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# Seeing Stars: Emotional Trauma in Athlete Retirement: Contexts, Intersections, and Explorations

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Seeing Stars: Emotional Trauma in Athlete Retirement:  
Contexts, Intersections, and Explorations

by

Scott P. Tinley

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of

Claremont Graduate University

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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## **APPROVAL OF THE REVIEW COMMITTEE**

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Scott P. Tinley as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract of the Dissertation

Seeing Stars: Emotional Trauma in Athlete Retirement:

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Few areas of modern sport are as misunderstood in popular and academic literature as that of retired professional and elite athletes. While the subject has been studied, the case of the retiring athlete has yet to be fully explored in a detailed, qualitative, and interdisciplinary study focusing on nuanced contexts affecting the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. Utilizing 3 participant groups—29 elite athletes (16 sports, 18 males, 11 females), 9 professional sport administrators, and 8 sport media journalists—over an 18-month period extensive semi-structured interviews resulted in 1,436 raw data themes assigned to 13 direct, 3 indirect, and 3 emerging philosophical contexts. Significant direct contexts emerged including health, social support/influence, and preretirement counseling. Unexplored indirect contexts include athlete's relationship with media, corporate sport structures, and sport consumers. Emerging philosophical contexts include issues of fear-mortality, bodily awareness, and shifting Identities. Positive ideology, appreciation, and predisposed conditions such as having

realistic perspective, and a knowledge of self were noted. Participant group responses and all 19 contexts were identified and noted for their interdependency. Hypotheses included that socially-constructed and cultural ideas exist about retired athletes and are embedded in perceptions of fame and fortune associated with the role of professional athletes. Results indicated that considerations of micro and macro social processes of athlete commodification (especially immediacy in production/consumption by the corporate sport and media/fan nexus) contributed to the quality of their transition. Cultural narratives and mythologies about athletes-as-heroes—including ways in which the athletes themselves internalize these popular ideas—produce a system in which elite athletes are often unprepared for life after sport. Analysis of the data suggested that role residue and mortality themes were present, while a longitudinal portion of the study confirmed the significant affecting contexts. Suggestions for reconsideration of retired elite athlete's sociocultural and economic roles were included as ambiguity in responsibility remained prevalent. Significant contributions of the study include application of data that offers behavioral, social, and cultural scientist insight to the transcendent challenges that constitute fluid and emerging human conditions when individuals move from one life condition to another. Additional contributions suggest social costs for disposing of transitioning athletes.

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CHAPTER ONE  
AN INTRODUCTION TO ATHLETE RETIREMENT  
AND TRANSITION

re·tired/ri'tiɹ(ə)rd/Adjective

1. Having left one's job and ceased to work.
2. (of a place) Quiet and secluded; not seen or frequented by many people.  
(“Retired,” 1982)

They say you're a rarity, and sleep in your bed. And strangle your purity  
. . . and leave you for dead.

(L. Williams, 2008)

**Project Justification, Hypotheses, and Overview**

This project, like many personal and professional works of a significant nature, was catalyzed within me by a combination of self-reflexivity, fate, and purpose. It was an intellectual exercise of magnitude shot through with personal emotion and desire to know the subject, to understand the feelings that I was beset with upon leaving a career as a professional athlete. From the onset, I offer the somewhat bold claim that my experiences as a professional athlete for 17 years (1983-1999) placed me in a small category of social scientists who are able to complete a project of this scope and investigative style. The period I competed as a professional triathlete allowed me to fit the inclusion criteria for this study and to access a large number of study participants who, historically, have resisted speaking with others outside their immediate circle of influence about their transition experiences unless they felt the researcher had “earned the conversation,” as one athlete participant suggested, and trusted that researcher

with their personal data. This project enabled me to make empirical a unique paradigm of pathos-laden life transitions that I and other elite and professional athletes have experienced upon exit from sport. I believe that it broadens the body of knowledge within the subject/topic of athlete retirement and opens up new opportunities for social scientists, sports administrators, sport media, and transitioning elite and professional athletes to reconsider the many and varied contexts that affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. It also challenges the social use and appropriation of professional athletes in such a way as to both suggest and prove (through the results of this study) that the burden of responsibility for any emotional trauma (and its derivative actual and symbolic effects) should be extended well beyond the athletes and into the social structures and institutions surrounding the role of commercial sport in our world. To support this claim, I will suggest on several occasions that the consumer of commercial sports (a large percentage of the general population) is underinformed as to the role of the elite and professional athlete in the social construction of sport. We have failed to see how these individuals function in the way we project, admire, produce, consume, love, hate, envy, dispose, and offer them second chances when they fail us. I will argue based on the data from varying and sometimes opposing participant groups that, as the sport consumer does not comprehend the role of the professional athlete as a construct *they* have produced, the athlete as they exit that social role has diminished chances of understanding their place in a social world. And this results in various forms of trauma for the

athlete. Thus, the reader necessarily remember that the stakes of this project extend well beyond the focused group of transitioning athletes.

While engaged in this project, I reviewed excerpts of an earlier text that I had written. It had been published some years ago (Tinley, 2003) and I had found that some of this project's findings could appear as a response to significant questions I had rhetorically posed near the end of that study. However, this project, its intent, motive, and praxis were envisioned *a priori* my earlier reflections and any personal, professional, or theoretical connections stand as a kind of support for the findings herein. This is to say, as I will offer and support throughout following pages, athlete transition is an extended, personal, and contextual project that unfolds in ways that we have not fully explored in previous literature. This study explored those ways and means. Thus, the psychosocial and cultural veracity of this project, as I extend it beyond my role as a social scientist and into my experiences as a professional athlete help to support the conclusions found herein.

The bridge between my reflexive thoughts shortly after I retired and the decade spent in studying the athlete retirement paradigm might be recalled as I noted in 2003:

A person is lucky to find one true thing in their life that he or she can become totally passionate about; a thing that challenges and heals and nurtures and rewards and kicks your ass and you love more than love—a thing that defines you, that gives you reason for living. . . . Is it too much to ask for more than one of those things in life? I now stand alongside many others who have somehow achieved what they set out to do in their lives; they were successful, they made it—but they made it too soon. And then the troubles began. (Tinley, 2003, p. 11)

For the reader, in some ways this study might stand as a reply to that question—Is it too much to ask for more than one true passion in your life? And how will you know it (a new passion) when you see it? What will you do with that knowledge? For this researcher, this project stands as a reply to that query. Indeed, the topic of athlete retirement as I approached it, combining my experiences, exploration of contexts, and rigorous academic review, added synchronically to the knowledge of my own life and the literature. It was and remains an area of passionate interest to me.

There is an often-confusing cultural space that exists between the struggles of elite athletes exiting from sport and a society that has, in a variety of ways that will be discussed, both created (produced) the athlete's exalted status and disposed (consumed) of them when they no longer serve the *needs* of that social world.

From the onset, the reader needs to remember that the role of a professional athlete is catalyzed, constituted, and facilitated in how they are consumed by a public desiring the sport narrative in a multitude of forms and formats. Certainly, it is easier for the casual reader to dismiss this thinly-veiled attack on their consumptive distinctions and reply with the standard narrative: Elite and professional athletes are entitled with material wealth and differment; people treat them better than the Everyman. But I remind the reader that there exists a kind of tyranny of fame that is difficult to comprehend unless they have felt the constant public focus, intrusion, and judgment of "celebrityhood." The first time someone asked for my autograph, I felt a kind of validation for all the



effort it had taken me to reach some minor level of notoriety as a result of my place in the emerging sport of triathlon. It was as if exterior adulation had become an interior justification for my efforts. This is the beginning of the tyranny of fame as it begins to dictate the movements of your life.

A few years later I was on a training ride with the actor and comedian, Robin Williams. As we rode our bikes through the winding routes north of San Francisco, he was accosted in various forms and levels no less than a dozen times in 2 hours. My friend could not stop at a traffic signal without some passerby asking for an autograph or for him to entertain them with some line from a film or a stand-up routine.

“Is this what it’s like?” I asked Robin. “Is this the level of scrutiny that you face every day in the public sphere?” And to his insightful credit, Robin Williams said that yes, it is intrusive, but most of them are well-meaning and only want the celebrity to participate in the joy that you have provided them.

I offer this anecdote to suggest to the reader that there is a process associated with the culture of celebrity and the professional athlete that prefigures the way they are treated as they exit that role. And the contexts that this study explores will help to detail the import of these transitional episodes as they affect both the athlete and, with some intuitive reading, the sport consumer.

Areas of impetus for this project have origins in both the noted lack of context-based inquiry within the literature (J. Coakley, 1983) and the tensions between mainstream and academic responses to the athlete transition paradigm and its surrounding narratives.<sup>1</sup> I found the infusing of ideology into responses by

study participants and those I observed or conversed with an excellent place to extend the athlete retirement discourse. The place of the elite and professional athlete in modern society, increasingly catalyzed in the ideological-messaging of media, has been a barrier to some literature in the field. As will be explained in great detail, this supports the project's foray into comparing responses across participant groups (see Figures 1, 2a-d, and 3).

To contribute significantly to the literature, I had to undertake a multifaceted, interdisciplinary, and complex study of athlete retirement qualities, mining four particular databases. First, I had to undertake an exhaustive review of the academic literature surrounding athlete retirement and transition (see Chapter 3 and References). Second, I had to locate the *positionality* of athlete retirement within the corporate structures of elite and commercial sport. This positioning of the elite and professional athlete requires the reader to remember that professional athletes are by definition, entertainers, and that, as consumers of sport, we are self-indicting when we ask for entertainers to venture into the arena of mythic herodotus. Third, I had to review substantial athlete retirement narratives found in popular culture in the form of mainstream news sources, nonfiction treatises, filmic approaches, and a variety of additional nonspecific, popular forms such as song, verse, and corporate advertising that chronicled, engaged with, represented, and utilized the retiring athlete narrative (see Chapter 5). Finally, I had to conduct my own series of interviews with, and ethnographic observations of, active and retired athletes, consumers of commercial sport, producers and administrators of commercial sport, and various

media sources that engaged with, reported on, and provided commentary on the subject (see Chapters 4 and 5).

The importance of this work might be in making explicit the fact that life-transition and change (as exemplified through athlete retirement) and its oft-accompanied emotional trauma are both difficult and understudied areas when approached from a sociocultural area. It also suggests that our overly-consumptive society has devolved into the arena of disposing of persons who no longer offer what the consumer requires. As will be explained and supported here, what we can determine by studying the nuanced contexts of athlete retirement is valuable and transcendent data that offers the behavioral, social, and cultural scientist insight to the challenges that constitute the fluid and emerging human condition as presented and experienced when individuals move from one life condition to another.

At the root of this project are the kinds of experiences noted in participant response; thoughts in words that help us explain the contexts and processes experienced in exit from socially-identified roles in sport. Within the raw data offered by participants are the maps to understanding the professional athlete and the things they face upon transition out of that role. But as will be noted again, the stakes of this project are extended as we see how the professional athlete is but one example of others who face consequential results as they exit a role socially proscribed as a result of late modern, consumer-centric society. These experiences are, at times, transferable qualifications. Indeed, an intended goal of this project was to identify possible transcendence of findings across occupational

transition areas. Thus, this project takes on a deeper and more layered level of investigation, results, and significant contribution beyond sport retirement as I explore the intersections and mutual affectations between these various sources of data and suggest how they might be extended into arenas such as returning military personnel and the vicissitudes of upward trending age demographics.

A review of transcendent concepts of life transition and change may lead the reader into a number of necessary, defining, and helpful questions that both guide and influence their review of this project and their own relations to the results. For example, if this project attempts to explain in some validated way the contextual and informing details of an ex-athlete's life quality during and after their exit from sport, the reader might ask that the lead researcher necessarily require a direct life experience in the specific context of the profession to construct a valid argument.<sup>2</sup> Can one speak authoritatively of what Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) calls the "role-exit process" (p. 7) without ever having exited that role in its phenomenological specificity? Or is it enough that the researcher fits the primary inclusion criteria for the study and follow necessary rules of qualitative methodology to assure validity?

As will be seen throughout these chapters, the reader is treated to an infusion of self-reflective, authorial narrative. I suggest that the results of my methodology—in particular the less-filtered access to retired athletes and their feelings—advances the body of knowledge by my extension of the *retired athlete's voice* into an empirical project.

The reader may have cause to inquire of the resonant import of studying athlete retirement and how the experience differs from that of exciting other professions and careers. They may ask which life elements define the notion of “quality” for an ex-athlete. Are those qualifications universally transferable to other career changes and, if not, what are the personal, behavioral, and cultural indulgences of an athlete that constitute the intricacies of the athlete retirement paradigm? How are they the same or different from an ex-shoe salesman or an ex-priest? Or is it, as I will argue and the data will suggest, a case where if an individual has spent enough years identified (and identifying) as an athlete (or any other role-specific occupation) into that role, their new roles always carry forward the subtitle of their former occupation? The notion that there is a sociocultural-influenced role that contributes to the quality of an athlete’s exit from sport separates this study from others primarily focused on behavioral traits. By extension, the importance of one’s social support and community remains as an influential modifier of their next occupation, emerging social community, and newly formed perceptions of Self.

My hypotheses suggest that there are many factors that contribute to the nature of an athlete’s exit from sport, and the application of traditional (as defined by previously published and applied) models of life transition and retirement do not offer us the ability to understand why so many athletes face emotional trauma during the period in their lives after they exit sport. A significant factor, I will argue, is that a professional athlete’s image is often *manufactured*—at times with their own consent and/or by their own efforts—for the benefit of corporate

media structures and other associated for-profit entities, and are purposely and continuously (re)presented in varying forms to fit the ideological content demands of the sport media corporate sport nexus. Concurrently, the athlete is subject to the unique aspects of their relationships with consumers of modern sport—the fans and spectators whose patterns of consumption materially affect an athlete’s disposition (Crawford, 2004; Quinn, 2009). The athlete’s role in image design, construction, and maintenance has a direct bearing on their self-identity while active in their sport career and, significant to this project, upon their exit from sport (Howes, 2009).

Increasingly, professional athletes have extended both their personal and professional roles as physically-talented athlete/entertainer into behavioral choices and patterns formerly reserved for other sectors of popular artists and entertainers. This has resulted in types and levels of fame and celebrity often misunderstood by both producers and consumers of modern commercial sport (Gamson, 1994; Marshall, 1997). When the subject athlete can no longer fulfill the needs of the teams, leagues, corporations, media, and fans, they are often excused (consumed/disposed) under whichever exit-narrative best meets the needs of current structures of commercial sport at the time (Horne, 2006). This can occur without warning, at a young age, and in an unexpected, sudden, and compressed fashion. What can follow is a dispossessed athlete who often struggles with issues of identity and varying kinds of health-related pathos (emotional, physical, familial, relational, and financial; Clairborne, 2009; Teitelbaum, 2005). I argue that a consumptive public, complicit in this paradigm and too often naïve to the effects

on the athlete, would benefit from what retiring elite athletes could offer to society if given the opportunities to (re)integrate with a social and economic world.

As a result of this project, I suggest that perhaps consumers of sport do not fully understand what the retired athlete might contribute to society based upon their experiences in an elite physical culture. I will suggest that the ways, means, and motives of a for-profit, market-based commercial sport structure have taken little responsibility in understanding if, when, how, and where to *place* a retired professional athlete after they have been produced and consumed by the corporate structures of commercial sport.

This study looks at the *direct* and *indirect* contexts of an athlete's exit from sport. I also believe and will support that there exists a unique interdependency within and between the *indirect* and *direct contexts* of an athlete's transition out of sport. For example, if a professional athlete has been represented in the popular media as an "*angry, defiant, African American from a tough part of town*" or an "*attractive but weak player known more for her sexuality than her athletic performance,*" regardless of any validity to the projected imaging, the athlete may be faced with the effects of this externally-constructed persona as they face the task of reconstituting themselves in a new self-identity (Messner, 1992).

The unique values in identifying these contexts as they function explicitly within the individual, social, and cultural narratives are threefold. First, we can identify the contexts in which athletes leave sport that contribute to their varying health statuses in an effort to address those contexts through such areas as

preretirement counseling or suggested shifts in structures of modern commercial sport. Second, we can gather evidence on how one group (the athletes) have perhaps been *gladitorialized* for the benefit of fans and followers of sport who are uniquely connected to mass media and their corporate partners. The end result of exposing this human capital paradigm may be that it will expose the underbelly and vicissitudes of sport when such great import is placed on modern commercial sport and its hyperbolic success narratives (Rosen, 2007). Finally, we might be able to identify emerging, theoretical, and transcendent concepts of life transition and change as it is seen in other compacted, unexpected, and understudied examples outside of sport. If new theoretical and conceptual models can be proposed from the study of retiring professional athletes that might be applied to returning soldiers or victims of corporate, familial, or physiological trauma, then value-added results ensue.

Thus, my project combines theoretical considerations of the retiring athlete in contemporary society as seen through the athletes, mass media, and corporate structures of production and consumption with a sociocultural study of retired elite athletes exploring their own experiences leaving sport.

My primary guiding research questions include:

1. What are the contexts within athlete retirement contributing to the quality of their retirement and transition experience, and how do they affect the athlete?
2. How have the corporate structures of modern commercial sport contributed to the quality of the athlete's experience as they exit sport?



3. How have consumer society, sports fans, and all types of media representations of the athlete leaving a career in commercial sport contributed to the athlete's retirement experience?
4. How are these contexts—the athlete's individual contributory conditions and the current sociocultural conditions placed upon modern sport and the athlete—connected to affect the athlete's retirement experience?
5. To what extent and effect are the micro systems or perhaps the innate or socialized psychological/behavioral traits of the athlete, as or more important than the larger social contexts under which they played and left sport?
6. To what effect does an athlete who takes charge of his or her own representation and agency through such platforms as new social media and autobiography alter their experience as they leave sport?

Secondary questions include:

7. Are there social costs in the summary disposal of athlete/heroes as they leave sport? (assuming we believe that athletes have reached a level of "disposability" in commercial sport)
8. Are there resonant findings in the study of athlete retirement that apply to other collectives dealing with retirement and transitional issues?
9. To what extent do non athlete-specific contexts produced by the multinational corporate entities that control commercial sport affect the athlete as they leave sport?

10. What kinds of context-based pedagogy or intervention models can be created to address the vicissitudes of nontraditional life transition(s) that have emerged in the wake of late modern social constructs and institutions?

### **The Project: Assumptions, Analogs, Definitions, and Directions**

This study explored the various contexts in which an elite or professional athlete retires from sport and the extent to which those contexts—direct and indirect—affected the qualities of their transition. Emerging philosophical contexts are noted but not explored in as great of detail as direct and indirect contexts. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews were conducted with three separate participant groups: 29 retired elite or professional athletes who met inclusion criteria, 8 sport administrators actively working in the area of commercial sports, and 9 sports journalists or sport media experts gainfully employed in the arena of sport media. Inclusion criteria are noted in chapters that discuss the various contexts. The results are discussed in subsequent chapters that focus on direct and indirect contexts, their intersections, and conclusions that suggest further research in new or emerging philosophical contexts of athlete retirement.

I define *direct contexts* as athlete-specific factors or *an act being done by or specifically toward, the athlete* (see Figures 1 and 4a-4d). I define *indirect contexts* as *society-based structurations within the extended frame of factors that may influence an athlete's life*, especially their life after sport (see Figures 1 and 5). The three indirect contexts that were identified and explored in this study

include (a) media representation of the athlete, (b) athlete relationships with corporate/for-profit structures in sport, and (c) athlete's relationship with sport consumers. *Emerging philosophical contexts* include mostly unexplored approaches to understanding the quality of an athlete's transition from sport (see Figure 6). Emerging philosophical contexts were not originally hypothesized in the design of this study and emerged organically and significantly as the data were developed and explored. These specific areas as defined include (b) *Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness, and Shifting Identities*, (b) *Positive Ideology, Appreciation, and Desire to Give Back*, and (c) *Predisposed Conditions, Realistic Perspective, and Knowledge of Self*.

For additional clarity in term usage, *direct contexts* in athlete retirement includes those actions, whether committed by or toward the athlete, indeterminate or purposeful, and directly affecting his or her retirement or transition (out of sport) experience. Examples of *direct context* identified and explored in this study include (a) age, (b) gender, (c) socioeconomic class, (d) education level, (e) race or ethnicity, (f) sport specificity, (g) performance level achieved, (h) health condition(s) upon exit from sport, (I) support structures and/or a surrounding community, (j) intervention/pre-retirement training, (k) financial status, (l) region/nation where sport was played, and (m) reasons for career termination.

All raw data-themed responses ( $n = 862$ ) from athlete participants were identified, themes analyzed, collapsed, and coded for meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). The specific context(s) and their type and level of import in

the athlete's experience were collapsed into four 2nd order themes that were labeled (a) Economic Indicators, (b) Physical and Psychosocial Factors, (c) Characteristics of the Sport Experience, and (d) Individual Characteristics (see Figure 1). Each direct context is noted (see Chapter 4) for its role in the transitioning athlete experience based upon data results such as (individual and gross assignment of) numbers of athlete response(s) and intersections with other noted contexts, both direct and indirect. For example, *social support* and *health* was noted much more often (overall and by athlete participants) as a significant factor in the quality of the transition than were *age upon exit from sport* and *region/nation where sport was played*. The context of *financial health* was noted by athlete participants more than 2½ times as a significant factor in the retirement experience than was noted by sport administrator study participants. The 13 identified indirect contexts were constituted by the 862 raw data themes offered by athlete participants and then collapsed for higher order meaning. This is discussed separately (see Chapter 4).

Athlete retirement literature has suggested additional need for contextual exploration and identification of specific issues (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Blann & Zaichkowsky, 1986; J. Coakley, 1983; Lavalley, Grove, & Gordon, 1997a; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Other literature has, to a minor extent, identified and utilized contextual referencing and labels specific to the facilitation of their individual and group studies (Cecić Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004). Since this study was concerned with identifying the effects of contexts, intersecting *affectations*, and multi-disciplinary considerations of the processes of athletic

retirement and transition, my focus in identifying contexts was concerned with those direct contexts which were not predetermined for exploration and emerged organically in piloting and data collection. Of the 13 *direct contexts* and the 3 *indirect contexts* listed above and discussed in later chapters, all were identified (after being hypothesized in pilot studies) as categories after they emerged ipso facto as the most often cited contexts in participant interviews. I consider the identification of *emergent philosophical contexts* that were not collapsed into my list of 13 direct and 3 indirect contexts a significant finding in this study but beyond the ability to explore in any great detail.

I originally hypothesized (and piloted) that the raw data would yield emergent and/or phenomenological properties (in participant's response) that would identify contexts to be divided into *direct* and *indirect* contexts. I did not foresee the level and scope of *emerging philosophical contexts*. However, I note this section of the findings from the onset as a significant contribution to the overall discourse surrounding contexts and its potential for further exploration (see Chapter 6).

A comparative study exists in Fuchs Ebaugh's (1988) project. In similar fashion, her study of 106 individuals who represented types of "Exes" such as physicians and dentists, police officers, recovered alcoholics, transsexuals, divorcees, and ex-convicts, identified such properties of the role exit process as (a) reversibility, (b) duration, (c) single versus multiple exits, (d) individual versus group, (e) degree of control, (f) degree of institutionalization, (g) degree of awareness, (h) sequentiality, (I) centrality of the role, and (j) voluntariness

(pp. 35-40). Each of Fuchs Ebaugh's 11 properties of role exit, in further exploration, might be linked to the athlete retirement experience. For example, single versus multiple exits correlates to the athlete who leaves sport but returns in an attempted comeback to their sport; a narrative theme that intersects with both sport consumers' and journalists' decoded reading of the retiring/unretiring athlete's intent, if not their mostly-hidden or often misunderstood motives. Fuchs Ebaugh's notion of "degree of institutionalization" (p. 39) correlates with how an athlete might both interpret and use (in self-reflexivity) their *place* within the institutional state of modern commercial sport. For example, if they have played for the same team in the same city for many years and retained cordial and reciprocal socioeconomic and familial relations with both the structures that control that specific corporate enterprise (the team, club, or corporate sponsors), as well as the local fan base, I would suggest, based on the data, that the athlete has a better chance at reducing emotional trauma because of the regional social support and postcareer business opportunities they will receive. This direct context of "region" is explored in Chapter 4.

Following Fuchs Ebaugh's (1988) development of role exit properties neither the direct contexts or indirect contexts were chosen *a priori* or deductively but by using grounded theory, theoretical sampling, and pilot study results to identify emerging contexts. I extended my research focus and sampling in those (context) areas that were suggested first by the piloted results and then within the individual participant interviews for further investigation (Charmaz, 1983; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A sample of these areas as they emerged were

(a) the levels and structures of social support and community noted by the participants as a factor in athlete retirement and (b) the difference in experience by gender. Both are introduced below in the section titled, Preview of Significant Findings, and discussed at length in Chapter 4.

Those study participants ( $n = 8$ ) labeled Sport Administrators offered a total of 304 raw data themes, 124 of which were assigned to the three *indirect contexts*. The additional study participant group labeled Sports Media Participants ( $n = 9$ ) offered a total of 270 raw data themes, 154 of which were assigned to the three *indirect contexts*. The results from the combined groups (Administrators and Media) contributed (along with the 129 themes coded from athlete participant's responses) to the identification of the three *indirect contexts*. These contexts are socially-constructed influences that are essentially produced as a result of the structures of modern sport, are most often connected to the for-profit production and consumption of commercial sport, and are not specifically-intended to affect an individual athlete's retirement experience. As introduced above, they included (a) mass media coverage of the athlete and its formations and representations of the athlete, including representation of athletes in other non-televisual forms of popular cultural such as literature, drama, film, and new media forms of the digital communication processes, (b) corporate sports' structure, inclusive of its strategy for means of (for profit) production, legislative rules, and guidelines that directly affect the health and well-being of an athlete; and (c) crowd/fan behavior patterns toward athletes, inclusive of societal shifts and *distinctions* in influential athlete/hero choices (Bourdieu, 1984; Wann, Melnick,

Russell, & Pease, 2001). The three primary indirect contexts noted above were also inductively chosen from a list of between 6 and 10 possible contexts after data were collected in semi-structured and unstructured interviews with participants randomly chosen from this researcher's contact list and individuals who work in sport media or as sport administrators for a commercial sport-related corporate entity. Inclusion criteria are discussed in Chapter 5. As I argue, these indirect contexts under which athlete's careers are constituted, concluded, and experienced beyond their playing careers are not insignificant in affecting the quality of an athlete's retirement.

As the athlete participant data were analyzed and inductively collapsed, a number ( $n = 282$ ) of the raw data themes offered by the athlete participants ( $n = 862$ ) were noted and collapsed beyond the emergent and identified 13 direct contexts and 3 indirect contexts of the retirement experience. This figure was substantial enough in size (32.7%) and recurring raw data themes as they emerged beyond the original hypothesized categories that they were identified as significant findings and are noted both as new conceptual terrain within the literature and how they intersect with other direct and indirect contexts and themes. As noted above, I label these *Emerging Philosophical Contexts in Athlete Retirement*. I will discuss these contexts briefly as they intersect with other contexts in Chapter 6.

Throughout the project, however, I sought out, identified, and discuss the intersections between direct and indirect contexts. As *Emerging Philosophical*



*Contexts* were identified, those contexts as well, were observed for how, where, and why they intersected with direct and indirect contexts.

An example of intersecting *direct* and *indirect contexts* of retirement affecting the quality of an athlete's exit from sport would lie in how their career performance levels achieved influenced both fan's and sport journalists' opinions of an athlete's retirement.

One athlete participant claimed that "it's hard not to believe what the papers say about you, positive and negative. The media has an effect on everyone's opinion of you including your family, friends, and business partners." Other comments offered by study participants suggested that an athlete's personal and professional reputation, considered alongside the length and level of their athletic performance, would influence a sport consumer's opinion about that athlete's exit from sport. What we did not know, for example, and what this study explores in part, is how popularly-constructed narratives and their re-presentation of the athlete as a public figure, affect the athlete's own personal feelings about their exit from sport. For example, in the fall of 2011 a largely underinformed student body at Penn State University rioted in support shortly after it was announced that long term head football coach, Joe Paterno, was relieved of his position in the wake of the childhood sexual abuse charges against one of Paterno's former assistant coaches. Less than 48 hours later, after a deluge of details on the alleged actions of the involved parties were offered over a multitude of media sources, students, in reversal of their actions if not immediate ideologies, offered a candlelight vigil for the victims of the alleged crimes. I offer this

example for its explication of the effect of resonant and fast-moving information but also for the power and effect of that data, regardless of its veracity, on the feelings and actions of sport consumers.

However, a concept that has been explored in the literature is that an athlete's exit from sport is unique within the models of life transition (Huang, 2002; L. E. Lewis, 1997). As will be detailed in Chapter 3, academic studies have endeavored to both apply models from other disciplines and theoretical approaches (gerontology, psychology, career counseling, and thanatology), as well as create athlete-specific frameworks for interpreting the athlete retirement experience. While the development of models and frameworks to outline the athlete's retirement from sport advanced the discourse (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Taylor & Oglivie, 1994), a deeper investigation of the nuanced contributory elements and issues that affect both the athlete's transition period and their life quality after sport is required.

### **Multiple Narratives of Life After Sport**

The narratives of elite and professional athletes<sup>3</sup> transitioning out of sport catalyzes fruitful and transcendent responses for the Cultural Studies researcher focused on issues within modern sport as a sociocultural institution. The topic, commonly referenced in academic sport science literature as *athlete retirement*, has been critically analyzed by sport studies researchers, utilized as popular subject/content within mainstream sport media, and thematically-produced in popular films and literary fiction forms. There appears a universal connection with and attraction to the subject by mainstream followers and consumers of sport

though for reasons that few, if any, have explored within traditional sports literature.

McPherson (1980) reported that a literary search of career transition<sup>4</sup> in sport revealed 20 published titles on the topic. In more recent years, Lavallee and Wylleman (2007) claimed, “no fewer than 270 empirical and theoretical citations have been identified on sports career transitions” (p. xiii). An early 2011 review of titles in the *Netflix* catalog of online and mail-ordered movie rentals revealed at least 100 fiction and documentary films that (under some debatable criteria) could be considered to include the *transitioning athlete* or the *fallen athlete hero* as a primary or secondary narrative theme.

Retirement and exit from sport is also a popular topic of discussion with sport consumers and fandom (see Chapters 2 and 5). The meta-narrative of a professional athlete’s exit from sport, regardless of the reason(s), influencing factors, coping strategies, or additional contexts of their exit, is a resonant and connective topic for critical analysis, mainstream sports journalism, and fodder for amateur and professional contributors to digital and online sports information sources. For reasons that this project explores, athletic retirement and transition is an attractive, transcendent, and often contrarian subject within the myriad elements and topics that constitute modern sports and its surrounding narratives.

Deford (1981), for example, in a 2004 Preface to his work of fiction addressing the subject of emotional trauma in the retired athlete (*Everybody’s All-American*), wrote “I think the story, although set in a time past, is just as applicable to any modern period” (p. ix). The subject of athlete transition and

retirement has been critically analyzed in sport humanities journals and anthologies (J. Coakley & Donnelly, 1999; Slusher, 1985), referred to in media studies texts (Wenner, 1989, 2006), associated with empirical analysis of fame and celebrity culture (Evans & Wilson, 1999; Gamson, 1994; Marshall, 1997/2006; G. Turner, 2004), and approached through studies of sports fans and fandom (Quinn, 2009; Wann et al., 2001). Works by Oriard (1982b), Roderick (2006), and Tinley (2003) reflect a combination of auto-ethnography with critical and narrative analysis of their own exits from careers in elite and professional sports. Lavalley and Wylleman (2007) anthologized international perspectives in *Career Transitions in Sport* while Lyon (1999) constructed a popular collection of case studies in *When the Clock Runs Out*.

While the subject appears to succeed in topical value as both a popular and empirical research subject, I found additional and informative results in how the logistical elements played out (intended pun) through other related structures of meaning in narrative production. The sociocultural, political, economic, and legal negotiations, for example, within and between the corporate and media structures, legions of sport consumers, professional teams and leagues, and athletes associated with the retirement experience(s) are themselves sources of material and data that should prompt researchers to explore the topic of athlete retirement and transition from new perspectives. The polemics within the contested terrain of athlete retirement and transition help us to better understand a complicated subject with all of its own transcendent qualities.

While the academic literature to date has not explored the reason(s) for this topic's growing popularity, mainstream examples and treatments have offered, perhaps by accident, interesting reasons for the multidisciplinary approach to the popular and eclectic interest in athlete retirement (see Chapter 5 and Figure 3). The clues to this popularity might be seen in the style and ideology of content presentation, the motives of the author/producers, their media platforms, and the audience interaction and response (see Appendices A and B). It would take additional research to identify and develop this area. However, there is some support in the results from this study. One study participant tried to explain why some leading actors, for example, are drawn to playing the role of the transitioning athlete.

“Lots of the leading actors who gravitate to the role of the aging, fallen or failed athlete do so because it's both easily dramatic and somehow connected to their own past,” suggests a study participant who works as a sports television producer. “Sly Stallone as *Rocky* [1976] and Kevin Costner as the character, *Crash Davis* in the film, *Bill Durham* [1988] are examples of leading actors drawing on life experiences in roles that many viewers, especially men, can relate to.” These universally-applicable themes often contain mythic references (inclusive of the *hero's journey*) within those inherent narrative formulas that are projected into the stories of the retiring athlete (Campbell, 1988). In the next section, I offer ideas on how elite and professional athletes develop a self-identity and individuated concept of themselves as an entitled person. This informs later discussions such that we might begin to understand how the various means in

which they are socialized as an athlete also play a contextual role in their exit from sport and the transition into new areas of their lives.

### **The Narratives of Ascension, Image, and Identity Construction**

To understand the influences that affect the quality of an elite athlete's exit from sport, it is important to note some of the contributory factors in how the players ascend to their lofty positions within our social worlds and specific places in modern sport. To reach the rarified levels of world class, elite, and professional sport, the great majority of athletes begin playing at a very young age, sometimes at 7 or 8 years old. Many are supported in their training and socialization into advancing competitive levels by such facilitating elements as enhanced academic opportunities, financial incentives, suggestive parenting, personal coaches, medical care, free sports equipment, travel opportunities, and a relief from "distractions" such as education, work, and unhealthy relationships or activities (Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1991). Many athletes can and do live insular and entitled lives for up to 10 or 15 years before they join the ranks of the elite and professional athlete. Sometimes there is a gradual realization by the athletes of the levels of effort and commitment they have made or are making to sport as well as to those around them who have enabled their rise (Bloom, 1985).

At the same time—often in the early to middle teens—a self-image of oneself as a successful and highly skilled athlete takes hold of the youth's idealization processes (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). If there are challenges in balancing sport and other interests, they come to believe, these can be addressed

by and through continued athletic success and further self-reification in the athlete's role (Stier, 2007).

Concurrently, the self-image of a great athlete, often coupled with rampant hubris, seems a necessary psychological element and competitive tool in their athletic success; a strategy of supreme self-confidence practiced within the psychology of sport pedagogies (Messner, 1992; Weinberg & Gould, 1995). Age, educational status, and performance levels achieved are also linked to types and levels of quality in career retirement (Cecić Erpič et al., 2004). Elite and professional athletes have reported feelings of being a homogenous member of an elite sporting community with common goals, shared codes, and mutual exclusivity (Barker, 2008; Roderick, 2006). Athletes develop symbolic links with society and those who follow their performances create “socio-culturally valid . . . social subsystem(s)” with elite athletes (O. Weiss, 2001, p. 393). They let go of many distractions during seasons of play, tournaments, and high level competitions. *A presentation of self* and use of *sign vehicles* (Goffman, 1959) by elite athletes are maintained and often reinforced by those with whom the athletes choose to socialize. These new roles and identity are often willingly created and accepted by both athlete, sports fan, and members of the commercial sport structures (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; G. Turner, 2004).

