...I wasn’t really super healthy at the time. It felt like a relief to not have to be so stressed out all the time. At the end, I was crying before (competition detail), I was so stressed out. I think it was good for me to be done, but it was still disappointing to not have reached the potential that I should have.

During her interview, Skyler repeatedly noted feeling “disappointed,” she explained:

I just feel like I had such high expectations for myself, and I failed to meet them, so I feel like it’s weird because it’s just a sport technically, but it meant so much to me. I just directed a lot of effort into it, and I just wanted to be really good and to have that feeling after you make a really good play or you run a really good race. That high feeling, to have that to end off on a good note instead of a bad note, I guess. It would’ve been nice to have—(sigh, pause), it’s the dream, I guess, to have ended on a really successful career—well, not necessarily career, but had your full five years. Sure, there’d be some struggle but end off with success, I guess (pause)

During her university athletic experiences, Skyler worked with a counsellor and then with a sports psychologist. Skyler began working with a sports psychologist rather than a counsellor because she felt the sports psychologist better “understood the mindset of an athlete.” In addition to formal supports, Skyler explained that a teammate emotionally supported her during her athletic transition. After ending university competition, Skyler lost access to coaching support and access to her sports psychologist, which she explained as quite distressing. She explained that she tried to access other formal supports but had difficulty finding support to help her with

her athletic transition. At the time of interviewing, Skyler participated in recreational sport and continued to do her university sport for enjoyment and health purposes.

#### **4.1.2 Hillary**

Hillary had been out of university competition for around one year. She was in her late twenties and working in a professional field. Growing up, Hillary participated in various individual and team sports. Hillary explained that school was “not her strong suit” and attributed her academic achievements to her sports involvement. Hillary explained that she had always wanted to “be a university athlete,” which motivated her “stay in school.” Hillary began specializing in an individual sport during high-school and started competing at the university level right after high-school. During her first two years of university athletic competition, Hillary reported experiencing an eating disorder, which she described having affected her ability to “compete competitively.” After two years of U Sport competition, Hillary ended university competition. Under her coach's support, Hillary continued to compete outside of the U Sport league. During this time, Hillary described how her outlook on athletic competition changed, and she reported increased well-being:

When I was younger, and I first started [competing at the university level], eating was a big thing, so there was just—I wouldn't eat, and that was a big deal so that I found harmed me until I got older and realized you need to eat in order to compete...I got older and realized that food is going to help me in the long run and having an eating disorder isn't the best if I want to compete, competitively.

Around six years after leaving university competition, Hillary decided to return to university and compete with the same university athletic team and complete her university degree. She reported experiencing a different relationship with her sport the second time competing at the university level. She shared that she became a “leader” and “positive influence” on her team because she was “a lot older.” She described experiencing increased maturity, agency, and self-compassion during her second period of university competition. Hillary ended participation the second time when she graduated with her university degree. Hillary felt her athletic transition was “easy” because she experienced “a positive outcome,” which she described as graduating with a university degree and getting a professional job. Hillary reported utilizing social support from her teammates, husband, and family during her athletic competition and transition experiences,

which she described as helpful. At the time of interviewing, Hillary continued to compete outside of the university league and trained with her previous teammates “on the daily.” She was mentoring high-school and university student-athletes and explained how she still feels very involved and connected to her university athletic program.

#### **4.1.3 Alexis**

Alexis was in her late twenties – early thirties and had ended university competition around eight years earlier. Alexis played a team sport and began specializing in her sport of choice at a young age. Alexis filled a specialized position in her sport and started playing with a Canadian university team right out of high school. Alexis described joining a University team with “some really strong, good athletes.” Alexis described “committing” to her program and working closely alongside her coach and teammates to “put in her time” to work towards gaining a starting position in her specialized role. In her third year, Alexis described how she felt “recruited over.”

At the university level, they’re recruiting every year, so there’s new players coming from wherever. There was always this stress and anxiety around is someone new gonna come in, and that’s what happened to me in that third year was that there was a recruit...that came in that was put in that position I was under the impression that I was getting, so then it was a shift for me...I was doing all of the work training. I was the fittest I’d been. Doing all that stuff coming into that third year, having conversations with my coach about where I seemed to be going, so thought we were all on the same page, so then when I found out that there was this other person...I was like, ‘Well, what’s the point?’... after I’d already done my best to put forward the best I had, I knew I wasn’t—I left it all out there.

Alexis described feeling ‘overlooked,’ ‘not valued,’ and ‘not seen’ by her coach, which impacted her sense of self as an athlete. During her third year of university competition, Alexis decided to end competition. She described this as a distressing period and described feeling disconnected from her university and university athletic community for multiple years afterward. During her athletic transition, Alexis utilized social support through her family, partner, and teammates. After ending her university competition, Alexis took a “break” from playing her sport. At the time of interviewing, however, Alexis explained that she played her sport again and was coaching youth. She explained how she had re-connected with her sport, her coach, and her university athletic alumnus community.

#### **4.1.4 Morgan**

Morgan was in her mid to late-twenties. She had ended university competition around five years earlier and was working towards completing a professional degree program. Morgan began specializing in her sport during elementary school, and at 14-years-old Morgan moved away from home to attend a specialized athletic high school where she lived with a “billet family.” Morgan filled a specialized position for her team. During her final year of high school, Morgan receiving several scholarships to various universities across Canada. She accepted a scholarship and moved across the country from where she was living at the time.

Morgan described her first year of university competition as “very fun” and explained that this was connected mainly to a healthy relationship with her female coach. Morgan explained that she felt supported by her first coach as “an athlete and as a person,” which she explained was essential to her athletic performance and overall well-being during these years. After two years of university competition, there was coaching turn-over, which Morgan described as a significant shift in her student-athlete experience. Morgan experienced what she referred to as “bullying,” from her new coach. Her unsafe sporting environment negatively impacted her well-being. Morgan sought counselling support and academic advising to assist her in navigating a safe exit from her sporting team. Morgan explained that she had feared leaving her university team, as she was worried this would result in financial and academic implications. Morgan also feared reporting her coach’s behaviour, as she feared negative repercussions. Morgan was passionate about speaking about the “reality” of “abuse” within Canadian university athletics programs. Morgan took a few years ‘off’ from playing her sport after her experience; however, she was playing her sport again and was coaching younger athletes at the time of interviewing.

#### **4.1.5 Francis**

Francis was in her mid-20s. She had ended university competition around five years earlier and was studying in a professional degree program. Francis competed in an individual sport throughout high school and began competing with a Canadian university right out of high school. During her years of competition, Francis experienced multiple physical injuries. One in particular, that required surgery and significant rehabilitation. Francis described her injury experiences as “pretty devastating.” She explained:

There was a lot of like stop and start. But like you'd stop really hard, and then you'd start really hard again. So you weren't really properly rehabbing your body in-between, you would just kind of get over your injury enough so that you were like functional again, and then you would just start pushing it right away.

Francis explained that her injuries had an emotional toll as well. She explained, “emotionally, of course, it's pretty tough 'cause you'd see other people filling in your spot at (sporting detail) and that sort of stuff while you're injured.” Francis explained that her coach “didn't believe” her injuries and that team supports (e.g., athletic trainer, physiotherapist) were prioritized to competing athletes. She explained:

It's tough too because the coaches, they put their priority on those athletes who are going into (sporting detail). Which is understandable, but it is tough when you're eagerly kind of needing some of that support too. But the focus is elsewhere...or sometimes the athletes who had injuries that were currently being recovered and they weren't competing, (pause) their physio appointments would get pulled for the athletes who had an immediate competition...it is quite a tough cycle to be in, and you kind of feel forgotten at times.

Francis accessed support from an external physiotherapist, surgeon, and sports psychologist to support her during her athletic competition and transition. Francis described her sports psychologist as “just fantastic” and explained, “you'd always come out of there feeling – if not refreshed and refocused, at least you kinda knew where you need to go next. So he was a big help.” Francis utilized social support through her partner and family. Francis does not compete in her sport anymore but has found other sports that she enjoys. She coaches, referees, and supports high-school athletes going through athletic transitions.

#### **4.1.6 Tanis**

Tanis was in her late twenties – early thirties. She had been out of university competition for about one year and was working on a doctoral degree. Tanis experienced multiple athletic transitions from both professional and university sport. Tanis competed as a professional athlete from high school until her early twenties and competed for two years as a professional athlete and university student-athlete in an individual sport. After ending professional competition and graduating with her undergraduate degree, Tanis took a year off from competition. After this year, she returned to university to obtain her Master's degree and competed for her university for

two more years. During her year off from university sport, Tanis reported that she had experienced motivational and adjustment difficulties and accessed informal support through her female assistant coach. She shared:

I found it hard. I was working full-time, but my hours were kind of flexible and I found it really hard to get through the day without having workouts kind of manage my schedule... [during] my year off, I started (training particular) and I was like, ‘Ugh. I’m not motivated.’...and I actually reached out to my varsity assistant coach and said, ‘Do you wanna write me a program?’ So my year off, I actually got—she wrote me a program... getting a program—which is weird to think about now – was motivating for me... I guess I used varsity supports, in a way, or the assistant coach as a part of a transition to write a program and talk about (sport particular). I kind of explained I’m not motivated, I know I wanna (do sporting particular), but I don’t know how I should be doing it and fitting it in...and then she’s [assistant coach] like, ‘Well, what’s your goal?’...so [we] made some goals. I think it [goal setting with her former assistant coach] helped my mental health and also my work to have structure.

Tanis emphasized the importance of structure and her assistant coach’s informal support to her well-being. Tanis described her transitional experiences as an ongoing process. She described her involvement in university athletics “the first time” as her “transition out of professional sports,” and “the second time” as a means to “fall back in love” with her sport and to see what she could do “under less pressure.”

Tanis emphasized the importance of female coaching and mentoring support during her athletic career and transition experiences. At the time of our interview, Tanis continued to utilize informal support and mentorship from her previous female assistant coach. Although no longer competing in her sport, Tanis continued to participate in her enjoyment and health purposes.

#### ***4.1.7 Ciara***

Ciara was in her late twenties – early thirties. She had been out of university competition for around five years and working on her master’s degree. Ciara competed with her high-school in a team sport and began to play in the U Sport league soon after high-school. She filled a specialized role on her team.



A few years into play, Ciara experienced several injuries, including a significant injury that required multiple surgeries. Ciara explained that she did not get a “supportive” response from her coach about her injuries. She explained, “the response I got was sort of that I wasn’t returning to play soon enough. I was not pushing myself as hard as I used to. She [coach] was sort of encouraging me not to follow the instructions of my physician and my (specialist name).” Ciara continued to play soon after her surgery and explained how her injury worsened to a point where she needed another, more significant surgery. At this point, her surgeon and her physician recommended she discontinue her sport. Her coach referred Ciara to a sports psychologist who had been arranged by the coach. Ciara shared that her “Sports Psychologist reported directly to our coach and we didn’t, or I didn’t, at least, have a very high level of confidence in (their) confidentiality, respect for confidentiality on things that we shared.” Ciara explained,

Often if I would go the Sports Psychologist and talk about being worried about challenges with my (injury detail) and the return to play program and our training not lining up, they would report that back to the coach and at the next practice, I would experience a lot of questions and what I perceived as sometimes anger and challenging from the coach to me about did I have a letter from my surgeon? Could I have her [surgeon] call my coach? Could I blah, blah blah? I kind of stopped feeling comfortable talking to the Sports Psychologist and stopped feeling like that was a safe place to share my thoughts about what I was struggling with while I was playing,

Ciara then sought support from a social worker off campus to help work through feelings of overwhelm, from “the demands from the sport, on top of school, on top of challenges from health, on top of lack of support from the coaching team and questioning whether I should continue playing.” After her fourth year, Ciara ended her involvement in university sport. Ciara did not utilize formal support again after her university competition; however, she used social support through her family. Ciara explained that she no longer participated in any formal athletic activity, partially due to her injury and partly because she no longer had “any desire” to involve herself in “formal athletics.” She explained that she found new enjoyment in “independent activities in nature,” such as canoeing.

## 4.2 Female Student-Athletes' Athletic Transition and Support Experiences

Participants' transcripts contained rich narratives as they discussed their varied and diverse athletic transition and support experiences. While each participant made meaning of their experiences in distinct and individual ways, several commonalities were captured. I attempted to capture the nuance and richness of individual participants' experiences while simultaneously capturing commonalities across the seven cases within a thematic structure and written narrative. The thematic structure consists of an overarching theme: *An Ongoing Athletic Transition*, three superordinate themes: *Navigating a Decision*, *Growing the Self*, *Supporting the Journey*, and six subthemes.

The purpose of this research was two-fold. First, the study aimed to explore female student-athletes experiences of athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility in the U Sport league. Second, the study aimed to explore female student-athletes experiences of formal (e.g., counselling, sports psychologist) or informal (e.g., social, family, coaching) support during athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility in the U Sport league. When reflecting on their experiences, the seven participants described an ongoing transitional process, which emerged into *An Ongoing Transition* overarching theme. The participants' explained how their transitional experiences began during athletic competition and continued well after university competition had ended. Participants' athletic transitions were ongoing and did not have a clear 'end.' These ongoing athletic transition experiences were further captured through three superordinate themes, *Navigating a Decision*, *Growing the Self*, and *Supporting the Journey*. The superordinate theme *Navigating a Decision* was made up of two subordinate themes: *Jeopardized Well-Being* and *Quitting the Dream*. The superordinate theme *Growing the Self* was made up of two subordinate themes: *Filling the Void* and *Expanding Identity*. The superordinate theme *Supporting the Journey* was made up of three subordinate themes: *Fostering Belonging*, *Feeling Understood*, and *Mental Health Literacy*. Each subordinate theme was made up of individual themes. Figure 4-1 provides a representation of the final thematic structure.