Athletes' narratives have cited such psychological experiences as a “fulfillment of destiny” (Tinley, 2002b, p. 86), a “validation of my existence” (p. 83), and “the power of realizing the archetype” (p. 84). These themes suggest that the celebrated athlete—in particular those participating in mediated,

commercial entertainment forms—are fulfilling a role that they feel they have earned by virtue of innate physiological tools, years of preparation and training, social support, and miscellaneous behavioral traits and *life chances* (J. Coakley, 2008) that enabled their success. Even if an athlete realizes the fleeting nature of fame and mass adulation that helps constitute the culture industry exemplified in modern commercial sport (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979), they often fail to fully comprehend and understand the mortality and transience of their roles as sports stars (Tinley, 2009a).

“There’s a certain moment when you realize that you’ve actually just left the planet for a bit and that nobody can touch you,” Rolling Stones’ guitarist, Keith Richards (2010) suggests. “You’ve been somewhere most people will never get; you’ve been to a special place. And then you want to keep going back . . . again, and when you land you get busted” (p. 97). Richards is speaking about the feelings he attained when playing music with his band members (*Ladies and Gentlemen, The Rolling Stones*) in front of a large and appreciative audience. These feelings of heightened existence and the desire to sustain them when they elude the retiring performer are similar to claims heard by retiring professional athletes. As will be seen in Chapters 4 and 5, numerous athletes cited similar kinds of experiences when referring to their lives beyond professional sports. “Once people have tasted [great success]” asks Evans and Wilson (1999), “how do they deal with failure?” (p. 151). Richards’ (2010) thoughts were particularly resonant with me in this project, not for our shared penchant for rock and roll music or our ages (Richards is approximately 14 years older than I), but for his



honesty found within his autoethnography and his willingness to subject his former lifeworld to popular dissection.

Still, as an example of how one might perceive differently a famous or successful person's place in the public arena, I offer this anecdote from 2007. I let my wife, who is not a follower of rock and roll music, take my place in an opportunity to meet with Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones. Admittedly, it was more accident than intent, but when I inquired about the meeting, she replied "We didn't know what to say to one another, so I was not impressed." Whether this brief anecdote represents a momentary inability to communicate or some larger ideological divide is unknown. However, the point being is that the relationships between producers and consumers of popular cultural forms are fluid, dynamic, and may be hegemonic or resistant. I will return to this concept in later chapters.

As will be discussed in Chapter 5, our own ideology and relation to such things as fandom, commercial sport, or personal projection into athlete-celebrity/heroes affects our interpretation of the athlete retirement paradigm. Certainly, some public figures and entertainers are better versed at verbalizing their own experiences, regardless of their motive for offering them. And consumers of popular culture may take a variety of dominate, negotiated, or resistant readings of these narratives. "When you are no longer entitled by your place in sport," suggests a student participant and former career Grand Slam tennis tournament-winning player, "it shakes the fabric of the nature you've acquired as a player."

On occasion, the subject athlete is more accurately and poignantly depicted in fiction than reportage, as sportswriter, Frank Deford (1981), does in his work on the subject. Near the end of his fictional treatment of the retired professional athlete, *Everybody's All-American*, the protagonist, Gavin Grey, realizes that, in many ways, the most pleasurable times of his life happened when he was a star football player some years ago. Deford's protagonist suggests to a fellow player after a touchdown that "it can't ever get any better than this. Never" (p. 366). But what Deford is foregrounding in his fictional dialogue is that many years later, his character, Gavin Grey, will come to an understanding—as perhaps does Keith Richards—of the place that fame and entitlement have played in their lives. "And, of course," as Deford completes his thought about the best times of Grey's life, ". . . it never could and it never did and it never would have" (p. 366).

In my own brushes with fame as a professional athlete for 17 years (1983-1999), I saw, experienced, and felt the multi-directional pull, the effect that fame can have on an individual. I wrote the following in 2002, and upon review in 2011, believed it was a psychological, period-influenced, and sweeping claim:

When an athlete who comes from humble beginnings and makes it to the pros, two things can happen. They can appreciate their roots, keep their egos in check and buy their mammas a house in a new suburb [cliché as it is].

The other thing that can happen is that they will forget all this [their roots] and revel in their newfound success, take the adulation and internalize it, make it part of the *new them*, the pro athlete. (Tinley, 2003. pp. 64, 65, italics and parentheses added)

I believe now that I failed then to take into account that many elite and professional athletes do understand and/or negotiate the myriad tyrannies of fame

and *celebrityhood* that come with some athletic success. I had both created and felt resistance to my belief that my life could never get any better than it was as a professional athlete, even though I had been told by a fellow retired professional athlete that “the sooner you can realize the best part of your life is over, the sooner you will be able rebuild a very nice life.” At that period (2000-2002), I did not adequately explore the contexts that influenced an athlete’s response to fame. Thus, my suggestion at the time was that fame and success in professional sports, viewed as a concurrent mutual experience, could be compartmentalized.

In Chapter 6, I offer an example of an epistemological arc of understanding seen in athletes who have been out of sport for several years. A portion of these findings emerged by comparing interview data from the same participating (retired athlete) subjects ( $n = 7$ ) over a 9- or 10-year period (2001-2010/11). Comparing data from semi-structured interviews of retired professional athletes secured in a 2002 study (Tinley, 2002a) with data gathered in more recent (2010/2011) interviews of the same subjects, many of the athletes spoke of gaining perspective on their transition experience as months and years passed (see Chapter 6).

One of the challenges to qualitative research in this area remains in gaining access to the athlete’s inner thoughts on the subject. The longitudinal aspect of this study, however minor, is relative to the other expanded areas and one of this study’s successes. The psychological effect of an athlete’s (or other creative performing artists’) willingness to document their feelings about sport (or

their art) is largely unexplored. Highly-informing narrative methodologies, as well, are rare in critical sport inquiry (Lavallee et al., 1997a).

When elite athletes who have been adulated by many fans suffer emotional trauma upon exit from sport, it is sometimes surprising to them and complicates their transition (Stier, 2007). They do not generally offer their feelings up for research and public or academic deconstruction. Pipkin (2008) claims that “the typical lens for studying sport is almost always positioned *outside* the lines” (p. 3). Still, consumers of sport and, in particular, sport retirement and *fallen hero* narratives are an oft seen journalistic and filmic product. (In Chapter 5, Indirect Contexts of Transition, I will address how and why specific cases of empirical research and popular depictions of the theme may complement or contrast each other). What is important for the reader here is to gain an understanding of how athletes come to absorb their identity in the role, to imagine how it will extend into their exit from that role, and to see its direct connection to the central issues of human concern that this study will address. This transferability is made possible by the universality of the narrative and its applicability to other structures in modern sport.

“It’s entirely thematic,” suggests a study participant who works as an Executive Producer with a major cable TV network. “Audiences can relate to the classic rise, fall, and rise again structure; it’s just easy for them, especially when framed around a sport subject.” A portion of this study includes an effort to explain the subject’s eclectic popularity—beyond the notion of accessibility

offered by this participant—and the appeal of its universal themes, narratives, and concepts.

Study participants interviewed for this project, when questioned about the indirect contexts of retirement, suggested that on occasion, popular culture's version of the elements of athlete transition retain more veracity than academic investigation(s). One media scholar and follower of Major League Baseball claimed that, "Kevin Costner's portrayal of Billy Chapel in the 1999 film, *For the Love of the Game*, illustrates the psychological state of the aging and retiring athlete better than many published qualitative studies on the subject."

Another study participant who was recently retired from playing 14 years in MLB (Major League Baseball) suggested that,

A lot of fans and writers want a piece of you when you're playing. That makes sense to me. It's the business of being an entertainer, you know? But they seem to want a different kind of piece as you when you begin to leave the game, and I'm still figuring that one out. Maybe I'm just a human souvenir that reminds them of something else. I don't feel like an earthly god but maybe, in some way to them, I am.

What this participant is perhaps referring to are the representative contrasts and resulting conflicts found when, in Marxist fashion, there is alienation when the laborer is separated from the product they produce. For the professional athlete, the product is the entertainment they provide to sport consumers. But when their declining physicality or deviant social behavior or their negotiation with the changing tastes in the sport consumer alter their ability to produce that product there exists the potential for a multiplicity of alienation(s). The athletes are alienated from their product, from the fans that provided self-validation (and,

in turn, “produced” them as actors), and ultimately from themselves when their self-proscribed image is altered or erased and they lose the ability to self-determine their actions, identity, and direction. They lose the ability to conceive of themselves as the controller of their destiny. Imagine producing a form of physical culture entertainment but not being able to relate to how it is consumed. What this study will conclude is that this form and type of separation contributes to the quality of the elite and professional athlete’s exit from sport.

Concurrently, sport consumers are integral in the production of the athlete-as-producer of entertainment. When the fan-as-consumer no longer has any need for athlete-as-entertainer, the athlete may be summarily disposed of, further complicating the binary produce/consume and dispose paradigm. Perhaps, as Boorstin (1987) suggests “the root of our problem, is in our novel power to make men famous” (p. 46). In the next section and in Chapter 5, I explore this concept in greater detail.

I note the inclusion of varied accesses and approaches to the subject for the following reasons. First, within the interdependence of the empirical and the popular, I identify findings and offer conclusions that contribute to the literature of athlete retirement and its possible applications. Second, and true to the project’s subtitle—*contexts, intersections, and exploration*, a multiple narrative and textual approach allows theorization well beyond the frameworks of the behavioral sciences of psychology and sociology where much of the academic literature has been situated (see Appendices C and D). The application and articulation of such key concepts as found in the discipline of Cultural Studies—

representation, relations of power, subjectivity, textual analysis, and popular culture studies—broaden the discourse and methodological approaches, opening up a space where the subject of athlete retirement accesses new ways of consideration and conceptualization. Finally, a consideration of various portrayals of the athlete in his or her role as they exit from their sports career helps to support some of the larger social questions upon which this project is grounded. In the following section, I offer suggestions as to why the subject of athlete retirement and transition retains social and humanitarian importance beyond what currently exists in popular ideology.

### **The Question of *Why These Stories***

Many of the questions driving this project are grounded in how I viewed the social import of athlete retirement and were developed over my years of analyzing the subject of athlete retirement and transition. They were catalyzed by both the dearth of context-based findings and conclusions in the literature, and by my own experience and desire to advance the discourse into a more polemical arena, where issues of human rights are unearthed and addressed. As a researcher who fits the subject criteria (see also the *Author Positionality* section below where I explain my researcher bias), a sampling of my socially-infused inquiries include, but are not limited to, (a) has commercial sport reified athletes as products to be produced, consumed, and disposed? (b) who is complicit in this paradigm and what are the effects on the structures and participants of modern sport? (c) are these effects worthy of analysis, exposure, and re-structuring? and (d) how might the findings be applied to improve what logistic politico challenges that exist

within the treatment of athlete-workers within modern sport? Several anecdotes below help to explicate the necessary thread of altruism considered by this project's author.

On November 20, 2006, former NFL (National Football League) star Andre Walters was found dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. Because of repeated injuries to the brain suffered during his 15-plus years as a collegiate and professional football player, there was cause to believe that the clinical depression Walters suffered from was a direct result of multiple concussions and subsequent damage to the brain. With the permission of his survivors, a portion of his brain was studied by the forensic pathologist, Dr. Bennet Omalu of the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Omalu told the *New York Times* that the condition of Waters' brain tissue was that of what would be expected in an 85-year-old man. Dr. Omalu added that there were characteristics of someone being in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease (Schwarz, 2007).

In 2003, The Center for the Study of Retired Athletes at the University of North Carolina concluded from a study of nearly 2,500 former NFL players that cognitive impairment, Alzheimer's-like symptoms, and depression rose in direct proportion to the number of concussions a player had sustained. Perhaps the most visible, if not pathos-laden, example of this syndrome is that of NFL Hall of Famer Mike Webster, a four-time Super Bowl winner who suffered from a variety of physical and mental ailments upon retirement. Webster, rated one of the top 100 NFL players of all time by ESPN, lived for a time in his truck, broke, jobless and unable to raise his four children. He died of heart-related causes on



September 24, 2002. He was 50 years old. His survivors were in litigation with the NFL over disability benefits for several years (Schwartz, 2007). Interestingly, an employee of the Sport Legacy Institute, the business arm associated with Boston University where Dr. Omalu is tenured, asked me if I would be interested in donating my post mortem brain tissue since “I’ve pushed my body in places few have done before.” While I appreciate their efforts at science in CTE exploration, I declined, though the reader will have to draw their own conclusions as to the reason.

While signifying narratives suggesting the notion of “premature death” (Werthner & Orlick, 1986) in former professional athletes are constructed in and through both mainstream media and academic journals, the athlete’s personal narratives of specific physiological and psycho-social medical maladies is a telling facet within the study of the emotional trauma of transitioning and retired elite and professional athletes. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, morality-related themes offered by all participant groups are seen in each of the three context areas identified in this study—direct, indirect, and emerging philosophical.

There exist within popular media sources many other significant stories of athletes failing to leave sport in a manner that represents accomplishment, success, integrity, personal autonomy, and choice. The sports consumer’s interest in the “fallen hero” narrative, in concert with the sport journalist’s willingness to craft those related texts, perhaps illustrates a barometer of current states of moral valuation and tastes within the sport consumption area of our society (E. Cohen,

2004). Still, if we realize the paradigmatic transcendence and multiplicity of the hero parable, we might begin to grasp the universality of this particular narrative. Odysseus' wife, Penelope, for example, suffers the effect of unruly suitors when he is considered dead during the 10 years he takes to return home from the Trojan Wars. British pop singer David Bowie pens and sings about a character named Major Tom in the summer of 1969, a modern day space hero who cannot (or will not) return to earth after he has discovered how inconsequential human conflicts are after viewing the planet earth from the vast (and what Major Tom feels is infinitely beautiful) purview of outer space. The poet Robert Hamblin (as cited in Vanderwerken & Wertz, 1985) writes in his 1978 verse, "On the Death of the Evansville University Basketball team in a Plane Crash, December 13, 1977,"

the orphaned heart knows  
that every contest is do or die,  
that all opponents are Death  
masquerading in school colors.

What Hamblin might be suggesting here is the projection of mortality into the games of sport and that perhaps we are conflicted by this metaphor as we so often use sports to symbolically create the illusion of *immortality*. Higgins (2010) offers a lament on the death of Bob Biniak at 51 years old as a long-forgotten member of skateboarding's *Dogtown and the Z-Boys* (Stecyk, 2002) for the *New York Times*. I have read the *New York Times* nearly every day for several years and cannot remember when the last time the sport of skateboarding was referenced in the paper. What is significant in these narratives is how mortality is connected with the retired athlete in popular and literary sources.

What is made explicit in the fictional use, public opinion, and treatment<sup>5</sup> of the transitioning athlete's early *demise*, a term often used in conjunction with and referencing of a kind of *social death* (an often cited thanatological model, i.e. Schlossberg, 1981), is that we need to study the subject in connection with its details. For example, there appears some connection between both popular discourse and empirical studies and the connection of human mortality with the retirement of iconic elite and professional athletes. Athlete participants in this study offered 79 themes that were coded as *Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness, and Shifting Identities*. Other participant groups (sports administrators and sports media) offered a total of 40 themes in the same area. This concept will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 5.

These brief biographies and their representations considered in various contexts of the social world, offer an introduction to one of the bases for this project—that there are indirect contexts that affect the athlete retirement experience—and that one of those contexts—the media's attention to retiring athletes—often utilizes a mortality and thanatology theme in its thematic structure.

The extensive qualitative analysis of an athlete's personal narrative that offers the researcher rich, organic material from which to induce a more empirical conceptualization, however, remains a desirable but daunting form of data collection (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Webb & Nasco, 1998). Applying a thanatological approach to athlete transition, for example, an athlete's *death*—mortal, social, or psychological—should be considered in the context of and

concert with a modern society that has in ways that will be explored, re-subjectified its communal athlete heroes (J. Coakley, 1983; Schau, Gilley, & Wolfinbarger, 2009; Schlossberg, 1981). Older models of thanatology applied to athlete retirement studies were too restrictive. Recent<sup>6</sup> scholarly theorization of athlete retirement suggests moving toward the development of a “more complex and multifaceted perspective of the course of athletic retirement and adaptation to post-sports life” (Cecić Erpič et al., 2004, p. 45). Previous suggestions for contextualization in studying athlete transition have been offered (J. Coakley, 1983; Lavalley et al., 1997a). Still, due to factors such as the challenge in methodology and access to qualified and willing study participants, conclusive results in studying contexts of sport retirement have been lacking.

The most accessible data and conclusions in this project were found in the exploration and analysis of *direct contexts* of athlete transition—those attitudes, circumstances, and issues that directly affect the quality of life after sport for the elite and professional athlete. This may be because the reader can relate to the specificity of these contexts as they extend into similar life transition and changes that they have experienced. Additionally, the intersections between the contributory *direct contexts* and the *indirect contexts* (that also constitute the conditions of exit) are a unique and previously undocumented area of the athlete retirement discourse (see Figures 2a-2d, 3, and 7). Direct and indirect contexts as referred in this project are further addressed below and in later chapters. In the next section, I offer an explanation of the author’s position in the project and the role of reflexivity within the theoretical frameworks.

### **Author Positionality, Reflexivity, and the Athlete Self-Narrative**

Due to the fact that the author qualifies as a study participant along specific inclusionary lines,<sup>7</sup> it is important in this *Introduction* to explain and clarify the relationship between researcher and topic. As the results of this project have suggested, there is a positive correlation between the quality of an athlete's transition out of sport and their willing and reflexive engagement in some form of text that functions psychoanalytically in affecting the quality of their transition out of sport. Results suggest that the more an athlete was willing to discuss, share, or communicate in any manner their experience leaving sport, the further reduced was the long term emotional trauma they experienced.

This study was initially catalyzed partly by a desire to further the body of knowledge within the athlete retirement discourse and partly by my own heightened curiosity about the origins of the varied responses to the narratives (both academic and popular) displayed when an elite or professional athlete exits sport and enters the public sphere. This is exemplified in the question of how an athlete's autobiography might function within the athlete retirement paradigm. Autobiographies, as Bjorklund (1998) reminds us, "are a bountiful source of information about vocabularies of the self, and they allow us to study changes in self-understanding over time" (p. 8). I will attest to gaining a better understanding of the athlete transition experience, as well as the overall discourse after writing about my own experience(s) in leaving professional sport (Tinley, 2003, 2011a, 2012). One study participant claimed that "when you retire you are faced with who you are" and then qualified that suggestion by claiming that he could not say

that to anyone until he had been retired for some years and had written his autobiography. Several other athlete participants in this study, for example, noted the positive effect of offering their experiences in verbal and written format, even if developed with a co-author and for the primary purpose of advancing their name recognition in a commercially-motivated venture. Some participants suggested that they did not offer more details of their own retirement experience to nonathletes because they did not feel the recipient(s) (friends, media, sport fans, sport business manager, or family) could relate to or *understand* their emotional travails after leaving a career that many sport consumers covet as desirable (Sparkes, 2004; see Appendix E).

When I retired from sport in 1999 and spent nearly a decade writing metaphorically about themes such as redemption, mortality, and self-exploration (Tinley, 2003, 2007b), I thought that my family would be able to read the material (both published and not) and it would offer them some explanation of the feelings I had experienced. The inverse had more veracity, however, and my wife and children spoke of being embarrassed by how personal my work had become. One athlete who was both a participant in this study and my 2002 study (Tinley, 2002b) revealed that he had failed to realize shortly after his exit from sport that “most people just don’t get it.” But several years later, he understood that there was a necessary “screening process,” as he labeled it, and that when he had spoke openly about his feelings and experiences upon exit from sport he wanted to know that the listener had “earned the conversation.” Over time, however, and as he

became more comfortable in his new occupation and identity, he admitted to “opening the gates wider” to people who inquired about his life in and after sport.

One analog in the discourse of reflexive narrative might be, as referenced above, the returning soldier—a reference I will use numerous times in this project and a subject I was inexplicably attracted to soon after leaving professional sports. Much literature exists that chronicles how men and women return from theaters of war and find solace, comfort, and healing in the reflexive “earned conversation” with fellow veterans or those with whom they find confidence (Fornari, 1975; Hedges, 2002; Kovic, 1976; Shay, 1994; Tick, 2005; Tinley, 2001). At the same time, there exist few examples of academic writers with a personal history in elite or professional sports. Few writers have combined empirical, postplaying career research with autobiographical projects. CLR James’ (1963) *Beyond a Boundary* and Michael Oriard’s (1982b) *The End of Autumn* are perhaps the mostly widely known within academic literature and each are respected for their scholarly rigor, social commentary, and authorial integrity. What is exposed within these texts and this project are the contexts and conditions that contribute to, intersect with, and inform the resultant quality of an athlete’s life after sport. James’ commentary achieves this through memoir, informed political commentary, and the cultural aesthetic of cricket. Oriard (1982b) is successful as he unpacks and deconstructs the athlete hero figure in relation to his own feelings in the role, and in a second text (1982a) where he places these heroic feats and exploits within significant works of sports fiction during the period 1868 to 1980.

Following examples of autoethnography as one theoretical tradition of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2005), my historical background in sports prompts me to ask, as Patton (2002) inquires, “How do my own experiences of this culture connect with and offer insight about the culture, situation, event, and/or a way of life?” (p. 132). Throughout my investigations, I have attempted and believe was successful in remembering Sands’ (2002) claim that “in the era of new or interpretive ethnography . . . the ethnographer is living testimony to one level of self versus another” (p. 124) or the transfer of self-identity after sport retirement. In the interest of validity, I had to acknowledge and practice a separation of roles in data collection. Yet, I was able to utilize my own experiences transitioning out of sport for logistical, empathetic, and structural purposes, and was necessarily cautious about authorial intrusion and subjectivity that might reduce validity. Borrowing from the work of Barker (2008), du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus (1997), Gray (2003), Rorty (1989), and Willis (1981), on occasion I will interject my own narrative as a study-qualified participant with an extensive history as a professional athlete and a researcher who has considered and published on the subject from both popular and academic approaches (Tinley, 2003, 2010a). Following Rosaldo’s (1989) claim about the ethnographer as a “subject [who] occupies a position or structural location and observes with a particular angle of vision” (p. 19), I utilize my position as a retired professional athlete for subjective access in my own and other’s career transition experiences. There are risks to this, of course, as Pipkin (2008) notes, and that on occasion, “the power of the personality is inseparable from the subjectivity of the



autobiography” (p. 3). I address these challenges in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

This rest of this introductory section will offer a sample of significant findings and preview content for each of the five remaining chapters.

### **A Preview of Significant Findings**

In this section I note several of the findings that will be discussed at length in later chapters. The first area is that of the role of “community” or sometimes noted by “social support” as a significant contextual factor in determining the quality of an athlete’s exit from sport. The importance of internal support systems has been identified in research on social gerontology. Schlossberg (1981) and others (e.g., Cobb, 1976) have considered the role of social support networks found among transitioning individuals. Other theorists (Parker, 1994; Thomas & Ermler, 1988) have noted the importance and influence of the coaches and sporting associations in preparing athletes for the challenges beyond sport. While “social support” is noted as a factor in influencing athlete retirement, I will argue that the breath and meaning of “social support” has been too generic in its previous academic investigation, definition, and application. As noted by Lavalee and Wylleman (2007), when referring to the *specific context* of social support as an influential factor in the quality of the retirement experience, “little research has been [qualitatively] conducted in this area with retired athletes” (p. 11).

Findings in the area of *social support and influence* concluded from this project were achieved organically through many hours and months of extensive athlete interviews and ethnographies. Utilizing Patton’s (2002) emergent design

flexibility, once particularized notions of social support and community were observed and noted on a regular basis, a naturalistic inquiry was utilized to offer subjects additional opportunity to comment on possible contextual roles of social support and community.

While a detailed analysis of the area is beyond the scope of this study, there is suggestion from the data that there may be a noteworthy physiological component in transition out of sport that connects levels of social support and emotional trauma with identifiable bio markers. There does exist nonsports related literature, for example, documenting the neuroendocrine response to social relations (Seeman & McEwen, 1996). Hennessy, Kaiser, and Sachser (2009) claim that

studies dating back to the 1970s have documented many cases in which the presence of a social companion can moderate HPA (*hypothalamic pituitary adrenocorticoid*) responses to stressors. However, there are also many cases in which this *social buffering* of the HPA axis is not observed. (Abstract, my italics)

In Chapter 6, Conclusions, Emerging Contexts, and Recommendations, I offer additional conclusions based upon my own medical records and personal narratives linking HPA response to emotional trauma experienced during exit from sport in an effort to suggest further areas of research.

Of the subject athletes ( $n = 29$ ), 26 athletes or 89.6% referred to the notion of *community* or a closely-related, connotative term in suggesting that as a context of athlete retirement, *community* and *social support*, when viewed positively, contributed significantly to a less emotionally-traumatic transition. I identified 98 raw data themes noting social support and community as a factor in the athletes'

retirement experience. These themes were collapsed into the 2nd order theme of Physical and Psychosocial Factors, along with “health” and “preretirement counseling.” In very few cases, the notion of community is referred to in a negative context. These specific examples and additional data results will be discussed in Chapter 4. However, it is important to note here that most of the literature citing issues of community and/or social support fails to go into great detail about how the athlete defines the terms and their narrative explanation of how they felt it functioned in their transition experience. As is discussed at length in Chapters 2 and 3, concepts of “identity” are frequently explored as the primary elements of the athlete experience within the literature. A finding of this study is how identity and social support intersect.

The importance of considering the issues of identity within athlete retirement literature are well documented (Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997; S. A. Jackson, Dover, & Mayocchi, 1998; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). But this study found through its inquiry into the contexts of an athlete’s exit from sport that discussions surrounding self-identity—when explored in lengthy interviews—suggest additional layers of meaning. As Giddens (1991) suggests, “an account of self-identity has to be developed in terms of an overall picture of the psychological make-up of the individual” (p. 35). It was offered by several participants that their sense of self-identity was better understood and restructured when supported by variously-constituted communities.<sup>8</sup> The end conclusion was that types and levels of well-perceived social support were instrumental in positively effecting the quality of an athlete’s retirement experience. This

conclusion is supported by the inductive analysis of raw data themes (athlete participants  $n = 862$ , sports media participants  $n = 270$ , sport administrator participants  $n = 304$ ) identified from transcribed participant interviews and subsequently collapsed into context areas; a significant and notable one of which is “issues of community and social support.”

While noted theorists such as Dewey, Mead, Blumer, and others have suggested that the “self” is always relational, this concept has been understudied in the sport retirement literature. This study directly links the athlete retirement experience with the importance of connecting the context of *community* as a positive factor in the transition experience. Although such concepts as symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969) are well understood when noted as a distinction between personal or face-to-face interaction and macro level social relations in sociology-based literature, a particular finding of this project indicated that the idea of *community* and *social support* are interdependently linked to other *direct contexts* (i.e., gender, sport specificity, and levels of achievement) and *indirect contexts* (i.e., how an athlete is signified in the sport media). As will be discussed in Chapter 5, results will suggest intersections between micro and macro level relations as they are exposed in the context of “community or social support” and how they may be further studied or applied to other nonsport-related incidents of life transition and change.

A second finding to emerge from the *direct context* exploration of this project is the effect of gender on the quality of an athlete’s retirement. While anecdotally it has been proffered within popular ideology that female athletes

experience less emotional trauma in athlete transition than males, often with the use of patriarchal-centric ideas such as “athlete role identity is replaced by motherhood,” “there are less job opportunities for women to play pro sports than men,” and “most females don’t feel the pressure to succeed at high level sports,” these are unsubstantiated (Tinley, 2007a). This current study counters those suppositions. Thirty-two (34) raw data themes noting “gender” as a factor in their transition were identified from comments made by 15 of the 29 athlete participants (51.7%). With females constituting 11 of 29 or 37.9% of the athlete participants interviewed about direct contexts of their retirement experience, it was concluded that female athletes do appear to experience less emotional trauma when leaving elite or professional sport but not for the reasons often referred to in popular ideology. In a future study, data results by gender should be reviewed separately (male vs. female). Initially, gender had been identified (first in the pilot study and validated in athlete responses, both male and female) as a notable and useful context in describing the quality of an athlete’s exit from sport. Gender was collapsed in the 2nd order category (along with age and race/ethnicity) to Individual Characteristics of the Athlete. A number of raw data themes within the context of gender were also collapsed down to several conceptual ideas explaining the differences. First, females reported a more significant validation of their physical self through sports. Second, they noted specific socializing factors that enabled a more positive transition experience, and finally the data were collapsed to conclude that female athletes had “practiced,” as one female athlete participant

noted, dealing with significant emotionally-charged decisions of consequence more so than male athletes.

More specific results of the study are further discussed at length in Chapter 4, Direct Contexts of the Athlete Exit; Chapter 5, Indirect Context of the Athlete Exit; and Chapter 6, Conclusions, Emerging Contexts, and Recommendations.

### **A Preview of the Following Five Chapters**

The outline below offers the reader a preview of areas to be discussed in the following five chapters.

#### **Chapter 2. Defining the Field of Athlete Retirement and its Evolving Terrain**

- A. Micro and macro social systems in athlete retirement
- B. A review of how the athlete in transition and retirement is viewed in structures of commercial sport
- C. A review of how the retiring athlete is constructed and consumed in popular culture

#### **Chapter 3. The Empiricism of Athlete Retirement: A Literature Review**

#### **Chapter 4. Direct Contexts of Athlete Transition and Retirement**

- A. Research methodologies inclusive of hypotheses, limits, and challenges
- B. Results of data, discussion of synthesis
- C. Primary findings and conclusions on each of the 13 identified direct contexts

- D. Comparing current findings and conclusions with empirical, structural, and popular ideology

#### Chapter 5. Indirect Contexts of Athlete Retirement: Between the Myths, Modes, and Meanings

- A. Research methods and results of nonathlete data collection
- B. How structural and popular narratives affect the individual
- C. The role and place of fandom, celebrity culture, and athlete/hero narrative in the athlete retirement paradigm
- D. Placement and meaning of athlete retirement in popular culture
- E. Theoretical influences on social placement of athlete retirement

#### Chapter 6. Conclusions, Emerging Contexts, and Suggestions

- A. Review of results for direct and indirect contexts inquiry
- B. Explanation and discussion of emerging philosophical contexts
- C. Contrast and comparisons across longitudinal studies
- D. Applications and potential pedagogy
- E. Suggestions of further research

CHAPTER TWO

EXPLORING THE FIELDS AND SPACES OF ATHLETE  
RETIREMENT AND ITS EVOLVING TERRAIN

**Introduction**

In this chapter, I situate the subject of athlete retirement and transition within the areas of structural and popular approaches to the subject. I discuss such areas as the mortality narrative and subjective identity creation as seen through these two approaches. The purpose of this level of inquiry is to support my central argument that the athlete retirement discourse is better explored when multiple *contextualities* are inclusive, if not the focus of a topical study. I argue and support the notion that contexts themselves are made explicit when discussed in the context(s) of how they are presented. This is to say, for example, if the data suggest that “social support and influence” are a significant factor in the quality of an athlete’s transition, then an additional layer of inquiry will include how that suggestion compares across participant groups, where and how it is observed in the literature, the structures of commercial sport and popular culture, and how it extends into other identified contexts such as sport specificity, age, region, and gender. Also in this chapter, I define the field in two major categories: *structural*, and *popular*. A third category or way of approaching the field is the *empirical* categorization and is confined to published material found primarily in academic



journals or media sources that focus on scholarly inquiry. This area is discussed in Chapter 3.

*Structural* categories will include (a) how the subject of athlete transition is defined, contested, legislated, or experienced within commercial sport organization(s) and its myriad surrounding economies and corporate entities, and (b) sport media and its forms of representation, image production, and reification of the transitioning athlete. *Popular* depictions of the field include those seen in mainstream journalism (e.g., sports sections of print, televisual, and digital news), fan and sport consumer relations with the transitioning and retired athlete, and use of the transitioning athlete as narrative theme in popular culture forms such as film and fiction. Certainly, there is sometimes pervasive, ambiguous, and contestable overlap in how the subject exists across each of these areas and to what relational effect the subject is constituted and represented in one area over another. While I address several areas of overlap, it is beyond the scope of this project to mine the multitude of cross-thematic examples and their possible meanings. The reader is encouraged to consider for themselves how personal meaning might be imbued across conceptual and theoretical lines. In Chapter 6, the areas suggested for further study and exploration note specifically where we might focus further investigation.

I will also address the place of athlete retirement from a phenomenological perspective which, strictly speaking, would fall within the micro branch of sociology if analyzed alone. As noted in Chapter 1, as a researcher who meets participant inclusion criteria, I offer, on occasion, personal anecdotes that support

the project's ultimate conclusions. In later chapters, where I explore the intersections of contexts and results of my data collection, the benefits of micro/macro synthesis as framework for analysis will be indicated.

Finally, in this chapter I will discuss how the various methods, modes, and experiences of an athlete retiring from sport are different from other forms of retirement and life transition. Additional data and discussion from this study on the effects of nonempirical or popular narratives on the quality of an athlete's exit is covered in Chapter 5. I begin here with a brief review of how my topic is theoretically-situated in both macro and micro sociocultural approaches, historically, and in more recent discourse.

### **Theoretical Situation: Micro and Macro, Past and Present**

To explore the contexts (and their intersections) within the field of athlete retirement and transition, it is necessary to define the various empirical, sport-structural, and sociocultural/popular spaces the subject inhabits. I continue by describing where and why I locate the subject in my explorations.

A review of the *direct contexts*<sup>1</sup> of most transition experiences affecting the quality of an individual athlete's exit from sport might be theorized within the *micro* branch of sociological study due to its inherent focus on issues of human agency, the individual, and phenomenology. This theoretical placement on the individual, however, has been problematic in early research on athlete retirement since it (especially when connected to a small sample size) placed much focus on the individual athlete experience and perhaps not enough on the surrounding and mutually-affective contexts—social, cultural, and structural—as they contributed

to the quality of the athlete's retirement experience (Alfermann & Gross, 1997). Additionally, early studies on athlete retirement (e.g., Mihovilovic, 1968) were based on nonrepresentative studies that included samples less validating than have been seen in more recent research (c. 2000-2011) with a more focused participant inclusionary criteria. Generally, the inclusion criteria in some early studies had not been restrictive enough, and the methods did not insure that the participants were elite or professional athletes<sup>2</sup> or that their transition experience was exemplifying of the research questions within the emerging discourse.

Much of the academic literature on athlete retirement in previous decades have been catalyzed and explored through the discipline of sport psychology and behavioral study disciplines such as career counseling and social psychology (Lavalley et al., 1997a; Schlossberg, 1981). While several popular treatments of the subject<sup>3</sup> created in the later half of the 20th century (Bouton, 1970; Exley, 1968; M. Harris, 1956; Kahn, 1971; Kinsella, 1982; Malamud, 1952; Michener, 1970; Plimpton, 1966; Sillitoe, 1959; Terkel, 1972; Updike, 1960) signaled both a literary and public interest in athlete transition among the larger popular interest in sports in society, there have been few attempts to connect the empirical and the popular. I suggest that the addition of the focus on popular formats (at times clearly connected to canonically-mythic themes) and on the media's use appropriation of the athlete as "fallen hero" and the representation of a confused and sometimes undermatured behavioral pattern by athletes leaving sport, may lead to the development of new empirical discourses in athlete transition (Briley, Schoenecke, & Carmichael, 2008; Lally, 2007; Rosenberg, 1982). I make this

claim based on data taken from this study which illustrates how the intersections of contexts relating to athlete retirement, both direct and indirect, create a reverberating coaction of occurrences that relate to the transitioning athlete (see Figures 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d, 3, & 7).

While conclusions from this study prove the quality of a retiring or transitioning athlete's life after sport is connected to the other structural and popular forms of commercial sport (see Chapter 5), the athlete and academic might both consider how the subject is placed beyond established forms of exploration. Pipkin (2008), for example, suggests that while "some of the best [academic] studies of sports have been written by historians and sociologists . . . they [academia] tend to distrust the subjective and rely more upon the objective and empirical" (p. 3). I argue there is a need for scholars working in athlete retirement to consider the notion that the reflexivity, self-analysis, and general qualitative exploration of the indirect or surrounding qualitative contexts is where we might find the answers to nagging questions still existing in the subject area (J. Coakley, 1983; Gordon, 1995). For example, Pipkin (2008), in referring to sports autobiographies, suggests that many social scientists still do not pay much attention to the "rhetorical strategies and figurative language of metaphors" (p. 3). My investigations have revealed that the effect of the *autobiographical athlete* (one who participates in the chronicling of their personal/athletic history) has been considered by the transitioning athlete as a positive experience in their lives after sport. Several athletes interviewed noted the beneficial effects felt in the processes of writing about their past experience in and after sport. One athlete

participant claimed “when I began to write my own story is when I started to put it all back together.” Another offered that “I wrote about it [retiring] a lot and about the end of my job and of all those things I knew” and when prompted to explain further she suggested that there was “a kind of liberation” when she placed her own story as an athlete in the public sphere. Data suggest that the way and means an athlete (re)constructs their own identity as an elite athlete both during and after their career has proven a valuable tool for self-reflexivity in the athlete. Marilyn (pseudonym and a nonparticipant in this study), an Olympic swimming hopeful on a college scholarship before submitting to years of (mostly self-admitted deviant but creatively-fruitful) nonathletic experiences, said this about her experience writing an insightful and best-selling memoir:

M: How did the experience of writing your life story recast your thoughts of yourself as an athlete?

Marilyn: It was like discovering—or rediscovering, since I’m guessing I had muscle memory/DNA knowledge, you know—my body and life in metaphors. Writing that book was like shedding several skins and emerging so differently back into the world.

In the next section, I continue with my discussions of where and why I place the topic of athlete retirement and transition. This is offered to support some of my central arguments that the topic resonates in our social and cultural worlds beyond the study of the individual leaving a specific occupation. It is in identifying the contexts and connecting them to the effects of how retired athletes are situated where we come to this project’s conclusions.

## Topic Positionality

As the primary research question in this project is framed around identifying and exploring the contexts that effect an athlete's exit from sport, I avoided the a priori *placement* of my inquiry beyond the three emergent context categories noted above (direct, indirect, and emerging philosophical). As will be explained in detail (see Chapters 4, 5, and 6), these areas emerged from naturalistic inquiry. Additionally, from the outset we should remind ourselves that in "seeing stars" or looking at a particularly (media-exposed) population and their role(s) in society, the view itself is contextually-based upon both the researcher and reader's own experiences, ideologies, and relations to high-level sports and its' iconic athletes (see Appendix E). For the athlete/reader who has had some degree of experience and/or performance success in elite or professional sport, for example, they may take a supportive position when reading a transitioning athlete's quotes laced with such themes as denial, identity-confusion, anger, health challenges, and frustration as they regale their experiences leaving sport. But a larger consumer populace might take a confused if not oppositional read on the subject of elite athletes retiring. I opted to allow the initial data results to drive the inquiry—the specific contexts indentified by the subject participants—and the driving research question to remain: What are those contexts that affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport and what do they tell us about the structures of commercial sport and those who constitute them? Still, it is worth noting some of the variety in response to questions about transitioning athletes.

“They go from hero to zero,” one randomly chosen fan at a MLB baseball game told me in an unplanned question about retiring athletes. “I would’ve loved to be a pro ball player, but I’m not, and I can’t pretend to understand what they’re going through. But I know they made a lot of money and probably had a great time.” Sport business administrators ranging from team presidents to athlete’s agents to media pundits opined variously. Their thoughts and ideas—both professional and ideological—were aligned to and infused with their own interests, beliefs, socialization, and a number of their own contextual bases for reactions to and conclusions about elite and transitioning athletes. Sport journalists appear to favor the negative case studies of athletes who have suffered emotional, personal, and financial setbacks or have attempted failed returns to sport after a first retirement (Rhoden, 2010; Shafer, 2010).

To understand the contexts that affect the quality of an athlete’s transition out of sport, I avoided positioning the subject in one particular theoretical approach or establishing a narrow hypothesis. Instead, as is explored below and in later chapters, I opt for a multi-perspectival view of the subject and hypothesize that the literature is lacking in too few methodologies that include extensive qualitative analysis. However, logistics require that I limit the range of my textual and critical strategies and inquiries to a manageable number, while constantly remembering that all interpretation, as Kellner (1995) suggests, “is necessarily mediated by one’s [own] perspective and is thus inevitably laden with presuppositions, values, biases, and limitations” (p. 98).

One study participant (sport administrator), then an acting president of a Major League Baseball team<sup>4</sup> told me that “the team or the league owe these guys nothing after they quit. They either have the skills to make it in another career or they don’t. There are no guarantees in this business.” In many cases within this project the values, biases, and ideologies of the participants were evident in their transcribed responses and raw data themes culled from interview transcripts. Thus, the positioning of the subject became a matter of allowing the participants’ responses—regardless of their specific occupation in sport—to suggest the place(s) and conditions where we might consider how athletes are contextually-effected in their exit from sport.

As noted, much of the exploration in this project is centered around an attempt to identify not only the athlete’s own experiences connected to the *direct contexts* in which they played and exited sport but also to correlate the *indirect contexts* that interdependently affected the quality of an athlete’s life as they left sports (see Figures 3 and 7).

As athletes begin to recreate identities, roles, ideologies, social structures, careers, somatic body types, and health bases—all while negotiating myriad *intrinsic* influences within the transition period—they must concurrently negotiate *extrinsic* sources that are constituted both in a social world and the structures of modern commercial sport. These extrinsic or *indirect contexts* as noted in Chapter 1 include: (a) their relations with commercial structures of sport (teams, leagues, governing bodies, sponsors, etc.); (b) mass media’s representation of them both as they played and as they existed beyond sport; and (c) sport consumer



reaction(s) to the public narrative of their exit. The *indirect contexts* under which an athlete leaves sport are a topical and methodological opportunity to expand the body of knowledge by use of such enhanced research methods as “cultural ethnography” (Gray, 2003; Willis, 1981), textual analysis, and reception studies (Barker, 2008). While I was careful not to cross methodologies such that conclusions could not be made, it is noted that use of a “multiple methods” approach as put forth by Silverman (2005) and the “circuit of culture” (du Gay et al., 1997) are used as research tools to best fit the research opportunities. As I explored the sport fan’s production, consumption, representation, and identity use of the fallen or retired athlete-as-hero, for example, I utilized the example of work by du Gay et al. (1997). They offer an empirical model to explore the contextualization of the athlete retirement experience as viewed from such areas as mass media content, sport consumer, and relations with various *structurations* within sport.

An example that explicates the many layers of this paradigm might be found in noting the types and levels of daily physical interaction that professional athletes have with the public. Tim Sullivan, a long-tenured and award-winning sports writer for the *San Diego Union Tribune*, suggests a widening separation between the athletes and consumers of commercial sport:

We ask ourselves, “What could *I* possibly do for a retired professional athlete?” They have it all. They did it all. They live in a different world, behind guarded gates with little real public contact. *They* aren’t the same as you and me. (My italics)

What Sullivan is suggesting is that due to factors such as increasingly high levels

of financial remuneration for athletes of media-fueled sports and media's own predatory desire for sport-related content, many professional athletes have the financial means and choose to insulate themselves and their families from regular, daily contact with sports media, fans, and the general populace. When they leave sport, they often remain in both a physical and social location of isolation that hinders their ability to reintegrate themselves in a social world beyond that which they experienced while playing. Certainly, some iconic athletes remain separated from a mainstream populace well beyond their playing days. But results from this study will conclude that the addition of a positive social support and influence facilitated less psychological trauma in the retirement experience.

The levels and overlaps with popular narratives will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5. In the next section, I situate the subject of athlete retirement within an overarching *mortality narrative* that transcends both micro and macro analysis. I offer this section since the theme of mortality was seen infused in much of the participant's data as the material was identified and coded. As noted in Chapter 1, 378 of 1,436 or 26% of the total raw data themes offered by all three study participant groups were coded as Emerging Philosophical Contexts. One area that constituted Emerging Philosophical Contexts, *Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness, and Shifting Identities*, showed 119 of the total 1,436 (or 8%) of all raw data themes in this section. Thus, the notion of fear of mortality (and how it was used in signification) and shifting awareness of the body and identity becomes a significant and symbolic element—in particular when it is related to self-identity. In the next section, I discuss how these

intersecting issues of mortality and self-identity are seen and placed in my conceptual approaches.

### **To An Athlete Dying: Connecting Athlete Retirement With Issues of Mortality, Identity, and the Self Narrative**

Another intersection of micro and macro situation of athlete retirement is found in identity (re)construction. While issues of altered identity within sport transition are well studied in the literature (Lavalee et al., 1997a), findings within this study relating to identity were mostly observed and noted within the contexts of new and emerging social and self-narrative frameworks. One of the frameworks—fear of changing identity as it signifies a kind of mortality—the death of one identity and the birth of another—is seen in a number of athlete participant responses. One study participant, in speaking about the feelings he had while working on his autobiography, claimed that

writing my history was like reconstructing my past, like trying to make sense of all the things that I did, the decisions that I made. It taught me a lot about who I was, and whom I chose to associate with, which helped me in thinking about what I was going to do next because before that, I did not feel alive.

Another athlete, who did not fit the inclusion criteria but had competed competitively in college sports and before moving into higher education as a professor, said that “writing my memoir helped me to understand the role of sports in society, my support systems in my past but also the death of my older feelings about who I was in relation to my social group.” These comments align with similar raw data themes offered by additional study participants and suggest that there are revealing intersections between fear and mortality, identity and

social support, the individual and the collective, and the micro and macro sociological structures aligned with sport. These intersections will be discussed in later chapters.

A driving motive in this study was for me to connect my own previous thoughts, ideas, and feelings about leaving a career in sport with the many texts I had created in an effort to understand how the transition functioned in me as well as others. Some of the texts were popular musings and others of substantive empirical bases (see all listings for S. Tinley in References). This study has functioned as a way to support my identified hypotheses but also as a way to connect my own exit with my emotions and myriad narratives. The *narratology* of both active and retired athletes has been theoretically-deconstructed from a phenomenological and textual approach (Briley et al., 2008; Ogden & Rosen, 2008; Oriard, 1982a; Oriard, 1982b; Sparkes, 2004). While the discussions on the role of the self-narrative within sports literature might be limited relative to other literary disciplines (Sands, 2002), the analogs discussed in general ethnography are often applicable (S. G. Brown & Dobrin, 2004). Other areas of reflexive narratology, such as that of the returning war veteran (Tick, 2005; Tinley, 2009b), share issues of emotional challenge in transition with the retiring athlete. As was noted in Chapter 1 and will be discussed in Chapter 6, the transcendence of this study's conclusions will include how they might apply to other trauma-subjective life transitions inclusive of the military soldier returning from theaters of battle. Results from this study will suggest the application of findings to other topic areas

and disciplines. In one of my own narrative memoir/topic exploration of athlete retirement (Tinley, 2003), I wrote,

Truth be known, I wrote this as a form of healing; trying to understand the paradigm of lost identity, at the hands of a career ending young. It was the best training manual I could study, and the library was the best hospital I could check into. (p. 11)

While I made no specific reference to myself as a “warrior” in that passage, numerous examples exist in academic and popular literature that further address or suggest the connection of the “returning warrior” as a popular term and a palpable thematic thread, and are easily linked to the retiring professional athlete (Beisser, 1977a; Drucker, 2008; Hedges, 2002; Hemingway, 1929; Klapp, 1962; Teitelbaum, 2005; Tinley, 2001; P. Williams, 1994). Hemingway (1929) in particular was able to chronicle the effects of having “done battle” and then witness a return to a life of relative normalcy. And though his context(s) and settings are often situated in theaters of war and their aftermath, we might replace the war veteran character with the transitioning athlete, not so much in an actual war setting but by extension, in an attempt to argue (as others such as Chomsky have<sup>5</sup>) that popular culture, in its projection of athletes as heroes (Drucker & Gumpert, 2008; J. C. Harris, 1994a) has purposely and overtly facilitated the metaphor and the analog. Consider the lexicons utilized in football: the long pass is hailed as “the bomb,” the line of scrimmage as “the killing field,” upfield movement is “advancing into enemy territory,” and sacking a quarterback is “taking out their general.” Still, writers such as Hemingway (1929), in their lyrical depictions about the aftermath of war, describe the realities of the effects of

war on the individual returning from such a profound, emotional, physical, and consequential place in a way that turns to cliché such trite sound-bite comparisons of sport and war as appropriated by media structures of commercial sport. “The world [war] breaks everyone,” Hemingway writes, “but those that will not break, it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry” (p. 34).

If we allow the analogical connection between soldier and athlete for the moment, we recognize a placement of the theme of significant life transition and change well beyond the academic literature of athlete retirement. I suggest that our relationships with where and how the themes and the textual vehicles of *life transition* exist for a transitioning athlete signify an additional message that might be explored when we look for the interdependence in contexts affecting the quality of athlete retirement.

J. Coakley (1983) suggests that there are often a series of unnoticed developmental stages that are exposed in the catalyst of the retiring athlete. This suggests that perhaps the emotional trauma seen in retiring athletes should not be considered an isolated event but a necessary stage that occurs in the evolution of the person. Anecdotally, this is supported when we consider that many elite and professional athletes have led insular lives from a very young age, protected from having to deal with life experiences that would increase their emotional stability but detract from their focus on increasing performance levels in the immediacy of their playing careers. In the next two sections, I continue to address the placement

of athlete retirement within the conceptual frameworks of (a) Emerging Philosophical Contexts—Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness, and (b) Shifting Self-identity. What this section illustrates is my effort to take the previous, explored topical areas within the literature (self-identify) and place them under my contextualization approach.

### **Supportive Data in the Athlete, Mortality, and Identity Paradigm**

As noted above, of the 862 raw data themes offered by retired athlete participants in this study, 282 themes fell outside the 13 identified direct contexts and 3 indirect contexts influencing athlete retirement. As noted in Chapter 1, those 282 themes were collapsed into the area, *Emerging Philosophical Contexts* (see Appendix F). A number of the comments and themes suggested by the study participants offered commentary that were linked with ideas of mortality or the ending of *something life-giving* or “life validating” as several athlete participants referenced. One of the athlete participants in this study claimed that “it’s the fear that you’ll never be that good again, at anything,” while sports journalist, Bill Lyon (1999), suggested that “the athlete is the only member of our society who has to die twice” (p. 2). A reader does not have to go far to find the correlative placement of *mortality* within both empirical studies and popular culture as they relate to the end of an athlete’s career.

In a communication with a colleague, I wrote this about the notion of how we might consider and approach the subject of athlete retirement beyond the obvious areas of sport psychology and sociology.

I now consider athlete retirement as a protracted (prolonged) means of evolution in the arc of one's life, not a step from one career to another. Best analogs are the returning vet and empty nested matriarch—if one over-identifies with any role for an extended period, one is never an ex-athlete (or anything else) but carries that piece of themselves around for the tenure of their life.

My colleague, a tenured Professor of Sport Philosophy at an esteemed university, offered this in reply:

We all face mortality and hope that we will be remembered in some way. But the athlete's expectations are set high at the outset (Babe Ruth is a household name). When such an athlete falls into the abyss of retirement the normal issues are thus intensified. Anyway, this is what you suggested and it seems right to me. In short, you might say, as you suggest in the e-mail, that the high end athlete has to die twice and the first death makes the second one even more alarming. The first death is the death of the Self that depends on its relations for identity, security, and self-understanding.

What my colleague was perhaps suggesting or corroborating is that issues of legacy, mortality, and the contrasts of age/youth are pervasive in popular ideology of athlete retirement. Forms of popular culture are often thematically-appropriating of the *death of the athlete* as the loss of something else. This something "else" might include any combination of notions of youth, innocence, playfulness, health, courage, nobility, limitlessness, confidence, naïveté, and hope. These areas are often related to sports, physical fitness, and a youthful vibrant life. Thus, when the retiring athlete is situated in popular culture (as having lost these traits), there is an underlying message that their loss of career in sport amounts to the loss of much more.

Petrie (1971), in his poem "The Old Pro's Lament," writes about the natural business of old men unable to sustain the physicality required to keep playing: "to let the body go, [to] the rafters, moth-eaten and decayed, [and] cave."



A. E. Housman's (1896) iconic "To An Athlete Dying Young" appears to celebrate the victories of youth before the athlete is subject to the ravages of age and time. In the fifth quatrain, he reframes the very notion of legacy as it extends into the realities of the lost physicality of youth:

*Now you will not swell the rout  
Of lads that wore their honours out,  
Runners whom renown outran  
And the name died before the man.*

Here Housman (1896) is suggesting that the unfortunate champion lad who died young might be envied for his fate because he will not have to suffer the great loss of physical excellence seen as elite and professional athletes leave their sports. In a focus group discussion with approximately 34 university students, I asked what they thought was the primary difference between athletes leaving a sports career and other professionals exiting their occupations. Thinking that they might offer that the athlete's retirement might be unplanned or that it would occur at a relatively younger period in their lives or that gender and sport made the biggest difference, I was surprised when many of the students offered that it was the "publicness" or the fact that everyone knew about their exit and that they were no "longer young and immortal and like a hero." The media's role in the indirect contexts will be well-explored in Chapter 5.

In early investigations of sport transition (McPherson, 1980), the work of Kubler-Ross (1969) was cited for its contributions to understanding death and dying. Where this became problematic was in the application of her model, which was conceptualized and created under much different contexts than athletes

exiting sport, was related to the vicissitudes seen in modern transitioning athletes. As noted above, we can identify issues and behavioral traits that transcend cases and disciplines, but what is problematic is when models from one area of study (i.e., Kubler-Ross' work in thanatology) are pressed onto another without the necessary exploration of contextual analysis. In Chapter 3, *The Empiricism of Athlete Retirement*, I discuss the problematics of thanatology as it has been applied to academic studies on athlete retirement. In the following section, I continue my discussion of how athlete retirement is placed within popular and structural approaches to sport in society by extending my discussion of the place of athlete (as viewed through contexts) onto the area of self-identity.

### **Placing Identity**

Findings from this study suggested that notions of self-identity in the retiring athlete were constituted in a variety of contexts, inclusive of both direct and indirect influences on the athlete. While the concept of self-identity, as noted in Chapter 1, is well-discussed in the literature, I suggest that by looking for issues of “self-identity” and its placement in other direct contexts, we might discover more about the subject. The concept of identity loss and change is seen in athlete comments connoted within other contextual themes such as gender, sport specificity, health, and socioeconomic status.

Barker (2008) in his discussions on “personhood as a cultural production” (p. 216) suggests that identity might be better understood from an anti-essentialist approach. For Barker, identity is not a fixed entity but an “emotionally charged discursive description of ourselves that is subject to change” (p. 216). Giddens

(1991) adds to this claim by suggesting that identity might become fractured by an inability to sustain a consistent narrative about oneself. This notion of a broken chain of self-identity, as is often overly (and stereotypically) associated in our society by our past and present occupation(s), proves that the placement of athlete retirement in the academic literature and popular culture necessarily consider that life transition out of sport is well beyond a simple transfer of occupations and associative social roles.

“The self forms a trajectory of development,” Giddens (1991) suggests, “from the past to an anticipated future” (p. 75). As several study participants offered, they had little projection of their place in society after sport and had essentially been halted in the maturation of the Self by, among other elements, a necessary over-identification of themselves as, one participant put it, “immortal, infallible, forever athletes.” Another participant suggested that perhaps the primary difference between a professional athlete and person working in the commercial sector is that “athletes don’t have an exit plan. Businessmen think about their next step even before they start a new job or a new venture.” Another participant from an earlier study (Tinley, 2007a), who was both an elite athlete and was forced (due to injury) to retire from her job as one of the first female firefighters in a large urban city, said “It wasn’t until I found a new job with a title and way for others to think they knew me that I was okay with my new identity.” In some ways, what the athletes are suggesting is that the nonathlete role has a trajectory of development in the way that they project themselves from period to period, and by extension, from occupation to occupation. This occupational

projection likely includes an upward movement in their socioeconomic status.

Rare is the case when a professional team sport athlete earns more money in their postplaying career.

There is support for the idea that the nonathlete occupational group practices self-narrativism in an on-going bases and in much greater degrees than the athlete (Terkel, 1972). The athletes see themselves (within their athletic career) moving into greater levels of physical performance and higher structures of public awareness and compensation. But their projected self-story often ends with them at the peak of their physical existence in sport. Athletes do not dream about being nonathletes or perhaps the self-reflexivity is a form of bridging the historical gaps in Self.

Narrativism is an organizational scheme that links individual human actions and events into a pattern that we can understand. It is how we see the world as we live the story. As several athletes testified, there is a necessary self-projection and identification of oneself as a very high performer in order to achieve levels of success in commercial sport. Michael Oriard (1982b), who played in the NFL for eight seasons before completing a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Stanford University, connects levels of success in elite sport with the quality of transition out of sport:

How ironic it is that the better players and the players for whom football has greater personal importance must pay a penalty in a more difficult adjustment to retirement. Blessed are the mediocre . . . for they shall inherit the future. (p. 322)

While Oriard's (1982b) claim links the context of performance levels achieved in sport with the challenges of transition out of sport, they remind us of the role of self-identity and how it functions as necessary in one arena and a barrier in transition to another. Athletes and coaches realize that performance levels are often linked to levels of confidence in ability (Tinley, 2002b). Oriard's suggestions in 1982 and more recently (personal communication, September 12, 2010) are that there is a necessary elevated self-identity in an athlete who reaches such levels that it becomes a barrier when the (validating) modes that enable that identity (sport success, external validation, financial compensation, etc.) are no longer available to the athlete. The inevitable change in the place that an elite athlete occupies in both society and their own lifeworld is what concerns this study. I continue by describing how I situate those social places in my types of inquiry.

### **Placing Inquiry**

I consider and situate the larger *macro* social structures within my identification and exploration of *indirect context(s)* that affect the quality of transition out of sport. Primarily, I identify and utilize the elements of commercial sport, sport media, and sport production and consumption. These mostly corporate, for-profit entities and approaches to modern commercial sport, however, are constituted with myriad micro structures. Thus, I am faced with the potential for theoretical dichotomies in how I identify the places where athlete retirement discourse, and personal narratives of self identity in particular, exist. Following Giddens' (1984) theories of structuration and effort to link the concrete

dichotomies of micro and macro sociology, I have opted not to create traditional separation of such areas as individual versus society or organization versus personage and rather approach the field of athlete retirement by viewing micro and macro sociology as its own analytical distinction, while noting when each is significant, the mutual effects, interdependencies, and intersections. Following Giddens' (1991) claims that identity is a project, something that is an ever-evolving process moving *towards* as opposed to arriving *at* some place where identity is static, I place the problems and challenges of athlete retirement (as described in Chapter 1) in a distinction that micro and macro approaches are necessarily merged. Calhoun (1987) in his description of the "sport establishment," cites the work of Baker (1982) describing four groups of participants "who like threads on a shuttle, weave in and out of the story of sports in the Western World" (p. 176). Baker develops the notion of role systems that constitutes the modern social order in sport by identifying four groups of participants: players, patrons, spectators, and commentators (p. vii-viii). Each of these roles in sports have their own notions of personally and professionally-derived cultural meaning and relations of identity. This claim is supported in the data taken from this study. One athlete participant claimed that "I was confident but scared [about life after sport] but I dealt with this fear by reminding myself, that there are other things in life." Another study participant, who had played sport at an elite level for 3 years before retiring with a life-changing injury and then transitioning into a job within sport media, claimed that "you have to get

your fix of somebody recognizing you. And then gradually that addiction goes away.”

“I distinctly remember the first time I saw my name on another cyclist’s rear,” I told a group of students in our discussions about branding in commercial sport. “And it really bothered me that I was neither affected nor unaffected. I was ambivalent to the point of temporary neuroses.” What I was referring to was a small commercial concern of athletic apparel that I had helped to start utilizing my last name, *Tinley*, as the brand. And when the company produced cycling apparel with the name—my name—screened onto the backside of its products, I would see the athletes out training with my name stenciled to the rear section of their shorts (that was the current style of logo placement for cycling shorts). Twenty years later, I still have trouble verbalizing the feelings of what that was like. Professional athletes do not often think like those who work in commerce or marketing, commercial arenas where employees are trained to consider production and consumption as necessary and natural. One study participant who worked in the role of President for a Major League Baseball team said that “we only hire ex-players who can think like businessmen.” His tone was not derogatory or mean-spirited but very matter-of-fact, very business-like. I continue with a more focused explanation of how, why, and where I placed my inquiry.

The methodological *placement* of athlete transition in this study was designed for and intended to identify both intersections of direct and indirect contexts and the variety (in data responses) according to one’s own connection to sport.<sup>6</sup> The data suggest, for example, connections between levels of athlete

education, preretirement counseling, and the athlete's postplaying relationships with corporate structures in sport. Athlete participant's comments were placed within the emerging philosophical contexts category of *Predisposed Conditions, Realistic Perspectives, and Knowledge of Self* as they offered comments about their (knowledge of and) challenges in new identities that were also reflective of predisposed understandings of "who they were and what they were meant to do." Of the 29 athlete participants in this study, there were 76 raw data-themed comments that were categorized under *Issues of fear: Mortality, bodily awareness and shifting identities*. Of these same 29 athlete interviewees, there were 123 raw data themes that were assigned to the emerging psycho-social context of *Predisposed Conditions, Realistic Perspectives, and Knowledge of Self*. Of the nine sport media participants, 18 raw data comments were offered in the area of *Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness and Shifting Identities* with 22 raw data themes assigned to *Predisposed Conditions, Realistic Perspectives, and Knowledge of Self*. And of the eight sport administrators, 23 raw data themes were noted in their comments of how athletes were often fearful of new and emerging identities as they left the arena of elite and professional sports. These were also collapsed into *Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness and Shifting Identities*.

I offer a sampling of the variances in response here to exemplify how a participant's response is often tied to their perceived role and place in sport, both past, present, and future. These are better illustrated in Figures 2a-2d, 3, and 7. Even though the interview items were similar, the responses varied. For example,



many more athletes were willing to speak openly about how issues of personal identity, fear, and social support were influential in their transition out of sport than were sport media and administrators who offered less reflexive comments about the sport experience. While this may seem self-evident,<sup>7</sup> I do not suggest that the roles of the participants reduced the power of their responses to the point of failing to add to the discussion. If anything, varied responses to similar inquiry adds to the general questions and conclusions of this study: What are the contexts that affect an athlete's exit from sport? And if participant's responses varied based upon how they perceived their role in the transition paradigm, it is but one more finding that supports the conclusions. What has not been explored or identified in the literature are how the actions of sport administrators and media are reflected in the experience of the athlete as they leave sport.

As will be noted in Chapters 3 and 4, self-identity is a well-considered theme in the athlete retirement literature. But if we are to try and isolate the issues of identity within the discourse without extending them to other contexts and structural entities beyond what exist in the literature, then I have failed in this project's attempt to expand the placement and spatial consideration of the topic. That is not the case. The concepts and contexts of *age upon retirement*, for example, or *level of success achieved*, or the *athlete's relationship with the fans* should serve as a placement of how each would identify and occupy a place and a bearing on how athletes self-identify themselves upon leaving sport within the contexts of age, level of performance achieved, and relationship with fans. One study participant who retired from a sport that did not offer high levels of

financial compensation spoke of his feelings of emotional trauma upon leaving sport and noted that he had “left on his own terms,” and claimed “I feel like a hero now when I work with the community.” While any suggested connections between his two comments would be projective at best, the comments—taken in sync—offer us a glimpse of how a retired athlete who appears to retain both agency and the emerging philosophical context of “giving back” would enjoy a positive transition. Another context that has been considered to a small degree in the literature and popular ideology is age upon exit from sport. (While it was identified as a direct context in this study, age at retirement was noted much fewer times than other contexts by athlete participants).

Retirement at age 25 or 45 is not the same as a socially-inscribed period similar to age 65 (McPherson, 1980). But if we are to follow these claims without allowing for emerging social and cultural distinctions, for example, about such factors as “acceptable” or “sanctioned” ages for retirement with possible correlative changes in health status at retirement, then we might miss a temporal and social reconstruction of how the notion of athlete retirement holds a new and emerging place in society unexplored in earlier published literature.

Hill and Lowe (1974) did, however, claim that “identity, status, and occupation are inextricably bound together in the human psyche. Thus, adjustment to the social and psychological changes involved in retirement becomes more pressing than facing up to the biological effects of aging” (p. 12).

We might ask specifically, how do these ideas on retirement—both generic and within the athlete retirement paradigm—alter the public consideration of

professional athletes as they leave a life of sport at the highest levels? And is there a material effect on the retiring athlete because of it? Before Bouton's (1970) tell-all memoir, *Ball Four* chronicled the vagaries and debaucheries of athletes playing in Major League Baseball, sports writers would often protect the players from public exposure by self or collective censorship.<sup>8</sup> In more recent years, sport media's narratives have altered the relationship between player and consumer. S. L Price (2010), for example, claims there is much to be learned about ourselves by studying how sport consumers have accepted convicted felon and NFL quarterback, Michael Vick, after his high level of performance when he re-entered the League in fall 2010. "We, watching, are part of it [Vick's return to the NFL]. The longer it continues, the more it gets, the more the Michael Vick story becomes about us" (Price, 2010). While Price fails to fully develop this claim, the suggestion itself—that our (re)consumption of a once-deviant, convicted felon could tell us about the nature of how fandom produces, consumes, disposes (and re-produces)—is important in the placement of popular cultures as we move to understanding its role in the athlete transition paradigm. In the next section, I continue by exploring how the athlete retirement is placed within the structures of commercial sport.

### **Placing Sport Structural Terrain of Athlete Transition**

To understand the place of the transitioning athlete within the structures of modern commercial sport and to what effect those structures (and their myriad elements) are influential in the quality of the athlete's retirement experience, we must remind ourselves of some parts of the discourse seen in sport consumer

studies (Adorno, 1991; Horne, 2006; Quinn, 2009). The leveling of cultural hierarchy seen in late modern societies and the effects of the *cultural turn* as approached through a sociology of sport should be noted. It is the increasing role of commercial and institutionalized sport in modern societies and how they are linked to the athlete's transition experience that is of concern.

Of the 142 raw data themes offered by athlete participants in this study that were assigned to indirect contexts, 69 of those themes were coded to the area of *Athlete Relationship With Corporate/For-Profit Structures in Sport*. These were qualified subject athlete participants who made comments in the interview processes that correlated and linked the athlete's connection to the corporate structures of their sport (teams, leagues, sponsors, agents, and ancillary groups) with the quality of their exit from sport. Many of the comments had a negative tone, including such noted claims as "the league says they want to help but they don't," "the athlete can be preyed upon by the business of sport," and "pro football is just one big science project where the players are lab rats." However, this is not to suggest that corporate and commercial structures of sport are always directly-linked to a negative exit from sport. Additional athlete participants noted the advantages of knowing and using the commercial elements of sports in an effort to improve their retirement experience. One athlete participant suggested "the responsibility lies with the individual athlete to prepare for life after sport" and added later "we all need to take more responsibility for ourselves, if only we could get some support."

As this study identifies and explores the contexts that affect the transitioning athlete, the athlete's relationship(s) with commercial and corporate structures were noted by participants to such a level that those relationships (and those indirect contexts) made it imperative to explore how these contexts function. A primary area was how self-identity and body image, as constructed within commercial sport structures, functioned in the quality of an athlete's transition. Issues of identity in the athlete retirement literature have been explored but mostly from psychological and social psychological basis (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996; Shaffer, 1990; Stier, 2007). Results from this study suggest that within the athlete retirement paradigm, self-identity as it affects the quality of an athlete's exit from sport is concurrently linked to other psycho-social, socio-economic, and socio-political factors.

The growth of commercial sport<sup>9</sup> occurred in concert with the role of "consumption as an activity in and through which identity is constructed" (Smart, 2003, p. 74). Neal (1972), however, in her early philosophical treatise on sport identity, draws on her experience playing elite international sport in the years before ubiquitous sports media connections began to fuel the multi-billion dollar pro-sports industry. Neal's argument is that identity is derived in and through sports, dependent on how meaning is created from the individual sport experience. Partly because of the resultant increase in player salary levels and the players foray into celebrity culture, beginning in the mid-1970s, commercial sport offered new economic incentives to players, resulting in new and diffuse meanings (and benefits) that one might derive from involvement in commercial sport. With the

growth of corporate/commercial sport, the athlete body and its use in for-profit sport became to mean something very different than in previous decades (Messner, 1992; Ogden & Rosen, 2008; Rinehart, 2002; Shields, 2004).

I support this argument and suggest that the athlete body has become much more than the primary vehicle for the production of sports-as-entertainment and now exists as contested terrain on which numerous stratifying battles are fought, including how it is negotiated by the retiring athlete and those that would witness their exit from the public space of commercial sport. The physical body politic within commercial sport is now seen as a signifying object of much contemplation and discourse (Shields, 2004).<sup>10</sup> It can represent a variety of narratives based upon the contexts in which the athlete/body is produced and projected. The creator of these contexts is sometimes the athlete in motion but more often catalyzed within the operationalized structures of commercial sport that stand to materially gain from the commodification of the sporting body. In Chapter 5, I will further develop the argument that the sporting body has become increasingly produced, consumed, and disposed of as sports has increasingly become tied to consumer culture. In this section, however, I introduce the idea that a regulatory control of the (sporting) body is now manipulated through consumerism, entertainment, and fashion (B. Turner, 1996). Where this will lead is to my argument that the indirect contexts of playing commercial sport has a direct effect on the athlete as that body (and mind) is/are no longer of value as a productive vehicle within the structures of commercial sport.

In earlier iterations of commercial sport (1920-1965), there was a distinct separation between elite and popular culture. The elite “owned” the means of production within team ownership and control, while iconic athletes were temporarily allowed “visitation rights” (my term) by owners and media who protected them so long as they *produced* for the team and the mass media narratives. However, the advent of cultural populism within commercial sport reduced the separation of cultures, resulting in a new paradigm of societal “placement” for the professional athlete (Featherstone, 1988). This outgrowth of late modernization and the ongoing restructuring of sports media content has resulted in severe challenges to both collective and individual forms of athlete identity. As the athlete/hero is destabilized in the media, s/he may become de-centered in other areas of the commercial sports structure. Professional athletes have a unique history of exercising their agency (or suffering the effects from a lack thereof) within the confines and political economies of commercial sport structures. More recently, a kind of fluid re-presentation—largely a result of emerging media technologies and their effects on athlete/fandom relationships—have altered the way the public interacts with athletes both while they play and when they exit sport. “What we don’t know, and what coaches, teams, and leagues are scrambling to figure out,” Klemko (2011) asks, “is how to deal with a medium built upon spontaneity” (p. C-1). The subtext, however, suggests that commercial leagues and teams are losing the ability to control the image branding of their entity if individual athletes are connecting with, and reporting to, a mass audience on an unfiltered basis. Consumers of sport have subscribed to social

media in ways and levels that suggest they are socially-invested in the lives of professional athletes. This area of identify within the athlete retirement literature is unexplored as of this writing. What is not known are the implications of how that relationship will extend into the quality of the athlete's exit from active participation in elite and commercial sports. The data from this study contribute to answering that question.