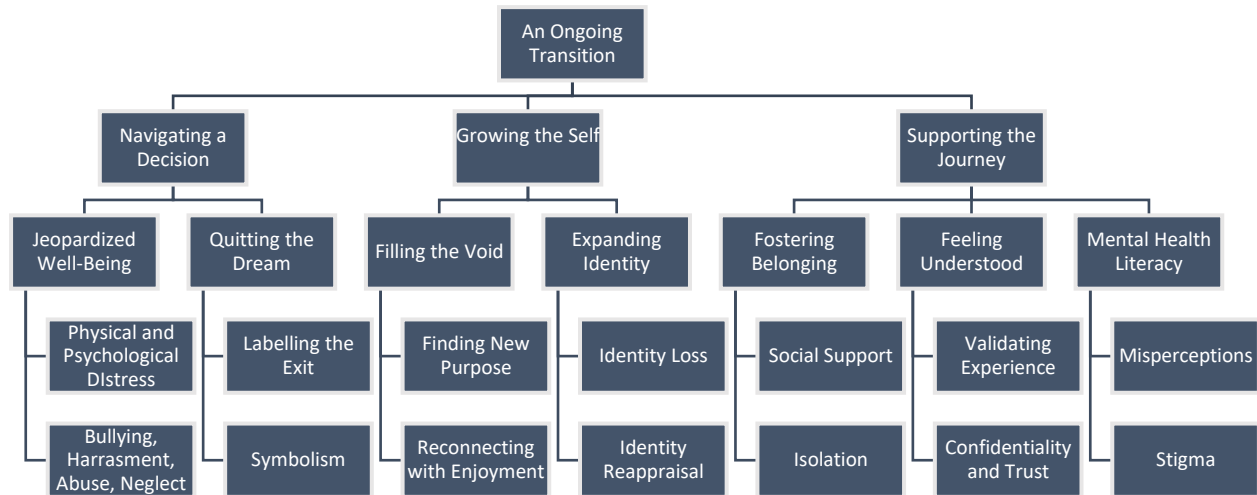


Figure 4.1 outlines the organization of themes

### 4.3 An Ongoing Transition

Across cases, the participants represented their experiences as an ongoing and fluid transition and not a static, stand-alone, singular event. The participants' collective representation of the ongoing fluidity in their transition experiences has been captured as the overarching theme, *An Ongoing Transition*. Participants voiced a clear and unanimous preference to understand and describe their experiences as a transition rather than a retirement. What further stood out was that the participants' physical ending of athletic competition did not demark to them when their athletic transition experiences began. Instead, the participants' accounts reflected their transitional experiences as beginning while competing in university sport. All participants' reflections described a dynamic process without a clear or absolute end. Participants' words sparked the idea that perhaps their athlete transition experiences were not 'complete,' and may never be 'complete.' Francis explained:

I honestly don't think that there'll ever be an end [to her athletic transition], just because there's always going to be a part of me that's very engrained into that sport still, and that sport is still very much engrained into me.

Francis described a portion of her self-identity as always containing a component of her university athletic self. Skyler described her athletic transition experience as a “continuum”:

I think it is something that is on a continuum, I guess, but I don't think it really ends because I am still attached to sport in some way even though I am not competing nearly to the same level.

The participants described their athletic transition experiences ongoing nature and expressed a clear preference for describing their experiences as an ‘athletic transition’ instead of ‘athletic retirement.’ Ciara explained:

I think when you frame it as a transition, that has language with connotations towards you're moving on to new things that are equally as important or more important, whatever that is. It's not just an end to it. It has a continuation sort of context to that term.

Tanis explained that she “hates” the word retirement when used within an athletic context and explained that the word “retirement” was her “anti-definition.” Tanis explained, “for me, I know I'm always going to do sports. I'm not going to retire from doing an activity.” Tanis suggests that “the transition is a different mindset” and explained that her athletic transition experiences are characterized by a changing of “the relationship that you have with the sport.” In respecting the participants' unanimous preference, I have referred to the phenomenon of ending university sport as an athletic transition throughout this document.

Two meaningful and distinct ‘stages’ of the participants' athletic transition experiences emerged during data analysis. The first stage was a period of decision-making, which included the participants' experiences deciding they would end participation in university sport. This stage was captured in the superordinate theme *Navigating a Decision* and was expressed through the subthemes *Jeopardized Well-Being* and *Quitting the Dream*. The second distinct stage that emerged was a period of adjustment and growth after the participants had ended university competition. This stage was captured in the superordinate theme *Growing the Self* and was expressed through the subthemes *Filling the Void* and *Expanding Identity*.

Understanding female student-athletes experiences of support during athletic transitions was the second research objective and an area of inquiry during interviews. The participants' support experiences during their athletic transitions were captured in the superordinate theme *Supporting the Journey* and are expressed through the subthemes *Fostering Belonging*, *Feeling Understood*, and *Mental Health Literacy*.

#### 4.4 Navigating a Decision

The first superordinate theme captures the shared experience of navigating the decision to end participation in university athletics. Each interview began with the interviewer asking the participants to talk about their “athletic experiences.” The majority of participants responded to this question by sharing details about how or why they decided to end participation in university sport. All participants revisited the topic of their decision-making experiences multiple times throughout their interviews. It was evident that deciding to end university sport participation was undeniably a significant component of the participants’ overall athletic transition experience. For two participants, deciding to compete for the second time in university sport was also a significant experience.

In recounting their experiences, some participants described a sense of intuitive knowing that it was time to end or re-visit participation in university sport. Alexis described experiencing a “shift,” where she explained, “I just knew I was done,” she stated, “I had given my best,” describing emotional depletion as she felt she had been “recruited over.” Morgan described a “mental breaking point” and explained that she reached a point where she “decided” that she was “not going to let my coach have control over my life again.” The length of the decision-making process varied across participants’ experiences. Two participants described rather distinct moments in coming to know that they would end participation in university sport. Three participants described a slower and less clear process of knowing. The final two participants described multiple periods of decision-making.

Francis described an extended course of coming to acknowledge that perhaps, “my body is finally telling me it’s time to be done.” Similarly, Skyler described a process of coming to recognize that it was “time to take a break” to prioritize her mental health. Ciara described a period of questioning her involvement in university sport, and she started considering, “Is this really what I am supposed to be doing?”

Alternatively, Alexis described an immediate “shift,” where she “just knew.” She described her period of decision-making as occurring over a week and described immediate certainty about her decision. Alexis explained:

I knew I made the right decision. I felt really good about that. I was sad. I mourned the loss of what could have been and what I wanted to happen, but once I did it and once it was done, I was just kind of like, ‘Okay. That’s that.’

Alexis described feeling at ease with her decision:

Within the years I could have been playing, they [her team] had the most successful runs that they've had, and they started to really build. They won Nationals when I would have been on the team, I think, but I never had been like, 'Oh that could have been me,' like I never had that. I really just was done.

While Alexis described a week-long decision-making period and described confidence and ease with her decision, Ciara's decision-making occurred over two-years, which was followed by, what was understood as a year-long period of distress. Ciara explained:

At the time [of ending participation], it was awful. It felt very rough and I'm sure that my mom and my sister could probably attest to the number of evenings I would just be angry or upset about like I should have been at practice right now or the other girls are at practice.

While five of the participants described one decision-making period, Hillary and Tanis described multiple periods of decision-making. These two participants decided to end participation, return to participation, and end participation again. These accounts revealed that deciding to participate in university competition a second time was also a meaningful process. Hillary explained that when she initially enrolled to go back to school for the second time, she was not planning to compete again because she felt "school is more important." However, she explained that a significant moment for her was when she fully appreciated the significance that university sport had in her life thus far. Hillary emphasized the importance of this moment when she came to acknowledge that: "sport helped me get to school in the first place... without sport, I wouldn't be here." Similarly, Tanis described a process of coming to appreciate the importance that competitive sport and structured training had on her "mental health and work," and explained that she decided she wanted to compete in university sport again to "fall back in love" with her sport.

While participants' experiences of decision-making differed, it was clear that the experience of deciding to end or revisit participation in university sport was a significant and meaningful component of their athletic transitions. However, deciding to end participation in university sport was not portrayed as an easy process. The participants' decision-making experiences are further captured in the themes: *Jeopardized Well-Being* and *Quitting the Dream*.

#### ***4.4.1 Jeopardized Well-Being***

Most participants reported experiencing physical, psychological, and emotional distress in the period leading up to ending participation in university sport. Such distress was captured in the subordinate theme, *Jeopardized Well-Being*, which was made up of the themes: *Physical and Psychological Distress* and *Bullying, Harassment, and Abuse*.

**Physical and Psychological Distress.** The participants described jeopardized well-being as physical and psychological distress, which included bodily injury and jeopardized mental health. Francis described what she referred to as “the injury cycle” and described how this cycle had a physical and psychological toll on her. Francis explained there was “little time to mentally and physically recover in between injuries,” which she described as “devastating.” She explained her physical injuries were devastating and carried a large emotional toll, as she watched other athletes “fill her spot” while she was injured and rehabilitating. Francis expressed feeling under-supported, and perhaps neglected, by her coach and physiotherapists, as she explained that she did not feel they “believed her injuries,” and they “prioritized support” to the non-injured and competing athletes. Her jeopardized physical health and lack of support seemingly resulted in Francis’s disengagement with university sport and her decision to end participation. Francis explained:

I think when I went externally [to find physiotherapy support], and I told my coach this, I think he started kind of realizing that maybe I was serious, that I needed a bit more support and that I was considering leaving the sport. And then I just (pause), he still didn’t quite believe me and then eventually I just slowly stopped coming to practices at the end of the season, just because it got to a point where I was starting to shift my priorities, where exams were more important or going to [external] physiotherapy.

Like Francis, Ciara and Morgan also experienced significant physical injuries. Ciara and Morgan experienced pressures by their coaches to play through injury and return to play before medically advised, which carried physical and psychological consequences. Morgan described coming to realize she was becoming depressed during this injury period. Morgan explained:

It was a weird feeling to recognize that I was starting to get depressed, but I recognized it as just the symptoms... being like, ‘Okay, I don’t want to eat, but I’m going to make myself eat because you have to eat,’ and like, ‘I don’t want to get out of bed but I’m going

to make myself get out of bed.’ ... There were times when I would go to practice in the morning, and it would be so hard not to start crying or break down in that hour and a half or two hours that I would have to go home and sleep for four hours. I was like, ‘That’s unhealthy, time to go see somebody about this.’ So, I’m not - I was like, ‘I’m going to go talk to a counsellor first. If this gets really bad, then maybe I’ll seek a psychiatrist’s help, but I think we can just go see a counsellor first to talk about this.

In addition to jeopardized physical health, jeopardized mental health was captured across multiple cases. Hillary described working through an eating disorder during her first university competition period. She explained, “eating was a big thing, so there was just, I wouldn’t eat, and that was a big deal so that I found harmed me until I got older and realized you need to eat in order to compete.” Skyler also described experiencing mental health struggles during university competition. Skyler explained that she “needed” to end university competition due to undisclosed “mental health” struggles. She explained that she was not “very healthy” during university competition and needed to prioritize her well-being over her university competition.

Multiple participants experienced burnout. Four participants explicitly described experiencing “burn-out,” and some reflected on how this led to disengagement with their sport. Feeling depleted emotionally was a common component of participants' experiences of burn out. Alexis described emotional depletion after feeling she had been “recruited over.” Alexis described this experience as a “shift” and the point when she decided she would no longer continue in her university sport. Alexis explained:

I was the fittest I had been. Doing all the stuff coming into that third year, having conversations with my coach about where I seemed to be going, so that we were all on the same page, so then when I found out that there was this other person... I was like, ‘well, what’s the point’ ... I’d already done my best to put forward the best I had... I left it all out there.

Alexis's words carry a sense of hopelessness that her situation would improve. Alexis described feeling like she was not being “seen” nor “valued” by her coach, which seemingly contributed to her feelings of hopelessness. This sentiment was echoed across multiple cases. Multiple participants described experiencing a lack of control, lack of hope, and lack of perceived support during their athletic competition, which appears connected to these participants' decisions to end university competition.



While most participants described experiencing lacking control and lacking support as negatively impacting their well-being and contributing to their decisions to end university sport participation, Tanis described a different experience. Tanis experienced an increased sense of control and efficacy in her athletic pursuits and experienced a supportive relationship with her assistant coach during her second university competition period, which seemingly benefitted her well-being and enjoyment in university competition. Tanis explained:

My next two years as a varsity athlete definitely came with a bit more agency. It was more of a working relationship with the coaches...it was more of a discussion, so it could be more individualized, which, again, I don't think, had I not had that break, I don't think that would have been the case because I think you get your program and you just do it for five years unless something is chronically going wrong.

Like Tanis, Hillary also described benefitting from time away from university competition and described experiencing increased well being, more enjoyment, and more self-compassion and agency during her second period of university competition.

**Bullying, Harassment, Abuse, Neglect.** Some participants experienced unsafe sporting environments, which was a factor in these participants' decisions to end university sport. Unsafe sporting environments included bullying, harassment, emotional abuse, and neglect. Emotional abuse consisted of demeaning comments, acts of humiliation, intimidating or threatening acts of aggression with no athlete contact, intentional denial of attention and support, and chronic expulsion from competition. Neglect consisted of not providing adequate recovery time or treatment for sports injury and not providing adequate counselling for signs of psychological distress signs.

Ciara described feeling “pressured” by her coach to disregard her surgeon’s advice and return to play before her medical professionals advised. She explained how she returned to play before medically recommended and made her injury more severe, which required additional surgery. In addition to feeling pressured to return to play before medically safe, Ciara also described “fearing” how her coach portrayed her exit from the team, as she explained, “a number of previous athletes” had been “portrayed very negatively” by her coach in previous years. Ciara explained:

We had a number of situations throughout my first, second, and third-year where girls just didn't return to the team, and that was presented to other teammates very negatively by the coach, and always as if it was their fault when having known some of those girls, I realized that it wasn't necessarily their fault. So I also, after quitting, harboured a little bit of fear around what my former teammates had been told by my coach about why I was no longer playing and whether they understood that it was the best decision for me not to.

Ciara explained

I got, in person, a response from her [coach] that was almost, I would say, faux supportive, pseudo-supportive. She gave me a hug and said, 'Of course your (injury detail) is more important than this season. You'll take care of that, and you'll come back blah, blah, blah.' She gave me a hug. I walked out of her office, and I felt like she hadn't really understood me saying that this was me quitting. I have to put my health ahead of the team, and I was kind of a little uncertain of really did she understand what I was saying kind of thing. In some follow-up email messages that we had, I got responses from her that were just kind of like, 'I'm disappointed in you. This is a challenge for your other teammates. We're so close to off-season training that this is a really bad time for you to quit. Why didn't you do this last year before the (pause)?' All those kinds of things that I hesitate to call abuse, but are not the way an ideal coaching situation would go and disappointed was something that I heard from her a lot, and then I just stopped hearing anything. She just stopped replying, and the rest of the communication around figuring out details of the last semester of payout for my academic athletic scholarships and stuff like that was all handled by the Dean's Office, rather than her [coach].

Morgan described how she played through a significant injury because she felt she did not have the option to say no. Morgan described experiencing bullying and harassment from her coach as she tried to play through her injury:

I just remember how mad he [coach] was...Screaming, 'Fuck!' as soon as I [pauses stops thought], [then he] waits, stays on the bench, waits for me to get in the tunnel and then screams that right behind me as I'm getting off the (sporting detail)...He was a very large man and...he'd just get really mad. You could see it on his face 'cause he would turn really red, and his head would get red. You could tell it [anger] was directed at you. It was not at the team. It was not at the situation. He would focus on *you* (emphasis in voice).