In this study, for example, athlete participants noted *Athlete's Relationship With Sports Fans* as an influential (context) theme 42 times. They noted *Social Support and Influence* 103 times out of the 438 raw data themes identified under Direct Contexts (see Appendix F). In other words, 33% of the thematic responses from athletes assigned to the 13 identified direct contexts, and 30% of the athlete responses identified and coded to the 3 indirect contexts influencing the quality of their retirement were related to their relationships with either fans, family, coaches, mentors, or others noted as significant to the athlete in their exit from sport. The recent (winter 2012) concern from commercial sports leagues and teams about athletes using the social media platform, Twitter, to communicate with their followers has raised issues of agency and control between athletes and their place within the commercial sport structures. Essentially, the argument is centered in the athlete's posting of short (140 character) messages that often reveal the player's role in and around the commercial sport environs, sometimes in close temporal proximity to actual competitive venues. We remind ourselves that commercial sport athletes are essential actors paid to entertain the masses and that concurrently, as Park (as cited in Goffman, 1959) suggested in 1950,



“everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role . . . [and] it is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves” (p. 19).

Could the ability to develop one’s self- identity beyond their athletic career through the use of social media as a tool in the *presentation of self* (Goffman, 1959) have a direct bearing on the quality of their life after sport? In Chapter 5, I re-visit this question of whether new social media has any bearing on the athlete as they exit sport, citing data revealed in the study. In the next section of this chapter, I continue my review and explanation of commercial sport as it pertains ultimately to the quality of an athlete’s exit from sport.

Commercial sport can be defined as any physical activity with roots in play and games, is rule-governed, voluntary, competitive, end-resulted, entertainment-focused, and whose *primary* economic motive is for material gain by the corporate structure. Commercial sport is a modernist creation of the late 19th century “as opposed to the considerable number of physical game contests and play forms that have existed throughout the world over several centuries” (Horne, 2006, p. 3). As with any capitalist industry, commercial sport is replete with its own modes of production, divisions of labor, corporate culture, and methods of marketing and distribution. The North American economy of commercial sport, inclusive of professional leagues and teams, sport media, and production of sport-related goods and services, has been estimated to be in the \$300 billion range in the first decade of the 2000s (Rosner & Shropshire, 2011).

Sports are “no longer contests between nation states,” suggests Sulkunen (1997), “but between international teams and their sponsors” (p. 4).

Locating the study of athlete retirement within modern sport’s commerciality and legislative structuring appears to be synergistic with modernity’s movement of quantification, rationalization, and consumption deeper into structures of commercial sport. Few would argue that addictive consumerism and planned obsolescence are not identifiable in commercial sports (J. Coakley & Donnelly, 1999; E. Cohen, 2004; Parks & Quaterman, 2003). But making a case that sport fans summarily produce, consume, and dispose of (*gladitorialize*) professional athletes, and that there exists a pattern of identifiably-connected maladies within the subject athlete that are directly linked to this production/consumption paradigm will require more supporting data (see Chapters 4 and 5). I suggest here, however, that as commercial sport has strategically continued on its own post *cultural turn*, consumer-centric trajectory, it has endeavored to sustain some of its mythic historicity, or more likely has created an “illusion of history” (Baudrillard, 1994), as it has socialized us as consumers of sport with its purposefully-hegemonic placement of *heroic* athletes into our social worlds. Several athletes in this study confirmed this idea, citing such comments as “the retired athletes are expected to play golf, and shake hands, and tell them the old stories that all the ‘suits’ want to hear. But they didn’t offer me job training and a good position in the firm.”

When I left sport and was offered to be placed in similar scenarios, I either declined or, in more than a few cases, accepted the offer but spun the ensuing

conversations to their own arena, asking about things like amortized depreciation ratios and ancillary gorilla marketing strategies rather than regaling what it was like to win my first world championship. Sometimes I felt guilty using this tactic to increase my knowledge of commerce and entrepreneurship, for example, but mostly, as I told my wife on occasion, “I didn’t want to be anyone’s monkey. They invited me as a guest without conversational qualifications.”

Still, we remind ourselves that the heroic ideal and its universal and natural transcendence to sports have existed across epochs. The structures of commercial sport simply exploited the current narrative.

J. C., a study participant within the sport administrators group, suggested this:

The young successful athlete represents heroic ideals that start very early in the socialization process. The images—media is there—tell us they can do it [sports] better than us. And then people who will later become fans learn to idealize their behavior patterns. Fans saw that these were people—the athletes of their youth—of importance and carried that idea into adulthood. And now in modern society athletes are exemplars of prominence, upward social mobility, and sexuality . . . and we follow them.

Thus, if we are to extend the comments of J. C.—that we are early socialized with the idea that the athlete/fan relationship is preconditioned on an idealization of a youthful history rife with young heroes signifying immortality—we begin to see not only the foundations of fandom but the structurations within that will dispose of athletes who fail to sustain the idealism of sport adult sport consumers. “The fan is reverting to early relationships of his childhood,” J. C. continues, “and sports media capitalizes on the man-as-child behavior patterns.”

Benjamin, in his *Arcades Project* (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999; Buck-Morss, 1991) offers a more positive approach to the effects of consumer culture, resisting the sometimes totalizing claims of Adorno (1991). What is relevant for this study is that Benjamin suggests that it is “the child rather than the adult [who] can negate the various myths of modernity through play” (Horne, 2006, p. 10). This dialectical notion—that through the innocence of play we might better understand the emotional trauma of man-as-child-game-player facing the vicissitudes of forced maturity—applied to my primary research question—offers a unique opportunity to extend the athlete retirement discourse.

Finally, there remains an interesting and sometimes contentious discussion within the popular press, commercial sport administration, and consumers of sport that centers on issues of responsibility for retiring athletes. These include areas such as preretirement counseling, issues of player health and safety, and long term health care. These contested issues are situated in the political economies of commercial sport and are embattled within boardrooms, courtrooms, and in the popular press. While divisional lines are not always clear or predictable, the challenges—in particular when associated with tragedy and health and safety—have placed the subject of athlete retirement in front of many consumers of sport. For the consumer of sport, the rhetoric can be confusing. Cole (2010) suggests that professional athletes belonging to leagues and teams are offered counseling services to prepare themselves for life after sport but rarely take advantage of these. An internet search of “athlete retirement services,” for example, will expose more financial services firms targeting retired or retiring athletes than any

other nonprofit, research-based, or academic institution reporting on or offering data for the transitioning athlete. According to Duncan Fletcher (personal communication, March 2010), the Director of the Professional Athlete Training Institute headquartered at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut, the structures of commercial sport require a “summit [that] is designed to highlight best practices in the area of athlete development and to provide an educational opportunity for those responsible for athlete well-being.” Fletcher (personal communication, March, 2010), in supporting the institute’s pedagogical opportunity, further describes the summit claiming that

Since its inception, the following organizations have been invited and historically attend: ATP Tennis, LPGA, MLS, MLSPA, National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A), NBADL, NBAPA, NFLPA, NHLPA, PGA, U.S.A. Basketball, WNBA, all NBA and NFL team athlete development professionals, and a host of industry experts and professional consultants.

While it is beyond the scope of this project to dissect and comment on the efficacy of said conference, its production is noteworthy in identifying where the topic of athlete retirement is placed in various social, economic, and political structurations.

Perhaps one of the most well-publicized subjects linking structures of commercial sport with issues of athlete retirement is that of the increasing documentation of CTE (chronic traumatic encephalopathy) in both active and retired professional boxers, and football and hockey players. Beginning in early 2007, an increasing number of mainstream articles, many supported by empirical studies, explicated the human costs of violent games-as-entertainment. Schwarz

(2007) links the suicide of former NFL player Andre Waters to CTE and resultant depression with empirical evidence. Dr. Bennet Omalu, a leading expert in forensic pathology, “determined that Mr. Waters’ brain tissue had degenerated into that of an 85-year-old man with similar characteristics as those of early-stage Alzheimer’s victims” (Schwarz, 2007, p.1). The popular press appears to have influenced commercial sport’s (in this case, mostly the NFL) position on the effects of sustained head trauma found in football and initiated rule changes to address the longterm health of the league’s players. In Chapter 5, I will revisit this case as an example of how the indirect context of a sports organization’s relationship(s) with the players have a direct and material effect on the quality of an athlete’s exit from sport.

In the final section of this chapter, I continue my discussion of where and why athlete retirement is placed by offering ideas and examples on where the subject is found in popular culture. To do this, I begin by a review of sport media, itself a dominant structure in commercial sport.

### **Popular Placement of Athlete Retirement: Sport Media**

One of the conclusions from this study (see Chapters 5 and 6) will be that the topic of athlete retirement resonates with the populist for a number of reasons, including our projection of Self into the life-arc of a heroic, modern/mythic elite or professional athlete. Data from this study will suggest that the popular narrative of an elite or professional athlete who in their retirement also exits a sport consumer’s life. This fan may have projected the athlete’s exploits as a substantial and focused activity and their retirement may trigger thoughts and

feelings in the sport consumer of narratives that transcend into the subject self. These include (but may not be limited to) the need for community and social support in times of significant life transition, self-reference to mortality, the need to plan for the future with education and economic forecasting, and the importance of health. Results from this study show through the identification of the *indirect contexts* affecting the quality of the athlete transition that the relationship between a professional athlete and their follower/fans does have an effect on the individual athlete's exit experience. While the collective behaviorisms are often centered within a search for in-group identity (Klapp, 1969), individuals may seek other forms of validation through their association with a team or athlete (Halpern, 2007). The relational movement from athlete to fan is mostly from the athlete to the collective of fandom. However, as I have noted, athletes as well have the need to be needed, "the warrior's heart," as one participant suggested. These multidirectional relationships are facilitated by media platforms that create a synergistic and relational paradigm (G. Turner, 2004).

The medium and the messages of this popular culture exchange are partially identified in the micro and macro vehicles that propel them. While much of the tone found within the athlete transition literature—both in academic journals (Marthinus, 2007; McPherson, 1980) and popular press (Larson, 2009; Sokolove, 2001)—have illustrated the negative aspect of athlete transition, others (J. Coakley, 1983; K. McKnight, 2007) have explicated the more positive aspects of athlete transition. The data results from this study situate portions of the

conclusions within popular culture vehicles. I continue with a brief review of commercial sport before noting the primary popular media formats where the topic of athlete retirement is seen and contested: mainstream press, online discussion, fiction and nonfiction literature, and film.

It is here in popular usage of the athlete retiring or “falling from grace” (Teitelbaum, 2005) that we see examples of my research topic’s interdependency across subject areas. What is structural—the corporate, operationalized strategies of sports-as-entertainment—is necessarily popular. “Sport,” Horne (2006) suggests, “has its own cultural origins but these are mixed up with the development of industrialism and capitalism, the spread of liberal democracy and the growth of mass communications” (p. 3). It is self-evident that what can be commodified requires an active, participating market constituted in part by constructed images. Those images of the retiring athlete come to us in mediated form and, as noted, draw us into multiple narratives that exist below the surface of the retiring athlete’s story. Whannel’s (1983) commentary on the importance of sport in social life, as considered by Jhally (1989) is significant here. While Jhally’s address on the place of sport in our social worlds is relatively generic, it is easy to extend his claims onto our discussion of the specifics of athlete retirement:

The challenge (on what to do with the social energy directed towards sport) for a cultural studies approach to sport is to use the fantasy creatively; to understand the context within which sports spectating as a cultural activity takes place so that the domain of sport becomes not merely something to be deplored but a sight on which to fight for definitions of the social world. (Jhally, 1989, p. 71)



As noted in earlier sections, I am concerned with how commercial sports (and by extension and to varying degrees, other levels of sport practices) and their *modus operandi*, psychologically and materially, affect the professional athlete—its primary labor force—upon the athlete’s exit from the industry of sport. I argue that an increase in consumer culture and consumption identity, coupled with the growth of economic globalization, neoliberal economic practices, and strategic media partnerships have enabled commercial sport to sustain rampant growth in recent decades (Wenner, 1998). Consumers of sport and its resounding (and resonant) culture have increased accordingly. Top professional athletes have become highly paid, recognized performers, integral with the structural basis of advanced capitalist countries (Whannel, 2002). They are *heroicized*, mythologized, and their physical exploits are negotiated and consumed as a means of personal empowerment, acceptance, projection, and resistance; that is, as Horne (2006) suggests “mediated by active consumer audiences” (p. 8). Sports and the athlete/entertainer product have become an embedded part of the sociopolitical lexicon well beyond the arena of sports and existing in the realm of *myth*.

“Myth” as Barthes (1957) claims, “is a type of speech” (p. 109) and the language of physical achievement in sport has come to create meaning beyond the specifics of physical performance. For example, in early May of 2011, shortly after members of SEAL Team Six assassinated Osama bin Laden in Pakistan and U.S. President Obama was choosing words to explain his decision not to release images of the Bin Laden’s bullet-riddled corpse, he used the sport-referenced phrase, “we don’t need to spike the football” as explanation (Obama, 2011).

Instead of an extended diatribe to support his decision, seven words offered the cultural cache to deliver his intended message.<sup>11</sup>

The sports media nexus is integral in our placement of the retiring athlete within commercial and popular sport structures. The representation of professional athletes in mass media has become mediated to such an extent that it is perhaps impossible to discern the athlete themselves from the simulated event and persona that frames the athlete narratives. Commercial sport has become only sparingly (and purposely) representative of any history of games and culture that predated it. The production of the athlete/hero creates both the act itself as well as the person/persona behind it. This becomes significant in this project when we consider that the athlete often internalizes this *outwardly-in* focus both as subconscious “tactic” (de Certeau, 1984) in necessary hubris development and reinforcement of the athlete identity.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it might also be argued that both fans and athletes alike are bystanders to their own lives. They are actors in the scene but may not recognize the play in which they star.

This suggestion is significant when we return to our primary research question: What are the significant direct and indirect contexts that affect the athlete retirement experience? One study participant, N. J., a former player in the NFL who in multiple interviews appears to have resisted much of the hegemonic narrative offered by the NFL and espoused by some ex-football players, suggested that “the power of popular fiction and film contributes to all this bullshit misinterpretation of what a dumb jock is supposed to do when they retire.” A question posed in this study is whether this popular stereotype could contribute to

the fragmentation of the athlete-in-transition's psyche. As is suggested by the French cultural theorist, philosopher, and sociologist, Jean Baudrillard (1994), "by crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials" (p. 2). This fragmentation was noted by athlete participants who spoke of "not having a clear picture of who society wanted me to be" and extended into their postplaying lives where a sometimes necessary re-cohesion of ego must take place for a return to emotional stability. Still, Baudrillard suggests that reality has a "lazy relationship" to images and representation. Thus, we have little conclusion on situating his claims at this point.

The results of this study suggest that image construction and representation of the transitioning athlete may have a direct bearing on the quality of their retirement experience (see Chapter 5). Of the 142 athlete participant raw data themes that were coded as *indirect contexts*, 42 or 32% were assigned to *Athlete's Relationship With Sports Fans (inclusive of sport hero paradigm*; see Appendix F). One athlete participant claimed that "praise from others amplified my self-image, until I quit and it stopped." Another said that "some kids think all Olympic athletes make a lot of money." In Chapter 5, I will further address notions of whether sport fan's relationship(s) with professional athletes are "lazy" and whether they have bearing on the athlete's retirement from sport. I also extend the discussion to note how, if at all, the pervasive referencing of athletes as "heroes" in both popular and literary approaches may influence the athlete's quality of retirement (Oriard, 1991).

In early formations of the secondary questions for this project, I asked whether the *hyperreality* of modern commercial sport had affected the original (early 20th century) forms of athlete heroes as they evolved out of amateur games. I wondered if technology, its mass media partner(s), and the *scientization* of sport had begun to dictate or influence the role of the athlete hero. Or because the roots of all sport can be traced to the *autotelicity* of play, I asked whether commercial sport and its sports heroes were simply an evolving, reified, consumer-driven sport *derivative of play* that reflects other shifts and values in a late capitalism society. Baudrillard (1994) might have argued that commercial sport and its media partners are consumed by a frantic self-referentiality and that the over-representation of sport has altered our experience with it. He might have posited that everything in commercial sport is now filtered with preconceptions built by constructed images that are themselves a system of signs. With such new forms of communication such as Twitter and Facebook, professional athletes are now “communicating” with their fans on a more direct bases than in previous periods where a sports fan’s knowledge of the athlete was limited to mainstream journalism and limited personal observations. Urry (1995, 2004) speaks about the consumption of places (imagine the sport stadia) and the “tourist’s gaze” (imagine the fan’s visual relationship of the athlete on the field). He concludes that there exists a kind of fetishizing of the places we imagine and covet. While his work is focused on physical locations, I make note that cyber travel and locations might extend the “tourist’s gaze” and alter the fan/athlete relationship. The effect of this technology-based process on the very notion of athletes-as-heroes, let alone how

the connection will alter the athlete retirement experiment was previously unknown. I suggest, based on the data that the indirect contexts, inclusive of an athlete's relationship with both the corporate structure of their sport and the fan base, can and do have an effect on the quality of an athlete's transition.

The data from this study suggest that there exists a transcendent implication of the role of athlete if they are situated within the popular hero myth. One athlete participant noted "the public might think that athletes need to be held to a higher standard but we are only humans that are made out to be heroes by fans who need something from us" (see Appendix E). Another said that "people have thoughts of who and what you are after sport and if they think of you as a hero even when you're done, that helps you realize that after all, you're really not." What these themes and similar ones suggest is that there are athletes who recognize how they are placed in society along modern heroic roles and ideals, most of which they cannot ever live up to. In Chapter 5, I explore this area further, citing study results in some detail.

Baudrillard's writing, for its part up to the mid-1980s, is open to several criticisms—he fails to define key terms, and his writing style is hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking sustained, and systematic analysis. Still, his work is informative in this project as I consider the area of indirect contexts. A particular challenge in applying his work to this project has been in addressing any contradictory evidence such as the many aspects afforded by the placement (however re-inscribed) that sport and the athlete now hold in society and how that place is being changed along such lines of changing media platforms. At the

center of that contestation is the athlete hero and, in particular, their experience while they leave sport as the hero mantle is taken from them or somehow lost in transition.

Recognizing that it would be a mistake to cling too tightly to any one group of theorists for fear of “navigating by gazing in the rearview mirror” (Whannel, 2009, p. 72), we recall that the role commercial sport plays after the *cultural turn* is still a fluid construct mirroring societal values, norms, and paradigmatic shifts. Thus, I note multiple theorists, each offering the reader a theoretical vehicle to argue and address my research questions. Adorno (1991), for example, suggests in *The Culture Industry*, “sportification has played its part in the dissolution of aesthetic semblance. Sport is the imageless counterpart to practical life” (p. 89). Yet, for some, that practical life (de Certeau, 1984) is still negotiated by great sporting performances and fills a cultural lack that, even if it is the result of consumer ideology or the quite human desire to elevate one’s metaphysical grasps of the natural order through projection, is for many an acceptable life model. I reject this aspect of Adorno’s claim and suggest that his failure to explore the myriad contexts that shape our collective and individual relationships with sports render it a totalizing claim in the context of his use of the sports analog.

The intricate and fluid relation between sport production and consumption has its analog perhaps in other forms of popular entertainment. When extended to the retirement experience of the actor, for example, it appears that the former *leading lady* whose vagaries of age have deselected her from the roles she once

enjoyed, is a comparable image. A. P., a study participant for this project in the media group who has the distinction of working as a lead actress on one of the most successful TV shows in history and competing (as an invited amateur) at a sporting world championship, claimed that “actors and actresses are always hoping for one more big role and this depends on how the media and fans perceive you.” What A. P. is explicating here is the relational significance of how the constructed image of an entertainer—professional athlete or actor—is held interdependent by how they are both produced and consumed by the audience. The leading male (and aesthetic, fan-coddling, pro athlete) appears to have more opportunities to continue his theatrical work in decreasing, but still significant, character-driven roles. Thus, the notion of the body, or what I refer to as the *corporeal habitus* as contested terrain, is also made explicit in the desires and tastes of a society ideologically-inclined to heroic, inspiring, entertaining, and youth-centric values.

This study’s data suggest that further investigation is required to discern if part of a changing hero paradigm and its relations to identity and mortality are related to socially-constructed tastes (perhaps within contexts themselves) and altered social milieus or rather, a modern shift in an essential *denial of death* (Becker, 1973). As noted above in this study, 282 raw data themes offered by athlete participants were assigned to Emerging Philosophical Contexts. Of those, 79 were coded *Issues of fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness, and Shifting Identities*. One athlete participant who left a career as a professional basketball player to seek an advanced degree in higher education suggested:

There aren't that many things that match up to the produced image . . . that's part of the grief of retirement. I'm a real person, too. But they [fans] don't believe you. How could you ever be less than the image that was created for and about you on TV?

Bourdieu's ideas (1984), extended to my notions of the loss of an athlete's *corporeal habitus* and their resultant feelings of a disembodied Self upon exit from sport, are of some concern here and should be explored in further research. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is grounded in a focus on the body, action, and practical dispositions; all applications that transfer well to sport sciences. Thus, Bourdieu's sociological account of human agency and social order (as grounded in the influence of Durkheim and Husserl) is apropos in consideration of the athlete retirement experience. His theory of human agency and "social suffering" helps to "explore the possibility that the most intensely personal experiences may also be broadly social in their significance" (p. 164). This concept applied to athlete retirement corroborates such myriad anecdotal comments from retiring athletes as "I didn't miss the game, I missed my teammates" and "I felt so alone when I left sport. Even my family couldn't replace the people I played with."

However, lest we forget, athlete transition as placed in popular culture is not only occurring within the retiring athlete population. The late spring 2011 discourse on NBA star LeBron James that situated him in conflict with sport fans is a telling example of the fluidity in Bourdieu's distinction and social suffering. Vecsey (2011) suggests that in James' failure to provide his new team with a publicly-promised NBA championship, and his gratuitous reply to both angry and expectant sport fans, illustrates his failure to comprehend the tenuous relationship



between producer/consumers of sport and their embodied collective force. In addressing James' comments directed to the "personal problems" of those that "pay his salary,"<sup>13</sup> Vecsey suggested:

Somehow, it does not seem likely that LeBron James was making a poetic eye-in-the-sky observation about the flawed but still beautiful human condition. If he could elucidate his innermost feelings, James was probably referring specifically to sports fans, who pay so much money, who feel so strongly about a guy who legally jumps teams, when he mentioned "personal problem." (p. 2)

The "jumping" of teams is a reference to the professional athlete who appears to have no loyalty to any one town or team but leaves for another when his or her contract is up and he or she can earn more money elsewhere. The fan, however, usually is often less-than-informed as to the intricacies of the complex contract negotiations. This fact illustrates a significant extension, however, within my project as I endeavor to explain the effect of the indirect contexts on the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. As each participatory group in this study (athlete, sports administrator, and sports media) suggested and was noted in my raw data themes (see Appendix E), often the consumers of sport fail to realize that the source of their information is mediated and that sport remains, as Boyle and Haynes (2000) suggest, "an important cultural, political, and cultural marker of boundaries, identities, and markets" (p. 164).

Vecsey (2011) notes the lyrics from country singer/songwriter, Tom T. Hall's *Last Hard Town*. In the song, T. T. Hall (1974) writes, "they came to see the people that they thought we were, and never changed their minds." Tom T. Hall's lyrics exemplify parts of the fan/athlete relationship where perhaps fans

feel that if they “consume” an athlete by virtue of their gaze and their myriad financial and emotional investments in them, they will be empowered in this consumption. de Certeau (1984) and Fiske (1987, 1989a, 1989b) focused their work on the popular and the practices of everyday life to “maintain, strengthen, and challenge social and cultural boundaries” (Horne, 2006, p. 8). The very notion of “the fallen athlete hero,” for example, is perhaps best examined within mediated popular myths of how and why that narrative is effecting of fan consumption ideology (P. Williams, 1994). For example, why did so many fans despise NBA star LeBron James in the summer of 2011? Is he not a product of the vicissitudes of our sporting-centric society, honed for greatness and spoon-fed bites of hubris until he actually believed that he was an earthly king? And now as we project ourselves into “his highness,” as he was referred to by several interviewees, after having produced and consumed both the man and the myth, we are left feeling not empowered by his callow, ingratiating response but confused by the ignorance of his juvenility. We are Hall’s town folk who came to see the athletes as we thought they were and regardless of the obvious, are struggling to change our minds.

Popular mainstream narratives (textual, film, fiction, and nonfictives) have produced a large number of entries on the subject of athlete retirement, perhaps for reasons that are connected to the themes as noted above and in later chapters. These include our interest in the athlete/hero as they exist in celebrity culture. A preliminary review of the scholarly articles published between 2005 and 2009 can be collapsed into several general trends of the discourse. In a 2002 study, I

suggested that the subject of athlete retirement and transition should be extended to include a cultural exploration of the various identifiable and measurable contexts in which athletes exit sport and how those cultural contexts might affect the retirement experience (Tinley, 2003). Central to theoretical conclusions and journalistic or fictionalized approaches (indirect contexts) to the subject of athlete retirement are several key areas that have been identified both in the mainstream literature and popular ideology: issues of self-identity and reflexivity, emotional and financial struggles, and treatment by former teams, leagues, and a fan base. In Chapter 5, I will explore how and why these contexts affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport.

In Chapter 3, I explore the literature of athlete retirement as relates to my placement and exploration of the topic of athlete retirement. And in Chapter 4, I return to the direct contexts of sport and carefully dissect each of the 13 direct contexts that were identified and coded as the participants' data were synthesized.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EMPIRICISM OF ATHLETE RETIREMENT:

A LITERATURE REVIEW

**Introduction**

As has been suggested, this project was constituted in the contexts of athlete retirement, personal and societal, direct and indirect. Researchers in the late 1980s and early 1990s devoted considerable focus on athlete retirement, sometimes through the application of empirical, nonsport-related models of life transition and loss onto the subject/topic of athlete retirement, transition, and subsequent emotional trauma as a result of such a compacted and condensed life experience. Theoretical perspectives of athlete retirement have most often arisen from theoretical frameworks used to explore general career retirement.

**Thanatology Re-Considered**

One of the theoretical perspectives offered by Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) is grounded in thanatology, or as Rosenberg (1982) has suggested, that sports retirement is a form of social death, including isolation from former teammates and players. This is supported anecdotally by experiential athlete accounts and in forms of popular mainstream literature such as Bouton's (1970) *Ball Four*, Deford's (1981) *Everyone's All-American*, and Kahn's (1972) *The Boys of Summer*, where the athletes—both real and fictional—reveal the myriad difficulties they and other retired athletes had in staying connected to both the

sport they played and the newer, younger players. Thanatology in sport retirement has also received some criticism. Blinde and Greendorfer (1985) argue that social death is fraught with melodrama and excessive negativity, focusing some of their commentary on the intentional pathos developed around the sentiment of death. Data collected for this study, however, suggest that thanatology—the study of the processes of death and dying—also exhumes (no pun) and investigates the circumstances, contexts, and contextual factors of death and dying. Athlete participants in this study offered comments that were identified within the category of Emerging Psycho-Social Contexts. Of the athletes interviewed, 79 comments fell into the constitutive category of Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness, and Shifting identities. Comments such as “I knew that I had to play it all the way into the end,” “I think back on my playing career as almost another life,” and “I just felt so dead for a few years after I left sport” suggests that concepts of thanatological theory and mortality might be reconsidered qualitatively within the study of athlete transition. Explored early by Park (1912), at first as an outline of biomedical causes of death, Lavalee (2000) claims that thanatology

has evolved into a multidisciplinary science . . . [including] disciplines as anthropology, psychology, sociology, and theology [that] have all made significant contributions to the literature, and a total of 62 different sets of variables have been identified in the extant [nonathlete] literature to influence the dying individual. (p. 6)

One of the challenges to applying thanatological models to the area of athlete retirement is that sport has always and already been associated with the widespread transcendence of games which have their roots in play (Huizinga,

1955). Play theorists argue for the autotelic qualities of play (Suits, 1978) and by extension, games and sport. Though commercial sport has become far removed from conceptual notions of play in many modern societies, it still retains a socializing and narrative connection to the idealized notions of innocence, spontaneity, essential pleasure, and youth. Thus, when Blinde and Greendorfer (1985) argue that thanatology is rife with melodrama and excessive negativity, I argue that it is not so much a case of over-dramatization in theoretical interpretation as much as it is the extenuation of contrasting polar opposites, conflicting contexts in which fandom produces and consumes athletes, and perhaps the result of a youth-centric culture that conflicts the application of thanatology to athlete retirement. The claim exemplifies the import of this project—that we can use the athlete retirement discourse and extend it to such connected but diverse sociocultural and psycho-social topics as youth-culture, fear of death, and how these areas are constructed in our social and cultural worlds.

When this emerging concept of contextual and applied thanatology made itself present in early results of this study it struck me as both obvious and revelatory; I thought, “Well, of course this makes sense . . . but how revealing to re-constitute our study of athlete retirement by aligning it with extended issues of human mortality?” There were a number of study participant responses (mostly athletes) whose comments were in sync with my own conceptual ideas—that as a sport identity dies, so does much more. Admittedly, I identified with athlete participant comments as they reinforced or perhaps helped explained my sub-surface ideologies if not un-exorcised thoughts on my own experiences in leaving

sport. But as noted in previous chapters, my challenge as a researcher who fit inclusion criteria was to divorce myself from the data. That said, as I digressed from this challenge I saw quite clearly how I could triangulate established and recent mortality/transition narratives (Becker, 1973; Beisser, 1977b; Branch, 2011; Estes, 1990; Fuchs Ebaugh, 1988; Hargrove, 2006; Kovic, 1976; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Rank, 1956; Schwarz, 2007; Updike, 1990) with athlete responses and my own thoughts about leaving a life in professional sports, a life where others—but not myself—considered me as a heroic figure.

### **A Question of Empirical Heroes**

We (as consumers of commercial sport) often look at sport and its athlete heroes in the framework that, as McPherson (as cited in Wann et al., 2001) suggests, are within the “four sources that are responsible for teaching the values, beliefs, attitudes and norms of sport fandom” (p. 21). These are noted as the individual’s family, school, peers and community. So, as we consume sport while simultaneously producing its heroes, we do so within the contexts of our socializing agents. But still, there are empirical universalities to the way we study elite and iconic athletes, both as they exist as active players and as they decline and cease in their ability to entertain, thrill, and inspire us with their on-field (and sometimes off-field) physical and psycho-social behaviorisms. Based upon the capacious data collected in this study from athletes and others associated with elite sport, I suggest that there is an oft-misunderstood relationship that fandom has with elite athletes (and athletes have with their fans). While this idea is expanded in Chapter 5, it is suggested here that, as Lavalee (2000) felt,

thanatology has expanded into multiple disciplines and notions of mortality. As noted previously, athlete participants in this study noted 79 raw data themes collapsed within the area of *Emerging Psychosocial Contexts of Athlete Retirement* that were specifically noted as *Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness, and Shifting identities* (see Appendix F). Those study participants working in sport media noted 18 themes related to the same category, and sport administrator participants offered 22 raw data themes in this same direct context category of Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness, and Shifting identities. Still, we wonder why issues of significant change, mortality, or its metaphorical stand-in—the decline of the physical body—are resonant themes within the placement of the athlete retirement discourse. I argue that the data indicate a kind of polarization of themes, the essential and contrasting narrative themes of young/old, emerging/dying, playfulness/submission, and as a constant and pervasive thread in athlete retirement—the somatic decline or the falling away of the body politic that has roots in and connections to issues of self-knowledge and Giddens’ (1991) project of self-identity. To wit, a sampling of comments offered by study participants include: “Even if you are still playing well and are in your mid thirties, the fans want you to move on.” “I thought I was in pretty good shape after a hard off-season. But the young guys were just too good and the coaches and fans knew it.” “I used to have a lot of fun playing this game, but now it seems like a lot of work and that’s fine. But some days it sure seems like a regular job.”

One study participant noted several of the polarities in his response:



Athletes don't have an exit strategy. How can they? Everyone from their family to their friends, coaches, and fans want to see them live forever in their spotlight . . . until the lights go out. And then what? It's dark and they're wishing they had finished school, gotten a degree, took advantage of the counseling services. So, they train harder, lose weight, get fit, and hang onto their youth and their job if they can, because for so many of us, leaving sport is a kind of death. Fans don't want to watch old athletes; that must remind them of their own death.

I thought to myself . . . you don't pay for tickets to watch your own funeral.

In the previous chapter where I spoke of Placing Athlete Retirement in Sport Structures, I suggested that commercial sport has been increasingly linked to production and consumption of goods and services. Our mass consumption of the athlete's physical body has become "an object of contemplation and improvement in the spectacular discourses of the mass media," as Horne (2006) claims, and "the regulatory discourses of the state and in people's everyday practices" (p. 2). I continue with additional consideration of the historical and empirical placement of athlete transition.

### **A Literature Review Sampling of Athlete Retirement**

Social gerontology, an area of study with an emphasis on aging and life satisfaction through the experience, is another focus of the sport retirement experience. It has been proposed by Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) that this category consists of: Disengagement Theory (Cumming, Dean, Newell, & McCaffrey, 1960), Activity Theory (Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953), Social Breakdown Theory (Kuypers & Bengston, 1973) and Continuity Theory (Atchley, 1980). The theories are described here in better detail.

1. Disengagement Theory: the thought that both the athlete and the society withdraw for the good of both.
2. Activity Theory: when lost roles are exchanged for new ones and an individual's level of activity is maintained.
3. Continuity Theory: where people with varied roles reallocate time, energy, and focus to remaining roles.
4. Social Breakdown Theory: the idea that some individuals withdraw from the activity and internalize negative evaluation.

The work done by researchers Baillie and Danish (1992) conclude that over-identification with the role of the athlete may lead to limited development in other career possibilities, that athletes acknowledge their own limited preretirement training but appreciate the support they get in transition, that the process of athlete retirement is multifaceted, complex, and specific to the individual, and that specific programs to support and assist retiring athletes are needed. On a general note though, Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) do find fault in the use of social gerontology as applied to the study of athlete retirement, indicating that there is no empirical support for the relationship between sport-retirement and nonsport retirement; the belief that the differences in age, life experience, and expectations between athletes and mainstream retirees is too great to share the same model.

Transition as termination was first explored by Hill and Lowe (1974) in the realm of sport retirement. The origins of their work came from work done by Sussman's (1971) analytical model of the sociological study of generic retirement. Sussman asserted that retirement will be affected by several factors: the

individual's motives, values, and goals; the contexts surrounding one's retirement (i.e., retirement planning, income ); structural elements such as social class and marital status; social factors such as support of family and friends; and boundary constraints (economic cycles, employer attitudes, etc.). While the concept of multiple social factors affecting retirement were evident in Sussman's work nearly 40 years ago (from 2011), the literature continued in the direction of endeavoring to apply more traditional, nonsport models of life transition onto the specificity of athlete retirement without applying sport-specific contexts. Much of the early literature referred to Kubler-Ross' (1969) work, perhaps due to its cultural cache or its ease in cross-discipline application.

Kubler-Ross's (1969) model defines five stages in the grieving process of loss that have become well accepted in the literature (Ogilvie & Howe, 1986; Wolff & Lester, 1989). The theoretical model is a stage theory and includes denial against the initial trauma, anger about the injustice and control, bargaining to delay, depression over loss, and complete acceptance of one's new life. Kubler-Ross's early work was done within the framework of her study of death and dying. It could be considered a model, as it is intended to define patterns and create predictable feelings or behavior surrounding grieving and loss. It is listed here within the other theories since most researchers have used her early work as loss theory, adapting it to the loss experienced in athlete retirement.

Coleman and Barker (1991), whose theoretical framework has antecedents in the work of Super's developmental self concept theory of vocational behavior, offer a look at two elements of athlete retirement theory: self-concept

development and self-esteem. Following the work of Super, Starishevsky, Matlin, and Jordaan (1963) they define the self-concept development as the time an individual begins to develop his or her identity as a person, beginning as a childhood event and continuing through to adolescence. Role playing is discussed, as is reality testing in real life situations. Translation is defined as transfer of self-concepts into vocational terms either by choice, accident, or the discovery of personal attributes. Implementation is defined as the period when the person actualizes the self-concept within formal education, professional training, or new occupation.

Coleman and Barker (1991) continue to cite the work of Super et al. (1963) in their definition of self-esteem as a type of self-acceptance or a dimension of self-concept. They conclude that people with high levels of self-esteem feel a sense of value and worth, while those with low levels of self-esteem see themselves as doubtful about their worth and can experience feelings of anxiety and depression. From the research, they develop a list of factors entitled, *Strategies: A Model of Career Development* (Coleman & Barker, 1991). The factors include introduction; self-assessment; decision; educational, occupational, and community information; preparation for work, leisure, and retirement; and research and evaluation. The descriptions of these factors, while validated in the research of others, are not expanded upon to any degree.

J. Coakley (1983) concludes that the development of theory, no matter where its origins or basis, is still a multi-factorial episode. "It is argued," he says that:

the dynamics of the sport retirement process are grounded in the social structural context in which retirement takes place. Factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and social and emotional support networks shape the manner in which one makes the transition out of sport. Therefore, retirement from sport sometimes may be the scene of stress and trauma but, by itself, it often is not the major cause of those problems. (p. 1)

Even as was suggested by Sussman (1971) and J. Coakley (1983), much of the topical research in the 1980s and 1990s was still situated in an effort to create models of athlete retirement, often using models grounded in other subject areas of life transition. However, there have been several specific models of career retirement created for the retiring athlete that are noteworthy. The intent and purpose behind the research vary, but not often does it appear that the goal is to ultimately provide counseling and intervention for the retiring athlete but more so to empirically analyze and explain the phenomenon of emotional trauma in athlete retirement.

Landers (1983) argued for more theory driven study of the important issues surrounding athlete retirement. The literature offering theory on athlete retirement is even more extensive than efforts to create models. Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) suggested that

there is a noticeable lack of empirical data to substantiate the positions held by leading thinkers in the area . . . ; as a consequence, a program of empirical research based on a sound working model of the career termination process should be the goal. (p. 771)

Still, even prior to 1993, models for athlete retirement were already being constructed. Several researchers before and after that period have cited Kubler-Ross' (1969) model as particularly useful (five stages to loss: denial, anger,

bargaining, depression, and acceptance). These include studies by Wolff and Lester (1989), Grove et al. (1997) and Taylor and Ogilvie (1994). Others (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) have referred to the work of Schlossberg's (1981) model. Schlossberg analyzed human adaptation to transition, using such subject areas as crisis, coping, and stress in various life transitions to generalize her findings. She defines transition as an "event or nonevent resulting in change or assumption and change of social networks resulting in growth or deterioration" (p. 5). Schlossberg designed a schematic model that lists the factors affecting transition and adaptation in a flow chart form. The three main headings are: perception of the particular transition (role change, source, timing, onset, duration and degree of stress); characteristics of pretransition and posttransition environments (internal support systems: relationships, family unit, network of friends, institutional supports and physical setting); characteristics of the individual (psychosocial competence, sex, age, state of health, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, value orientation and previous experience with a transition of a similar nature). These mid-level hierarchy factors are used in her final description of the adaptation process or what she calls the movement through phases following transition and the pervasiveness through reorganization. They depend on balance of an individual's resources and differences, and pre- and posttransition environments. It was Schlossberg's work in advancing the discourse into the area of contextualization-in-processes (my term) that philosophically-informed parts of this study.

Kerr and Dacyshyn's (2000) study reflects their use of Schlossberg's methodology. The researchers interviewed the participants, allowing them to describe their experience from a phenomenological perspective, endeavoring to capture the complexity and contextuality of the athlete retirement paradigm. They gathered raw data themes from their interviews and created general descriptive terms to provide a framework for the discussion of their findings. Kerr and Dacyshyn discuss the retirement process by use of a label they call, "nowhere land." This is subheaded with a description of disorientation, feelings of void and reorientation.

While Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) do not go so far as to label their findings a "model" of athlete retirement, the fact that the data were qualitatively gathered and induced sets it apart from other model creation. Many of the first studies in the area of athlete retirement focused on retirement as a type of loss, as opposed to a major period of change. This may have stemmed from the anecdotal evidence derived in athlete observation, the small sample sizes, or simply that there had not been enough work done to uncover other factors and elements in the transition process. McPherson (1980) stated that actual studies of the process of transition are rare. Baillie and Danish (1992) cite Haerle (1975) and Mihovilovic (1968) as early evidence of this. Allison and Meyer (1988) also reference the scarcity of studies of retired female tennis players. However, it is important to note that comprehensive work has been done using athletes, with the results listed in the various literature defined as factors, concepts, implications and conclusions. While this published material may not be written with the intent to develop a

specific model or context or transition, per se, it can still be considered valuable in understanding the subject.

Ballie and Danish (1992) used several studies that accessed athletes in their review article, synthesizing the data to develop the extensive material in this journal article. They quote Kleiber and Greendorfer's (1983) study to examine reactions of former intercollegiate athletes to leaving college sports.

Questionnaires were developed and mailed to former basketball or football players from Big Ten universities. They focused on issues related to psychological difficulty upon retirement, whether the reactions to retirement were varied, and, if so, what affected those reactions, and whether the athletes thought that data could be generated to profile the athlete retirement process. The authors found that most athletes still had a good attitude toward sport, yet they felt a sense of loss of identity, friends, and opportunity, and an additional sense of unfinished business. Ballie and Danish (1992) also cite Haerle's (1975) survey of 312 former baseball players regarding their preparations for postathletic career finding that many felt unprepared for life beyond sport. Allison and Meyer's (1988) survey of 28 retired female tennis professionals, using open-ended items in a mailed questionnaire and Werthner and Orlick's (1986) similar open-ended interview questions used to gather information about the transition of 28 Canadian Olympians are further examples of athletes being used for direct response data collection. Analysis of the transcripts from those interviews identified seven factors determining the nature of an athlete's exit and transition out of sport. They are listed as (a) a new focus, (b) a sense of accomplishment, (c) coaches,



(d) injury/health problems, (e) politics/sport-association problems, (f) finances, and (g) the support of family and friends. Several of these correlate to the direct contexts identified in this study. Werthner and Orlick's "a sense of accomplishment" is comparable to my "level of success" (coded as A6 in raw data themes, Appendix B), their "injury/health problems" correlates with this study's "health" and "financial health" codes (A4 and A5). And their "support of family and friends" directly relates to my direct context category of "social support and influence" (A7). As indicated in Chapter 1, a significant context of quality in athlete transition is social support. But as is noted in Chapter 1, this category and context have not been extrapolated to a discursive discussion of the contexts that may have moved the focused area of athlete retirement and the social contexts of its affecting qualities beyond notions of an athlete moving from one job to another.

A survey of more recent literature (48 studies between 2004 and 2010) suggests that some movement into exploring the subject by contexts has been taken up with sampled foci on (a) reasons for retirement (often injury or deselection), (b) preretirement training and planning, (c) nationality, (d) health and somatic body imaging, (e) support systems, and (f) period of retirement from sport (i.e. collegiate, youth, or elite).<sup>1</sup> These six areas might also be related to my 13 identified indirect contexts.

Much of the literature remains within the disciplines of sport psychology, social psychology, and in a few cases, micro-sociology. Very little of the recent work considers athlete transition within contexts of changing external factors,

specifically, for example, the effects of consumer culture and emerging technology. However, one study utilized “cultural perspectives” and cited a European perspective on the athlete retirement project (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004). Another study (Lally & Kerr, 2008) investigated the effects of sport retirement on the parents of youth and high school athletes.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the literature appears to remain closely tied to the usages of transition models (some of them dating to the early 1990s) and often considers transition as a series of identifiable stages, each containing their own affectations, implications, barriers, opportunities, and rewards that would fit within a prescribed model. While an in-depth analysis of the reasons why more work (in the literature) has not focused on contextualization when it has been suggested and encouraged, it is beyond the scope of this study. However, as will be discussed in other sections of this study, I offer that the three primary reasons include (a) early work in the literature focused on theory and model creation and other researchers followed suit, (b) theory and models lead methodology toward a more quantitative arena and thus are not as subject to the scrutiny of qualitative inquiry, ethnography, and other emerging forms of cultural analysis, and (c) access to qualified subjects willing to offer detailed accounts of their experiences leaving sport is very limited, resulting in small sample sizes and noninclusionary tendencies in research.

A primary focus that remains and perhaps bridges earlier to more recent empirical studies is in the subject area of self-identity. Though less than five identified studies of the 2004-2010 list noted above connected identity with

contexts of retirement, this remains an area of research focus. Interestingly, a significant trend indicated that more than 65% of the 48 identified studies were conducted by, and focused on, international, nondomestic subjects. This fact adds to other macro sociology of sport discourses that identify modern commercial sport as another vehicle for economic, cultural, and political globalization (Sage, 1991, 2010). One or two studies did move across disciplines and noted transcendent applications toward retiring business leaders. One or two studies had a primary focus on pedagogy and treatment, a marked change from earlier literature foci, and no less than 15 studies noted the importance of preretirement planning in their discussion sections. Of the four dozen identified studies, only one identified its primary focus on looking at multiple contexts of athlete retirement and their sample size (six subjects) is too small to project any sweeping empirical claims.

In conclusion of this section, the empirical literature and subject placement suggests that the discourse is moving in the area of contextualization and additional focus on cultural applications. However, much work is required to develop this area of the subject. I continue in the next chapter by discussing the specific direct contexts of athlete transition as identified and explored in this study.

CHAPTER FOUR  
DIRECT CONTEXTS OF ATHLETE RETIREMENT  
AND TRANSITION

**Introduction**

The identification and exploration of the *direct contexts* that affect the quality of an athlete's transition out of sport constitute a central research question of this study. I begin this chapter with a review of the methods used to acquire the substantiating data found in this project. As noted and defined in Chapter 1, this study included three separate participant groups: retired elite or professional athletes ( $n = 29$ ), sport administrators currently (at the time they were interviewed) and gainfully (full time) employed in the business of commercial sport ( $n = 9$ ), and those individuals working in roles identified as "sport media" inclusive of various formats of reportage ( $n = 8$ ). In this chapter, I explore the 13 direct contexts (that affected the quality of an athlete's transition) as they were identified by the 46 study participants. While I note the variances in response by participant group (Figures 2a-2d), due to the larger sample size and depth of experience(s) associated within the group of athlete participants, I focus my discussions in this chapter first and mostly on the athlete participants, rather than the other two participant groups—sports administrator and sport media. In Chapter 5, I will focus discussion on the data gleaned from the sports administrator and media participant groups. In Chapter 6, I will make both

conclusions about the project and further discuss how the data compare and contrast by participatory group.

In this chapter, I begin with an explanation of methods (participants, procedures, interviews) before discussing how the data were analyzed. I continue with a discussion of the findings, specifically looking at each of the 13 identified direct contexts including sample comments from (mostly athlete) participants. I conclude the chapter by previewing a comparison of athlete participant results in the area of direct contexts to other participant groups and published literature. Additional general and detailed conclusions of the data are continued in Chapters 5 and 6. In the section below, I discuss the methods, referring to the athlete participants first and the two additional participant groups next.

## **Methods**

### **Participants (Athletes)**

As noted, 29 retired athletes participated in this study, with the mean age being approximately 38 years old.<sup>1</sup> Each athlete had competed as a professional athlete (defined as having relied solely on their sport—and its derivative nonperformance commercial opportunities—for employment compensation), competed at and/or won a medal during an Olympic Games, held a national record within his or her sport, or had been selected to an elite national-level team that would signify their position as one of the best in the country at the time. The criteria were established so as to study the athlete retirement process in athletes having reached the apex of an elite, Olympic, or professional sports experience.<sup>2</sup> There were no criteria as to the length of time retired or time in their sport. The

scope of this study did not allow for focus on length of retirement or time in sport as factors in the retirement experience, nor were these specifically identified in pilot studies as significant contexts that affected the retirement experience.

Generally, length of time retired from sport has produced significant alterations in an athlete's emotional state. This study is primarily considered with the contexts of exit from sport that affect the athlete within the period of less than 5 years from sport retirement. This focus is noted more as a point of interest in the subject than as a limitation in the study. Correlatives in other life transition and change areas that have looked at the intensity of a subject's temporal adjustment include soldiers returning from theaters of war (Shay, 1994; Tick, 2005).

Length of time having played in sport is often related to the identified direct contexts, *reasons for retirement* or *level of success*. Athletes noted, for example, that they retired because of advancing age and declining skill, or they had achieved their goals in sport. Athlete participant's data were identified and coded 30 times as *level of success* in the direct contexts affecting the quality of their transition and 19 times as *reasons for retirement*. In Chapter 6, I compare some athlete participant data in this project with a previous study (Tinley, 2003). This longitudinal comparison of athlete responses (participants  $n = 7$ ) is discussed in Chapter 6 and includes brief discussion on how the same athletes meeting the same inclusion criteria offer varied responses to similar question across an approximate 8-year span. This aspect of the project is significant, as it helps to explicate one of the central arguments and findings of this project—that the athlete-in-retirement is an evolving and paradigmatic process (or series of

processes) connecting contexts of transition to the quality of the experience. By extension, I argue (and the data support) that as an athlete moves through these processes over time, their interpretation of the transition experience is altered. Understanding why and how that interpretation changes is beyond the scope of this project but might be explained through memory discourse. In my own self-reflection of the period when I retired from sport, how I perceive those tumultuous months in late 1999 has continued to change over time. How I consider the roles of my family and friends in my transition during that period, for example, was much different in 2011 than it was in 2005 and 2000. I remember other retired athletes counseling me in early 1999 by offering such comments as “you just have to hang on to the roller coaster ride. Eventually, you will barely remember being as terrified as you are now.”

Schlossberg (1981) considers the characteristics of the pre- and posttransition environments, noting the need to evaluate internal support systems and institutional support for what they are and how and why they are available for the transitioning athlete. Crook and Robertson (1991) explore how pre- and postretirement counseling affects the transitioning athlete. P. Z. Pearce, MD (personal communication, February 12, 2002), a noted exercise scientist, suggests that, “whenever possible, the subject-in-transition who is experiencing emotional challenges should endeavor to avoid making decisions of import, in particular about relationships.” The application of Dr. Pearce’s advice in a counseling situation might be extended through the findings of the longitudinal aspect of this study. In particular, the notion that, in the early stages of a significant life

transition period, we might realize that our view and interpretation of the situation is not as well-informed as it might be in subsequent periods. For many athletes, the first weeks and months (and for some, years) after they retire from career sport, are fraught with high emotional feelings and irrational thoughts. Many counselors who have worked with transitioning athletes suggest, as did Dr. Pearce, major decisions about one's life direction be delayed until emotional stability is returned (Brammer & Abrego, 1981; Swain, 1991).

In this study, any sport was accepted so long as it allowed the participants to meet inclusion criteria. Athletes were randomly selected by the chief researcher from a list of approximately 75 athletes collected and developed by the researcher and who met inclusion criteria. Age and gender were not a consideration in inclusion criteria for this study, as it was felt that requiring these additional inclusion criteria extended the scope of the methodology beyond the logistics to complete it within an acceptable time frame (18 months—start to finish).<sup>3</sup> Specific comparative gender, age, and time since retirement data were separated and secured for possible use in further study. Gender as a direct context affecting the quality of an athlete's transition, however is discussed later in this chapter. Age as a factor is also noted below within discussions on specific direct contexts.

The initial list of athletes was developed as the primary researcher contacted the athletes personally or through their assigned agent representatives. No more than five athletes from any one sport were chosen, and a total of 16 sports were represented in the final selection. This particular criterion for inclusion was established because, within the areas and contexts the researcher



was exploring, there was an attempt to determine if the retirement experience was notably different by sport. Much of the prior literature utilizes athletes from the same sport, thereby eliminating the context of sport specificity as a factor in noting differences in the athlete retirement experience. The larger number of (athletes from different) sports contributed to the findings as both an emerging direct context to consider and in its ability to identify general patterns of behavior that were transcendent across various types of sports.<sup>4</sup> The number of athlete participants ( $n = 29$ ) was considered a large enough sample size to provide for validity, yet not so large, given the logistical difficulty of a thorough qualitative study (Patton, 2002), that the study became too large in scope to be undertaken by one primary researcher and one additional results coder.

Each athlete was contacted by the chief research investigator, initially by phone, email or in person, and was given a description of the study purpose and procedure and asked if the athlete was interested in participating in the study. Upon agreement, the athlete (or their representative) was sent an informed consent that explained the procedures. The athlete was informed that they had the opportunity to ask any additional questions prior to participating in the study and would be allowed to leave the interview process at any time without explanation. They were told that the interview would be conducted by phone or in person by one primary researcher trained in qualitative methods and experienced in the topic of athlete transition. This had been done in previous qualitative studies and discussed in qualitative methodology texts (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). The primary researcher was trained in the interview

process through prior occupational skill training, several years of experience as an interviewer familiar with the topic, and became familiar with the details of successful qualitative study through prior graduate research and consultation with published researchers experienced in qualitative methodology (Tinley, 2002a, 2007a). The athletes were contacted after the interview (within 60 days) to review their responses and clarify any problem areas. They were assured confidentiality. Seventeen of the 29 athletes were reached on call-backs and 4 made slight alterations to their initial statements, creating triangulation. The remainder of the 17 contacted participants were in agreement with the interpretation of their responses as presented by the researcher. The additional 12 participants were left messages via phone, email, or through their representatives explaining the opportunity to review and amend their responses but failed to respond. Four of them did eventually return the message by phone or email stating that they were satisfied with what they had offered in the interview(s).

University Institutional Review Board approval had been sought and given prior to any contact with participants.

The following represents the breakdown of athlete participants by sport: road cycling,  $n = 2$ ; track and field and running,  $n = 2$ ; football,  $n = 5$ ; baseball,  $n = 1$ ; tennis,  $n = 3$ ; triathlon,  $n = 4$ ; soccer,  $n = 1$ ; speed skating,  $n = 1$ ; water polo,  $n = 1$ ; volleyball,  $n = 1$ ; golf,  $n = 1$ ; sailing,  $n = 1$ ; mountain biking,  $n = 1$ ; moto-x,  $n = 1$ ; basketball,  $n = 2$ ; and swimming,  $n = 2$ . There were 18 male athletes and 11 females included. Seven sports (track and field and running, triathlon, golf, moto-x, speed skating, mountain biking, and swimming) were

defined as, “individual sports,” where the actual competitive performance is displayed by the solitary athlete, and six of the sports (basketball, football, volleyball, baseball, soccer, and water polo) were noted as “team sports,” requiring other athletes to partake. Three sports (cycling, tennis, sailing), retain elements of both, and study participants noted that they had athletic experiences that they considered both individual and collective.

### **Participants (Sport Administrators and Sport Media)**

Study participants who were included in the category “sport administrator” ( $n = 9$ ) offered data that, along with participants in “sport media” ( $n = 8$ ) constituted much of the results found in my discussion on indirect contexts (see Chapter 5). However, the reader need note that all 19 contexts (direct-13, indirect-3, and emerging philosophical-3) were addressed at some level by each of the three study participation groups. Generally, there were more raw data themes and resultant discussion on the *direct contexts* from the athlete participants and more raw data themes and discussion on *indirect contexts* from administrator and media participants. This was expected in the study design due to the nature of each participant’s experience with sport and the kinds of questions utilized in the interviews. However, to insure validity in comparison of data results, the questions asked of each participant group were very similar. Where they became differentiated was in the ethnographic exploration of an area particular to that group. For example, I did not ask sport administrators about their camaraderie with fellow athletes, and I did not ask athletes if they had ever purposely slanted a

story writing in the press that they know might affect a fellow player's reputation with the fans.

Inclusion criteria for the sport administrator group included that they be gainfully employed by a sports structure or their sole job was focused on facilitating some aspect of institutionalized sport. The criteria were kept purposely broad since narrowing it would complicate the methods to a degree that would inhibit the overall project. While I felt that the study require a more strict inclusion criteria for athletes, I did not feel the same about sport administrators so long as they worked in commercial (for-profit) sport on a full-time basis and had done so for a minimum of 5 years. This allowed me to access a variety of individuals, each of whom had brought their own experiences to the central research question of which factors affected an athlete's retirement from sport. Study participants in the sport administrator group included coaches, sports agent/representatives, major league team presidents, executives with player's association groups, those working in sport law, those who were employed by sport governing bodies, sporting event producers, sports medical personnel, and employees of "athlete's services" organizations.

Inclusion criteria for sports media participants included that they be gainfully employed on a full-time basis in an area of mass media where the primary focus was on sport reportage or sport media production. These included newspaper journalists, sports television producers, sports film writer/producers, sports radio hosts, online sports site writer/producers, and an actress who had worked on sports film but also met inclusion criteria as an athlete participant.

## **Procedures**

Data collection was accomplished through the use of semi-structured and unstructured interviews. To help insure validity, the questions asked were proposed and reviewed by seven individuals who had knowledge of the athlete retirement paradigm (four retired professional athletes, one counselor, one psychiatrist, one qualitative researcher) and who commented on the questions. After reviewing their responses, the questions were re-written with the advice of the experts and were subsequently shown to four nonparticipating retired athletes to determine if they were an accurate vehicle from which to elicit athlete responses on the subject of which contexts affected the quality of their exit from sport. After these responses were reviewed, the study was then piloted through interviews with a separate group of four retired professional athletes (after having explained the study and received informed consent from them) who met the inclusion criteria but were not selected for final inclusion. Sample interview questions were asked of this group drawn from the bank of 36 developed questions to date. A focus group-styled discussion was then conducted with the four athletes, the researcher, and one other published researcher experienced in qualitative study. The researcher asked the questions and the experienced researcher offered guidance and suggestions when necessary. The responses were written down and reviewed for potential context categories and generalized themes. None of the participants in the pilot study were used in the actual study.

The pilot study was reviewed by the primary researcher and the contributing athletes. The results of the pilot study were discussed by all parties

present, including the athletes, in a subsequent discussion of the questions and the responses given by the athletes. This discussion took place immediately following the pilot study, and suggestions for fine tuning the interview process were considered and applied to the final group of questions. It was generally felt that the athletes, when prompted through a question (without identifying a specific context, direct or indirect), would offer themes that indicated which contexts effected them. The group wanted to know why some questions were asked that addressed areas of their career (i.e., relationships with media and their sponsors, where they had played sports, did they feel different from the opposite gender as they left sport) but had not been asked before by media or others inquiring about their transition out of sport. They appreciated seeing the easier questions first and the more thought-provoking questions toward the end of the interview.

Interestingly, there were several comments from the piloting-athletes suggesting that the list *not* refer to the more “obvious contexts.” Health, financial success, and level of education were mentioned. They suggested framing a question in such a manner that if a response was offered as an influential context, the response would carry more truth value. These comments surrounded the idea that they had been asked questions about their retirement before by family, friends or media but that the questions in this study allowed them to speak about the more intimate details of their experiences from areas and approaches that they knew were influential in their transition, but family, friends, or journalists had not asked before. One interviewee from the pilot study said, “If someone wants to know my story, then they should get out of the way and let me tell it.” The notion

that allowing from more of an oral history approach rather than a structured qualitative interview was noted and applied by the researcher.

Approximately 20 possible contexts were noted in the piloting and the 15 most-cited direct contexts were applied in the design of athlete interview questions to be used in semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Thirteen final direct contexts were identified and explored. *Direct contexts* identified and explored in this study include (a) age, (b) gender, (c) socioeconomic class, (d) education level, (e) race or ethnicity, (f) sport specificity, (g) performance level achieved, (h) health condition(s) upon exit from sport, (I) support structures and/or a surrounding community, (j) intervention/pre-retirement training, (k) financial status, (l) region/nation where sport was played, and (m) reasons for career termination.

## **Interviews**

Each athlete participant was prompted from the same bank of 36 questions. However, not every question was asked of every athlete. Following guidelines for ethnographic inquiry (S. G. Brown & Dobrin, 2004; Sands, 2002), the prompting of reflexive experience (Gray, 2003; Lipsitz, 1990), and naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the interview format was structured to allow for athletes to reflect on the kinds of experiences that initialed effecting contexts as they left sport. The interviews started with nonthreatening subjects such as “can you reflect on the people who were around you when you played?” and “tell me about the kinds of relationships that you had with them.” The question prompts (listed in the appendix) gradually tended more toward their specific transitional

experience out of sport and were considered to require some deeper reflection. These included “what kind of role did you see yourself fulfilling in society as a retired elite athlete? Do you think that role is the same as what society wants for you? Do you feel comfortable as an ex-athlete?”

At no time were potentially offensive or intrusive questions of a sensitive nature (i.e., did they get divorced, did they use drugs, did they experience heavy depression, or were they ever suicidal?) asked of the participant. If the participants offered personal information unprompted and were agreeable to its usage in the study (confirmed in call-backs), the data were included and analyzed in the same manner as all other responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interviews took place over the phone or in person, 17 by phone, 12 in person, following established criteria for mixed format data collection in qualitative research (Patton, 2002) and used in other studies using similar methodology (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). The interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and no written participant responses were allowed due to the fact that data to be analyzed qualitatively is often better gleaned in the interview as opposed to written response (Patton, 2002). Videotaping was not allowed to encourage open response and retain confidentiality. Some minor and generic interviewer prompting took place to keep the discussion on track and moving forward (statements such as, “tell me more about this,” or “what do you mean by that?”). Each interview was scheduled so that the entire process could be completed in one sitting so as to keep the participant from fragmented responses and a resultant decrease in the reliability. On two occasions, however, additional data were



gathered from the same participant at different times: one time when the participant had to be interrupted and one time when the participant called the researcher unprompted with the desire to speak more about his exit from sport. The average interview lasted between 39 and 41 minutes (range 21 to 62 min.). All interviews were transcribed as close to verbatim as audio quality allowed, and both the audio files and the transcriptions were stored under lock and key with only the primary researcher having access. As noted in Chapter 1, I chose a hybrid of methods in this study in an effort to access rich and organic data that have been lacking in prior studies but also, to insure validity, I utilized proven forms of qualitative methods.<sup>5</sup>

### **Data Analysis**

In an effort to identify the direct and indirect contexts that effected an athlete's retirement experience, the athlete interview data were inductively analyzed using hierarchical content data analysis procedures, as explained in Glaser and Strauss (1967), Patton (2002) and detailed in Scanlon, Stein, and Ravizza (1989) and Udry, Gould, Bridges, and Beck (1997). This inductive data analysis procedure has been used by other researchers using qualitative methodology (e.g., Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993; M. R. Weiss et al., 1991). Udry et al. (1997) used a six-step procedure for their data analysis which included the following. First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. Second, each researcher (primary and co-coder) became familiar with the interview, listened to the audiotape, and reread the transcript. Next, each researcher developed an idiographic profile of the athlete. Then, each researcher developed raw data

themes that characterized the participant's responses within each of the subsections of the interview. After extracting raw data themes, the researchers met and reached a consensus on all raw data themes. Next, raw data themes within each section were grouped into like categories establishing a hierarchy moving from specific to general. The process was considered complete when no additional meaningful groupings coalesced. And finally, frequency analysis was used to determine the percentage of participants who cited a theme within each second-order and general dimension. This study used several of the steps of that list, beginning with clustering the quotes around underlying uniformities and common threads. These are termed the emergent or raw data themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 2002) and facilitated the inductive process that built upon itself. However, remembering that this study had several layers in both research questions and methods design (multiple participant groups, multiple grouped contexts, and associative methodologies), I refrained from following hierarchical data analysis procedures to one particular end. Instead, with the knowledge that my research questions would include the exploration of *indirect contexts*, plus any new emergent (and organically-derived) themes and contexts surrounding the quality of an athlete's transition, I chose to collapse the 13 identified direct contexts into four second order themes but not third order or general dimensions. This layer of collapse enables the discussion in its ability to compare generalized but supported concepts without the tedium of considering an excessive number of contexts. The collapsing of data in this fashion also enables the movement of the project to its findings and conclusions. The second order themes include

Economic Indicators, Physical and Psychosocial Factors, Characteristics of the Sport Experience, and Individual Characteristics (see Figure 1).

To help insure “truth value” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the analysis, the primary researcher utilized another secondary researcher for development of raw data themes and collapsing the respondent’s replies into higher order themes. The researchers looked for any inconsistencies between their interpretations, and either disallowed that response, contacted the participant once more for clarification, or identified how often and where the differences of data interpretation occurred. To reach consensus validation, a third researcher was available to adjudicate any differences in opinion between the primary and secondary researcher. But due to the resultant high inter-rater reliability, this option was not employed.

Ultimately, 862 raw data themes were drawn from the athlete participant data (1,436 total raw data themes from all participant groups), and of which 417 were assigned to direct contexts, 142 to indirect contexts, and 282 to emerging philosophical contexts (see Appendix F). Both researchers reviewed each other’s responses and in 34 cases of the 1,436 emergent themes, the responses were different enough to require discussion. After the researcher and co-coder reviewed the 34 raw data themes in question, agreement was found on all but 2 themes which, upon further review, were identified in other participant responses and eliminated rather than sent to an adjudicator. The 34 total negotiated interpretations equated to an inter-rater reliability well within the guidelines established within qualitative research design (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). In all

cases, the researchers were able to discuss their specific responses and agree on a mutual interpretation.

The rest of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of the 13 direct contexts associated with the quality of an athlete's transition out of sport. I will address by how they are grouped in second order themes beginning with Economic Indicators.

### **Direct Contexts—Economic Indicators**

Economic indicators is constituted by three direct contexts as identified by study participants. They are (a) financial health, (b) socioeconomic status, and (c) education levels (see Figures 1 and 4a). I will discuss each separately and as a collective.

#### **Financial Health**

Financial health as a factor in the quality of their retirement from sport was noted 52 times by athlete participants as a raw data theme, second only to *social support and influence* (103) and *preretirement counseling* (53) as a significant context among 13 direct contexts. However, the athlete's responses were both varied in their meaning and not always in sync with either popular ideology or other study participant's responses. Mainstream thought and qualitative analysis within fandom and celebrity culture has associated professional athletes who earn substantial amounts of money while they are playing, living a conspicuously consumptive lifestyle (E. Cohen, 2004; Gamson, 1994; Marshall, 1997; G. Turner, 2004; Veblen, 1899/2008). Upon retirement, for a variety of questionable reasons, it has been reported in popular press that many professional athletes lose

much of their wealth. While I have witnessed this scenario of loss in my tenure as a professional athlete, a sports administrator, a sports writer, and an academic researcher, few empirical studies have explored these allegations or commented on them with any degree of methodological support. Certainly, we know that many professional athletes earn very high salaries. But we also know that there exist many more elite and world-class athletes who do not earn much money and retire with little or any financial security. Torre (2009) suggests that there are both personal and structural reasons why, “according to a host of sources . . . by the time they have been retired for two years, 78% of former NFL players have gone bankrupt or are under financial stress because of joblessness or divorce” (p. 2). Among the possible reasons for a retired athlete’s postcareer financial status, the author lists the areas as, “the lure of tangibility,” “misplaced trust,” “family matters,” and “great expectations” (pp. 4-6). While there may be anecdotal support for these journalistic claims, the fact remains that we have little reliable data that connects professional athletes with any specific pattern of financial (mis)management. However, some of the data from this study do corroborate Torre’s claims.

What this study explicated is that retiring athletes did note the financial status they left sport with as a context that affected the quality of their transition and that there were other contributory factors that might be included when discussing this direct context. For example, one athlete participant claimed, “I came from a wealthy, influential, and supportive family, so I was used to money,” which suggests that she had been socialized with material wealth around her.

Later in the interview, she spoke of not feeling the desire to spend money on material things when she first earned money in sport. However, she also went on to say, “My expectations increased with monetary success, but when I left sport I made hardly any money.” For this athlete, financial success had been linked to athletic success, and when she left sport there was neither the validation of athleticism or, for her, its monetary correlation. This may help to support Torre’s (2009) claim that retired athletes too often invest in tangibles such as restaurants, car dealerships, and inventions, when other financial investment vehicles are perhaps safer and historically have shown a higher rate of return relative to risk. Another athlete participant in this study equated financial status with feelings of entitlement. “Entitlement influences their post playing experiences,” he claimed, adding, “It’s an oddity to be catered to because you have money.” This athlete spoke about how athletes expect to be able to transfer their wealth and its corollary perks into postplaying careers. But another athlete participant claimed that “athletes don’t have an exit strategy where business people do.” If there was a general thread among the athlete’s comments, it was that their focus was on excelling at their sport and not on learning about or executing financial planning while they played.<sup>6</sup>

An area that is generally agreed upon by fandom, the athlete participants, and the administrator/media participants is that athletes often, in their immediate focus on athletic performance, have a higher chance of being “preyed upon,” as one athlete said, than those who have had the opportunity to gain hands-on financial experience. It is also thought that athletes too often place their trust in

commercial structures and individuals who are not meant to or are incapable of managing their money in a professional and secure mode. To determine how these ideas and data address my primary research question requires more discussion. One athlete participant claimed that “you want to be rewarded with a lot of money,” but when prompted to explain why, noted “well, money gives you freedom.” The notion of freedom, however, as it is incorporated into the athlete retirement paradigm, varies in its personal connotation. In a previous study (Tinley, 2002a), an athlete who played in the NFL told me that he was *free* to do whatever he wanted after sport because he had a variety of skills. This athlete told me that he had earned approximately \$6,000 from an NFL team for 5 month’s work in 1969, but had earned \$7,500 during the other 7 months of the year as a licensed plumber. He was proud of his off-season skill. An athlete from this current study claimed that he had earned “just enough money to have the freedom to re-tool myself.” Other athletes claimed that they had trained themselves to become one of the best in the world at their sport but retired with no financial security because their sport had little monetization attached to it.<sup>7</sup> Financial health is also linked to the other economic indicators—socioeconomic status and education levels—as well as the additional direct context, preretirement counseling. While many professional sports teams are now offering preretirement counseling, study results indicate that team-assigned counselors and advisors offer only generic advice in the area of financial management and that professional teams are motivated to provide these counseling services not out of an altruistic care for their athletes but because of the resulting “blow-back” from mainstream

media when stories of retired athlete's failures associate commercial leagues and teams with culpability in this modern sport paradigm.

Financial health in retiring athletes is connected to social support and influence, if one is to factor the high divorce rate seen in athletes when they retire (Torre, 2009). While I purposely avoided asking athletes about the question of divorce, several athlete participants volunteered the state of their personal relationships and how they were affected in a variety of ways by a divorce and child support. Anecdotally, it has been shown that the divorce rate (and subsequent challenges) for retiring athletes is substantially higher than average. Torre claims,

In a survey reported by the financial-services firm Rothstein Kass in December, more than 80% of the 178 athletes polled—each with a minimum net worth of \$5 million and two thirds under the age of 30—said they were “concerned about being involved in unjust lawsuits and/or divorce proceedings.” (p. 5)

However, at this juncture we cannot rely on these data to make any empirical assumptions about the connections between athlete transition, failed relationships, and financial status. It is a risk to make broad sweeping claims about how financial status affects an athlete in transition. However, based on the results from this study, I will offer these generalized suggestions. If an athlete puts some effort into their financial planning and has career or life choice options upon retirement due to financial planning, there is a higher percentage chance that the quality of their transition is more favorable than retiring without options due to financial constraints. Having a clear vision, if possible, of where you will be financially when you retire appears to help. One participant claimed, “Since



we—my wife and I—never made a lot of money in our sport, we knew from the beginning that we couldn't retire on our savings and we would have to get jobs.”

The knowledge that they would require additional skill sets in order to earn a living after sport appears to have been a favorable piece of admission.

Conversely, some athletes who retire with large financial portfolios can be adversely affected by their status. One participant who played in the NFL before the salaries were very high suggested that “sometimes leaving sport with the perception of financial wealth is a curse.” Athletes have noted that they miss the structure of the sport upon retirement and often return to the game in some nonplaying capacity, not for the compensation, but for other reasons. While these reasons vary with the athlete, the structure of an organization provides stability for the athlete as they move through such processes as changing self-identity, body type, and relational capacities.

Even with growing notification (both public and within the structures of commercial sport) about the challenges of financial planning in postplaying periods, athletes continue to focus on the game while they play. Athletes who retire with enough money to offer them a period of transition where they can “re-tool,” acquire an education and prepare for a new career or any new personal venture appear to have a less traumatic transition than those who retire with no money, or lots of money and no idea how to manage it.