Morgan described reaching what she described as her “mental breaking point:”

I remember it [the bullying and harassment] kept going. The situation got worse and worse. ... the bullying, it would be stuff like, he would do stuff like come (sporting detail) in front of me and just turn his back to me and just block me. I’m like, ‘Are you trying to physically isolate me at this point? Are you kidding me?’ And just comments he would make. His favourite comment to make to me, because I’m not very tall and the team joke used to be that I was the shortest (sporting detail) in the country for three years running, so he would say, ‘Oh, make sure you play big. Make sure you play nice and tall.’ ...he did a really good job of isolating me from my teammates and my support system and trying to drive a wedge. He made a point of treating all the girls on my team that *were* [emphasized in speech] my friends very well, so he gave them no reason to complain. As he was doing this to me, I was realizing that it had happened to a couple other girls.

Morgan explained that,

At one point he had made a joke about me being on suicide watch, which is pretty distasteful considering I *was* [emphasized in speech] in counselling because of what he was doing... I remember that being the mental breaking point of, ‘There is no way I could’ve played for that man again. Over my dead body, am I giving that guy any control over my life again.’ And then same with [pauses] and then the (injury detail), I’m like, ‘I’m just done.’ And at that point, honestly, I kind of hated (sport name). It’s a very weird moment where the thing that used to be your escape is the thing that torments you, and that’s a really awful feeling. It took me, oh, my gosh, probably a year and a half to not just hate the thought of a (competition location) and to not hate the thought of putting on (equipment detail) and playing.

Morgan explained how ‘the thing’ that used to be her ‘escape,’ had become the ‘thing’ that then ‘tormented’ her. ‘The thing’ was interpreted as her sport and sporting environment. Which she explained, used to bring her joy and was her “escape,” which once experienced as unsafe, had become a place of “torment.” Morgan’s transition from experiencing her sport as enjoyable and safe to distressing and unsafe was described as “a really awful feeling,” and resulted in “a year and a half” of adjustment and recovery. Morgan explained that her friend and her counsellor helped her to name the abuse she experienced, which she described as “bullying” and harassment, which she explained that this support helped her feel like she was not “crazy.”

Morgan emphasized, “I thought I was actually losing my mind” and emphasized how counselling and social support helped her to recognize and validate the significant psychological impact of her unsafe sporting environment. Morgan explained:

She [the counsellor] was really good about recognizing, whether she believed me or not, her validation skills were very good. Although, I do think she believed me because she was talking about where I could be reporting some of the behaviour to (laughs) so I think she believed me, but she just did a good job of being like, ‘It wasn’t about the playing time, and it was never about the playing time, it was about the other things that were happening that were unprofessional and inappropriate.’ And the fact that you don’t get to, as somebody who is in complete control of my schedule and complete control of my time at a university, essentially start to bully and harass me. That’s not your job. That’s unacceptable.

Morgan’s counsellor, parents, teammate, and academic advisor assisted her in exiting her sporting environment. Morgan emphasized how her academic and professional goals beyond university sport motivated her to access support. Morgan explained:

I basically explained [to the counsellor] what was happening, and I needed to know, ‘Look, I don’t think I can come back here next year, but also I need my degree.’ I couldn’t fathom walking back onto that campus either a) being treated the way I was for another year, I knew that would’ve been too much on my mental health, or b) I also knew it would’ve been incredibly hard to sit back and watch all my teammates - my friends were the team, so watch them play (sport name) and be on the outside. That wasn’t something I was willing to do either. We looked at it [and] we saw which classes I had to switch around. I ended up actually dropping a double major; at that point, I was going to graduate with two degrees, and I was willing to lose it completely just to be able to [leave sporting environment]... I remember being just so *relieved* [emphasis in voice] that I didn’t have to come back if I didn’t want to, and that he [coach] didn’t actually [pause changes thought] because the biggest thing that was upsetting to me was that effectively he [coach] was in control of my education [participant was on scholarship and she had concerns about her coaches influence over graduate school applications] at that point and I was like, ‘That is so wrong that he gets to affect my education.’ Which is one of the reasons that I did seek counselling, and I was making myself get out of bed and go to class is because I was like,

‘I have goals that are bigger than just playing for this guy.’ (name of professional degree program) was always on the cards, so I was like, ‘I know I want to do more than just this [play university sport], so I’m not going to let him take away from this. I’m not going to let him make me get bad grades this semester.’

Morgan further described how she felt stuck in her situation and explained how she had harboured fear about reporting her coach’s behaviour:

I know that sometimes when you talk to, or even when I’ve describe the situation to friends they’re like, ‘Man, I would’ve just quit.’ And I’m like, ‘But you *can’t* [emphasis in voice]. You don’t feel like you can. Also, they’re paying me money. They’re paying some of my tuition now. How am I supposed to just (pause) if I walk away from that, can they take that back? I don’t know.’ ... You’re actually committed to them, right? And again, they’re in charge of your education, so you get a little nervous about ticking them off because you’re like, ‘I don’t know how much pull do you have in the academic department.’ And also, ‘Can you torpedo my career moving forward? Can you affect my (degree name) school admissions?’ That was my biggest - that was the biggest reason why I didn’t really create any waves when I left. Knowing what I know now, I probably would’ve gone kicking and screaming, but at the time, I thought that they could potentially make it so that I couldn’t get into (graduate school program) school, and that’s terrifying. So, it’s like, ‘I can’t report them because if I piss off the university, then they’re just going to torpedo me.’ ... I felt that all that I could do was control *me* (emphasis in voice) and get *me* (emphasis in voice) out of the situation, and in hindsight, I wish I would not have done that. I wish I would have gone up the chain and done some major reporting, but that is okay.

#### ***4.4.2 Quitting the Dream.***

Multiple participants explained how playing university sport had been a long-term “dream” for them, a dream they had spent much of their lives pursuing. Hillary explained, “I always wanted to be a (team name) athlete.” Skyler shared, “I always wanted to do a university sport.” For many participants, playing five years of university sport was a component of their university dream. As Morgan noted, “it had never crossed my mind to only play four years.” And, as Skyler explained:

It's the dream, I guess, to have ended on a really successful career- well, not necessarily career but - had your full five years. Sure, there'd be some struggle but end off with success, I guess.

Participants described how deciding to end university sport before exhausting eligibility felt like *Quitting the Dream*. Multiple participants explained that their university athletic experiences were not what they had "hoped for" and described a process of "grieving" and "mourning" the loss of their university athletic dream. Alexis explained, "I was sad. I mourned the loss of what could have been and what I wanted to happen" *Labelling the Exit and Symbolism* were captured as significant components *Quitting the Dream*.

***Labelling the Exit.*** Interestingly, four of the seven participants referred to their exit from university sport as "quitting." It seems that labelling their exit from university sport as "quitting" had a significant impact on their athletic transition and support experiences. Ciara explained that she struggled with feeling like she had "quit" and she felt "quitting was equivalent to failing." Morgan, however, emphasized, "I wasn't quitting; I just wasn't returning." Morgan emphasized that she "didn't quit" but "finished" her athletic career in four years, emphasizing in her articulation a significant distinction between the two. The participants labelling their exit from university sport, and their internal perceptions of such labels, impacted their experiences.

Some participants highlighted that because they identified themselves as "quitters" or as "quitting," they did not identify themselves as an alumnus to their sporting team. It seems that labelling their exit as 'quitting' and oneself as a 'quitter' negatively impacted some participants' ability to identify as an athletic alumnus, which, in turn, negatively impacted continuity of athletic identity. Alexis explained that for her, this was "the biggest thing:"

The biggest thing was, I never felt like I was a (team name) alumni because I'm like I didn't finish my career. I'm not an alumni. I was a quitter. I was a person who quit the program kind of thing. That was my mentality.

Perceiving herself as a 'quitter' and 'not alumni' seemed to cause Alexis adjustment and identity distress:

I would just avoid. I wouldn't go watch games. I wouldn't go to - I think I went to the fifth-year nights with some of my best friends when they were finishing, but I'd be anxious. I would have anxiety about going to the (training space), being there. (Coaches name) would give me these hugs, and I would just kind of be like, 'Ugh,' like we're not

okay. I'm not okay. 'Cause I just didn't feel like I was alumni, but all the people I was around were, so I just felt like I didn't fit for a long time... It took probably about five years to start to go [watch her athletic alumni play] and the timing of me being okay with what my experience was and moving on from it, but for the longest time, I was uncomfortable and anxious and did not feel like I could call myself an alumni or be a part of the sporting scene.

When asked if she would now consider herself an athletic alumnus, Alexis responded, hesitantly, that yes, she would now consider herself an athletic alumnus. "But" Alexis emphasized, "I always have - that little voice is still always there kind of like, 'Well, but you didn't get your five years,' kind of thing."

Ciara explained that it was likely her "fear of quitting" that prolonged her period of decision-making:

At the time, the decision to quit was a really challenging one, even though pretty much everything in me knew that it was not the right decision to continue playing anymore. It was more so having a problem with that term quitting, rather than [pause], I guess it was a fear of quitting, rather than a fear of losing the sport, I think, at the time. Throughout my fourth year, I was really struggling along. I was really, I think, deep-down knowing that not playing anymore was the best decision for me, but it just took that whole last season to try to convince myself to go ahead and leave the team and continue on, just as a student, so that was really challenging. In my last year, I accessed a lot of support from my family in helping me to actually get to that point to be able to go to the coach and say, 'No, I'm not playing anymore.'

Ciara described utilizing her family to assist her in her decision-making and assist her in overcoming her fear of 'quitting.' She further reflected on the possible connection between her fear of quitting and her gender:

I don't know if there's some intersectionality there, too, of female athletes in sports, right? You always feel like you have something to prove, or you always have to be the best, and you always have to excel. You're just always very driven, so that fear of quitting, you feel like, as a female athlete, is like this huge, looming, awful thing that you want to avoid at all costs, right? So I think maybe a mixture of being a woman in sport and my own personality and just the situation, at the time, really made that fear of quitting like huge.

*Symbolism.* ‘Seniors night’ is an athletic tradition held by many athletic institutions to acknowledge and celebrate student-athletes who have completed five-years of competition with a university team. The significance and symbolism of ‘seniors night ’ were captured across multiple cases. Multiple participants described how watching other athletes celebrate this athletic tradition was difficult for them.

Morgan’s transcript portrayed this symbolism; however, Morgan’s account captured a slight variation on other participants’ experiences. She explained how she could attend this celebration, which helped her have “that feeling of finishing.” For Morgan, the tradition of seniors’ night represented to her that she had “finished” her university athletic career:

There’s a senior graduation night on the last home game of the season and I was like, ‘You know what?’ [pause] And that’s the other thing I decided, I was like, ‘I’m not going to quit. I’m not going to give him [coach] that satisfaction of robbing me of my senior’s night. I’ve put way too much work into this university and into this program. Yeah, right.’ ...I had wanted to play five years; that had been the plan since I was in high school. I was like, ‘If this is how it’s going to go I’m not going to let him [coach] drive me out. I’m going to go out on my own terms.’ I remember thinking, ‘I’m going to make him hand me that picture and those flowers on senior night and give me that respect that I deserve, not that he just drove me out after my third year and I never got to finish my career.’

For Ciara, the celebration of a seniors’ night symbolized closure and formality. Ciara reflected on the lack of closure and formality in her experience ending university sport with remaining eligibility. Ciara explained:

You sign all these papers when you join a team, but you don’t sign anything when you leave one... If you’re a fifth year, you get all this, you get your final home game, you get a bouquet of flowers, you get photo ops to take with the coach in your jersey and all that kind of thing, but when you leave early, there’s no process to be like okay, I checked the boxes of telling my coach, telling my trainer, taking myself off the fitness testing list, following up on these athletic scholarships or blah, blah, blah. There’s no closure to being able to say like this is what I did. I’m done that now. It’s all completed. I did it the proper way. You don’t have anything to have confidence in the fact that you’ve done it all properly. A formal process would have been, I think, a million times more helpful to me in the moment.



Participants also reflected on the significance and symbolism of physical space, such as a training facility. Four participants explained how they felt unable to go into or experienced distress when going into a physical space after they had ended university competition. Alexis explained that she “couldn’t go into that building,” referring to her old training facility, and explained that she “would just avoid” going into this physical space. Interestingly, Alexis connected her “healing” to when she felt more comfortable going back into “that building,” referring to her previous training space. Similarly, Morgan was unable to go into her training facility after ending her university competition and stated that she experienced a “physical rejection” of the space. Ciara explained how she had struggled to walk down a particular hallway in her university after ending her university competition. She explained:

One of the hardest parts, it sounds so petty or something, but one of the hardest parts was walking down the hallway in the athletics building where the plaques for the Academic All Canadians are and seeing my name on a number of them, but not on five of them. That was the hardest challenge...it sounds goofy, but I stopped walking down that hallway. I would walk around campus, way out of my way, to get to classes in that building. I would walk outside in the minus 50 weather in the middle of winter in a blizzard just so I didn’t have to go down that hallway and see those plaques.

#### **4.5 Growing the Self**

The theme of *Loss* was salient across the participants' experiences. The compilation of emergent themes that comprised the theme of *Loss* included: identity loss, loss of purpose, loss of belonging, loss of routine, loss of expected self, and motivation loss. When re-visiting the transcripts, I realized that where I had captured loss was repeatedly the same context where I had captured growth. As such, I merged the subthemes loss and growth, which became the second superordinate theme, *Growing the Self*, which captures personal growth from the participants' shared experiences of loss. Self-growth and loss were captured in the subordinate themes: *Filling the Void* and *Expanding Identity*.

##### **4.5.1. Filling the Void**

Across the cases, multiple participants described a sense that something was missing in their lives after university sport ended. Two participants referred to this feeling as a “void,” while another referred to it as a “gaping hole.” While there were different ways to express this

experience, all seven participants described a sense that something was missing from their lives after university sport ended, something more than the sport itself. The subordinate theme *Filling the Void* captures the participants' reflections of this portion of their athletic transition experience. This subordinate theme was made up of the subthemes *Finding New Purpose* and *Reconnecting with Enjoyment*.

**Finding New Purpose.** Across multiple cases, the participants described a shared sentiment that university sport provided them with, to some extent, purpose and direction in their day-to-day. Without sport, the participants had to explore what provided them with a new purpose and direction. After ending university sport, Francis described finding less purpose in her daily activities:

Even just going to the gym, that was a really tough one because I'd go to the gym and I didn't feel like I had a reason to go to the gym anymore...for me to go to the gym after discontinuing my career as an athlete, it was like, 'Well what am I going for?' I had no purpose in going to the gym.

Francis explained how she navigated new activities to help her find a renewed sense of purpose and direction:

The two activities [yoga and rock climbing] that I really picked up on and made me feel, I don't know, full again? I'm trying to figure out how to explain it. It kind of gave me a bit of a sense of purpose and direction again. My life just didn't feel so empty with this gaping void that (sport name) had left.

Like Francis, some participants described finding new activities that provided a sense of purpose. Another source of direction and purpose that participants mentioned was coaching or mentoring younger athletes. Hillary shared how, during her athletic transition, she found she was becoming more of a "leader" and "positive role model" for the younger student-athletes. After ending university competition she started mentoring and coaching high-school and university student-athletes. Finding new purpose and direction by supporting others was a salient experience. Five of seven participants became supports, coaches, or mentors for other athletes during their athletic transitions.

**Reconnecting with Enjoyment.** Multiple participants described how they re-connected with a sense of enjoyment in their sport during their athletic transition experiences. Hillary

explained that she reconnected with the “fun” in her sport during her second period of university competition. Hillary explained:

This last year I didn't [pause], I took it seriously, but it wasn't as serious as I took the first couple of years. I laughed more. I was able to enjoy it more 'cause I didn't feel like I had so much stress lying on me, and like you have to be this perfect athlete. You have to do this. You have to do that. I just felt like, 'you know what, I'm doing this for myself,' and I'll do the best I can, and if it's not great, then we'll move forward and get better at the next one...don't dwell on one (competition detail). It's one (competition detail). You could have had a crappy week leading up. It could have been a crappy morning. Just move forward and focus on the next one...I just felt like I was doing it more for the team rather than myself. First go, it was I had to be the perfect person, couldn't stay out late, couldn't have bad food. I had to follow a strict schedule, but, now, the second time, I was like, 'I'll do what I want,' but still be professional about it and be an athlete, but it wasn't as strict, I found.

Interestingly, Hillary's reconnection with enjoyment in her sport coincided with increased self-compassion. Moreover, it seems that increased enjoyment and self-compassion led to an overall increase in Hillary's well-being. Like Hillary, Tanis described the process of “falling back in love” with her sport. Tanis explained:

I used varsity the first time as a transition [out of professional sports], and then, I feel like I used varsity the second time as kind of to like maybe – this sounds cheesy – like fall back in love with (sport name).

Tanis explained that she was in the process of developing a “new relationship” with her sport, which was described as a less “prescriptive” and more “exploratory” relationship with fewer “expectations.” Tanis explained

Now, we'll [her and her husband] go for a (sporting detail), and we'll (sporting detail) while we're exploring. As long as we're enjoying it, we keep going, whereas before I was more prescriptive, and now, I'm definitely more just free for all. Some weeks I'll do less, some I'll do more. It's all over the map, and it doesn't bug me anymore.

Like Hillary, Tanis described how her changing relationship with sport involved increased self-compassion and reduced performance expectations, which she connected to increased enjoyment

and renewed motivation. Tanis reflected on her growth experience: “I think maybe this is just a transition out of being an elite athlete long-term.”

#### ***4.5.2 Expanding Identity***

Identity expansion was a salient component of the participants’ growth. Multiple participants described a process of self-exploration and self-discovery that occurred during their athletic transition experiences. Some participants had an appreciation for how their experiences helped them expand their identity. Alexis explained:

As hard and as brutal as it is was, I became to be like ‘Alexis,’ not like ‘Alexis, the (sport) player, so that is an adjustment, but it felt good kind of just finding yourself outside of sport...and just be a person, who just wasn’t an athlete... I started to just channel myself and get different experiences...my world opened up when I didn’t just have (sport name). I learned so much more happened outside of sport...your world can be so small as an athlete, so you don’t really have your identity outside of that. And, you’re known in your community as this athlete, and then, it’s like you just start to open that up and it just kind of empowers you to be like, ‘Oh, there’s just so much more out there,’ and more that I can do and it feels good to travel and have those experiences and be uplifted by so many different things.

Alexis emphasized how travel and employment helped her to expand her identity. It was evident across the cases that participants benefited from expanding their identity and being recognized socially as “more” than “just” an athlete. Ciara described a significant moment for her was when she felt she could identify as a “successful” student and a contributing member of her academic community. Ciara explained:

I did feel a certain level of satisfaction and pride in the first purely academic scholarship I received after quitting...the first purely academic scholarship I got after leaving the team, I was like - wow, there’s my moment of pride in myself and being like, ‘yes, you don’t play anymore, but you are still succeeding. You are still - as hokey as it sounds - contributing to this school or whatever it is,’ so I think that was pretty huge

The participants' experiences of identity expansion involved salient elements of *Identity Loss* and *Identity Reappraisal*.

**Identity Loss.** Identity loss was experienced across cases. Both Hillary and Skyler described identity loss as one of the hardest parts of their athletic transition experiences. Skyler explained that she felt like she no longer had “something to represent” after she ended university athletic competition, which Skyler explained caused her distress. Similarly, Hillary felt frustration because she felt socially recognized for just her athletic role, which seemed to result in identity distress when she felt she could no longer identify as a university athlete. Hillary explained:

Constantly people are like, ‘are you still doing (sport name), are you still doing (sport name), are you still competing?’ And yes I am, but then they ask if it is with the (university team name) and I have to say no, I finished school blah blah blah, and (pause and sigh) it is just tougher because people know me as the (university team name) athlete and not as the student and not as (name of profession) and not as myself. It is you are the (team name) athlete...and now that I am not that, then who am I? Like my big identity is gone, *that* (emphasis in voice) is how I feel...and that is how I thought other people thought of me as well. That, ‘oh, she is done, so what is she going to do now?’ or ‘she is not going to compete anymore, she is not going to (doing sport)’ ‘Her athletic career is over.’ That is how I felt.

Two participants described benefiting from work they did with formal supports (e.g., counsellors, sports psychologists) during university competition that had prepared them for the possibility of experiencing identity loss after they ended university sport. Skyler explained that her work with a sports psychologist helped her “gain a different outlook on myself and realize there is more to me than just sport.” Skyler explained that her identity was “pretty tunnel vision like I had like three things that I felt could identify myself, and just realizing that’s probably not all there is to me.” Francis noted how her sports psychologist helped her prepare for her athletic transition by becoming aware of her athletic identity and expanding her identity to include more than her athletic role. Francis explained:

I remember talking to (sports psychologist name) one time, and he’s like, ‘The toughest part afterwards [after ending participation] is just identifying as – not identifying as a (sport name).’ And I remember, I still remember there was a long period of time where I would be like – that’s how I would identify, as a (sport name). And once I was able to let that go, that I wasn’t a (sport name) anymore, I was just somebody who – I was a student

who used to do athletics, or I was a student who liked to do rock climbing and stuff now, rather than, I'm a (team name) athlete who (sport name). I found that's kind of when I really noticed that I was able to, I don't know, I could look at results from competitions again and not feel lost like I was missing out anymore.

**Identity Reappraisal.** Identity expansion included aspects of identity reappraisal. Francis described a process of reconsidering what it meant to her to 'be a student-athlete.' Francis came to understand that, for her, what it means to be a student-athlete is to be a constructive community member and role model and to "contribute back to the community" and "to the younger generation." Francis explained that if she reflects on "just" her athletic experience, she does not consider herself an alumnus to her athletic team, describing that she did not have the "flashy results" and was "frequently injured." However, when she reflects on what it means to her to "embody" the "greater contributions" of being a student-athlete, then she considers herself an alumnus. When Francis reflected on this, she appeared proud. Identity growth was not just about expanding identity outside of the athletic role; for some participants, identity growth involved a revision of what it meant to them to be a student-athlete and athletic alumnus.

#### **4.6 Supporting the Journey**

Part of the research purpose was to explore participants' experiences of support during their athletic transition experiences. During the interviews, participants were asked to share details of their support experiences. Four of the seven participants reported they had utilized professional supports during their athletic transition experiences. Professional supports included two sports psychologists, a university counsellor, and two private practice counsellors, one of which was specified as a social worker. Two of these four participants utilized a private counsellor before accessing a sports psychologist, and another used a sports psychologist before accessing counselling from private practice. Both sports psychologists and the university counsellor were accessed through the participants' university or university team.

No participants accessed formal supports after ending athletic competition; however, three participants noted that they "wish" they would have accessed or had access to formal supports after their university competition ended. One participant described losing access to her professional support when her university competition ended. Two other participants described feeling unsure of whom they could reach out to after their university competition ended.

The four participants who utilized formal support also utilized informal support through family, a roommate, teammates, and partners. The remaining three participants utilized informal supports but did not utilize formal supports. Two of the three utilized family and teammate support, and the third utilized a female assistant coach. The themes, *Fostering Belonging*, *Feeling Understood*, and *Mental Health Literacy*, describe the participants' reflections on their experiences of both formal and informal support during their athletic transitions.

#### **4.6.1 Fostering Belonging**

Multiple participants explained that they felt disconnected from their athletic community after ending university competition. Alexis explained, “for the longest time, I was uncomfortable and anxious and did not feel like I could call myself an alumni or be a part of the (sport name) scene around (team name) athletics.” A lost sense of belonging with university athletic communities (e.g., former teammates, other university athletes, athletic alumnus, coaches) was described across multiple cases. Participants described using support to help them reconnect with a sense of belonging with their athletic communities. For some participants, *Social Support* from former teammates and coaches helped foster a sense of belonging with these participants’ athletic communities (e.g., former teammates, other university athletes, athletic alumnus, coaches) after they ended university competition. However, for other participants, lacking social support from former teammates and coaches resulted in experiences of loneliness and *Isolation*.

**Social Support.** Feeling supported by former teammates and coaches after ending university competition was noted to be helpful to some part participants' athletic transition experiences. Both Skyler and Morgan emphasized the importance of a particular former teammate who assisted them during their decision-making and assisted them after ending their university competition. Hillary and Tanis emphasized the importance of their ongoing friendships with their former teammates after ending university competition. Alexis explained that feeling supported and included by her former teammates and coaches after ending university competition was essential to her reconnecting with a sense of belonging within her athletic community (e.g., former teammates, other university athletes, athletic alumnus, coaches).

Moreover, Alexis emphasized that it was very important to her that her teammates had discussed and acknowledged the significance of her exit from university competition, and how important it was that her exit from university sport “wasn’t just ignored.” Alexis explained:

I think it was just that we weren't ignoring [that she had ended university competition] - it wasn't something that wasn't talked about. I still needed to just kind of talk about where it [athletic transition] was at and have that open conversation about [it], and it was always a joke 'cause humour is a great way to kind of deal with some real emotions, sometimes, so especially with my teammates or whatever, it's like, 'Yeah, that would have happened had I not quit or had I not been like squashed out,' kind of thing. Because it was still real and when those situations come up, especially at the beginning, there, it's kind of like, 'Well (nickname), you can't come out yet because you're actually not allowed at this party,' or whatever. Certain little things just to kind of make it - what I needed was to not pretend like nothing had changed.

Alexis noted that her former teammates would continue to ask her to join university sporting events but gave her space to say "no." Alexis explained:

It was nice to have that option to still say no, but I was still included. I was still part of that scene and, I wasn't just totally ignored and forgotten about, even by the coaches and even by the program. They were still like, 'Oh, I'd love to have you come out,' and it's like yeah, not ready for that.

**Isolation.** Multiple participants described feelings of isolation and social disconnect after ending their university competition. Two participants described feeling "unwelcomed" and "left out" by their former teammates, coaches, and athletic programs after they ended university sport before exhausting eligibility. Francis described feeling isolated after ending her university competition. She explained that her former teammates stopped speaking with her after she ended her competition and noted that she had no further interaction or relationship with her former teammates. Francis reflected on how this experience of isolation and lacking social support was different for her than for her boyfriend, who competed in the same sport:

I find the guys have a fairly different dynamic than the girls. The guys, it doesn't matter if you've been retired from the sport for like five, ten years, they would still get together and that kind of stuff. The girls didn't have that same team aspect. In the sense, for the girls, once you kind of left the sport, that was pretty well it. You didn't get invited to things with them after the fact; you didn't really hear from them after the fact. Versus the guys were always keeping in touch and still getting together and checking in on each other, and all



that. But the girls didn't quite have that same aspect...I didn't have the women's team behind me so much when I left. It was more cold turkey for me, I think.

Ciara explained how her relationships "slowly died off" after she ended her competition. Her former teammates stopped speaking about her sport with her. Ciara explained:

I think some of my relationships with teammates, at the time, were a little strained afterwards. We would still get together, and we would still go to social events together, but after I quit, none of them mentioned it. We just stopped talking about the team. We stopped talking about games. We just stopped -we did not talk about (sport name), and that was both harder and easier. On one hand, it allowed me to distance myself from the team the way that I needed to, at that time, but it was also harder because then we kind of realized we had almost nothing else in common other than we used to spend three hours every evening together...It was kind of like when people just stop talking about (sport name) and (sport name) had been such a huge part of who I was, at the time, and you're in those awkward situations where you're like sitting around like what else do we talk about other than (sport name)? That was really uncomfortable.

#### **4.6.2 Feeling Understood**

Regardless of who was supporting the participants' (e.g., formal or informal supports), the participants reflected on the importance of feeling understood as athletes and people when accessing support. The participants described a clear preference for supports, formal or informal, who "understand" athletic culture and athletic environments. Ciara described very much valuing the unconditional and non-directive support her family provided her. Still, she explained feeling that someone who "understood athletics" and athletic transitions may have supported her in a way she felt her family could not:

I valued their [her family] informal support, in that way, more or just as much as what I got out of those conversations with the Social Worker, as well. That was very important. I will say, though, I feel like it would have been more helpful, and I think I probably would have come to the understanding that it was right for me to quit the team sooner had I spoken with someone who was outside of that particular team, not a teammate, but that also played and understood the sport because that was one thing that my mom and my sister didn't really have in terms of context of what I was talking about and, while I really appreciated

their reassurances and their understanding and their patience, just not sort of having that background understanding of the sport of what it's like to play, meant that I somewhat didn't—I always took what they said...I took that with a bit of a grain of salt because I was just like, 'Well, I don't know. What do you know?'

A desire for this sense of “understanding” was shared across cases. Alexis explained, “I wouldn't get into the whole back story with everyone else, only my close circle and all my teammates who I was close with understood, and they got it.” Alexis described a notion of ‘getting it,’ she described trusting and opening up to those she felt ‘got it.’ Multiple participants described feeling secure connections with those they believed understood the unique challenges associated with sports culture and understood the complexities of navigating the decision to end university competition.

Skyler first worked with a counsellor and then worked with a sports psychologist; she explained why she believed she connected more with the sports psychologist:

I felt like the counsellor was very nice. She just didn't (silence and pause). It was just nice having someone who understood the mindset of an athlete. Because I feel like it is a little bit different. I don't know, the sports psych was just very good at helping me reframe my mindset, which I'm sure the counsellor could have done too, but she [sports psychologist] was just really good at making it relate to sport and just like understanding some of the pressure that athletes go under and sometimes it's just not as easy as it seems I guess.