Financial health as a context in the quality of an athlete's transition is also seen in fiction. Updike's four volume *Rabbit* series (1960, 1971, 1981, 1990) chronicling Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, sees the protagonist fail in his efforts to

find a career that provides him with the satisfaction he experiences as a star basketball player in high school. In each of the novels, Rabbit's happiness and emotional stability is connected to his financial and career success. At times, it is an inverse relationship as is described in the third of the series, *Rabbit is Rich* (1981). Angstrom has inherited a Toyota dealership from his father-in-law and is now wealthy. But this brings its own series of challenges. In Sillitoe's (1959) novella, *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*, the protagonist, Smith, escapes the vicissitudes of working class, postwar Britain by running cross country for a small boy's camp school he is indentured to after being convicted of theft. When he refuses to be used by the bourgeoisie at this boarding school for deviant youth—his running leveraged in an effort to sustain the manager's ideology—Smith purposely loses a race and is punished by additional, forced, unpaid labor. In Chapter 5, I will review the possible effects of these popular narratives on the quality of an athlete's retirement.

### **Socioeconomic Status**

The second direct context collapsed under Economic Indicators is *socioeconomic status*. While there appears some overlap with the direct context, financial status, socioeconomic status was found in the data results to suggest more of a social and familial background as a factor in the quality of the athlete transition rather than the actual financial status of the athlete upon exit from sport. Out of 438 raw data themes identified by athlete participants across 13 direct contexts, only 19 or 4% were seen by the research coders as "socioeconomic status." One athlete participant claimed, "I was maturing faster in some ways

because I was making money sooner than my peers,” which suggests a correlation between early financial remuneration and maturation processes. Another participant suggested that “part of my motive was propelled by how my class and race never moved from what they believed.” This athlete participant went on to regale how the lower class ideology she had grown up in had prompted her to succeed both in sports and beyond her playing career. Another athlete noted, “I wanted to train far more than work at a normal job because I never grew up actually seeing working adults around me.” While this athlete noted that she had grown up with some material wealth, her comments suggest that if an athlete is not socialized with the presence of working men and women around them, they may have a different approach to notions of work and compensation and their effects while they play and as they exit sport. Of the 130 raw data themes taken from interviews with sport administrators and considered as direct contexts, none were collapsed into socioeconomic status. Of the 70 raw data themes assigned to the *direct contexts* by sport media participants, there were only 5 assigned to socioeconomic status. It is difficult to ascertain anything specific from these numbers. However, I might suggest after listening to the interviews again and re-reading the transcriptions that the nonathletes had less empathy for athletes (than athletes did for each other) who were socialized in a socioeconomic environment that shaped their relationship to sport. As was noted above, athletes often equate success with compensation. And when the levels and types of compensation are removed, they can suffer the effects of having to reframe their relationships with money and material wealth.

The clichéd narrative of the young athlete “finding his or her way out of poverty through success in sports” may also have an effect on the athlete’s notion of money-equals-success. The rags to riches theme, played out in sport narratives, both real and imagined, may have an effect on young impressionable athletes. One athlete participant claimed, “I saw other athletes believe that sport was the perfect ticket to a better life,” before expanding on his thoughts and opinions of the fallacy of this narrative. I address the role of media as it has contributed to the quality of an athlete’s exit from sport in more detail in Chapter 5.

### **Education Level**

The final direct context assigned to Economic Indicators is *education level*. The data put forth by all participant groups indicated a direct relationship between amount of education, both before, during, and after an athlete’s playing career and the quality of the athlete’s retirement from sport. Generally, it was found that the more education, formal or informal, that an athlete received, the less emotional stress they experienced as they exited sport. There was also a connection between an athlete’s education and their ability to have a healthy relationship with monetary capital and/or material wealth. I situate education level in Economic Indicators for this reason. Of the 438 raw data themes identified as direct contexts in athlete participant interviews, 35 or 8% were noted as education levels. The athlete’s responses regarding the importance of education in the quality of their transition out of sport could be categorized into two general areas. First, the participants felt that a formal education environment offered a broader view of life options both in their new career possibilities and

their attitudes toward the role of sport in their lives. One athlete claimed that “a real education is different than a tribe of team players,” suggesting further in the interview that, while he appreciated what he learned from his coaches and teammates, it was a different pedagogical experience than in a formal school setting. Second, several athlete participants noted how a formal education and a degree were helpful in finding work upon retirement. For some, this was a matter of having the minimum qualifications, and for others it offered them a certain level of confidence to seek new opportunities beyond sport. One athlete claimed, “My education helped me to learn about the realities of sport as a business.” Several athletes who did end up working in the business of sport after their playing careers noted that returning to a formal education environment after being in the spotlight of elite or professional sports was humbling but at the same time comforting. One athlete who had a surprisingly (for them) difficult transition period suggested, “During my sports career I was aware of what I knew and didn’t know and that knowledge eventually became a vehicle for building my life after sport.” For some, it is the admission of what they *don’t know*, that is both the most difficult and yet telling of the self-admission processes.

My own transition out of sport, itself surprisingly challenging, included a return to formal education. School and perhaps the pursuit of an advanced degree represented a return to a period in my life where I chose to leave school without completing an advanced degree. So, for me a return to education was the completion of an abandoned task and, as others in the study have noted, a return to an environment where sport-related hubris was unlearned and a place that was rife

with myriad potential in nonsport related fields. As one participant claimed, “An education represented . . . possibilities.”

Several studies have focused on the collegiate athlete’s transition experience (Barners, 2002; Blackburn, 2003; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Parker, 1994). The majority of these inquires consider the plight of the student athlete as they “retire” from high level sport. It is beyond the scope of this study to specifically compare collegiate athlete transition with other professional athlete’s experience. However, later in this chapter I discuss *level of success achieved* as a direct context influencing athlete transition. For some, the exit from collegiate sport represents the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood focused on career, family, and new nonsport interests. For others, it represents a kind of mortality, in particular when it becomes painfully obvious that their level of skill will not allow them the opportunity to continue playing at the elite, professional, or Olympic level and achieve the validation that is associated with fame and material compensation. Results suggest that some athletes seem to sense early on that level of success equates to the benefits of having options after sport. However, there was little indication that this idea was central to the socialization of the young elite athlete.

Of the other study participants—sport administrators and sport media—there were mixed results in their notation of level of education as a factor in athlete retirement. Of the 130 coded responses under direct contexts from sport administrators ( $n = 8$ ), there were only 5 or less than 4% that were assigned to *levels of education*. Of the 70 coded responses under direct contexts from sport

media participants ( $n = 9$ ), 7 or 10% were assigned to *levels of education*.

Revisiting raw interview data in this area suggested that more of the participants from the sport media group placed a value on education perhaps because they appeared to take a wider perspective on sports in society than those who were working in a specific area of commercial sport. Several sport administrators did note the importance of education, however, with a nonstudy participant who met the inclusion criteria and is now an executive with a group representing the interests of retired players suggesting:

Education is the key because it offers options. There's a big difference between having information and understanding information, and too many players consider themselves educated because they have access to data and advisors. An education should begin at home, but if an athlete's "home" isn't skilled in providing it then they need to find it elsewhere. And that's where it gets tough, because not everyone has the athlete's best interest at heart.

Sport media pundits, it might be said, necessarily lobby for more education for the athlete because it fits with dominant ideology. In this study, however, there was not enough data to validate this claim. One sport media participant offered this: "Education is the key . . . we should ask them [the athletes] what are the benefits of risking it all on sport?" This comment suggests that this journalist wonders about the importance of sport in society; a fact that he might be reminded of, provides his occupational opportunity.<sup>8</sup> In the next section, I explore the second order category, *Physical and Psychosocial Factors*, which is constituted by the direct contexts health, social support and influence, and preretirement counseling.

### **Direct Contexts—Physical and Psychosocial Factors**

The identified physical and psychosocial factors constitute a central portion of this study's findings (see Figures 1 and 4b). While the areas of health, social support, and preretirement counseling have been identified separately and discussed in prior studies (Cecić Erpič et al., 2004; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Fernandez, Stephan, & Fouquereau, 2006; Hughes, 1990; Kane, 1991; Lally & Kerr, 2008; Perna, Zaichkowsky, & Bocknek, 1996; Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, & Murphy, 1992; Schlossberg, 1981; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignières, 2003b; Stephan, Torregrosa, & Sanchez, 2007), this study re-considers them through the organic data offered by athlete, administrator, and media participants.

Of the 438 raw data themes offered by athlete participants and coded as direct contexts, *social support and influence* had the highest response of noted raw data themes ( $n = 103$ ) surrounding the concepts that *social support*, or the amount, means, and types of social interaction a retiring athlete is exposed to upon exit from sport, has a direct and substantial bearing on the quality of their transition. The second largest collection of raw data themes from the athlete participant group's direct contexts list was *preretirement counseling* ( $n = 53$ ), while the fourth largest was *health* ( $n = 36$ ). Collectively, these three areas were collapsed into the general argument that the physical, psychological, and social nature of an athlete's body, mind, and relational state had a significant effect of the quality of their transition out of sport. I continue with a discussion of the direct context, *health upon retirement*.



## Health

The notion of health, as explored through the data offered in this study, suggests a more layered, interesting, and perhaps consequential factor in the direct contexts that affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. Popular ideology will suggest that if an athlete leaves their sport in good relative health, they will have more options in their postplaying life. This is a supportable concept. But the data indicated that the notion of *health* was associated with other significant contexts of retirement including self-identity, sport played, level of success, and reasons for retirement.

As an elite, professional, or Olympic athlete is gradually socialized into the world of sport, they come to view their body as the vehicle which delivers everything from pain and pleasure to purpose and profit. They may not be able to describe it as such, but comments from this study such as "I came to know myself through my physical body" and "I had a fall from grace because of my deteriorating body," suggests that an elite athlete has a relationship with their physical being much different than a nonathlete. By definition of "sport" and "athlete," regardless of how cognizant they may be of what I refer to as *existential somatics*, their referential physical lifeworld is unique to their chosen career.<sup>9</sup>

One athlete, who competed on several Olympic teams in a sport that had sculpted his body into a very physical example of his sport, claimed, "When I retired and my body changed, people treated me differently." It is not significant that readers know whether the subject was actually treated differently because his waist size had morphed from 31 inches to 34 inches, as he noted, or that his perception of

his treatment by others was more a matter of a discursive construction of self.<sup>10</sup>

However, the significance of his notation itself, as well as his perception, contributes to the discussion.

The anti-essentialist concept of subjectivity follows that identities are not things that exist but rather are a product of discourses, representations, patterns of communicative processes, and sustained narratives. One athlete who played in the NFL for several years before retiring for health reasons claimed that “athlete’s bodies are just things to be consumed by fans” and went on to speak about the “disposability of players that fans forget . . . are people.” Barker (2008) suggests that “the moment of consumption marks one of the processes by which we are formed as persons” (p. 11). While popular discussion and sports journalism has often thematically-referenced what can be referred to as the “gladitorialization” of modern commercial sports figures, little research exists within the athlete retirement literature that suggests the consumption *of*, not *by*, a professional athlete. The athlete’s perception of how they balanced their “physical investment,” as one athlete labeled it, with the return they received from the structures of commercial sport (teams, leagues, fandom, associated corporate sponsors) can have a direct effect on the quality of their exit from sport (see Chapter 5). This effect on the athlete is perhaps best explicated in both their physical health as they leave sport and their perception of their physical health.<sup>11</sup> One athlete who had undergone 13 major surgical procedures on his ankle claimed, “Every transition I’ve ever had in sport was related to my health.” This athlete felt that much of his medical treatment offered by the team franchise while

playing professional sports was targeted at maximizing his ability to contribute to the success of the organization (defined in team victories and championships). He felt that he sacrificed long term health and full use of his ankle (it is now fused in a 90 degree angle) for the immediate good of his team. However, it would be totalizing to suggest that the blame for this case or others falls only with the corporate structures of commercial sport. We remind ourselves that the industry of commercial sports is an unorthodox one, with numerous cultural mediators acting as agents in support of their own interest but feigning alliance to another. At times commercial sport becomes a “paradox” (Beisser, 1977b) that purposely and successfully *gladitorializes* the athlete-as-product while simultaneously, purposely, and successfully producing their (team, league, sponsor, media, agent) image as paternal protector of athletes who could not otherwise take care of themselves. Consumers of sport struggle with their own relationship to sports and athletes (Bourdieu, 1993). Whannel (as cited in Horne, 2006) argues that consumers of sport “maintain high levels of consumption even if quality [success] declines and prices rise” (p. 3) and further suggests that overt consumption in the face of declining quality is a desired trait, since it signifies commitment to the athlete body and what it signifies. The athlete, however, should be cognizant of their commercial bases-as-product. Many are lured by the material benefits of high level commercial sport employment and fail to fully comprehend the toll their body is taking, especially if they are playing in a physically violent sport such as football or boxing. Others realize the long term effects of playing elite sports while others think they are unaffected but are surprised at either the extent

of effects of many years playing sport or the relative connection between quality of life after sport and their physical state. Several athletes noted that, even if they knew the long term risks, they chose to take them at the time. “Everyone leaves football beat up” one athlete said, while another said, “We made that choice but it’s still sad to see guys who can’t even pick up their kids at 40 years old because their knees and backs are so wrecked.” Some sports such as boxing have, after years of medical data, come to represent the disposability of the athlete body. Unofficial records claim that over 500 boxers have died in the ring worldwide since 1884, with perhaps thousands more suffering from the effects of their time in competitive boxing. Boxing, Sammons (1988) claims, “is directly associated with American strength and spirit,” a sport that has been “effectively packaged, marketed, and sold as a natural activity possessing redeeming social values ranging from socioeconomic escalation to character building” (p. 8). And though boxing has been re-aculturated by sport consumers since the mid 1990s, reframed as a social distinction and taste (Bourdieu, 1984) in sports fandom, what is left in the wake of this *patrio-combative* ideology are many ex-boxers who suffer the effects of early-onset, trauma-induced maladies to the brain; a result of their own sporting choices.

When I retired after a 17-year career as a professional athlete in a noncombat, endurance sport, I was surprised not only at the physiological state of my body but at the role its condition played in the quality of my exit from sport. Something was very wrong with me physically, and subsequent visits to the physicians, including a barrage of tests, revealed a compromised adrenal pituitary

axis. It was a malady mostly unknown to the sports physicians and rarely seen by the diagnosing exercise scientists with whom I had been working in this discovery. Lack of data, however, was not unexpected, since I had been involved in a new and emerging sport and subsequent years of endurance training had not yet produced either a collective of athletes exposed to these sport-specific rigors of extended physiological stress or the results of studying the effects of their sustained efforts. There was a correlative psychological component as well; near-clinical depression that resulted partly from the hormonal imbalance and partly from a self-diagnosed existential angst. I had been one of the fittest athletes in the world (but essentially unhealthy) and within a few weeks of testing, I was notified that my testosterone levels were dangerously low. The decline of my physical state was a kind of mortality signified to me in the sign of my bodily condition. I didn't look much different—perhaps not as tan—but on many levels, I felt betrayed by my body. And out of that betrayal rose up a kind of fear that I would never again be as physically fit as I once had been. Of course, this great somatic refusal was in many ways at odds with essential health. For elite endurance athletes necessarily place their physiological status on the prolonged paradigmatic cusp of systematic cellular breakdown and (eventual) regeneration.

One of the successes of this study is the identification of new and emerging philosophical contexts within the athlete retirement discourse. Issues of fear, mortality, bodily awareness, and shifting identities are linked to the context of health as an athlete exits sport. Part of the role of sport for both participants and fans is to cheat death by projecting a representative image of immortality on

the human athlete body. This particular constructed system of signs has been associated with elite sports since the Ancient Greeks athletes gave homage to their gods by sculpting their own anthropomorphic human shape in a likeness of what the artists and religious leaders had agreed was a human example of what their gods might look like on earth. What the data showed in this study is that there exists a series of intersections with bodily representations, the human vassal a site of contested terrain where image, health, form, fitness, and what each represent to the athlete, the sport administrator, and the sport media pundit in the transitional period where ultimately, the athlete must re-articulate his or her physical essence as it extends in their lifeworld. One athlete participant said, “I have my health now, but I’m not sure how I ended up thinking that I would die if I couldn’t still play world class ball.” Other athletes are subjected to career-ending illnesses and injuries that extend beyond their athletic lives. One athlete participant in this study retired with an incurable disease that attacks the nervous system. He said, “I wasn’t wholly comfortable existing in my own skin or my evolving identity as a public hero who is now living with a public disease.”

Perhaps the most public example of how health affects the quality of an athlete’s life after sport focuses on repetitive head injuries and their connection to Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). Research since 2008 at the Boston University School of Medicine’s Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy (CSTE), in partnership with the Sport Legacy Institute (SLI), have found evidence that retired professional football players from the NFL are several times more likely to suffer from early-onset Alzheimer’s disease and

dementia than the general population. Studies have shown that postmortem studies of brain tissue from former NFL players (who died in their 40s, 50, and 60s) shows an abundant amount of damaging proteins in the tissue linking numerous concussions suffered during their playing career and diseases usually linked to individuals in their 70s, 80s, and 90s (King, 2010). As of 2011, nearly 300 living players from contact or combative sports, both active and retired, have offered their brain tissue to Boston's CSTE and the Sports Legacy Institute (Nowinski, 2006). There has been widespread mainstream press coverage of this finding resulting in the NFL instituting rule changes that disallow the kind of violent helmet-to-helmet contacts that are suspected to cause many of the concussions. While popular ideology sees the league's actions as a response to public pressure to provide for the safety of the athlete, athlete participants in this study have indicated that the paternalistic, proactive response of the league is not always favored by the athlete. One athlete claimed, "Football is a violent game. We know the risks," while another suggested, "They might as well go back to leather helmets. We can take care of ourselves." Still, after several former NFL players with advanced CTE who required 24-hour care were profiled in the mainstream media, the NFL donated \$1 million with no restrictions to Boston University's CSTE in the spring of 2010. While this action could suggest an easing of the *gladitorialization* in commercial sport, findings from this study suggest that the NFL's actions are more likely a preemptive public relations move that was necessary when the narrative was taken up as a *cause celebre* by various media. One study participant who fit inclusion criteria as a sport administrator but

who had also played college football and suffered several career ending concussions spoke about why the narrative of the athlete with CTE has resonated with media and some sport consumers. “Concussions aren’t simple news; they aren’t tangible unless they relate to tragedy.” When prompted to expand he offered, “But CTE is news because it brings in newsworthy stories of real people suffering and they are also celebrity hero types who we [sport consumers] think will live forever and can end up with the mind of a small child at 45 years old.” In the spring of 2011, three separate NHL players who had a history of playing in the role of “enforcer” and by all reports had suffered numerous traumas to the head, died. The Associated Press and other news agencies had reported the cause of death as either mysterious or suicide. Subsequent investigations revealed possible depression in the players (Branch, 2011).

The fallen hero myth is transcendent for many reasons, some of which I explore in Chapters 2 and 5. Still, the majority of sports fandom itself continues to consume violent action in combat sports as is evidenced by the high sales figures of “big hit” styled DVDs and the growth of the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Competition). Certainly we live in what Turner calls a *somatic society* where personal and political challenges are problematized within and surrounding the politics of the body (Turner, 1996).

Health as an issue in the private and public arena of a transitioning athlete is also seen in popular fiction. Sharra (1991), Malamud (1952), and M. Harris (1956) all work with the somatic body of the aging athlete character to represent such ideas as mortality, lost innocence, and resulting maturation or acceptance.



Mostly, they focus on the destruction of the human form and its derivative themes of pathos and loss. On occasion, the direct contexts of health and, by extension, bodily image, are re-constructed in investigative nonfictives. Foster Wallace (2006) spares the reader melodrama and harkens to first the beauty of the human form before suggesting that this too shall pass in time:

The human beauty we're talking about here is beauty of a particular type; it might be called kinetic beauty. Its power and appeal are universal. It has nothing to do with sex or cultural norms. What it seems to have to do with, really, is human beings' reconciliation with the fact of having a body.

While watching another retired athlete from a previous study (Tinley, 2002a) whose actions and comments were also chronicled in a subsequent text (Tinley, 2003), I listened to the comments of David Bailey, a former National Motocross Champion, as he coached some of his young protégés around a dirt track. Bailey had suffered a career-ending spinal cord injury while practicing for a race. That fall resulted in his confinement to a wheel chair. On this particular day, he yelled to his young charges, "Do as I did and you could become a national champion. Do as I did and you could end up in a chair, just like me" (Tinley, 2003, p. 314). What Bailey's comment reminds us is that professional and elite athletes do have choices, can sustain agency, and many are well-informed of the risks and rewards stapled to their career choices. After several years and decades of physiological and psychosocial challenges, David Bailey has transitioned out of professional sport and lives a well-balanced life with his family and a stable career. If you ask him what enabled his long and sometimes torturous transition,

he will tell you it was his wife and children. I continue by exploring the direct context of social support and influence.

### **Social Support and Influence**

As noted above, social support and influence had the highest number of notations as raw data themes elicited from athlete participants ( $n = 103$ ). While literature exists on the role of social support and influence in the athlete career transition, much of it is connected to investigations on the role of causes for termination, adjustments to changes in an athlete's immediate social life, and specific developmental factors in coping mechanisms (Alfermann, 2000; Hughes, 1990; Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007; Kane, 1991). Other nonsport literature in social psychology and counseling have studied the role of social influence in traumatic and/or significant periods of life transition and change (Hennessy et al., 2009; Lent, 1993; Schlossberg, 1981). These components in the athlete retirement discourse appear to be psychosocial in nature (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2007). The significance of the context in this study is its high level of notation by the athlete participants and its variety in use across other contexts. The 103 RDTs out of 438 direct contexts offered by athletes represents 23%. Of the 130 RDTs offered by the sport administrator participants, 26 or 20% was their response in noting social support. The media participants noted 70 direct contexts of sport retirement of which 7 or 10% were designated as social support and influence. While most of the athlete's comments were generally supportive of social support, a few of the athlete's comments were contradictory. One athlete, who had played in the NFL for nearly 10 years but never really considered it a "career," suggested that when

he left sport “I had to be in a place that didn’t judge me for my past [in sports]. So I didn’t want the social support that connected me to my past career.” Kane (1991) discussed how social support networks associated with athlete transition can have an adverse effect. Where my study contributes to the discourse is in how the data suggest overlap and intersections between the contexts of social support and other identified contexts. Data from this study indicate that some athletes are cognizant of the nuances of altered social networks as they move into new careers, regions, or social patterns. One athlete participant suggested that “athletes today need to be careful of whom they associate with” and added “coaches and hangers-on often have ulterior motives.”

Others seek the support that connects them to their past life in sport; the clichéd restaurant with their name on the front and no business plan. There is often a connection between an athlete’s social infrastructure and their choice of regions to inhabit as they exit sport. While there are little data noting the migratory patterns of retiring professional athletes, anecdotally there have been comments in the research that suggest additional intersections between social support, region, sport played, and the indirect context of an athlete’s relationship with the media and their fans. Another athlete participant claimed, “I needed to distance myself from sport; I wanted to go home to become unknown,” while another said, “I had prepared myself [for retirement] by choosing a business community of nonathletes close to where I played, who could help me learn a new career and earn money.” I have known dozens of professional athletes who have moved to rural areas upon exit from sport. And I have known many others who

either stayed where they had lived or sought a more urban style of living. In most of these scenarios, their choice of regional residency was somehow connected to their choices in social support. In some cases, it was tied to health or career specifics. An athlete participant from an earlier study (Tinley, 2002a) spent nearly every weekend for 1 year immediately following his retirement traveling the United States “as America’s guest,” as he called it, playing golf, eating, drinking, and telling stories of his Hall of Fame career in Major League Baseball. But he said that he tired of it and finally returned to his hometown and took a low-paying job as a pitching coach with his former team because, as he said of his first year out of sport, “It was an inauthentic life.”

There is a conflict that exists in this contextual area (social support and region) of athlete retirement. While it’s supportable that if an athlete plays, lives, and trains in one region or with one team or even with one sponsor<sup>12</sup> for an extended period of his or her career, there are both more career options and positive social influence (so long as the athlete’s relationship with the local consumers of sport is positive) upon retirement than if they frequently change residences or play for a number of organizations. One athlete, who was a participant in an earlier study (Tinley, 2002a) and this study, experienced a very nontraumatic transition out of sport. He suggested that “if you embrace a community, they will embrace you back, and this brings all sorts of options for life after sport.” This idea was echoed by a president of a Major League Baseball team. “We want our athletes to connect with the community. We know it’s good for them and good for us [the corporate ownership].” Another sports

administrator study participant, who has been employed for 23 years as an athlete's agent and legal representative, reminded me that a professional athlete is more often than before (1980s and 1990s) trained by their affiliate team, league, sponsor, or governing body, in how to interact with the media and fans. They expect to undertake this task, he offered, and most realize that it is part of their job as an athlete/entertainer. However, the team President claimed that "the fan/athlete relationship changed with the change in economics." What he is referring to is the fashion in which the business of Major League Baseball is now run. Players and team owners see better short term options to profit (personally and in the immediacy) when the player is either traded or opts for free agency in an effort to find a team that fits their personal or financial needs. What is lost is the stability (and postplaying options) of an extended player/team/fan relationship. This fact is noted in some detail since it has been indicated in the results here that an athlete's relationship with a region, team, league, or fan population is connected to the direct context of social support and influence.

Technology, as well, has altered the athlete/fan relationship and its extension into social support, such that many athletes now (2012) avoid more traditional ways and means of interacting with people and have embraced social media platforms to develop large fan bases. How this will affect the athlete upon retirement is currently unknown. I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 5.

What has not changed in professional and elite sports and is supported in the data here is that of the importance of influence by other persons on an athlete. This usually begins when the athlete is young and is socialized by sports-minded

parents, siblings, coaches, teachers, and peers. An athlete often relies on others to instruct, coach, manage, represent, negotiate, and befriend them. And if an athlete reaches a certain level of fame, there is the constant question of the bases or motive for any relationship. One athlete said, “I started to become comfortable with people who became my friends outside of sport—but continued to suspect their motives for a while.” The notion of trust-in-partnership/friendship becomes increasingly significant when extended to the divorce and separation rate for retiring athletes. As noted earlier in this study, there have been structural barriers<sup>13</sup> to identifying empirical bases for the divorce or separation rates in retiring and transitioning athletes. Torre (2009) referenced the financial-services firm, Rothstein Kass’ study of 178 athletes. “By common estimates,” he maintains, “among athletes and agents, the divorce rate for pro athletes ranges from 60% to 80%.”

While the efficacy of the research associated with this claim is unknown, the anecdotes within popular and athlete-specific<sup>14</sup> reports offer divorce rate data that are above levels seen in the general population. The results from this study help to explain this level. One athlete participant who had been divorced and remarried claimed that “there is no one there to catch you when you fall” but later in the interview added to this response and suggested, “If you don’t have a good family of support, you can’t do anything.” Another athlete participant claimed, “I had an unexpected community when I retired, but my spouse just didn’t understand what I was going through.” This comment regarding the role of spouse or significant other is reflected in other responses to varying degrees.

Several athletes spoke of close family and friends who were not athletes and who exhibited difficulty in understanding any emotional duress within the transitioning-athlete. One athlete participant suggested that “in times when an athlete needs to connect with others, it’s just easier for us to speak with another athlete,” while another said that “we create our own network of support.” Other athletes who are raised and socialized in an environment where notions of community are unique to their region may fall back into that community for social support upon retirement. Major League Baseball star, David Ortiz, who was raised in the Dominican Republic (DR), told a reporter (Thomson, 2011) that “I love working with the community. I’m more recognized back home [DR] than for what I do in the games, which has made me a really happy person” (p. 1).

As noted in Chapter 1, there is an analog of retiring athletes seen in the soldier returning from theaters of war to their hometown. When faced with a community of nonsoldiers, they often retreat to places where other retired soldiers convene in an effort to seek others who share similar experiences and emotional challenges in transition. The athlete/soldier link is constituted in the depth of their experience(s) and excludes the nonathlete/soldier from the conversation unless they have correlative “deep life experiences,” as one participant labeled it, or they are either compassionate listeners or trained in psychological counseling (Gabriel, 1987). Spouses in particular, had been noted by athletes as a key element on the direct context of social support. At times, the spouse was depicted as supportive, while at others they were shown as unable or unwilling to understand. One participant claimed, “My wife only knew me as a big hero, but after I retired and I

was just a regular guy, she bailed.” Popular ideology has tended to unfairly portray the wives and girlfriends of male professional and elite athletes in an unkind light, suggesting that many of them leave their partners when they no longer provide for them the material wealth and exciting celebrity-connected style of living. More likely, when relationships are stressed to the point of failure or near-failure, there are myriad factors present, not the least of which is that the partners may not have known each other in an identity/role that existed before they reached a level of athletic performance (and resulting celebrity), and postathlete retirement is subsequently restructured as new occupations, roles, residences, and expectations are taken on. Additionally, little is known when the “star in the family” is a female athlete. Dunn (1998) elevates the evaluation of identity and social support beyond micro psychology and the Self to macro levels, suggesting in his chapter on Destabilization of Identity that, “an outgrowth of modernization . . . is characterized by a series of disruptions in the unilinear patterns of development” (p. 111). What he is suggesting is that within modernity, issues of social interaction and identity are affected by commercial forces. Thus, I return to claims from early sections of Chapter 2 when I suggested that macro and micro sociological approaches to the problematic of athlete retirement contexts are best considered in relation to each other.

The questions of changing self-identity are well-established in the literature (see Chapter 3), but little discussion has taken place that extends issues of identity into correlating and convergent contexts, such as social support. Stier (2007) and Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, and Delignieres (2003a) suggest that a



postcareer identity is often associated with establishment of, and distancing from, the past occupation. This appears to extend to contexts such as people, places, issues of health, sport played, and choices of activity. Athletes from this study and prior work by the author (Tinley, 2002b) support the claim that many athletes chose new environments upon exit from elite sport in an effort to allow new or re-emerging identities to surface (see *Region* as a direct context later in this chapter). Sometimes, this is simply a reflexive choice that the athletes follow because “it just feels right,” as one participant claimed. And sometimes there is a period of anger-in-separation that is part of the athlete’s creation of their new identity. Michelle Akers, a member of the 1999 U.S. Women’s Soccer Team that won the World Cup, when asked how she spends her days, told a reporter in 2011, “I’ve been digging post holes and putting up some fence . . . I painted the entire barn” (Wahl, 2011). An athlete from this study, L. B., suggested, “The best part of my whole career came when I let go of the bitterness toward the sport and others that I felt when I retired and then when I turned 40 years old and returned to race, I was okay.” However, as Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) argues, once an individual becomes heavily identified in a role for an extended period, they often carry aspects of that former role into their new identity. This can last for a few months to many years. Akers may be more involved in raising children and horses than playing soccer, but she speaks about the challenges in adapting a style of approach to a physical game to a style of working with animals and children. “I used to

jump [on horses] . . . kick ‘em: Let’s go! Let’s go!. . . [but] if you force them to do something, you lose the bond, that trust. They’re like little kids” (Wahl, 2011, p. 100).

In my own transition out of sport, it was important for me upon retirement to leave behind all self-identity associated with my role as a professional athlete and embrace a new one based on engagement in new areas of interest, regions frequented, athletic activities, and new relationships with persons not associated with elite career sports (Tinley, 2011a). But as others have noted (J. Coakley, 1983; Schlossberg, 1981), athlete retirement may appear (to the athlete) as a sudden and singular episode as the feelings emerge in unexpected waves. More likely, however, it is a prolonged process that unfolds over extended periods. I now realize that my own transition out of sport continues to be a process, and the importance of social support and influence is itself a dynamic series of processes that connects my sense of Self with those around me and their own reflexive notion of Self. Additionally, I realize now the feelings of existential isolation that I felt were, as Giddens (1991) offers, “not so much a separation of individuals from others as a separation from the moral resources necessary to live a full and satisfying existence” (p. 9).

The reader may put to question whether an engagement within professional sports as an occupation might be qualified as a “moral resource,” whether defined by Giddens (1991) or utilized by the writer. I argue, based on the data from this study, that an athlete’s “resources” are self-defined within the myriad contexts of our roles. For example, one study participant suggested that “athletic skills don’t always transfer to nonsport jobs, but the networking from

sport will.” What he explained further in the interview was that a transitioning athlete might find a postplaying career value (as applied to a new career) in *whom* he had socialized with (as an elite athlete) than the physical skills he had developed as an athlete.

As referred to in Chapter 2, when I retired from sport, I was surprised by my reflexive denial to utilize what resources (I had previously considered) would be of material, familial, and intellectual value to my postathletic career. My own moral judgment found in these unfolding processes of self-reflexive knowledge revealed new valuations of importance critical to the life and career choices that I was making. My family, however, was confused by my choices. Literature (Lally & Kerr, 2008), popular ideology (Lyon, 1999), and the author’s experiences have suggested that, when one person in a relationship makes substantial changes to their essential socializing agents (job, friends, activity choices), their partner(s) may struggle with the applications of these changes to their relationship. In this area, social support and influence as a direct context can become interdependent on issues of self-identity. Much of this has to do with issues of agency and feelings of control by both the athlete and the athlete’s close relationships (Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Hendrik, 1998). Elite athletes develop strong identities in their role (Brewer et al, 1993) and others close to them—athletes and nonathletes—can project their own identities into that role. Thus, when an athlete’s self-identity is fractured upon exit from sport, others close to them may also be affected. Lally and Kerr (2008), found examples in parents of retired female athletes with symptoms of loss of social circles and resultant psychological struggles for as long

as 5 years. When I retired from professional sport, my grandparents would often ask if I would ever consider returning to elite racing. This line of inquiry was often followed by their claims to have enjoyed very much their excursions to championship events, where they were treated differentially based on their relationship to one of the former winners.

Petitpas, Champagne, Chartrand, Danish, and Murphy (1997) offer five categories to describe a transitioning athlete's social support systems in (a) cheerleaders or "fans of where you're going," (b) challengers or "those who push you to be the best you can be," (c) mascots or "people who love you just the way you are no matter what," (d) resources or "people who can help you with information, skills, or training," and (e) the opposition or "people who put you down" (p. 17). While the author's efforts help to move the conversation in this area forward, there are problems to their categorization, however, for each identifying label fails to take into factor the overlapping and influencing contexts of social support for the retiring athlete. Cheerleaders, for example or *fans for where you are going*, does not ask if the place, direction, occupation, or interests are necessarily correct, let alone healthy for the athlete-in-transition. Challengers or *those who push you to be the best you can be* stands as a generic, totalizing label. Any athlete would hope to be surrounded by social supporters who would push them to be the best. But as the data from this study and anecdotal evidence suggest, there are often social supporters of retiring athletes who "push them to be the best," but their suggestions can be either self-serving, offered with no professional experience in advising, or be received in a harmful manner by the

athlete. However, the work of Petitpas et al. in this area does bring to light the question of preretirement counseling within the athlete transition. In the next section, I discuss the direct context of preretirement counseling as it is identified as the third area of my second order category, *Physical and Psychosocial Factors*.

### **Preretirement Counseling**

Of the 438 raw data themes offered by the athlete participants in this study and assigned to direct contexts, there were 53 or 12.1% that noted *preretirement counseling* as a significant factor in the quality of their transition experience. This context was second only to *social support and influence* in the number of times athletes had noted a specific direct context in the quality of their transition from sport. Like the other two areas that were assigned under Physical and Psychosocial Factors—*health* and *social support and influence*—the discussion of if, how, when, where, and why an athlete receives preretirement counseling is tethered to other direct (and perhaps indirect) contexts of their retirement from sport. As has been noted in Chapters 1 and 2, there exists an ideological chasm within the athlete that is focused on performance (and sometimes its associative professional/commercial) achievement in the immediacy of their playing career and the oft-conflicting needs, desires, and offers of counseling on the challenges of life after sport. It follows that an athlete who has been socialized from a young age to focus on the “never-ending task at hand,” as one participant labeled it, would be resistant to emotional or intellectual investment that projects their life circumstances beyond the scope of what nearly defines them at present. For them to consider and or/partake in preretirement counseling, popular ideology would

suggest, is an admission that they too will someday have to face the inevitable challenges of life after sport.