**Validating Experience.** Multiple participants described a fear of having their athletic or athletic transition struggles not-taken-seriously by helping professionals or a fear that their experiences would be diminished, or in one case, “not believed.” Across cases, there was a shared fear that professional supports might not recognize the significance of contextual factors on athlete well-being, and might overemphasize the level of control, or perceived level of control, that athletes have within their athletic environments. Morgan explained:

I think there's some risk of counsellors who don't understand athletics and don't understand the commitment that those people have made to just be like, 'Why don't you just tell your coach you don't like that?' [Laughs] He's [coach] not going to let me on the bus if I do that, it's going to get really bad then.

While many participants described familiarity with sports culture and an understanding of decision-making in athletic transitions as important to helpful and positive support experiences,

Morgan described a different experience. Morgan described feeling “validated” and “believed” by her university counsellor, who did not have an athletic background. Morgan explained:

So, I met with a counsellor at the university, and the one I met with was very amazing. I know that therapy styles depend on the person and depend on the counsellor. I lucked out in that I really liked the first one I got, and her and I were able to vibe right off the beginning, so I appreciated that....it was good that even though she [her counsellor] didn't have much of a sports background she took what I was saying about my situation and she took it at face value and wasn't, I guess, dismissive of how much sports could affect what was going on in my life.

Morgan emphasized how important it was to her that her counsellor “believed her” and “validated” her experiences. Morgan explained that her counsellor was helpful as she did not jump to pathologize Morgan's experience but rather validate and seek to understand Morgan's experience better:

She [counsellor] was able to - she wasn't intent on putting labels on anything, and I think she was able to recognize that this is just a situation that I was in, it wasn't like I was going down [pause], it wasn't a clinical depression, it wasn't a chemical imbalance, it was just somebody being stuck in a very objectively hopeless situation because at that point I didn't know what my options were. She [counsellor] did a good job of not being like, ‘Why don't you just, I don't know, quit your sport?’ She recognized that I was actively confined in this position, and she worked with me in that, versus I think there's some risk of counsellors who don't understand athletics and don't understand the commitment that those people have made to just be like, ‘Why don't you just tell your coach you don't like that?’ [Laughs] He's not going to let me on the bus if I do that. It's going to get really bad then. So, it was good that even though she didn't have much of a sports background, she took what I was saying about my situation and she took it at face value and wasn't, I guess, dismissive of how much sports could affect what was going on in my life.

Morgan explained how her counsellor “had gone, and she had looked up some of the terms that I had used in the session before, (sport name) terms, which was really funny to me [laughs] – and very endearing.” Morgan explained how her counsellor's attempts to understand Morgan's experience and her “validation skills” helped Morgan.

**Confidentiality and Trust.** While an understanding of sporting environments, or an attempt to better understand sporting environments, was described as essential to support during athletic transitions, Ciara described a noteworthy concern she had when working with a support provider closely connected to her sporting environment. When working with a Sports Psychologist who was hired by her coach, Ciara explained that she did not have a “high level of trust” in her Sports Psychologists’ ability to maintain confidentiality. She described feeling like her Sports Psychologist was “reporting back to my coach about topics discussed in-session,” Ciara explained:

I chatted with my coach about what was going on with my (injury detail) and with my health, and she recommended that I speak to a Sports Psychologist at the university and actually, she set that up for the whole team to have access to the Sports Psychologist. That was, I think, a really great support to have, but one of the challenges with it was that [the] Sports Psychologist reported directly to our coach, and we didn’t, or I didn’t, at least, have a very high level of confidence in (his/her) confidentiality, respect for confidentiality on things that we shared, so often if I would go the Sports Psychologist and talk about being worried about challenges with my (injury detail) and the return to play program and our training not lining up, they would report that back to the coach and at the next practice, I would experience a lot of questions and what I perceived as sometimes anger and challenging from the coach to me about did I have a letter from my surgeon? Could I have her [surgeon] call my coach? Could I blah, blah blah? I kind of stopped feeling comfortable talking to the Sports Psychologist and stopped feeling like that was a safe place to share my thoughts about what I was struggling with while I was playing, what could help me sort of keep my head in the game kind of thing while being on the team. I reached out, instead, to a Social Worker in the city that was separate from the team, separate from the university, that could be a separate third party for me to chat with.

Ciara described feeling unsafe working with someone so closely connected to and hired by her coach.

Tanis, however, described a different experience. She expressed feelings of openness and trust experienced with her former assistant coach and described feeling reassured by mutual understandings between her and her assistant coach. Tanis explained:

She [her assistant coach] went through two Olympics, and just hearing what she went through and her perspective on things, I was like, ‘Oh, okay’ [sigh of relief], like hearing perspectives makes you realize if you feel overwhelmed or whatever, everyone’s been through a variation and just hearing how they dealt with it, or their perspective on your situation is kind of comforting.

While Tanis had access to formal supports in her professional and university athletic experiences, she preferred the informal support that she got through her female assistant coach. In her interview, Tanis emphasized the importance of her trusting relationship with her assistant coach and highlighted the importance of female athlete role models supporting and mentoring younger generations. Her experiences stress a need for supports to normalize feelings of overwhelm and difficulties experienced in athletic transitions and illustrate a possible need for female athlete role models to support athletes during competition and athletic transitions.

#### **4.6.3 Mental Health Literacy**

Multiple participants noted a need to increase awareness of supports available to student-athletes’ and a need to normalize the use of professional supports during athletic transitions.

Francis described:

Right now, in (professional college), there’s always talk about going to see counsellors, psychologists, anyone to get mental health support as you need it. Or when transitioning between different fields, jobs, injuries, any of that kind of stuff. When I was in my undergrad, or even as an athlete, nobody talked about accessing those external supports, especially once you’re done being an athlete.

**Misperceptions.** Misperceptions about who can access professional supports and why a student-athlete would access supports were captured across the transcripts. Misperceptions and lacking awareness were described as salient barriers that participants needed to work through when accessing professional support. Ciara explained:

I was going in [to access support from a social worker] as a student-athlete who visibly looked very healthy. I don’t have chronic mental health conditions or anything like that, that I was going to chat with her about, so coming in and saying, ‘I’m having some struggles emotionally or experiencing some anxiety around whether I should be playing and I’m starting to feel upset by that,’ I kind of felt also I don’t know, should I be here?

Should I be talking to (social workers name)? Am I wasting her time? You know? You have those questions about whether you're really, I guess, supposed to be accessing outside help or support

Ciara's experiences emphasized an uncertainty of what signifies an 'acceptable' reason to access outside professional support, as she struggled to feel her experience justified such support. This sentiment was echoed across cases. Two other participants described the underlying belief that their struggles had to be "bad enough" or "clinical" to require outside professional support (e.g., counsellor). These misperceptions were found to be a salient barrier to support utilization.

**Stigma.** Morgan provided an alarming example of the stigma associated with mental health and support seeking, highlighting the urgent need to normalize mental health and normalize support-seeking within sporting environments. Morgan explained how her coach bullied her for accessing counselling services; one example she provided was when her coach made a joke in front of her team about her being on a "suicide watch" because she was accessing counselling support.

The stigma associated with "quitting" presented as a significant obstacle that prevented participants from openly disclosing their struggles. Multiple participants described feeling unable to discuss difficult emotions related to "quitting" with others, particularly other teammates or alumni who had "completed five-years" or "finished their eligibility." Ciara reflected on how her negative internal perceptions around 'quitting,' at that time, were likely a barrier to seeking social support from previous athletes:

Looking back at it, now, I probably could have reached out to a lot of our own team's alumni like the previous fifth years...but I think some of why I didn't was because when you are looking at fifth years who have successfully completed their years of playing or all of their eligibility, as someone who's questioning whether I should continue playing or not, you almost feel like you don't want to reach out to them 'cause it makes it feel like a failure if you quit if you don't complete your eligibility and they did... I probably wouldn't have gotten the same (pause), I wouldn't have connected in the same way as if I was speaking with an athlete who also hadn't completed their eligibility. Looking back on it now, I think I probably wouldn't have felt so open to share about my thoughts around quitting and my hesitations around continuing in the program, just knowing that they had completed it [five years of eligibility].

Participants described a stigma associated with ending university competition for reasons other than physical injury or academic necessity. Morgan felt relief after experiencing a severe injury that she experienced the summer after completing her university competition. Morgan described this debilitating injury as “the most helpful thing in getting out,” she explained that “finding out that I needed surgery actually was probably the best transition that I could’ve had. I couldn’t play a fifth year; there was nothing I could’ve done.” Alexis’s transcript further captured such stigma when she described needing a form of social justification to explain to others “why” she ended her participation in her sport before completing eligibility. Alexis indicated that she used “school” as an “easy excuse” to explain why she ended university competition. Skyler explained that getting into a professional program “gave me a reason not to have to feel bad about leaving (sport name) behind, because I think I would have felt a lot worse about it had I still been in the same university.” The stigma associated with ending participation before completing eligibility and stigma associated with ending for reasons other than physical injury or academic necessity was salient across multiple cases. Participants’ transcripts reveal that, perhaps, self-stigma regarding “quitting” might have presented as a barrier to their support-seeking.

#### **4.7 Summary**

This chapter presented findings from an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of seven female student-athletes athletic transition and support experiences. Many powerful themes emerged from the individual case analysis of the transcripts from the individual interviews. During cross-case analysis, individual themes that emerged from the individual case analysis were merged and mapping together into a final thematic structure. The final thematic analysis included an overarching theme, *An Ongoing Transition*. Three superordinate themes, *Navigating a Decision*, *Growing the Self*, *Supporting the Journey*, and six subthemes.

The overarching theme, *An Ongoing Transition*, emerged from the participants’ shared belief that their experiences were transitional and ongoing. The first superordinate theme, *Navigating a Decision*, captured the significance of decision-making during the participants’ athletic transition experiences. Multiple participants expressed a sense of *Jeopardized Well-Being* during their university athletic competition, which was captured as relevant to the decision-making process. *Quitting the Dream* captured the difficulty multiple participants

experienced when deciding to end competition before exhausting eligibility. The second superordinate theme, *Growing the Self*, captured the participants' descriptions of significant loss and growth experienced during their athletic transitions. *Filling the Void* captured self-growth experienced during the participants' athletic transitions. *Expanding Identity* captured the participants' experiences of identity growth and reconstruction.

The third superordinate theme, *Supporting the Journey*, captured the participants' reflections on how they experienced support across their athletic transitions. *Fostering Belonging* captured the role that teammates and coaches played in the participants' feelings of belonging after ending university competition. *Feeling Understood* captured the importance of feeling understood and validated by helping professionals during athletic transitions. The subtheme *Mental Health Literacy* captured misperceptions associated with support utilization and stigma related to mental health and ending university competition with remaining eligibility.



## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was two-fold. First, the study sought to explore female student-athletes' athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility in the U Sport League. Second, the research sought to explore female student-athletes' experiences of formal (e.g., counsellor, sports psychologist) or informal (e.g., social, family, coaching) support during athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility in the U Sport league. This study was designed with the belief that this specific population may have valuable experiential knowledge of athletic transitions and support needs during athletic transitions, which could benefit helping practitioners.

Athletes often experience difficulties after ending university athletic competition, usually with more pronounced difficulty for those who end participation involuntarily (e.g., unpredictable exit) or semi-voluntarily (e.g., semi-predictable exit) (Park et al., 2013; Schinke et al., 2019). Research suggests that student-athletes are underutilizing available supports despite evident challenges connected to athletic transitions (Breslin et al., 2017). One study exploring athletes' experiences of support during athletic transitions was found in the initial literature search. This study explored professional athletes' social support experiences during athletic transitions (Brown et al., 2018). No studies were found which explored student-athletes' experiences of formal (e.g., counselling, sports psychologist) or informal (e.g., social, family, coaching) support during athletic transitions. No studies that explored such experiences with student-athletes who ended university competition with remaining eligibility were found. No studies exploring gender-specific experiences with this population were found.

The data analysis findings revealed an overarching theme: *An Ongoing Transition*. Three subordinate themes: *Navigating a Decision*, *Growing the Self*, *Supporting the Journey*. Six subthemes were captured, which describe the female student-athletes athletic transition and support experiences further. The study findings are discussed in the context of the current literature in the following chapter. There is an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the study following the discussion of findings. Considerations for future research and implications for practice are then presented, followed by a researcher's reflection.

## **5.1 Integrating Findings with the Literature**

### ***5.1.1 An Ongoing Transition***

The phenomenon of ending participation in competitive sport has been traditionally presented within the literature as an athletic retirement (Taylor and Ogilvie, 1994). Within more recent research, however, there has been a conceptual shift. Researchers have started to conceptualize the experience of ending participation in competitive sport as a transitional process – as an athletic transition (Wylleman et al., 2004). The findings from the current study support this conceptual shift and complement the work of other researchers who have suggested the experience of ending participation in competitive sport may be more accurately viewed as an ongoing process rather than a static and singular event. The current study participants preferred to describe their experiences as a transition rather than a retirement and portrayed their experiences as a dynamic and ongoing process, which resulted in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg, 1981).

In reflecting on their athletic transition and support experiences, participants in the current study described seemingly distinct periods within their athletic transitions, which occurred during and after university competition. Furthermore, the participants described their experiences as impacting their holistic selves, not just their athletic selves. These findings complement Wylleman and colleagues (2004) holistic lifespan perspective on transitions faced by athletes, which positions that athletes' transitional experiences impact athletes on an individual, psychosocial, academic, and vocational level. Participants described how their athletic transition experiences impacted them across multiple life domains and described how these effects occurred while playing university sport and afterwards – suggesting that their transitional experiences were ongoing. The overarching theme, *An Ongoing Transition*, was further depicted through three major themes: *Navigating a Decision*, *Growing the Self*, and *Supporting the Journey*.

### ***5.1.2 Navigating a Decision***

*Navigating a Decision* presented as a meaningful and pertinent portion of the participants' athletic transition and support experiences. A distinct decision-making period was described within the participants' overall athletic transition experiences. Participants described needing to

negotiate the decision to continue or discontinue participation in university sport and, for some participants, deciding to return to university sport a second time. Such findings support current literature (Eggleston et al., 2019; Park et al., 2012) in suggesting that the process of decision-making is a significant and under-explored component of athletic transition experiences.

Interestingly, two participants described multiple periods of decision-making. First, navigating a decision to end university sport participation. Second, deciding to revisit university competition. Third, deciding a second time to end participation in university sport. This finding suggests that the process of decision-making in athletic transitions may not be limited to a one-time experience and may not be limited to the experience of ending university sport but also returning to university competition.

The participants' decision-making process to leave university sport took from one-week to two-years within the current study. Most participants described this period as an emotionally turbulent time. Multiple participants sought formal (e.g., counsellor, sports psychologist) or informal (social support, family, coaching) support during this period. All four participants who sought formal support did so during the decision-making process. This finding adds to current literature (Eggleston et al., 2019; Park et al., 2012) in finding that not only is the decision-making period a significant component of athletic transitions, but it is also a period where student-athletes may require support.

Consistent with other literature (Eggleston et al., 2019; Park et al., 2012) the participants in this current study described feelings of fear and uncertainty about the future while contemplating ending participation in sport and expressed grief, loss, and identity changes experienced during this decisional period. The current study participants utilized social support (e.g., friends, family) to help navigate their decision-making experiences and help adjust to life after sport, which is consistent with other findings (Brown et al., 2018; Eggleston et al., 2019). In addition to social support, formal supports were utilized during the participants' decision-making period, including sports psychologists, social workers, counsellors, academic advisors. Student-athletes experiences of formal support during decision-making in athletic transitions appear to be a seemingly unexplored area.

Many participants' decisions to end university sport were influenced by *Jeopardized Well-Being*, including jeopardized physical and mental health. Participants described various physical injuries and mental health concerns experienced during this time, including an eating

disorder, anxiety, depression, an undisclosed mental health concern, and burn-out. Participants described feelings of overwhelm and described experiencing isolation, hopelessness, anger, fear, shame, and disappointment.

Participants' descriptions of their exits from sport were varied and unique. While all of the participants decided to end participation in university sport, multiple participants made their decision by necessity and not preferred choice. Reasons such as jeopardized physical and psychological well-being and unsafe sporting environment (e.g., bullying, harassment, abuse, neglect) were provided as reasons participants experienced a need to end participation in university sport. Thus, the distinction between a voluntary and involuntary athletic transition was unclear, consistent with other research findings (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Four participants described that the physical and psychological costs of staying in their sport or sporting environment outweighed the benefits and described a need to prioritize their well-being. All seven of the participants described experiencing some degree of adjustment difficulty during their athletic transition experiences. This finding suggests that student-athletes who decide to end university sport participation are not exempt from adjustment difficulties, which further supports other literature (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000).

Multiple participants described feeling pressured to play through physical and psychological distress and described negative effects on their athletic performance. Consistent with other research (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Yannick; 2003) loss of autonomy, control, and perceptions of lacking success negatively impacted participants' well-being during university competition. Feelings of hopelessness and emotional and motivational depletion were salient and often connected to feelings of a forced disengagement (e.g., disengaging with the sport as a protective response) and reductions in identification with the athletic role. Multiple participants reported needing support, informal or formal, to help them feel able to end participation in sport. Consistent with other research (Eggleston et al., 2019) participants described experiencing loss and grief during and after their decision-making experiences.

The current study participants referred to their exits from university sport with remaining eligibility as 'quitting' or 'finishing.' Many participants explained that they understood 'quitting' to be synonymous with failing. Feelings of disappointment, shame, and sadness were connected with 'quitting.' 'Finishing' was presented as synonymous with success and was paired with feelings of satisfaction and contentment with the athletic outcome. More significant adjustment

difficulties and distress were described by the participants who referred to their exit from university sport as quitting and connected quitting as synonymous to failing than those who perceived that they had finished their university athletic experience. This finding supports current literature (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Cosh et al., 2013; Crocket, 2014) in suggesting common terminology used within traditional athletic culture and research, such as ‘dropout,’ ‘withdrawal,’ and ‘attrition’ may be problematic, as they may be seen as euphemisms for failure. The current findings support Crocket (2014) in suggesting that such labels may significantly affect athletes’ well-being.

Participants who understood their exits from university sport as ‘quitting’ described: identity loss and identity confusion, distress, anxiety, shame, anger, resentment, sadness, fear, and disappointment. ‘Quitting’ due to injury or academic need was described by participants as more acceptable than ‘quitting’ for other reasons (e.g., mental health, distress, unsafe sporting environment). Multiple participants described needing to use ‘excuses,’ specified as academic demands or family need, to explain or justify to others ‘why’ they ended university sport with remaining eligibility. Participants explained that ‘excuses’ helped them manage social distress associated with feeling like they had ‘quit.’ Literature has suggested that athletic injuries are one of the most difficult athletic transitions that athletes may be confronted with (Park et al., 2013; Wylleman et al., 2004). The current findings suggest that athletic transitions precipitated by unsupported mental health needs and unsafe sporting environments may be as challenging as those athletic transitions precipitated by physical injuries.

Participants who ended university sport for mental health reasons described self-stigma and self-blame for being unable to ‘succeed’ in sport and described negatively impacted self-efficacy, self-worth, and self-confidence. Participants who ended competition due to unsafe sporting environments, unequal opportunity, or lacking support were found to have increased: anger, resentment, perceptions of betrayal, social isolation, loss of belonging, and more often had temporarily or permanently ended participation in their sport or competitive sport. These participants described avoiding triggers that caused feelings of distress, including training facilities, specific hallways, media and social media, social events, teammates, and attending sporting events.

Interestingly, feelings of self-blame and self-disappointment were more salient with participants who had competed in individual sports. In contrast, feelings of anger and resentment

were more salient with participants in team sports. An exploration into differences across university teams and individual sports may be a worthy consideration for future research. Athletic literature has found athletes' experiences of 'drop-out' or 'disengagement' are frequently experienced alongside perceptions of negative coaching relationships (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Park et al., 2013) which supports the current findings.

### ***5.1.3 Growing the Self***

*Growing the Self* captured personal growth that occurred during participants' athletic transition and support experience. This finding supports other research in finding athletic transition experiences which are not solely characterized by adjustment difficulties, identity crisis, and distress; but also experiences that include personal growth (Kerr & Dasychn, 2000; Koukouris, 1994). Similar to other research findings, the participants' athletic transition experiences could not be accurately described through dualistic terms such as 'crisis' or 'relief' or 'loss' or 'growth' (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Like other research (Eggleston et al., 2019; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Menke & Mae-Lynn, 2019) the participants in the current study described experiencing significant loss after ending university sport. Despite different ways to express their loss, all seven participants communicated a sense that something was missing from their lives after university sport ended, something more than the sport itself. *Filling the Void* captured the participants' grieving process, adjusting to, accepting, and growing from their loss experiences.

Adjustment difficulties were salient in the current findings, consistent with other research exploring athletic transitions (Jewett et al., 2018; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Menke & Mae-Lynn, 2019). Adjustment difficulties included difficulties in managing day-to-day scheduling, relationship challenges, identity distress, and loss of motivation, enjoyment, purpose, meaning, and direction in life. The process of grieving and accepting loss that came with ending university sport was done mainly alone or with the emotional support of friends, teammates, and family, which supports other research findings (Brown et al., 2017; Eggleston et al., 2019; Menke & Mae-Lynn, 2019). Participants described grieving the loss of their sport and loss of their expected athletic experiences. Many participants expressed a process of accepting what their experiences were. This acceptance process was described to occur over an extended period, ranging from a year up to five-years. Participants were found to use coping strategies during this period of adjustment, such as avoidance, emotional venting, staying busy, relocating (e.g.

moving cities), withdrawal from sporting environments and sport participation, and finding new sources of achievement, pride, and purpose. Reconnecting with lost enjoyment or finding new forms of enjoyment, was a salient component of athletic transition experiences, consistent with other literature (Lally, 2007). Moreover, reconnecting with social belonging was a salient component of growth in athletic transition experiences.

*Expanding Identity* was a salient aspect of growth in the participants' athletic transition experiences. Athletic identity – which is the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Wiechman & Williams, 1997) – played a role in the current participants' athletic transition experiences. Like other research has found, participants in the present study reported distress, uncertainty, and disorientation connected to identity loss and identity confusion during athletic transitions (Kerr & Dacyshn, 2000; Lally, 2007). However, like other research (Lally, 2007), the current study participants also described flourishing and growth in the opportunity to re-visit or explore new dimensions of their identities.

All participants in the current study described identity expansion. Describing a process of renegotiating and expanding who they were outside of their athletic role. This process was found to occur at different periods. For three participants, identity expansion began before their university competition ended. All three of these participants described expanding identity through work with professional supports (e.g., counsellor, sports psychologist) who supported these participants in preparing for anticipatory identity loss before ending university competition. These participants described benefitting from professional supports who helped them to recognize their athletic identity, assist them in exploring other salient components of their identity, and provided them with tools to manage identity distress that could occur during athletic transitions. Participants who did not prepare for anticipatory identity loss with professional supports described identity expansion as occurring primarily after university competition ended and occurring with more pronounced identity distress. It seems those who prepared for anticipatory identity loss with formal supports experienced less pronounced identity distress during their athletic transition. This finding supports Lally (2007) in suggesting that anticipatory identity loss preparation can help reduce identity crisis during athletic transitions. However, it should be noted that while preparing for anticipatory identity loss did appear to reduce identity distress during athletic transitions, it did not appear to eliminate such distress. Regardless of the

amount of preparation, all participants described some identity distress during their athletic transitions. A unique form of identity distress captured in the current study resulted from participants not identifying as an alumnus because they identified as ‘quitters.’ The inability to identify as an athletic alumnus presented as significantly distressing to participants.

#### ***5.1.4 Supporting the Journey***

All seven participants utilized informal support (e.g., social, family, coaching) throughout their athletic transition experience (e.g., during the decision-making process and after university competition). Only four participants reported utilizing formal supports (e.g., counsellor, sports psychologist) and described using such support while playing university sport and during the decision-making process. No participants reported accessing formal supports after they had ended university competition.

Participants benefitted from support (e.g., formal or informal) that allowed them to share their experiences, examine their identity, values, sense of self, and explore future opportunities or goals. This finding is similar to other research findings (Brown et al., 2018; Carless & Douglas, 2008; Douglas & Carless, 2009). Participants in the current study reported using social support for emotional support and assistance in goal setting and exploring new forms of enjoyment after ending competitive sport. This finding supports other research findings (Brown et al., 2018; Eggleston et al., 2019). During decision-making, formal supports were used to support participants in navigating depression, burn-out, overwhelm, disengagement from sport, bullying, harassment, abuse, and neglect.

*Fostering Belonging* was found to be a specific support need during the participants' athletic transitions. Less distress was reported in cases where participants felt included, invited, and supported by teammates and coaches after they had ended university sport. Conversely, increased distress, grief, and isolation were reported in situations where participants felt their teammates or coaches had stopped communicating with them after ending university competition. Some participants described feeling they had received little to no social support from their sporting communities (e.g., coaches, teammates) after they ‘quit.’ This finding is similar to other literature (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Feelings of anger, betrayal, and disappointment were connected to perceptions of lacking social support, which caused further



distress during athletic transitions. This finding is similar to other research (Brown & Potrac, 2009).

Similar to Watson (2005) the participants described a unanimous need to *Feel Understood* by their support providers, describing a preference for formal or informal support that understood athletic culture and context. Like Watson (2005), the current study participants reported enhanced helping relationships with those support providers (e.g., counsellors) who had familiarity with the athletic culture. The present study also found that participants preferred support that understood the athletic culture and understood athletic transitions. The current study found participants benefited from supports that fostered trust, had shared understandings, and valued the participants as people, not just athletes, which supports other literature (Brown et al., 2018). The current findings expand upon the current literature (Brown et al., 2018) by suggesting that the need to feel cared for and understood as people, not just athletes is relevant to formal support as well.

A need for increased *Mental Health Literacy* was captured in the findings. *Misperceptions* and *Stigma* were captured across cases. Similar to Watson (2005) the current study found that a barrier to utilizing professional supports was a fear that service providers may not understand the concerns, needs, and pressures unique to student-athletes (Watson, 2005). Participants feared that helping professionals might overestimate the level of autonomy and control a student-athlete has in their athletic environments. Many participants emphasized that universities and athletic communities need to increase student-athletes' awareness of available mental health supports, improve mental health support availability, and increase mental health literacy. Consistent with previous literature (Watson & Kissinger, 2007) participants in the current study described the misperception that counselling services are only suitable and available to those experiencing clinical mental illness or severe emotional disturbances. Such limited mental health literacy and lack of awareness of mental health resources served as a salient barrier to support seeking, supporting previous research (Watson, 2005). Feelings of uncertainty about the legitimacy of their support-seeking during athletic transitions were evident in the current findings. Thus, the findings emphasized a need to normalize support-seeking during athletic transitions.

Moreover, some participants lost access to support during athletic transitions. Therefore, the findings emphasized a need for athletic departments to ensure that supports are available to

student-athletes during all stages of athletic transitions. Which, includes after student-athletes have ended university competition. Like other literature (Menke & Mae-Lynn, 2019) the findings emphasized a need to normalize difficulties during athletic transitions.

Mental health stigma was prevalent in the current study. Moreover, a stigma associated with ending university competition with remaining eligibility was evident in the findings. The findings uncovered a shared belief that there are ‘socially acceptable’ and ‘socially unacceptable’ reasons to end university sport participation before exhausting eligibility. Acceptable reasons to end involvement in university sport were debilitating injury, academic need, or family illness. This finding supports Cosh et al. (2013) in suggesting athletic culture may socialize athletes into feeling there is a ‘right time,’ ‘right reason,’ or ‘appropriate age’ to end competitive sport. Participants in the current study described feeling embarrassed or ashamed of quitting for reasons other than injury or academic need, which presented another barrier to support-seeking.

## **5.2 Expanding Athletic Transition Research**

Generally, IPA research does not attempt to apply a theoretical perspective to participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). However, the participants' depictions of their experiences ending university athletic competition resembled a transition, “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p.111). The participants described a unanimous preference to describe their experiences as an athletic transition. A significant amount of literature has conceptualized the phenomenon of ending competitive sport through the lens of transition theory and have categorized athletic transitions using athletic transition taxonomy.

Traditional athletic transition research has categorized athletic transitions as normative athletic transitions, which are understood as athletic transitions that are predictable and occur along a predictable timeline (e.g., ageing out, completing eligibility). Or nonnormative athletic transitions, which are understood as athletic transitions which are unpredictable and occur along an unanticipated timeline (e.g., career-ending injury, deselection) (Debois et al., 2012; Wylleman et al., 2004). As more athletic transition experiences are being explored, it is becoming evident that conceptualizing athletic transitions as normative or non-normative does not adequately capture the diversity of athletic transitions (Stambulova, 2016). Thus, researchers have posited a third category within this taxonomy – quasi-normative athletic transitions, which are understood

as athletic transitions that are predictable for a particular category of athletes. The conceptualization of quasi-normative athletic transitions is relatively unexplored and is being recognized as a main area of advancement in athletic transition literature (Stambulova, 2016; Stambulova et al., 2020).