Lavallee (2000) claims:

Despite the fact that retirement from sport is one of the only certainties in an athletic career, a recurring theme in the career transition literature is the resistance on the part of the athletes to plan for and develop a career prior to their retirement. (p. 20)

(See also Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). One contribution from this study is the supportive data that, increasingly, elite and professional athletes are accessing new and unique applications of preretirement counseling. In previous studies and texts (Tinley, 2002a, 2003), it was reported that a professional team may have on its staff a position often referred to as “Director of Player Development” or “Player Services Manager.” This position was often filled by former players who had been re-hired after their time as a player but were largely undertrained in their position to counsel, guide, and advise current players on a variety of matters; inclusive of such areas as off-field moral behavior, financial investments, and preretirement preparation. With the more recent advent (since the 1980s) of lofty salaries for professional athletes, as well as the re-construction of the *fallen athlete narrative* in mainstream media (Teitelbaum, 2005; Tinley, 2010b, 2010c; Torre, 2009) professional athletes have accessed preretirement counseling in larger numbers than previous periods. This is not to claim that they are better prepared but only to suggest that the data in this study support the anecdotal claims that elite athletes are more accepting of preretirement counseling than they

were before. This shift in acceptance of counseling appears to be the result of a new structural pedagogy—those advising the athletes are better trained in their roles and the structures of commercial sport are better motivated to assist athletes with their transition. The institutions of commercial sport have incorporated more rigid standards in counseling their active athletes perhaps, as one sport administrator participant claimed “to reduce the amount of bad publicity that the teams and leagues receive when retired athletes fail after sport.” Of the 130 raw data themes offered by sport administrators in the area of direct contexts, 14 or 10.7% were coded as preretirement counseling. This is not a significant difference than the 12.1% noted by athlete participants. What is a primary difference, however, is in the motive to counsel an athlete before they leave sport. Many athletes appear to understand the general need to prepare themselves for life after sport but are confused by the types and levels of counseling. One athlete noted that “I thought it [sport] would last forever, even though lots of people I trusted told me that it wouldn’t.” He went on to say that athletes in his era (1980s and 1990s) did not attend any training sessions because “they didn’t want to, didn’t have to, and just plain didn’t get it.”

It is sometimes a challenge for sport fans to understand why athletes have not engaged in preretirement training, why they make mistakes and end up broke or in jail after a storied career in elite sports, why they “just don’t get it,” as one participant noted. Sports fans have to suspend their disbelief when they hear of deviant or destructive behavior by retired pro athletes. They have to realize that many athletes are not subject to the kinds of formal and informal education that

the mass population are and you cannot make up for in a few weeks or months of counseling sessions what was lost over the previous 10 or 20 years. Sport media, as well, appear to take a miss or under-informed view of athletes and preretirement counseling. Of the sport media participants in this study, only 4 of the 70 raw data themes coded as direct contexts were assigned to preretirement counseling with comments such as “athletes don’t know how to do the little things which are big things” and “these guys have never had to do much for themselves, so it’s tough to start training them as an adult.” The comments by media participants were often made with a cynical tone that inferred little empathy. Commercial sport structures offer counseling based on the motive of the agency. An athlete’s personal agent often has conflicting motives than the athlete’s team, corporate sponsor, business partner, family, or friends (Lent, 1993). These motives are seen affecting the amount and kinds of counseling offered to athletes. An internet search of “professional athlete counseling” will reveal a large population of financial services companies and few nonprofit or educational organizations designed to assist the retired professional athlete. It is no wonder the elite or professional athlete has had an ambiguous relationship with counseling.

Some of the more successful examples of athletes leaving a career in sports with little emotional turmoil connect their “counseling” to positive social support. Often this is seen in parenting but can be extended to coaching and mentoring, as well. One particularly insightful athlete participant in this study claimed “everything I learned in life, I learned through sport. But behind that



were my parents and my coaches making sure that those lessons were positive ones that I would take beyond the court.” In the next section, I explore the direct contexts coded in the category of Characteristics of the Sport Experience. These include *sport played*, *region*, *reasons for retirement*, and *level of success achieved*.

### **Direct Contexts—Characteristics of the Sport Experience**

#### **Sport Played**

The direct context of *sport played* is best illustrated in how it intersects with other contexts. Some of the overlaps and comparisons are more or less obvious than others. The direct context of financial health, for example, is related to the level of compensation normally associated with a particular sport. However, as was noted above, a level of financial health does not always correlate to a specific quality of transition. Some athlete participants in this study claimed they knew well in advance what the commercial opportunities were for them to remain associated with or profit from their sport experiences upon retirement. One athlete claimed “the chances to coach are very few in skating,” while another stated that “over 50% of the guys I played polo with are still somehow involved.” A particular sport carries with it a hierarchy of compensation both for active and retired players. How an athlete connects to or is affected upon retirement appears to be dependent upon other factors and contexts.

Education levels may be associated with sport specificity but difficult to conclude any direct correlation. While data comparing individual sports college graduation rates with team sports, for example (Lapchick, 1995), we do know

that, generally, there are more male football and basketball scholarships at Division 1 universities in the United States than there are in women's swimming or men's tennis. Scholarships or attendance at an institute of higher learning does not guarantee an education either, and there is no empirical data comparing IQ (or other aptitude scores) to elite or professional athletes. Sadly, popular ideology has a history of embracing the myth that athletes from ethnic minority groups who attend universities with large athletic programs (or do not attend college at all) and who play team sports that are more popular in urban areas are less intelligent than athletes from private universities who play individual sports.

*Sport played* is related to issues of health in more obvious ways. Violent sports that produce serious long term injuries appear to have a negative effect on the quality of transition, while individual sports that allow the athlete to maintain the ability to participate at gradually declining performance levels provided the opportunity for a less traumatic transition. Athlete participants from the more physical sports,<sup>15</sup> and sports where their physical appearance had material consequences that related to the commercial success in sport, appeared to develop a higher sense of self-identity that was constituted in their relationship with the body. This might be explained through a cultural studies approach if we might ask who owns and controls the cultural production, mechanisms of distribution, and consequences of ownership of the athlete's body and a representation of their material image. This is not to suggest an economic determinism but rather to argue that different sports create and function within their own culture which extends beyond the athlete's days of playing sport. The most often cited example

of how self-body image affects an athlete in retirement is in the NFL where the culture nearly demands the external role playing of the athlete-as-physical specimen. The retiring American football player is challenged on several fronts, however. It is hard for them to maintain a physical participatory relationship with the sport, certainly much more difficult than most individual sports. Long term health issues have surfaced in football players and, for sure, the great majority of retiring players do not endeavor to maintain the physical size and strength they held as an active player. A professional long distance, runner, for example, may maintain the same somatic body type decades after they retire from their sport even though their performance declines. But a football player rarely maintains the unique physicality they held as an active player. Additionally, football players (mostly in the blocking positions) have been subject to a certain stereotype of lower intelligence creating additional barriers to future employment in some sectors. In trying to explain why 15-year veteran of the NFL, Jim Tryer, killed himself and his wife in September of 1980, Michael Oriard (1982b), a Professor of Comparative Literature and former NFL player, suggests “that powerful awareness of his [Tryer’s] diminished life could well have driven his troubled mind to welcome self-destruction” (p. 283). What Oriard is referring to are the specifics of Tryer’s failing business ventures and marital status. But Oriard is careful not to make any grand assumptions in his lengthy discussion of what might have motivated Tryer’s actions. Instead, he takes aim at those who might do so without knowing any of the facts.

“Anyone’s life is a mystery to others,” Oriard (1982b) writes, “in many ways even to himself. Who can see himself so clearly, so objectively, so wisely, that he knows exactly who he is?” (p. 275). The NFL is the most popular spectator sport in the United States and carries within its culture an expectation that its athletes, even in retirement, are expected to thrill and inspire us, not submit to the ultimate anti-social act of a murder/suicide. And even as we might project them into certain role-types, as Oriard suggests, we can never know them, for many of them struggle knowing themselves after a life in sport.

While on the topic of *characteristics of sport played*, something can be said of these power and performance sports if approached through the problems of postwar male representation and the what Barker (2008) calls “problematic masculinity” (p. 304). Addiction, depression, and self-medicating behavioral practices have been linked to what Giddens (1991) calls the “transformation of intimacy” and should be considered in context of self-regulation of emotions in a patriarchal society. Faludi (1999) claims that the promise of postwar manhood and its subsequent betrayal have resulted in an ornamental culture, what Barker (2008) identifies as “a culture of celebrity, image, entertainment and marketing, all underpinned by consumerism . . . [where] manhood has become a performance game to be won in the marketplace” (p. 306). Most professional sports—and in particular, the NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL—have created an opportunity for masculine expression through not only athleticism but the purposely-constructed images of its players. When an athlete begins to “buy into the hype” as one athlete suggested, they become invested in an externally-constructed image of

which they have little control. Still, as I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, the structures that create an acceptable masculine ideal (Messner, 1992) appear for the transitioning athlete better than no self-ideal at all. For the NFL sports fan, what is unique is that professional football players have such unique somatic types that there is an easy and acceptable differentiation that supports the commercial appropriation, as well as the self-image identity construction. But after their body types begin a gradual return to levels more closely identified with the average, the reduction in size, power, speed, and strength can be associated with issues of mortality. This notion is discussed as an Emerging Philosophical Context in Chapter 6 and is in concert with previous suggestions that identity is an ongoing project with various constructed trajectories from the past to an (un)anticipated future (Giddens, 1991). I will argue that consumers of sport have a much different relationship with athletes who appear similar in body size and type to them. One sport administrator in this study claimed that this is why fans of MLB have a different feeling about their sport heroes than fans of large male football or basketball players—“they just don’t look like us,” he suggested, “and that elemental disconnect affects our relationship with them.” Additionally, a retiring athlete’s somatic structure and size itself can be a barrier to emotional stability when exiting sport. Torre (2011) notes that an “actual accounting of 7-footers [athletes], domestic or global, does not exist in any reliable form” (p. 110). However, the great majority of very tall retired athletes, he explains, are constantly faced with a kind of discrimination in the form of stereotyping. They are faced with two incessant queries: *How tall are you?* and *Did you play*

*basketball?* This type of inquiry by sport fans and its related projection can have a negative effect on transitioning athletes as they try to “fit in” as Torre explains.

Results from this study made it challenging to determine if *sport played* affects female athletes in the same way as it does males. Even though 11 of the 29 athlete participants were female, data from this study as discussed below on the specifics of gender as a direct context did not offer much detail on sport specificity for the female athlete. However, from the results here I would suggest that additional research on sport retirement and gender would reveal that females leaving specific sports would be faced with nuanced challenges particular to their experiences. These might include self and consumer body imaging and representation, as well as issues connected to a stereotyping of sexual orientation.

An outcome of an earlier study (Tinley, 2002a) suggested that there was a need to identify the differences in retirement experience based on sport played, and further research was required if models for counseling and preretirement training were to be developed and employed. However, the period between 2002 and 2010 saw tremendous growth in what have been referred to as *action*, *alternative*, or *extreme* sports. Seen mostly in emerging youth cultures, this phenomenon presents new research challenges, as many of these high risk sports are just beginning to see athletes retiring from elite and professional competitive careers. The differences between these emerging sport forms and traditional team sports with established structures of commercial leagues include (a) fewer athletes earning substantial salaries, (b) a younger age at retirement, (c) a history of traumatic injuries received in their careers, and (d) fewer opportunities to find

employment connected to their sport upon exit as a competitor. Of the 29 athlete participants in this study, 7 had participated in *alternative* sports: 4 from triathlon, 1 from beach volleyball, 1 from mountain biking, and 1 from moto-x. Of these, only moto-x and mountain biking athletes offered data that fit the majority of differences as noted above. Triathletes and beach volleyball players, for example, can play professionally into their early 30s, but moto-x riders often retire before their mid 20s, and many sustain a high percentage of traumatic injuries. The numbers of professional mountain bikers is relatively small, with only a handful earning more than a living wage.

As alternative sports continue to become institutionalized and an increasing number of athletes participate at and retire from professional ranks, further study will be required to identify the differences. I suggest that older models of athlete retirement will not extend as well onto athletes when they, for example, retire from an 8-year career as a professional skateboarder at age 22. One study participant from the 2002 project, a retired professional surfer at the time, was interviewed for this study but was not included for methodological reasons. He did say, however, that he was still making more money as a “traveling surfer” whose image was used by well-paying corporate sponsors *not* to compete. His retirement from competition has been facilitated by an increase in the quality of his aesthetic sporting experience and a correlative market-driven demand for what he represents to consumers of surf culture and surf products.

## Region

The second direct context situated in *Characteristics of the Sport Experience* is *Region* (where athlete played) and introduces interesting ideas on how the region in which an athlete played the majority of their professional sport period might influence the quality of their transition out of sport. Firstly, we know that the changing structures of modern commercial sport favor athlete mobility across teams and corporate sponsor partnerships. What this means is that most professional athletes playing for the power and performance sports in the United States, such as basketball, baseball, football, and hockey, will choose to or be traded to many more teams during the tenure of their sports career than was seen in previous periods. They likely have more and varied relationships with corporate sponsors. This is often facilitated by emerging models of talent development that focus on an athlete's performance statistics and how they may or may not coalesce with a team's perceived requirements to achieve higher performance levels (read: win games and championships). The athlete's essential human behavioral tendencies and personality traits are of less import than a quantification of their specific historical performance levels at preidentified skill sets through *sabermetrics* or a close scrutiny of a player's statistics (M. Lewis, 2003). One result of this model is that a player is often traded many times in their career as their statistics change and are considered by teams using a sabermetric model of employment. The result of playing for many teams in many cities is that the player has less of an opportunity to (a) establish a long term place for his or her family to be socialized in and through, and (b) develop relationships with



local commercial businesses that might offer transitioning athletes new career employment opportunities. Additionally, the athlete is subject to the potential feelings that come with being regarded as transitory property and de-constituted as an integral and important element of a foundational social support system. Thus, the retiring athlete's re-ascription is challenged when they must acculturate themselves into an unfamiliar or unsupportive environment.

To complicate the "region played" paradigm further, increasing political, economic, and cultural globalization, made possible by emerging technologies have diffused sports across previous boundaries and barriers. Professional athletes have become global migrant workers touting the branding and messaging of multinational corporations. Except in world championships and Olympic events, the teams and individuals are increasingly drawn less on national lines and more so on how the athletes are associated with corporate structures. S. Hall (1992) talks about the "the questioning of cultural identity" through the enlightenment subject, the sociological subject, and the postmodern subject. If we take his temporal categorizations and project them, we might suggest that a postmillennium fracturing of identity extended into professional sports would affect the quality of their exit from sport, as athletes play across many structures that will fail them in their need for intimate social support upon exit. The structures are discussed in depth in Chapter 5.

Of the athlete participants, only 17 raw data themes were coded as "region" (where athlete played) of the total of 438 direct context themes (3.8%). Still, athletes offered such telling comments as "region is important if you have a

good relationship with your community” and “Europeans take better care of their athletes when they retire than the U.S. does.” Anecdotal evidence (Tinley, 2003) suggests that countries in Western Europe systematically offer more opportunities for their retiring athletes.<sup>16</sup> While this has been mostly associated with European soccer (*futbol*) and cycling, what we might infer is that as these two sports are structurally-organized in Europe from a youth and amateur participatory basis on their connections to towns or “villes,” there is a connection to social support as the region/community nexus affects the quality of an athlete in transition. In other words, what evidence had found is that the notion of regional loyalty to a European team (or team structure) supports the athlete in retirement due to their inherited social support better than what is seen in the United States. Even if an athlete leaves to play for a professional team in another region or country, they are usually welcomed back to that town and offered options for employment within sport or another industry. This practice extends into the athlete/organization and athlete/fan relationships and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Alfermann et al. (2004) support this in their comparative study between retiring Germans, Russians, and Lithuanian athletes. German athletes reported less emotional stress than the other groups, citing desirable employment opportunities that ameliorated some of the initial emotional trauma experienced as they left elite sport. The Russian and Lithuanian athletes also illustrated higher levels of self-identity within their active athlete role—an issue well documented as a barrier in reducing emotional trauma in the transitioning athlete—than the German athletes. Wylleman et al. (2004) suggest that in some European models of transition, a

“holistic lifespan perspective” is employed which includes the observance and following of additional life transition events proceeding within and beyond the singular event of an athlete leaving sport. This is reflected in early work by Schlossberg (1981) and J. Coakley (1983).

Interestingly, there were a higher percentage of sport administrator study participants (15 RDTs of 130 total or 11%) who noted region as a raw data theme. One sport administrator who has served as an athlete’s agent for several decades suggested that “athletes want to be beloved in their home town. This helps their life after sport.” When prompted further in the interview, he claimed that “a lot of players from the NBA are often from the large urban cities and because of their athletic skill, have had been catered to. Hockey players are more often from small towns and are raised with small town values.” While these comments suggest a correlation between town size, socialization process, and quality of exit from sport, more research is required to develop these ideas. Certainly these comments cannot be generalized without additional data.

### **Reason(s) for Retirement**

The third direct context situated in *Characteristics of the Sport Experience* is *reasons for retirement*. Literature reviews (see Chapter 3) have suggested that voluntary retirement from sport offers less emotional trauma than an involuntary episode. *Reasons for retirement* as a direct context affecting the quality of transition intersect with several other identified direct contexts. *Health* at retirement is significant in the case that an athlete is forced out of sport due to a sudden and career-ending injury; they have often had less time to accomplish their

career goals in sport, achieve a secure financial status, or access preretirement counseling. Athlete participants noted that, generally, if they had the opportunity to control and/or plan for their retirement they experienced less emotional trauma. Zaichkowsky, King, and McCarthy (2000) and Lavalley, Gordon, and Grove, (1997b) support the notion that increased agency and control over one's exit from sport has resulted in less difficulty. Athlete participants in this study offered such comments as "I was discouraged and overwhelmed when I knew my career was over before I was ready," and "after I turned 40 my performance had declined, and I knew it was time to do other things." The most common cited reasons for retirement in this study were injury, de-selection, and decreased performance. These findings support earlier literature, but where they add to the discussion is in the qualitative analysis where additional direct and indirect contexts of the reasons for retirement were exposed. Several athletes offered themes that complicated the reasons for exit. While some athletes did echo the sentiment that "I left because I just wasn't that good anymore," others extended the discussion during the interview process by claiming that there were other predisposing factors in their decision. One athlete, who had earned several Olympic gold medals and was given extensive financial opportunities to continue as an elite athlete in another sport, claimed, "I had [career] plans since I was a little kid and didn't want another sport to get in the way of them." Another athlete, who had been professionally-associated with a singular event in elite sports, suggested about the reason she retired was "I was still trying to move past that iconic moment to prove to myself I was still an athlete even after I left sport." Many athletes do not have

an *exit plan* from sport, nor do they give excessive thought to how, when, where, and why they will leave a career in elite and professional sport. It is both a great challenge and a revelation when an athlete can rationally objectify their life-altering decisions to leave sport. Athletes from this study offered such generic themes as “I just knew it was time” and “I quit playing because I was burnt out.” When pressed in the interview process, however, some offered a more in-depth purview of the reasons-for-retirement paradigm. One athlete claimed, “I retired because I didn’t see myself as an athlete anymore. I didn’t know who I was, and the fan’s reactions didn’t support it.” This comment is supported by social psychologists such as Cooley (1962) and Mead (1967) who argue that we find self-identity in the reactions of others to ourselves. I offer the anecdote below as evidence of this claim.

When I left professional sports in 1999, it was not due to injury; I was not de-selected from a team or a club, and my financial status was still connected to my ongoing participation. I still had the opportunity to compete in the elite category, but something seemed physically and emotionally amiss, as I often finished in the lower 50% of all elite and professional athletes. I did not “see” myself as a professional athlete anymore, and the feedback I received from others, the “looking glass” (Cooley, 1962) they held in front of me, suggested that I might not “be” a professional athlete any longer. I was something or someone else but had not identified it as yet. There was no single catastrophic reason for retirement, as some athletes have experienced. My retirement process was, as J. Coakley (1983) and Schlossberg (1981) had suggested, a long and gradually-

unfolding series of multiple experiences, life changes, and necessary adaptations. I still cannot point to a day, a week, or even a month and say, “That is the time I left pro sports.” When I consider now how I decided on the time to exit from professional sports, I see it as a psychological attempt at objectifying that which is still, as I have come to accept, a long and gradual qualitative experience that has muddled beginnings and, as was noted by Fuchs Ebaugh (1988), retains an ongoing association to my residual role as an ex-athlete.

This study reinforced the idea of interdependent reasons for retirement in its multiplicity of identified contexts and factors that affected the retirement experience. For those in individual sports, sometimes their exit from elite or professional sport took several months or years and was related to changes in their relationship with commercial structures of sport. As noted above, a former professional surfer left the world competitive circuit only to find his connection to his sport and its derivative benefits enhanced in a noncompetitive, market-based, and image constructed environment.

Of the 200 combined raw data themes offered by sport administrator and sport media participants in the study, only 3 raw data themes could be identified as *reasons for retirement*. While there is not enough data to support the following thesis, I would investigate in further research the notion that perhaps popular culture ideology constructed by sport consumers, has preemptively “mortgaged” the tenuousness of a pro athlete’s career, accepting both their sudden demise due to injury or illness or their full-term tenure as an athlete/entertainer/hero. Sport administrators and media appear to think less about how the reasons for an

athlete's exit from sport might affect the quality of their exit and objectify any relative short career periods. Perhaps this is due to their position in commercial sport or the many times they have witnessed an athlete's unplanned exit. Regardless, the data illustrate how responses vary by participant group.

### **Level of Success**

The fourth area constituted under direct contexts, *Characteristics of the Sport Experience*, is *level of success* and intersects with other areas identified both in *Characteristics of the Sport Experience* and all direct contexts offered by athlete participants, sports administrators, and sports media study participants. To begin, *level of success* as a direct context affecting the quality of an athlete's exit from sport is often connected in the literature with an athlete's "satisfaction" with a career. This area has presented a particular research challenge, since connection between "level of success" and "satisfaction" is a qualitative one, relative to how an athlete interprets *success* and *satisfaction*. One athlete participant in this study claimed that "winning was not as big a deal as I thought it would be." While another suggested, "Ah, mastery, I was good at my sport and proud of what I accomplished and that had a positive influence." While popular ideology and previous studies (Fortunato & Gilbert, 2003) have led readers to believe that if an athlete accomplishes many of their athletic goals and achieves an admirable (defined in both the athlete's and the fan's opinion) degree of success, then satisfaction in a sport career will enable a positive transition out of sport. As with *reasons for retirement*, as discussed above, these might be considered as simplified and reductionist beliefs, even if they were supportable in prior

literature. What findings from this study suggested is that *level of success* is a qualitative marker referred to and utilized by athlete, administrator, sport media pundit, and sport consumers in myriad contextual ways dependent on their own relation to the athlete, the sport, the markers of success, and their experience with that figure. One athlete participant claimed that “if you retire as a top player, then there are more opportunities for you.” I suggest that this particular claim would be supportable, however. The same athlete then claimed that “if you aren’t a top player, then you need to be a lot more resourceful,” also, a supportable suggestion. However, this particular idea—that level of athletic success in sport leads to increased opportunities which leads to an improved quality of exit from sport—has been validated beyond causal inference. One athlete in this study said, “I never won a big championship and that still bothers me,” while another said, “At first, I mourned my failure to win a big title, but then I realized that so many other things were so much more important.” In my own relation to how athletic success and the emotional quality of my life after sport are connected, I cannot say that an increased level of accomplishment in sport would have substantially altered my life after sport. It may have provided additional commercial opportunities, but as I argue, this is no guarantee of less emotional trauma. As noted previously in discussions on the direct context of financial health, it can and often does bring opportunity for choices, which generally, the data have shown, are better than no choices.

What did seem apparent in the athlete interviews was that there is a temporal element to an athlete’s perspective on what they achieved in sport. It



is not as simple as the cliché: The older I get, the better I was. Sometimes an athlete's perspective focuses internally on how they have negotiated their historicity as they place it on a lifeworld in arrears. Other times, they consider the external implications, or what kinds of validation they received from sport consumers or commercial sport structures after they have retired from sport. The following anecdote helps to illustrate this point.

In the summer of 2011, I happened upon a training diary written during my athletic career between 1982 and 1983. The biographical narrative lamented how I had lost the Ironman World Championships 2 years in a row (fall 1982 and fall 1983), finishing second each time to David Scott, one time by a scant 33 seconds over an 8 hour race. The tone of the text was dark and full of self-loathing. I had not won the biggest, toughest race in the endurance sports world. I had only finished second, which for me at the time, was as valuable as last. I have come to regard this document as evidence of both my obsessive behavioral patterns of the period and my eventual success<sup>17</sup> in realizing the value of the pedagogical experience inherent to that period misanthropy. Several athletes in this study echoed the same feelings—that they had failed to realize during their time in elite competition and relative performance levels achieved that personal performances could be quickly forgotten by themselves and sport consumers and remembering them could bring entirely new ideas, thoughts, and interpretations of the experiences.

Any external validation, long ipso facto, has shown to be helpful to the athlete. One study participant claimed, “I liked to know that I went beyond my

limits, but I also think it helped when others knew what I did and reminded me of it.” Athletes spoke about learning to appreciate not only what they accomplished in performance but the opportunity to have a career that allowed them to do so. The notion of appreciation as a factor in the quality of an athlete’s transition is noted in an earlier study (Tinley, 2007a), mostly in concert of the context of gender. As will be discussed later in this chapter, retiring female athletes have shown more appreciation for their opportunities in elite and professional sport than have males (Tinley, 2007a). Still, how a retired athlete negotiates their place in sport is dependent on how that “place” is shown to them.

In the fall of 2011, I was sent an application to apply for inclusion in the sport of triathlon’s U.S. national governing body’s (Triathlon Federation USA) Hall of Fame. While I had already been granted inclusion in two other triathlon-related halls of fame, I was taken aback by the request for application; as if after one of the most successful (most victories achieved) careers in the sport, I would have to justify to an external (sport structural) entity my requirements to be validated by an entity that had no bearing on my self-validation as a former professional athlete. I formally denied the application process from an ideological bases, since I felt no need to rejoin self-identify though an entity and structure of which I had no agency. However, this is not always the case with other retired athletes for whom external validation of their athletic success is a key element in the quality of their retirement experience. Some transitioning athletes appear to not fully understand the role of feedback from other nonathletes when they respond to inquiries about how they are doing or how they spend their time after

sport. One particularly insightful retired NFL player, when asked how he might respond to an inquiry about the level of societal contribution of an ex-NFL player claimed, “What can you say to others who ask ‘what are you doing now?’ after they have seen you on TV winning world titles? Tell them ‘Well, just working on a cure for cancer?’”

What this study participant was referring to was the external expectations of those who associate with retired professional athletes (NFL players in this case), and what they might expect in terms of personal accomplishment from a former professional athlete. This external expectation and validation will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, but what we might assume here is that levels of expectations in the athlete/subject are not always commensurate with what is produced by that individual. How this portends into the quality of an athlete’s exit from sport will be better explained in Chapter 5.

### **Individual Characteristics (of the Transitioning Athlete)**

The final second order category in direct contexts is *Individual Characteristics (of the Transitioning Athlete)*. This category was constituted by the identified direct contexts of age, gender, and race/ethnicity (see Figures 1 and 4d). Age ( $n = 12$ ) and race/ethnicity ( $n = 6$ ) had the two lowest number of raw data themes offered by athlete participants assigned to a category. Gender was noted 34 times out of the total 438 raw data themes by athlete participants.

#### **Age at Retirement**

Early literature in athlete retirement suggested that age at retirement can affect the quality of an athlete’s transition because, for many, they are much

younger than those retiring from other professions (Sussman, 1971; Washington, 1981). A younger age was linked to certain social expectations created in popular thought and ideology of retirement. However, older models of social gerontology have been suggested as ineffective in identifying the challenges of retirement, since many are based on several decades of sustained place in the workforce and less time projected in their remaining years alive (Baillie & Danish, 1992; S. C. Coakley, 2006). Athletes who retire in their middle 20s and early 30s can face 40 or 50 years left with the possibility of numerous careers after sport. Athletes can still face exit from sport in their late 30s with over 20 years played in their sport, or they can retire in their late teens with less than 5 years as a professional. Either way, their age at exiting a career in sport is atypical from societal norms in nonsport careers. Some athletes return to previous interests, education, and job training after sport but struggle with the (real or perceived) prejudicial treatment they might receive as an “older” participant in the specific context of their new social world. One athlete participant in this study claimed, “I went back to school after I left sport but never really felt like I fit in.” Another spoke about the challenges of working in a new position where their supervisor was many years younger than them.

Age as a factor is also related to health. In the more violent contact sports, there is a correlation between length of career, age, and health upon exit from sport. As noted above, health upon exit from sport has shown to directly affect the quality of an athlete’s transition. However, even though popular versions of this finding depict the 40-year-old retired football or rugby player suffering from

early onset arthritis or CET (chronic traumatic encephalopathy), the increase in popularity of youth-centric action or extreme sports and resulting commercial opportunities has added a new dimension to this stereotype. Athletes from such extreme sports as skateboarding and moto-x (including SuperCross and Freestyle MotoX) are retiring with injuries in their late teens and early 20s. Some of these athletes have not experienced socializing processes that would provide them with a maturity and skills to sustain the challenges of leaving a professional career at a young age. Admittedly, their young and potentially short time as an elite athlete might not place them in a position where they over-identify in the self-role, thus preventing or at least reducing the opportunity for them to experience similar challenges as older, longer-tenured athletes. As these sports gain in amateur and professional popularity, more research is required to gain understanding of the specific retirement processes inherent to these sports and their populations.

Age at retirement intersects with *sport played* in other relative socializing agents. Collegiate athletes who chose to graduate before trying to enter the professional ranks appear to have an easier time in transition, since they develop skill sets at a younger age in the process of determining what they might do if they do not succeed after a college athletics career. Sports that are less physical, such as yacht racing and lawn bowls allow athletes to play well past their physical peak. Sports that have successful age group competition offer the transitioning athlete a competitive venue, if that is what they are seeking in transition.

Generally, there is some suggestion by the athletes and correlating popular ideology that professional athletes tend to resist retirement as long as possible,

due to the transition's connection to responsibility and mortality. One study participant from the athlete group claimed, "It's like a prolonged adolescence. I just didn't want to grow up." Another claimed, "It took time to feel normal after retiring from competitive sports; I was so young I thought all I had was time. Maybe too much." There exists a level of comfort when an athlete reaches a level of success, and they can negotiate their way past periods when the thought of retirement enters their mindset. For many, it is not about playing forever, it is more pragmatic. You have worked very hard to achieve an identity, a comfortable level of compensation, and perhaps many material perks. If you are healthy enough and feel validated in your position, then what is the hurry to leave sports, one may ask? As one athlete suggested, "Why rush back to the real world? It'll always be there when you can no longer play." The challenge, however, is that "the rest of the world" keeps advancing in the direction that it must, as when the athlete leaves their stage at an age where they feel they must try to catch up, it can be a significant hurdle. There is no way to claim that it is better for an athlete to retire at one age over another. Much has to do with other contexts, such as health, level of success, sport played, education, social support, and reasons for retirement. What I will argue is that modern professional athletes represent youth, immortality, physical excellence, and a denial of the vicissitudes of modernity. Consumers of sport must negotiate their own relationship with the aging athlete. "When the athlete's star implodes, the natural order of our sporting cosmos is struck. Their feats of clay stomping our idealistic dreams" (Tinley, 2011b). Of course, there are the stories of athletes who retire and then return to the

professional and elite fields of play. Much can be said about how sport consumer reaction and other commercial sport structures affect the un-retiring athlete. In Chapter 5, I offer substantive notes on the athlete/sport structure relationship which will enable the reader to make their conclusions on the returning retired athlete.

When we produce and consume our athlete heroes, we are, as Lehmann-Haupt (as cited in P. Williams, 1994) suggests, “Standing here in the pantheon . . . in the presence of our simple smiling gods” (p. 67). And then we are confused when they can no longer fulfill our requirement for consumption, so we dispose of them and produce another that will fill our needs (Brunt, 2003). Conversely, some athletes leave sport only to return months, years, or decades after they first exit elite sports. Some, in the case of 61-year-old Alan Moore, who returned to collegiate football in 2011, over 43 years after his career was cut short by time spent in the Vietnam War, appear to defy odds, pose questions to popular ideology, and challenge the mainstream narrative (Bromberg, 2011). There is much to be said about why retired athletes return to sport. However, the scope of this study limits the discussion beyond mention and suggestion for future research. A future study in this area might begin with discerning why the athlete left sport to begin with.

### **Gender in Retirement**

The second of the three areas in direct contexts that were collapsed into the second order category, Characteristic of Sport Played, is *gender*. As noted above, 34 of 438 raw data themes, or 7.7%, offered by athlete participant in the

area of direct contexts noted *gender* as a factor in the quality of an athlete's retirement transition from sport. Of the nearly 450 items listed in the bibliography of this study, 9 or approximately 2% included a primary area focus on gender as an area of study or had used female-only populations as athlete subject-participants. While there is anecdotal and popular thought on why the dearth of gender-specific work in athlete retirement, not enough empirical studies have endeavored to identify how the direct context of gender has affected the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. Popular ideology on why the male-centric focus in literature include the lesser number of elite or professional female athletes experiencing retirement, primarily as a result of fewer numbers of elite or professional opportunities for women in commercial sport. However, while female participation in organized youth, prep, and collegiate sports has escalated dramatically in recent decades, the focus on female gender-specific studies in most sport science literature has not kept pace with the increased participation by females in all sport since the early 1970s (Messner, 1992). This lack also exists in correlation with other forms of popular culture that have mostly failed to account for the growing number of transitioning elite and professional female athletes. Of the 20 retired professional athletes chronicled in the popular text, *When the Clock Runs Out* (Lyon, 1999), only one develops the story of a female athlete; and that narrative is mostly a patriarchal view of her connections to male athletes and *their own* successes and failures in and after sport.

Other nonsupportable anecdotes gleaned from research in this and other previous studies (Tinley, 2007a) have indicated that popular ideology has



suggested, and as some study participants offered, that females generally experience less emotional trauma in athlete transition than males. Comments were offered such as “female athletes can have an easier time in transition than males because they become mothers and wives” or “female athletes aren’t subjected to the pressures to succeed in pro sports like males are.” These totalizing and patriarchal views have done little to advance the subject of female athletes in transition. My 2007 study of 7 retired professional or elite female athletes who offered 289 raw data themes in qualitative analysis suggested that there were no empirical bases for these claims. Results were collapsed into three general dimensions. The first was Validation of a Physical Self and was constituted by the 2nd order themes of (a) *importance of external recognition as an athlete* (participants noted positive response from athletic role taking, movements towards traditional male domain), (b) advantageous personality traits—participants noted skill sets enabling easier transition inclusive of conflict resolution, coping skill, and ability to sustain personal relationships, and (c) *ego fulfillment*—participants identified appreciation and acceptance of limited opportunity inclusive of gender barriers and nonpatriarchal roles. The second general dimension was Notation of Specific Socializing Factors and was constituted by (a) *acknowledgment of socialization factors* (participants discussed external influences to a greater degree), and (b) *issues of gender role in sport and society* (participants cognizant of external societal influences in traditional gender roles). The third general dimension was Acknowledgment of Emotional Issues Related to Sport and was constituted by (a) *notation of intrinsic and extrinsic*

*aspect of sport* (participants noted love of benefits and enjoyment of athletic lifestyle), and (b) *recognition of external and internal loss*.