The current study found that some student-athletes ended university sport participation due to unsafe sporting environments, bullying, harassment, abuse, and neglect. These findings raise the question, where does ending competition in elite sport due to unsafe sporting environments (e.g., bullying, harassment, abuse, neglect) fit within the current athletic transition taxonomy? Curiously, no research was found that discusses such transition experiences within the context of athletic transition taxonomy. It seems that the topic of athletic transitions resulting from athlete maltreatment appears to be seemingly unrepresented within current athletic transition literature. Moreover, ending elite sport due to mental health needs and jeopardized psychological well-being appears unrepresented within the current literature. Yet, ending competition due to athlete maltreatment, mental health, and a lack of access to supports were salient themes within the current study. Currently, ending elite sport due to physical injury would be classified as a nonnormative athletic transition, as they are unpredictable and cannot be planned for. Where, then, would psychological injury (e.g. bullying, harassment, abuse, neglect) be classified within the current taxonomy? It appears that previous athletic transition research has not explicitly explored mental health or unsafe sporting environments as a factor influencing athletic transitions.

In the original literature review, I found no studies that explored student-athletes experiences of athletic transitions that ended with remaining eligibility. Within athletic transition literature, there is a distinction between what is referred to as ‘disengagement’ and ‘drop-out’ from elite sport and ‘retirement’ or ‘transition’ from elite sport. It seems, currently, athletic transition literature has conceptualized ‘dropping out’ or ‘disengaging’ as a distinct phenomenon from an ‘athletic transition.’ Park and colleagues (2013) noted that “disengagement and drop-out processes are not as uncontrollable as forced sport career termination because athletes often have a choice to continue or stop their sports career.” (Park et al., 2013, p. 44). The current findings suggest that not all student-athletes who end university competition with remaining eligibility (e.g., ‘disengagement’ or ‘drop-out’) had the choice to continue or stop their sports careers. The findings suggest that some student-athletes end university sport participation (e.g., ‘disengage’ or

‘drop-out’) because it is the safest option, but not the ideal option. Hence, in some cases, ‘disengagement’ or ‘dropout’ may not be controllable, and the athlete may not have a fully autonomous choice to continue or stop their sports career. It seems that student-athletes experiences of unsafe, oppressive, or non-inclusive sporting environments are not explored within the current athletic transition literature. The current findings highlight that athlete maltreatment may be a factor in athletic transitions that occur with remaining eligibility, which is an area requiring further exploration.

### **5.3 Rigour in Qualitative Research**

There are limitations to this study that should be highlighted. Before discussing the limitations of the current study, it is appropriate to discuss how rigour is measured within qualitative psychological research. In the following section, I provide a review of the strengths and limitations of the current study, which I frame in the context of issues of rigour relevant to qualitative psychological research. First, I outline a set of commonly agreed-upon guidelines for assessing qualitative psychological research quality as set out by Yardley (2000, 2008). I discuss such guidelines in the context of IPA methodology, drawing on Smith and colleagues (2009). Next, I discuss the strengths of the current study. Lastly, I discuss the limitations of the current study.

Yardley (2000, 2008) notes that rigorous qualitative research demonstrates sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. Sensitivity to context can be understood as sensitivity to the social context in which the research has developed, sensitivity to the context within data gathering (e.g., interviewing), sensitivity to context in the data analysis (e.g., sensitivity to the context of the interpretations), and sensitivity to the context of the literature. Commitment can be understood as a commitment to the interview and analysis process, rigour is the quality and completeness data collection and analysis and the sample's appropriateness to the research question, transparency is how clearly the stages of the research process are described, coherence is how the researcher has communicated the argument (e.g., are the arguments put forward logical and well presented), and impact and importance are the research study's social validity (e.g., does the research hold social relevance).

### *5.3.1 Strengths of the Study*

There were several strengths in the current study. First, this study demonstrated impact and importance (e.g., social validity) and sensitivity to context. The study's rationale grew from the need for more research to explore student-athletes' athletic transition experiences using a contextually reflexive research methodology. Sensitivity to the context is one of the main philosophical underpinnings of IPA research. A core notion of IPA research is that human experience is “embedded and immersed” in context, and to understand an experience, one must reflect on the complexity of context (Smith et al., 2009, p.21). By using IPA to explore female student-athletes experiences of support during an athletic transition that occurred with remaining eligibility, I was able to capture the subjectivity and complexity of such experiences. The findings support that the specific context of experiences matter a great deal and should be considered when exploring individual experiences. As Stambulova and her colleagues (2020) acknowledge, the more we capture the complexity of athletic transition experiences, the more gaps in the literature become visible (Stambulova et al., 2020). I believe that by focusing on athletic transitions that occurred with remaining eligibility, the study highlighted many new areas needing future exploration.

The second strength of this current study was the study explored such a specific topic from female student-athletes' perspective. When designing this research study, I found most research that explored female athletes' athletic transitions had focused mainly on such experiences with dance, gymnastics, and swimming. I wondered how female athletes experience athletic transitions in other sports (e.g., hockey, wrestling, basketball, soccer, volleyball). The participants provided reflections on how being female might have impacted their athletic transition experiences in a wide range of sports. For example, one participant reflected on the notion that as a female, she might have increased self-criticism and fear about ‘quitting’ university sport and commented on “intersectionality.” Another participant perceived that her social-support experience as a female student-athlete differed from her perceptions of how her boyfriend experienced social-support as a male student-athlete. Another participant reflected on the importance of, and need for, female-athlete role-models in coaching or support roles. Another participant reflected on power dynamics between male coaches and female student-athletes. By exploring females' experiences, the study contributed to the relative shortage of female-specific athletic transition literature.

A third strength was the use of semi-structured interviews to explore participants' athletic transition and support experiences. Semi-structured IPA interviewing is interactional and requires active listening and empathic responding. Thus, IPA interviewing demonstrates significant sensitivity to context and requires a substantial commitment to being present and transparent within the interviewing process (Smith et al., 2009). Such reflexive interviewing enabled the participants to focus on important areas and describe their experiences on their terms (Larkin et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2009). The participants described aspects of their experiences that would have otherwise been left unexplored if following a more structured interview approach. For example, the richness in the participants' accounts around the topics of decision-making, labelling of their exit from sport (e.g., quitting or finishing), and significance of identification as an athletic alumnus were unexplored within the literature review. Thus, the participants' experiential expertise emerged within the data, which may have otherwise been left unexplored. Therefore, I consider the reflexivity of semi-structured interviews to be a significant strength of this study.

Lastly, the fifth strength of this study was the therapeutic value of the interviews themselves. Collectively, the participants communicated that they were happy to share their experiences. Some participants disclosed that they had not had the opportunity to discuss their athletic transition and support experiences to this depth with others and expressed appreciation for this study. Some even described the interview process as “cathartic” and “therapeutic.” If the interview experience provided therapeutic value for the participants, then that is a significant strength of the study.

### ***5.3.2 Limitations of Study***

There are limitations to this study that should be highlighted. First, several criteria were used to gather a homogenous sample of participants. The first criterion used was to explore experiences in a university student-athlete population. A second criterion was to explore the experiences of female student-athletes. A third criterion was to explore student-athletes' experiences who had not exhausted eligibility (e.g., played less than five years in U Sport). The fourth criterion was to explore the experiences of those who had utilized informal (e.g., social, family, coaching) or formal (e.g., sports psychologist, counsellor) support. Early in the research process, I was fearful that I had made the participant selection criteria too narrow. However, I

had no trouble finding participants who met my original criteria. In hindsight, I could have narrowed my selection criteria to another level and incorporate a fifth criterion. For example, explore student-athletes' experiences who participated in individual sports (e.g., track and field, wrestling) or team sports (e.g., soccer, hockey, basketball). The study found some divergence of experience between those who competed in individual sports compared to those who competed in team sports. Thus, a limitation of the current study may be that the participant selection criteria were too broad. An area for future research may be to replicate similar studies using more narrow selection criteria (e.g., separate based on individual or team sport). While I present this as a limitation, I simultaneously view this as a demonstration of rigour, as it communicates the need for such research.

A second limitation of the study was the purposive sampling that was conducted. The seven participants interviewed played university sport across Canada; however, all seven participants were currently living within Saskatoon's municipality. Due to the small geographic region in which the participants were collected, I had a pre-existing association with two of the seven participants. The prior researcher-participant association could lead to concerns about the two participants' possible hesitation to share their stories openly or honestly as they would have with an unknown researcher. While this prior association may be viewed as a limitation to the study, I believe the preceding association helped create rapport and trust in the interview and allowed for significant depth to be achieved.

A third limitation of the study could be considered the use of an interview guide. While used flexibly, using an interview guide could be seen as a limitation, as a pre-determined guide could affect the inductive epistemology of IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2009). In the future, research may consider utilizing a non-structured interview to explore this phenomenon further. Future research might consider exploring student-athletes experiences of support during athletic transitions using a case-study format that gathers multiple forms of data (e.g., writing, drawing, video extracts). Such research may provide an opportunity to understand experiences at an even deeper level incorporating multiple forms of expression.

#### **5.4 Implications for Practice**

Findings from the current study provide several insights that may help professionals (e.g., sports psychologists, counsellors) who work with female student-athletes during athletic

transitions. Previous literature has mainly focused on the period after athletes exhaust eligibility or end participation in university sport. However, the current study's findings have suggested that the decisional period leading up to ending university sport participation is a significant component of female-student-athletes athletic transition experiences. During this decisional period, the participants used formal support and described wishing they would have sought additional support after university sport ended. These findings suggest that formal supports may play a significant role when assisting student-athletes in the decisional portion of an athletic transition and adjusting to life afterwards. It is recommended that university Athletic Departments provide student-athletes with access to formal supports during and after university competition. Specifically, Athletic Departments should provide formal supports that can assist student-athletes during the decision-making period and assist with an adjustment period after competition ends.

Participants described needing support in helping them navigate mental health struggles and physical and psychological difficulties associated with injury or chronic injuries and burn-out, including emotional and psychological exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment and agency, and sport devaluation. Participants described struggling with hopelessness, anger, depression, anxiety, disordered eating, perfectionism, and a persistent need for achievement. As such, formal supports available to student-athletes during athletic transitions should be qualified to work with such difficulties and knowledgeable about referral options.

The participants noted requiring specialized assistance navigating academic program changes during the decision-making period of an athletic transition. For example, student-athletes may need assistance in organizing courses or transfer credits to transfer schools, course changes to adjust to four years of school rather than five, and academic assistance connected to mental health leaves. Thus, University Student Affairs and Athletic Departments should provide access to, and promote the availability of, academic advisors who can support student-athletes who may require specialized academic assistance.

The current study found that helping student-athletes prepare for anticipatory identity loss before ending university competition may reduce the severity of distress caused by identity loss during athletic transitions. Therefore, the findings emphasize the importance of support providers providing interventions that prepare student-athletes for anticipatory identity loss. However, preparation for anticipatory identity loss did not eliminate identity distress during athletic



transitions. Therefore, practitioners should support student-athletes in self-exploration and self-discovery to help student-athletes broaden their identity while also providing tools and coping strategies for managing identity distress during athletic transitions.

The participants who identified their exit from university sport as ‘quitting’ or identified themselves as ‘quitters’ and had negative internalized perceptions about quitting showed more marked levels of distress during their athletic transitions. Considering this finding, practitioners may consider exploring how their clients understand their exit from university competition. For example, do clients feel they ‘quit’ university competition? Do they feel they ‘finished’ university competition? Student-athletes who classify their athletic transitions by a label such as quitting, failing, or being unsuccessful, may be at higher risk for social isolation, avoidance, loneliness, disappointment, and general depressive symptoms. This finding highlights the psychological significance of the language used within university Athletic Departments and university athletic communities. Athletic Departments and university communities should consider the psychological importance of the language used to describe athletic ‘careers’ and consider celebrating various accomplishments beyond traditional ‘fifth year’ and ‘senior night’ celebrations.

Participants described benefitting from support, either formal or informal, that helped them challenge negative perceptions of quitting and reframing or redefining their exits from university sport. Practitioners may consider doing interventions that assist in such respect. However, given the findings of significant distress experienced during athletic transitions, practitioners may consider doing a risk assessment with clients first to ensure their direct safety before moving on to more general interventions.

The finding suggested that athlete maltreatment may have been a component of the participants' athletic transition experiences. As such, practitioners may think about supporting their clients using helping modalities that are sensitive to and effective in supporting clients who may have experienced maltreatment. Practitioners may need to support clients in accessing specialized supports when needed and consider working with Student Affairs and Athletic Departments to prevent athlete maltreatment. Methods of prevention might include mandatory psychoeducation and information sessions within Athletic Departments for coaches and coaching staff. Education on athlete maltreatment may consist of materials on emotional abuse, physical

abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, harassment, bullying, exploitation, institutional abuse, and assault (see Kerr & Stirling, 2016 for definitions of athlete maltreatment).

One participant who ended university competition for mental health-related concerns described losing access to her formal support during her athletic transition, which left her without mental health support during an especially vulnerable time. Practitioners assisting student-athletes with mental health challenges during competition have a responsibility to ensure their clients continue to have access to mental health support after they have ended university competition (see U Sports, 2020; or refer to Chapter 2). As such, practitioners working within university institutions or sporting environments should ensure that student-athletes have access to ongoing professional support after university athletic competition. Practitioners may consider working collaboratively with university Student Affairs and Athletic Departments to ensure they understand the need for mental health support. When necessary, practitioners may need to advocate for financial planning within Athletic Departments to ensure such support is available.

It may be advantageous to ensure that formal and informal supports, particularly helping professionals and coaching staff, are privy to unique risks associated with university athletic competition and athletic transitions. This study's findings highlight a need for helping professionals that understand university athletic culture and athletic transitions and that normalize and validate difficulties associated with athletic transitions. Within the current study, salient barriers to accessing formal support included: lack of awareness (e.g., not knowing who and where to access support), misperceptions about support-seeking (e.g., misperceptions on who can access professional supports and when), fear about accessing support providers who do not have an athletic background, a stigma associated with mental health and support-seeking, and a stigma associated with ending university athletics 'prematurely' and for reasons other than academics or physical injury. Moreover, the current study found that the participants had an easier time accessing formal support during athletic competition but struggled to access formal support after athletic participation. Therefore, it is recommended that practitioners provide psychoeducational programming that: promotes the availability of mental health services both during and after university athletic competition, provides information to help normalize difficulties during athletic transitions, normalize professional support-seeking, and normalize ending university sport for a variety of reasons. There is a real need for athletic and support communities to highlight and celebrate student-athletes who may have unique and varied careers.

Highlighting and celebrating varied careers may help reduce the stigma associated with playing less than five-years, experiencing mental health struggles, and seeking-support.

Findings from the current study also provide ethical considerations for helping professionals working with student-athletes. One participant shared that her sports psychologist had ‘reported back’ to her coach about concerns raised during a counselling session. Leading the participant to feel that working with this sports psychologist was not ‘safe.’ This finding confirms previous literature (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2007) in identifying complex boundaries and ethical considerations between athletes, coaches, and sports psychologists. The current findings, taken together with work from Van Raalte and Andersen (2007), suggest that there may be incentive or pressure for sports psychologists to produce specific outcomes. For example, there may be incentives for sports psychologists to help student-athletes return to play, improve performance, remain in the sport, rather than support student-athletes in ending participation, extending leave from play, or discussing negative coach relationships. Consistent with this other literature (Van Raalte & Andersen 2007), the current findings suggest that sports psychologists may face pressures to share client information with those who hire them (e.g., coaches, parents). In drawing on work from Van Raalte and Andersen (2007), a recommendation for sports psychologists is to be transparent in their communication with those who hire them (e.g., coaches, athletic institutions, parents) about the roles, agendas, and ethical obligations of their practice. Sports psychologists who are hired by coaches or families and working with athletes may want to consider preparing a document that communicates the following: (a) whom the practitioner is serving (e.g., the athlete), (b) what the practitioner’s priorities are for the client (e.g., health, well-being, happiness, athletic performance), (c) the practitioner's ethical requirements (e.g., confidentiality), and (d) a plan to manage boundaries between a client and the people who hire them (e.g., coach, team, parents, institution).

Lastly, it appears that statistics on student-athletes who participate in university athletics but do not exhaust eligibility are lacking. I found no studies that documented the occurrence of or reasons provided for student-athletes ending university competitions with remaining eligibility. Moreover, no participants in the current study reported any formalized process that allowed them to share their reasons for ending university competition with remaining eligibility (e.g., exit interview, survey). These findings raise the question: Are university Athletic Departments documenting such statistics? If so, how is this data being collected, used, and who

has access to it? If this data is not being collected, what are the reasons for not collecting such data? One participant in the current study recommended that Athletic Departments create a more formalized process for student-athletes ending university competition with remaining eligibility. Considering this participant's recommendation, taken together with the finding of lacking statistical data on athletic transitions, University Athletic Departments might consider formalizing this process and implement processes that can collect information about student-athletes exits from university competition.

## **5.5 Future Research**

Findings from the current study provide several insights that could be used to inform future research. A unique form of identity distress was captured in the present study. This identity distress resulted from participants feeling unable to identify as an athletic alumnus to their university because they ended university competition without 'finishing eligibility' or identified as 'quitters.' The inability to identify as an athletic alumnus presented as significantly distressing to participants. Future research may consider exploring this unique presentation of identity distress.

The study also found that supports that assisted student-athletes in preparing for anticipatory identity loss before ending university competition appeared to reduce the severity of identity distress during athletic transitions. Future research might consider exploring how helping professionals are assisting student-athletes with anticipatory identity loss and the effectiveness of such interventions.

Other literature has suggested that career-ending physical injuries are the most difficult athletic transitions that athletes may be confronted with (Park et al., 2013; Wylleman et al., 2004). The current findings suggest that athletic transitions precipitated by mental health concerns or unsafe sporting environments may be as challenging as those athletic transitions resulting from physical injuries. Future research exploring athletic transitions precipitated by athlete maltreatment is warranted.

Reconnecting with lost enjoyment, finding new forms of enjoyment, and reconnecting with social belonging, were salient components of student-athletes growth during athletic transitions. Future research may consider exploring how student-athletes experience and navigate new forms of enjoyment and belonging during athletic transitions. The current findings suggest that social

support was important in participants' feelings of belonging during athletic transitions. However, feelings of shame and embarrassment connected to participants identifying as a 'quitter' and ending participation before exhausting eligibility appeared to negatively impact some participants' willingness to seek social support during athletic transitions. Therefore, future research may consider exploring social support experiences with student-athletes who ended university sport with remaining eligibility.

Future research should consider using methodologies that require collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and student-athletes in knowledge generation, such as methodologies like Participatory Action Research (PAR). Such research methodologies may advance athletic transition literature by allowing for more voices to be involved across the entire research process (e.g., study development, data collection, analysis, and dissemination of results). Such methodologies can create an opportunity for new conceptualizations or reconceptualization of athletic transitions to develop and create more diverse and inclusive research.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

Current literature has recognized that many athletes experience adjustment difficulties during athletic transitions, and athletes who end participation involuntarily or semi-voluntarily are at higher risk for more severe adjustment difficulties. Despite such challenges, student-athletes appear to be underutilizing available supports. As such, the current study sought to explore student-athletes' experiences who had ended participation with remaining eligibility and who had sought support. The current study explored athletic transition and support experiences with seven female student-athletes. All participants had played Canadian university sport, ended university athletic competition with remaining eligibility, and had sought formal (e.g., counselling, sports psychologist) or informal (e.g., social, family, coaches) support. The participants' experiences were not described as a static event, nor were they described as exclusively positive or negative. Instead, they were described as an ongoing transitional process consisting of periods of challenge and growth. The participants described distinct periods of decision-making and self-growth through the interviews and described their experiences of support across both periods. The overarching theme, *An Ongoing Transition*, emerged from the participants' transcripts, which was further described through three superordinate themes: *Navigating a Decision*, *Growing the Self*, *Supporting the Journey*.

In their interviews, the participants shared about navigating the decision to end participation in university sport. The participants described jeopardized well-being (e.g., physical injury, psychological injury, athlete maltreatment) to have influenced their decisions to end participation in university sport. Many participants labelled their exits from university sport as ‘quitting’ or ‘finishing.’ Participants experiences of jeopardized well-being and negative perceptions of ‘quitting’ were connected to unique adjustment difficulties. However, despite the unique challenges associated with their athletic transitions, the participants portrayed significant growth that was experienced across their ongoing transition. While participants described feelings of loss, they also expressed a growth process when filling the void that university sport had left. Participants’ described a process of expanding and reconstructing their identity as they navigated their lives after university sport. Participants utilized formal (e.g., counsellor, sports psychologist) or informal (e.g., social, family, coach) support during their athletic transitions. Participants indicated how their supports were influential in fostering belonging during athletic transitions and described a strong desire for support providers to ‘understand’ athletic culture and athletic environments. Across the cases, misperceptions and stigma associated with support seeking and mental health were captured. The current study participants collectively acknowledged that further work needs to occur to better serve female student-athletes going through athletic transitions with remaining eligibility.

### **5.7 Researcher’s Reflection**

The depth of insight and openness demonstrated during the individual interviews was remarkable. I am honoured to have had the opportunity to learn from the participants’ hard-earned and valuable experiential knowledge.

I was surprised to see how varied each participants’ reflections were. This finding reinforced that no two experiences are the same, even when experiencing the same phenomenon, in a similar context with a similar population. This reflection highlights how essential research methodologies like IPA are. Much knowledge and compassion can be gained by exploring individual experiences reflexively and thoughtfully.

I found IPA’s in-depth and reflexive research approach, both rewarding and challenging. Throughout the research process, I explored new understandings and broadened and challenged my existing understandings, which is rewarding but not easy. Data analysis was time and energy-

intensive. Throughout the entire research process, I experienced a great deal of accountability to my participants. During data analysis, I continually referred back to the transcripts to confirm that my interpretations were indeed grounded in the participants' words. When writing, I would often stop and think about my participants, considering how they might feel when reading the document. When choosing a research topic, I sought to explore a research topic that would respond to a research need and be clinically relevant. I wanted to use a research methodology that would allow me to explore nuance and complexity, as I believed this would be important when exploring the phenomenon under study. I now have a deeper awareness and a more tangible understanding of the many psychological concepts that may relate to female student-athletes' athletic transitions that occur with remaining eligibility. However, I believe there is still much left to learn about this topic. I feel the participants' reflections have helped highlight relevant implications for practice and areas for future study.

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## Appendix

### A: Initial Screening Guide

Hello \_\_\_\_\_, thank you for your interest in my research project. If you consent to it, I have a few questions that I would like to ask you to determine if you meet the criteria for my research study (pause and wait for verbal consent to continue).

Great, thank you. Here are a few questions:

- 1) Where you registered as a university-level athlete (e.g., CIS, U Sport, NCAA)? **(Y or N)**
- 2) Did you complete full eligibility with your league? **(Y or N)**
- 3) Do you self-identify as a female? **(Y or N)**
- 4) Are you above 18-years of age? **(Y or N)**
- 5) Did you utilize some form of support during or after your university athletic participation (e.g., social, family, coaching, counselling support)? **(Y or N)**
- 6) Are you willing to participate in a one-on-one in-depth interview regarding your athletic experiences? **(Y or N)**
- 7) Do you feel that discussion on your athletic experiences will be harmful to you at this point? (e.g., emotionally unsettling) **(Y or N)**

○  **Meets criteria:**

Thank you very much for your interest in my study and for taking the time to speak with me today. All of the criteria for participation in this study have been met. Is there a time that would work for you to meet in-person to go over informed consent? Informed consent would take about 20-minutes of your time.

○  **Does not meet criteria:**

All of the criteria for participation in this study have not been met. Thank you very much for your interest in my study and for taking the time to speak with me today, I appreciate the interest in this study. Do you have any questions for me?

## **B. Sample Interview Schedule**

A.

1. Please tell me about your university athletic experiences.
  - a) Prompt: What sport(s) did you play? How did you become interested? How long did you play? Where did you play? Whom did you play with?
2. What does sport mean to you?
  - a) Prompt: How do you feel when you are playing sports?
3. Could you describe what sport participation looks and feels like for you now?
  - a) Prompt: Do you still participate in sport?

B.

4. Could you share with me your experiences ending university sport?
  - a) Prompt: Was there anything that influenced it?
5. Can you tell me about the hardest part of this experience?
6. Can you tell me about the easiest part of this experience?

C.

7. Can you tell me about the support you received during this time, or still currently receive?
  - a) Prompt: Who helped you? How did they help you?
  - b) Prompt: What was it like for you accessing this support?

8. Where there any supports that you thought to access but did not?
  - a) Prompt: Who? Why?
  - b) Prompt: How you decided to access support(s)? Did you have trouble asking for support? Encounter any barriers or challenges?
  
9. What do you feel you needed during this time?
  - a) Prompt: Did you have any prior expectations about or experience with such support?
  
10. What are your general thoughts about athletes seeking help?
  - a) Prompt: What do you suppose other people think about athletes seeking help?

#### D. Interview Closing Questions

11. What would you say to someone going through a similar experience?
  
12. What would you say to someone helping another person going through a similar experience?
  
13. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences that you have not had the chance to share with me?

## **C: Paws Bulletin**

### **Calling All Former Female University Athletes!**

Did you participate in a University sport? **We want to hear about your experiences!**

Looking for female research participants who have had previous involvement in University Athletics and who ended their university athletic participation before completing full eligibility. Participants are required to have been registered in a university sport (e.g., *U-sport*, *CIS*, *NCAA*) and to have received some kind of support (e.g., social, family, coaching, counselling) during or after ending their university athletic participation.

If this sounds like you, we would like to hear from you! If you meet eligibility for participation, you will be asked to take part in one 90-minute interview. The research study seeks to explore former female student-athletes athletic-transition and support-seeking experiences.

For more information, please contact Page Beaton at xxxx or call (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

This study has been reviewed by, and received approval through, the Research Ethics Office, University of Saskatchewan.

**Department of *Educational Psychology & Special Education***  
**University of Saskatchewan**



**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR  
RESEARCH ON FEMALE ATHLETIC EXPERIENCES**

Are you a Former Female University Athlete? **We want to hear about your experiences!**

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study of the experience of ending competition in university athletics and experiences of support-seeking during this time.

**Eligibility criteria are as follows:**

- Participants will identify as female
- Participants will have been registered as a university athlete (e.g., *U Sport*, *CIS*, *NCAA*)
- Participants will have ended participation in university athletics without completing full eligibility (e.g., less than 5-years in *U Sport/CIS* or less than 4-years *NCAA*)
- Participants will have received some kind of support (e.g., social, family, coaching, counselling support) during or after university athletic competition
- Participants must be 18 years of age or older

**If this sounds like you, we want to hear from you!**

Interested candidates will be asked to attend a brief initial meeting to discuss the study purpose and eligibility requirements. Eligible candidates will be asked to take part in a 90-minute interview.

Each participant will receive an honorarium in appreciation of their time.

**For more information or to volunteer for this study,  
please email or call:**

[page.beaton@usask.ca](mailto:page.beaton@usask.ca)

(xxx) xxx-xxxx

**This study has been reviewed by, and received approval  
through, the Research Ethics Office, University of Saskatchewan.**

**REB #: 1684**

## E. Participant Debrief and Mental Health Resources



### *Participant Debrief*

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*Thank you for your participation in this research study. Your participation is very much appreciated.*

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**Project Title:** Understanding female's help-seeking experiences during Athletic transitions

**Researcher:**

Page Beaton, Graduate Student

Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education

University of Saskatchewan

Email: [page.beaton@usask.ca](mailto:page.beaton@usask.ca)

**Supervisor:**

Dr. Laurie-Anne Hellsten, PhD

Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education

University of Saskatchewan

Telephone: 306-966-7723

E-mail: [laurie.hellsten@usask.ca](mailto:laurie.hellsten@usask.ca)

**Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**

The purpose of this study is to understand female student-athletes help-seeking experiences during Athletic transitions. This study will be guided by the following research questions: 1)



How do female student-athletes experience Athletic transitions? and 2) How do female student-athletes experience help-seeking during Athletic transitions?

This study will aim to provide sport and counselling psychology professionals with in-depth accounts of student-athletes transition and help-seeking experiences, with the aim of helping to inform sport psychology and counselling practice.

**Available Resources:**

Below is a list of available resources, should you feel you require any additional support after participation in this study:

**Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Services**

24-hour 7-day/week crisis line

306-933-6200

**(Canada) Crisis Services Canada**

4-hour 7-day/week crisis line

1-833-456-4566

**University of Saskatchewan**

**Student Wellness Centre**

Room 310 (Third Floor)

Place Riel Student Centre

Saskatoon, SK

306-966-5768

**Saskatchewan Health Authority**

**Community Adult Mental Health Services**

4th Floor - 715 Queen St.

Saskatoon, SK.

306-655-8877

**Saskatoon Community Clinic**

**Downtown Location:**

455 – 2nd Avenue North

Saskatoon, SK

306-652-0300

**Westside location:**

1528 – 20th Street West

Saskatoon, SK

306-664-4310

**PPC- Professional Psychologists & Counsellors**

Private Practice Counselling Services located near the University of Saskatchewan

1118 College Drive

Saskatoon, SK

306-664-0000

**Catholic Family Services**

506 25 St E

Saskatoon, SK

306-244-7773