The general conclusions of this study (Tinley, 2007b) were that elite and professional female athletes may have a comparatively easier transition out of a career than their male counterparts but not for the reasons offered in popular ideology and anecdotes. As was noted above, female athletes leaving sport often do so with a skill set of personality traits developed as they were socialized as a female athlete in a largely male-centric sports world. They learned how to adjust to challenges in life transition and change and appreciated what opportunities were offered them, however fewer than male counterparts, in professional sports. Female athletes acknowledged and were appreciative of the times they were able to physically validate themselves in their athlete role. Female athletes offered such comments as “I like the way my body looks but it’s not because I’m trying to attract a partner, it’s because it represents the work I’ve done to be fit.”

This general ethos of transitioning female athletes utilizing such emotional, intellectual, and psychological skill sets as acceptance, appreciation, and acknowledgment was echoed in additional comments from this study. One study participant claimed, “I think that women have it easier [retiring] because they aren’t part of the whole machismo/alpha dog thing. Female athletes can face a different way out of sport, same as the whole experience of sport is different for females.” Another female athlete claimed, “I felt more confident about what might come next than the male athletes I hung around with.” Female athletes in

this study gave evidence of the earlier patriarchal role of sport in society and offered insightful though not submissive comments such as:

My parents sometimes, especially my father, were not supportive of my passion for sports and wanted me to accept a more traditional female role in sport. My father coached my brothers with enthusiasm but thought my sport was unimportant. After he realized I was a good athlete he pushed me toward traditional female sports. But as a female, I'd already made a lot of tough decisions and wasn't worried about what I'd do next.

The male athletes in this study offered comments that ask for further research. One male athlete suggested, "I always thought women had it easier because they weren't subjected to the whole 'sports hero' thing like guys." What this infers is that this male athlete might realize that the socialization of female athletes in society has attached gender-specific vicissitudes, but some athletes, male and female, may not understand how they function in the paradigm of sport retirement. What I found lacking in the response of female athletes were comments or raw data themes that made explicit the frustration they felt and the need for additional research, explanation, or understanding of how the direct context of gender in athlete transition functions in the overarching arena of modern sport. One athlete participant, a male golfer, suggested,

It bothers me when women are looked upon so different than men in sports. We need more legislation or a revolt. Women train, prepare, and compete just as hard [as males] and when they have to give it all up [and leave sport], why should they be treated any different?

Certainly, more work needs to be done in this area since we do not really know how women leaving sports "are treated any different" from retiring males. What this study offers is some empiricism towards a more definitive answer to this question.<sup>18</sup>

After the data collection and examination for this study were concluded, I received a long communiqué from a retired female professional athlete, a friend whom I had raced and traveled with during our mutual period competing in professional sport. She regaled of the difficulty she had experienced in leaving sport and spoke of severe depression, suicide attempts, and finally some lasting peace found in work and marriage. Her husband, a retired Olympic athlete, had not experienced the same level of emotional trauma. I note this story to support the argument for a continued need for further study in identifying additional contexts of athlete retirement and how they affect each other. In my former peer's case, it might have been the context of social support and influence provided by an empathetic partner that helped her in transition.

Of other nonathlete study participants, sports administrators offered 2 raw data themes coded as gender issue of 130 themes in all direct context categories or nearly 1.4%. Sport media participants offered 2 raw data themes of 70 offered in the area or 2.8%. The lower percentage of raw data themes offered by sport administrators and media suggest a corresponding lack of interest in this area of athlete transition. It is difficult to say if this is due to fewer professional career opportunities for females in sport or if there remain lingering patriarchal views in these categories. One male sport administrator claimed "retirement is a direct attack on their [athlete] manhood and virility. We all fear this as men."

### **Race/Ethnicity in Sport Retirement**

The third and final of the three areas in direct contexts that were collapsed into the second order category, *Individual Characteristics (of Sport Played)*, is

*race/ethnicity*. Of the 438 raw data themes offered by athlete participants in this study, 6 or 1.3% of the thematic responses to inquiry were assigned to race/ethnicity. Of the other study participants—sport administrators and sport media—who offered a combined total of 574 raw data themes assigned to 19 contexts (13 direct, 3 indirect, and 3 emerging philosophical), only 2 were identified as race/ethnicity. These results support my early hypothesis that while race/ethnicity might influence the opportunities for access to or inclusion into modern sport opportunities, especially at the youth level, as elite or professional athletes exit sport, their race or ethnicity has little bearing on the quality of their transition experience. However, there were still comments such as “some guys get stereotyped for their position in sport that aligns with their ethnicity. And this carries on into life after sport.” One athlete participant claimed, “Because of my dark skin I just didn’t fit the stereotype of an Olympic water polo player.” These comments (and others with a similar thematic content) suggest that some athletes do think about their race and ethnicity upon retirement. But for the great majority of study participants, both athletes, sport administrators, and sport media, the direct context of race/ethnicity were much less a factor in the quality of their transition out of sport than the 13 other direct, 3 indirect, and 3 emerging philosophical contexts of the exit experience. Anomalies in data did exist, however, and the researcher and reader may become suspect when one comment emerges such as “we were all the same on the team, but you could see where some of the good-looking white guys had better job offers than the Blacks, Hispanics, and the women in their own leagues when they got cut.” Conclusions from this

study will support that race/ethnicity is a minor factor in the quality of the retirement experience for most. However, I do not reject any athlete's comments and support their own contributions to this project. Racial profiling may and likely still exists in the world of transitioning elite and professional athletes. Further study in this area is required to make any deeper conclusions.

In the next chapter, I discuss the effects of indirect contexts on the quality of an athlete's exit from sport.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE INDIRECT CONTEXTS OF ATHLETE RETIREMENT: BETWEEN THE MYTHS, MODES, AND MEANINGS

“Retire?” Hemingway replied. “Unlike your baseball player and your prizefighter and your matador, how does a writer retire? No one accepts that his legs are shot or the whiplash gone from his reflexes. Everywhere he goes, he hears the same damn question: What are you working on?”  
(Hotchner, 2011)

I’m special so long as I keep making touchdowns. When it’s over, it’s over.  
(Gavin Grey, as cited in Deford, 1981)

#### **Introduction**

The *indirect contexts* affecting the quality of an athlete’s transition out of sport explored in this study were first developed under the hypothesis that as extrinsic factors exist outside the athlete’s immediate sphere of relation to sport, and these factors act upon the athlete while they are active agents in sport, they will also affect the quality of their exit from sport. In other words, I argue and support in this chapter that structures of modern commercial sport, inclusive of how the transitioning athlete is depicted in mass media and the nature of their relationships with sports fandom and the corporate structures of their specific sport, affect the quality of their exit from sport. In Chapter 1, I suggested that a driving motive for this study was to illustrate and document the social results of how many professional athletes are treated after they leave a sports career. I suggested a kind of “disposability” of the athlete based on such unobvious and

unexplored factors as sport media's portrayal of the retiring athlete, and sport fan's and team/league structure's inability to find material value (or at least provide essential support) in the athlete as they are forced from or choose to exit sport. I suggested that the costs of this disposing of human capital is largely unfamiliar in mainstream and academic circles and that it clearly explicates a societal focus on consumptive entertainment, often with significant individual human costs in the form of emotional trauma and lost opportunity. I suggested that professional athletes, due to their unique physical and mental qualities and their myriad experiences in the amateur and commercial sport arenas, might be offered cultural and occupational places in our social and economic worlds where those unique skills and experiences could be better used as both pedagogical tools and iconic inspiration.

In this chapter, I support these claims by offering both examples of how the athlete is produced and consumed in commercial sport structures, and results from this study that validate my claims. I also remind the reader that I add my own experiences of suffering the effects of emotional trauma, partially as a result of how commercial sport structures functioned in my exit from 16 years as a professional athlete. As has been noted in earlier chapters, as a researcher who meets inclusion criteria, I am careful not to allow my experiences to alter the validity. However, it is noteworthy to objectify my feelings as I took on the role of social scientist. The experiences I had while writing this chapter and reviewing the capacious data that constituted it are themselves worthy of noting.



For example, in Chapter 1, I offered the somewhat ostentatious claim that my experiences as a professional athlete placed me in a small class of social scientists able to make empirical a unique paradigm of pathos-laden, life transitions. In an effort to support this claim and a central hypothesis of this study, I once again return to a claim made in a previous text (Tinley, 2003). “Do we not owe it to ourselves and those we would let entertain us,” I asked. “Who we would emulate, who we would worship as kings and queens, to look deeper at their lives beyond sport? For is that not an opportunity to look at ourselves and what we have or will face in the years to come” (p. 12). It was not until the results from this study began to emerge that I realized how this study addressed those earlier questions. What I realized in writing this chapter more than earlier ones was that a deeper motive for me that I had not allowed to fully emerge was a kind of activism against what I considered a systemic waste of a very special segment of the human population. In subsequent texts (see all author entries between 2001 and 2011 in References), I had argued in both academic and popular presses for increased social empathy for the transitioning professional athlete. At times I faced professional and popular resistance to my claims. Part of the impetus for my claims, as has been argued in each of the earlier chapters, were how and why unnecessary forms of (signifying) mortality were observed in the athletes. Familial, social, economic, psychological, and physiological examples of mortality have been observed during both my 16-year tenure as a professional athlete and my subsequent decade as a social scientist and writer.

This chapter takes the reader closer to the possible answers to the questions that were catalyzed in my own experiences, noted in earlier texts, and set forth for exploration in this study. I address these by focusing more on the larger social structural frameworks that affect the retired athlete and, in the process, implicates those active agents that constitute the structures as they serve as indirect contexts of commercial sport in a role that affects the quality of the athlete's exit from sport. I also suggested in Chapter 1 that the results from this study might be extended to other examples of significant life transition and change that included returning soldiers from theaters of war, suddenly "empty-nested" mothers, and those facing quick, unplanned, and significant changes in nonsport careers. While specific recommendation for application or pedagogy based on data found in this study is briefly discussed in Chapter 6, the discussion below will serve the hypothesis that the example of a retiring athlete and how they are affected by factors inherent to social structures such as depiction in the media and relationships with media and commercial structures might be transcendent in other examples of significant life transition and change. I have mentioned the transcendence of retiring athlete data and returning veterans returning from theaters of war. Katz (2008) claims the suicide rate among veterans is three times that of the general population. Perhaps data from this study will apply to other significant psychosocial problems in our social and cultural world. I continue with a review of how my exploration of the indirect contexts fit within the overall project.

## **Indirect Contexts of Athlete Retirement:**

### **The Frameworks to Understanding**

The indirect contexts of athlete retirement can be viewed under theoretical frameworks connected to forms of production and consumption, mediated narratives, effects of modern commercial sport structures, relational qualities between elite professional athletes and their fans, or any combination of the above. The indirect contexts I identify and discuss in this chapter include (a) mass media coverage and its representations of the athlete, including representation of athletes in other nontelevisual forms of popular cultural such as literature, drama, film, verse, and new media forms of the digital communication processes; (b) crowd/fan behavior patterns toward athletes, inclusive of societal shifts in hero choices; and (c) corporate sports' structure, inclusive of its strategy for means of production, legislative rules, and guidelines that directly affect the health and well-being of an athlete. While there are likely other indirect contexts that affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport, these three contexts emerged organically from pilot studies and offer the reader accessible and relevant areas on which to base their own conclusions. (I remind the reader of the popular resistance to some of my claims about the role of fans in the athlete retirement paradigm that was noted in Chapter 1). There also exist noteworthy intersections between these indirect contexts and direct contexts noted in Chapter 4. For example, the athlete's relationships with commercial structures of sport (teams, leagues, governing bodies, sponsors, et al.) are influenced by, among several factors, how the sport they are involved with is (systematically and ideologically)

produced by both fans and media, and, in particular, the historical corporate attitudes towards preparing the athlete for life after sport. Mass media's representation of the athlete as they exist beyond sport might be explained by how, where, and why those athlete narrative(s) are produced and encoded (by media) for consumption by the public sports fandom. Motives for creating a specific narrative, however, are difficult to ascertain beyond media's need to profit through readership. But what the data from this study suggest is that these narratives do have a material and psychological effect on the transitioning athlete. To further develop this strain of the project, a sport consumer's reaction to and consumption of the public narrative of the athlete's exit should be explored as to how they specifically affect the athlete's transition experience.

The *indirect contexts* identified in this study are used as specific, supportable, and emerging areas that affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport and necessary to the advancement of the literature of athlete retirement. They are also noted in this chapter as they intersect with the data found in this study's focus on *direct contexts*, as well as the unique affectations that influence the athlete retirement experience as they also intersect with new and emerging philosophical contexts areas (see Chapter 6).

Indirect contexts in this chapter were constituted and supported as raw data themes in similar methodology used to identify direct contexts in this study and described in previous chapters. Identifying exactly how indirect contexts affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport was more challenging than when considering the direct contexts. To address this challenge, I will, among other

strategies, compare the responses between participatory groups in an effort to find meaning in the similarities and variances in their replies. I will also offer examples from popular texts in support of my claims as they corroborate raw data themes offered by the participant groups.

The consideration of indirect contexts in this study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it expands the participatory scope of the investigation by including data from multiple and sometimes disparate participant sources. The results, as the reader will see, indicate ideological conflict that results in an effect on the quality of an athlete's transition out of sport. Second, the inclusion of indirect contexts necessarily expands the discussion to include social and cultural elements not always observed or measured in studies that focus on the individual athlete's experience without the peripheral structures that affect retirement. This broadens the discussion, offering richer and deeper results from which to make conclusions and creates useful intersections between micro and macro approaches to sociocultural theorization. Thirdly, it allows the researcher to take multidisciplinary approaches in methods, theorization, and discussion. The inclusion criteria for the two participation groups that were sought in an effort to advance the area of indirect context exploration—sports administrators and sports media—were less restrictive than the athlete participant group. First, there were fewer sports administrators and sports media participants. Second, it was hypothesized that identifying and exploring the direct contexts would yield more accessible data to advance the literature of athlete retirement, and third, definitions of sports administration and media were, by virtue of their normative

tasks, less clear than those who could be considered retired elite of professional athletes.

For sports administrators, criteria required that they be currently and gainfully employed (as their primary occupation, not as a part-time consultant) within an area that was connected to the production and consumption of present day, commercial sport. Participants were chosen randomly from the primary researcher's data base of contacts made over the past 20 years as I served in a variety of occupations that were part of the commercial sport arena. Potential participants were given details of the study, insured anonymity and security under the same extensive guidelines that athlete participants were given (see Chapter 4) and told that they could remove themselves from the project at any time with no questions asked. The data from their results would be kept under lock and key and available only to the primary researcher. Of the possible 18 participants contacted for possible inclusion in the study, 12 were given pilot interviews and ultimately 9 agreed to participate in the study under the extensive guidelines as identified and agreed to by the University Institutional Review Board.

Sport media participant inclusion criteria required that each of the participants be currently and gainfully employed in the area of sport media as a producer of sport information, news, narrative, or other such informative or creative material that utilizes sport as its thematic center. Possible participants were also chosen randomly from the primary researcher's database developed over the past 20 years working part time as a sports journalist. Fifteen sports media personnel returned inquiries and after pilot interviews; 8 sports media participants

were identified for inclusion. Study participant protection procedures offered to the athletes and sports administrators and directed by the Institutional Review Board were also extended to sports media personnel.

There was revealing and extensive overlap in raw data themes between participant groups. Some of these intersections will be offered in an effort to support the research conclusions. For example, when discussing the context of how media representation might affect the athlete upon their retirement, two study participants, one a retired athlete and one a sport journalist, offered these interdependent ideas. The athlete, a multiple Grand Slam tennis tournament winner and author of a best-selling autobiography of his life in tennis, suggested that “athletes live in a world of entitlement build up by the sport media, and when that world collapses, it’s not easy to navigate the waters that return you to normalcy and humility.” The award-winning sports journalist added, “Regardless of the individual case, the media create an image of the superstar athlete being different than the everyman . . . and most fans do believe they are different.” These comments, taken in concert with additional and supportive data from other participants, discussed, and inductively analyzed, suggest that the *indirect context(s)* of media’s role in creating an athlete/sports fan separation should become identifiable elements in their effects on the quality of an athlete’s retirement experience.

While there might be additional indirect contexts that affect the quality of an athlete’s transition, the three that were identified, discussed, and explored through the methodology are both separate and distinct while intersecting each

other and several direct contexts.<sup>1</sup> One of the successes of this project was in supporting the notion that when the contexts of a sociocultural phenomenon are explored, the intersections of those contexts make themselves known in the process. I continue with my discussion of how media's representation of the athlete affects their exit from sport before moving into the two additional areas of indirect contexts, their relation to the fandom associated with their sport and how an athlete's connection with their commercial structures affects the quality of their exit from sport. From a theoretical approach, I will refer at several junctures to the "circuit of culture" (du Gay et al., 1997). Specifically, I am using a model of this approach to representation (S. Hall, 1997) while applying it to the transitioning athlete. I illustrate how they are culturally produced through intersecting areas of identity (the athlete), production (media, fandom, organization), consumption (fans), and regulation (team, league, NGB structures).

### **Media Representation of the Retired Athlete**

To understand how the media's depiction/use of a retiring athlete might have a direct and material effect on the quality of their exit from sport, I begin with a review of how commercial and spectator sport has changed in recent decades. Readers, similar to study participants and random mainstream responses, might ask why we (sport consumers) care about the fate of the transitioning professional athlete. Thus, I address that query and respond by claiming that our modern society has elevated sport and its heroic/iconic players to levels rarely seen since the sporting practices identified in Ancient Greece between 600 B.C. and 200 B.C. We consume sport at a level that rivals or eclipses any currently



operating, entertainment-based industry in the world (Eitzen, 2009). Yet, our relationships with sport's iconic players are much different than they were just a few decades ago. While the links between fandom and players in the middle to late 20th century were mostly a form of community affirmation, and by extension, self-affirmation, continued influences as a result of an increasing consumer culture have altered these relationships (E. Cohen, 2004). Sport heroes between 1950 and 1970 were considered closer to fans in demographics, ideology, and class since their levels of compensation were closer to the middle and upper middle classes. A pervasive mass media's partnership with elite and professional athletes and their legislated free agency had not yet catalyzed a meteoric rise in athlete's salaries. The fan's community roots were often closely woven with those of professional athletes. Athletes played for the same city and team for much of their career and developed sustainable relations with local fans, media, and businesses even if team owners held them in a form of commercial indenture (Baker, 1988).

But as our tastes for commercial sport grew and player's rights were expanded, corporate structures responded to increased public demand for the product of sports-as-entertainment and grew their capital interests to levels never thought possible. A distortion of our social and material needs occurred in concert with increased consumptive desires (E. Cohen, 2004), resulting in an ever-increasing elevation in compensation and social capital of the athlete and a direct connection between the professional athlete and a sport consumer's "life politics" (Giddens, 1991). As Brunt (2003) suggests in addressing our changing

relationships with sport heroes, “we need them very, very much, and so we have made them (very, very) rich” (p. 82). This axiological shift occurred during a simultaneous alteration in value of other social institutions such as family, civic politics, organized religion, and the military/industrial complex. But the athletes, seeing the financial benefits of their elevated social and commercial status, reified (from the defensive to the offensive) their collective positions under third party (read: sports agents/attorneys) legal pressures advanced upon commercial sport structures. What resulted was a negotiated *détente* between wealthy owners of production (team owners, media moguls) and now-wealthy laborers (highly paid athletes). A re-evaluation of neo-Marxist thought informed scholars that elite athletes were acquiring a kind of upward social mobility but no essential class change, unless they were able to transform their wealth into the realm of ownership, agency, and control.<sup>2</sup> Still, in 2011 very few active and retired professional athletes have been able to transfer their newfound wealth into substantive positions of power and control within the commercial sports industry (Carrington & McDonald, 2009). A net result has been that professional athletes, the iconic “franchise players” in particular, are rarely beholden to or feel any social historical connections to regions and teams. The team owners themselves began selling their “product”—the branded, image-constructed, profit center called a team or franchise—to any major U.S. city that would provide them with the material means to enable the team owners to continue profiting from modern society’s increasing consumption of dramatic sports-as-entertainment.

At the root of all this were the professional athletes who became increasingly separated from the average consumer of sport due to the athlete's elevated salaries, shifting team alliances, jaw-dropping physicality (at times facilitated by the use of performance enhancing pharmaceutical agents) to move "almost entirely beyond sport into the realm of celebrity" (Brunt, 2003, p. 83). This shifting paradigm of import on performance, commercial association, drama, and *spectacularization* in commercial sport, facilitated by role-modeling, trickled down to youth sports. Some elite youth athletes, as well, have become separated from their communities under the auspices of having a chance of achieving everything from free sports shoes to college scholarships to a seven-figure signing bonus with a pro team or corporate sponsor.

Less the reader suspect a totalizing claim, I offer that (a) there is ample literature to support these claims (Boorstin, 1987; Crawford, 2004; Horne, 2006; Lapchick, 2005; Staudohar & Mangan, 1991); (b) data from this study support it (athlete participants offered 142 raw data themes that were collapsed into indirect contexts); and (c) the author offers his own experience of the vicissitudes of fame, drama, and media in professional sports. On that note, I offer an anecdote that explicates how the media can have an effect on the athlete's popular image through their (attempts at) *spectacularization*.

In February of 1982, I won for the first time the most prestigious event in my sport, the Ironman World Championship. I was not used to working with mass media or its close-in applications, such as commentators and cameras. As soon as I crossed the finish line, the host of the television show (ABC Wide

World of Sports) grabbed my shoulder, manipulated me into frame of a waiting camera, and began asking me questions about the event. I recoiled, moved away, and told the commentator that I wanted to warm down and would be back in a few minutes to speak with him. He was visually disturbed by my actions and, when I did return to the area, it was obvious that our ideologies on the function of media in sport were not aligned. He asked me how I had managed to improve my performance from the previous year (1981) from a 3rd place finish to current champion, and without giving the question much thought (I had just spent the last 9 hours racing very hard) answered, “I learned how to ride a bike.” The reply was supposed to note my focus on cycle training in preparation for the race, but the response sounded shallow, curt, and glib, and the commentator ended the interview before I could extrapolate on my reply. When the show aired on network television, the encoding made me look thoughtless, boastful, and terse. Many of my family and friends scolded me on my very poor manners and lack of respect for all that the television network was doing to promote the growing sport of triathlon. I have no remorse for those comments as they were offered.

Popular anecdotes (Exley, 1968), mainstream ideology (Bissinger, 1990), and empirical sources (Quinn, 2009) have shown that many sport consumers, relying on mainstream media for their information, place blame for the perceived misanthropy and greed in sport on structures of commercial sport, inclusive of leagues, team owners, and, most significantly, the players. But what is often omitted in this popular discourse is how mass media is complicit in facilitating this shift in public perception of the athlete to some other archetype that materially

affects the quality of the athlete's transition out of sport. When ESPN successfully marketed its live programming of NBA star LeBron James, as he offered his public decision to leave his former team the Cleveland Cavaliers to join the Miami Heat, the hyperbolic and over-dramatized show that tainted James' reputation through his self-aggrandizing "decision," the all-sports network received little if any real criticism for its use of James to increase viewership (and advertising revenue) while James suffered nationwide disdain.

While it is beyond the scope of this study to finely detail the intricacies of a media/fan/athlete relational typology, the results from this study, along with the noted examples above, suggest that a transitioning athlete (in the cases above—me into the world of sports media and LeBron James to another team) would suffer less emotional trauma without *mediatization*. Still, the commercial athlete relies on media to facilitate the entertainment narrative of which they are the key product. Their high levels of compensation are reliant on this relationship. This is why the notion of agency in media use by athletes as discussed later in the chapter is significant. I will continue by offering some examples of how a shift in consumer culture, facilitated by profit motives and shifting public tastes and distinctions, have altered these relational qualities.

Mass media's depiction of the retiring athlete might be observed and explored along several divisional lines by posing questions of the narrative. These include (a) is the biographical story narrative (about the athlete) or generic (about the subject), (b) is the general tone of the story supportive of the athlete or disparaging, (c) who is telling the story, and what stake do they have in reader

response, (d) is the journalistic treatment descriptive or interpretive, (e) what viable sources are used in the treatment, and (f) what central (or even mythic) themes are used in the story and how and why are they employed in the narrative? What this study found was that several of the identified themes in media narratives reflected those identified as direct, indirect, and emerging philosophical contexts. The three most popular narrative themes in mainstream media (focused on athlete retirement) that intersect with raw data themes in this study include (a) mortality, which is reflective of the emerging philosophical context, *Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness, and Shifting Identities*, (b) *financial health*, and (c) the fallen athlete hero, reflected in *Athlete's Relationship With Sports Fans (inclusive of sport hero paradigm)*. An additional theme seen on occasion is that of redemption, also associated with the *relationships with sports fans* and *fallen hero* themes. I continue with discussion and examples of each of these often seen themes, beginning with mortality.

### **Specific Media Narratives**

#### **Mortality Themes**

Themes of mortality are often seen in media focused on retired athletes. In some cases, mortality is used as a metaphor for such themes as the passing of time, seasons, youth, health, and their associated performative skills (Becker, 1973). In other cases, the use of a mortality theme in media as it relates to the transitioning athlete is more obvious. This is made explicit in cases of suicide by the retired athlete, a phenomenon increasingly connected to issues of health. For example, as noted in previous chapters, Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy

(CTE), a pathology directly related to sustained blows to the head sustained in violent sports such as football, boxing, and hockey, has been linked to clinical depression and suicidal tendencies. Results from this study connected this phenomenon with the perception that transitioning athletes may take when increasingly seen in mass media. Athlete participants, in speaking of how media depicts them in retirement and transition, offered comments that reflected both generic and specific support of how mortality is related to their exit from sport. One athlete claimed that “concussions aren’t simple news, they aren’t tangible unless they relate to tragedy and some athlete dies,” while another sport administrator participant suggested that “brain injuries start while you’re very young” and added later that “if we can get people [fans] to feel bad about the young athletes, that might extend to the adults.” Other athlete participants spoke about mortality-related issues in a broader sense through their responses, often referring to loss of youth or what I perceived was a coded reference for more generic loss. Comments such as “I never thought that I would actually grow old,” “I was very hard on, even self-destructive with myself, while driving for success,” and “I always thought that sport would take care of me forever” suggest that athletes are thinking about issues of mortality as a signifying theme even if re-inscribed to sound less fatalistic as they reflect on their place and time in sport.

These analogous comments of loss-as-mortality are extenuated when re-created in media. Of the 154 raw data themes offered by sports media participants and coded as indirect contexts, 48 were focused on how the media utilizes its various themes (see Appendix F). Several comments centered on how

mortality was appropriated. One sports admin participant, in discussing why the media uses what might be thought of as “morbid” in other contexts claimed that “athletes can’t accept their own [athletic] demise because it’s a reinforcement of their death. The fans just follow the storyline because, for the sports media, it’s simple . . . one athlete goes away and another takes their place.” I had felt this myth-based “crop replacement,” as one athlete called it, in athlete responses. Others spoke about “reading about the ‘up and comers’ in my sport” or they said they felt the “tug of time,” as another athlete labeled the feeling. What the results from athlete comments from this study suggested was that the media’s heavy use of the mortality theme negatively affected their feelings about leaving sport. Exactly how this works is unclear, but I will continue to explain. One athlete said, “I read that old article on football players dying early and it scared the crap out of me” (Hargroves, 2006). Another claimed that he read about a study relating fan suicide rates to a team’s poor performance (Reuters, 2009) and wondered how anyone could ever prove the claims before suggesting that “someone wanted to get published.” Later, he quipped whether he should feel any remorse if his team loses and a fan commits suicide.

A Google search of “retired athletes and suicide” will yield approximately 1,800,000 page links, many of which address the issues of CTE, brain injury, and the focus on performance, drama, and violence in modern sport. Many of these are also focused on the increase in athlete suicide in recent years (2010-2011) including the cases of former professionals such as Erica Blasberg, Dave Duerson, Mike Flanagan, Hideki Irabu, Kenny McKinley, Jeret Peterson, and Ryan Rypien.



How media's focus on mortality specifically affects the transitioning athlete is not exactly clear, but results from this study suggest that some athletes can develop fears of early onset brain disease suffered as a result of their involvement in violent commercial sports. There are perceptions of abuse by teams and leagues, whether or not they are validated or fueled by the media's focus on mortality. One athlete claimed that "most athletes have poor health when they leave sport. We were just too focused on winning to be smart about the rest of our physical lives." I would argue that based on these and similar study participant themes, the connection between media's focus on mortality and the retiring athlete's quality of exit is related to the athlete's perceptions of future prospects for good health as they age. When former NFL star Mike Webster died of heart failure in 2002, he was 50 years old and had been diagnosed in 1999 with brain damage, likely caused by the violent hits to his head while playing football. A story from ESPN (Garber, 2005) began with this statement:

Mike Webster never made it to his son's 10th birthday party in Lodi, Wisconsin. Lying in a dark room at the Budgetel Inn, some 20 minutes away in Madison, he was bed-bound in a haze of pain and narcotics, a bucket of vomit by his side.

If athletes are exposed to this kind of pathos-laden text, it follows that it may exacerbate depression and increase the challenges of a transitioning athlete in their effort to achieve some détente with their physiological history.

During the period of investigation for this study, I reviewed my notes and files from the immediate period after I retired from professional sport. I was experiencing clinical depression that was both unexplainable and unacceptable,

and my forays into the science of neurology were telling in themselves. First, I subjected myself to a barrage of physiological and psychoneurometric tests. Then I read deeply into the medical literature on a suspected malady—acute hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal failure as a response to extended periods of overstress and exercise. Then I found myself reading canonical texts on identity and mortality studies. I was struck with the work of Becker (1973). “Of all things that move man,” he suggests, “one of the principal ones is his terror of death” (p. 11). Within short order, my quest for self- knowledge and healing led me to believe that perhaps we (transiting athletes) try to come to some understanding of our universal fear of mortality by communing with the topic in a safer environment, by negotiating with it as metaphor rather than fact. That environment, I proposed then and do so now, is often fiction. I gained an understanding of how the retired athlete is characterized in fictional media platforms—mostly literature and film—to offer the reader a way to compare and contrast their own mortality with the highly-symbolized ex-athlete. During that period, the fictional works of DeFord (1981), M. Harris (1956), and Updike (1960) offered me a greater access to my own transitioning self, inclusive of my acceptance of death, than volumes of medical data. I now believe that this occurred because I realized that the self, as Giddens (1991) suggests, “forms a trajectory of development from the past to an anticipated future” (p. 75). As I projected my reformation of self through the use of fiction—that safer environment because it was not real—I found the self-role playing a therapeutic mode of testing who I was beyond sport and where I wanted to proceed with my

life choices. I also benefitted from the act of re(creating) my own image in the public sports arena through the development of a number of published essays and books. While I had earned a reputation for being a fierce, distant, and aloof competitor, in my ongoing series of reflexive essays I would allow a different, perhaps truer persona to emerge. The image was not constructed purposely but was a matter of, as I told my close friends and colleagues, “cutting a vein and bleeding on the page because I had no other choice in my narrative approach.” Following the work of Cooley (1962), I was able to see and judge my newer, postsport self in the response of others; the *Looking Glass Self* that came to gather light. One day I was quite shaken when my wife of 18 years at the time told a mutual friend, “Scott isn’t really the person that is behind all the essays that he is writing. That persona who the reader feels is the person he wants to be.” It was true enough then and remains a doctrine of the creative arts; the ideal of an author projecting a desirable characterization. At the time, however, the veracity of that statement constituted by my life’s partner was not an easy lesson.

### **Mortality Themes in Popular and Self Narratives**

The fictional use of mortality themes in athlete transition narratives are noteworthy for other reasons (see Chapter 1, The Question of Why Theses Stories, and Chapter 2, Placing Sport Structural Terrain of Athlete Transition). They can represent authorial and creative expansion of resonant, even mythic symbolism. Dybek (1990) meditates on how the sudden death of an active player catalyzes a quick burial by his teammates and emotional dismissal lest their teammate’s death somehow affects their active playing days. Malamud’s (1952) story of Roy

Hobbs, a young pitcher whose career in baseball is cut short when an early antagonist shoots him on a train, works deftly with mortality and life cycles as an older Hobbs returns not to avenge his shooter but to find redemption of a life in elite sports that was taken from him. While the astute reader will see reflections of Sir Perceval's quest for the Holy Grail and Eliot's associative treatments in *The Wasteland*, what is noteworthy here in applying Malamud's narrative to our central research questions is that popular culture<sup>3</sup> has utilized the constructed image of the transitioning athlete to resonate sustainable themes. The film version of Malamud's text released in 1984 offers the "naturalization" of other narrative themes through cultural critiques and metaphoric readings (Hunter, 2008). Results from this study suggest that the notion of mortality is considered metaphorically by the athletes not dissimilar than the producers of fiction. One athlete claimed, "Everyone who reaches some great height of fame, achievement, adulation, or celebrity has to come down . . . and the media will help you with that." Another athlete offered, "I was leaving a sport that I was comfortable with and the stories I read sounded like my eulogy." This athlete offered comments that were reflected by other study participants and were centered on the notion that for many successful elite and professional athletes, there was no "life after sport." Athletes spoke of having to learn how to take a "healthy disrespect" for the stories written about them but also offered such comments as "I missed being needed, and the papers reminded me I was yesterday's news." Data from this study suggested that media reinforces the Athlete Identity—a constructed image that is constituted by sociocultural role expectations delivered through the narrative.

Elite and professional athletes come to inhabit these roles as they are socialized through many years of sport participation and engagement in the associative culture(s). Fandom and consumers of sport media come to expect certain behavioral patterns that reflect the narrative themes and the athlete, in turn, often finds their identity in how others respond to them. This becomes problematic when there is conflict between the athlete's (specific or generic) depiction in media is in conflict with a more authentic Self. It can be challenging for the athlete to take an oppositional reading of both the narratives and the projected behavioral expectations placed upon them by others. To determine exactly how mass media functions within such critical areas of a transitioning athlete's self-identity, sense of agency, and image construction will require additional research.

My own relation to the use of mortality themes in sports journalism, literature, and film was often reflected in the data results of other athletes who spoke of the reflexive exercise of penning an honest autobiography. Their reflections on the athlete body and self were sometimes about knowing themselves through their athletic body and then struggling with the demise of it. Autobiographical athletes have written at length about knowing themselves through their body or what Pipkin (2008) calls "body songs." Oriard (1982b) claims, "As a football player I was acutely aware of sun, rain, stiff winds, light breezes, dryness, humidity, grass, mud, the dirt of skinned infields . . . all of it alive" (p. 196). National Football League Hall of Famer Jim Brown (1989) claimed in his autobiography, *Out of Bounds*, "Bottom line, man is a physical being" (p. 189). Still, autobiographical athletes have extended the notion of

knowing themselves through their body into the theme of mortality as it was made explicit upon exit from sport, and their retirement felt like a kind of death. Major League Baseball Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson (1984) suggests in his book, *Reggie: The Autobiography*, “It’s like dying: nobody dies at the right time. Everybody feels, ‘If I just could’ve done that one more thing!’ Your career is the same way. It doesn’t end the way you want it to. It just ends” (p. 127). Major League Baseball great Willie Mays (1988) claimed in his autobiography, *Say Hey*, “Suddenly, it seemed like I had become the old man of the Giants . . . just yesterday I was the teenager” (p. 198). Tennis great John McEnroe (2002) claimed in his autobiography, *Serious*, “I’ve given a lot of thought to who I was, who I am, and who I want to become” (p. 13). In making sense of the import of his playing career relative to other aspects of his life, tennis great Andre Agassi (2009) writes in his opus, *Open*, “I am about to learn the true meaning of meaninglessness” (p. 255). Athlete participants from this study contrasted the end of their career with notions of youth and immortality. “I thought I’d play forever and never have to grow up,” one athlete claimed, while another said, “Fans are intrigued because they see grown men playing children’s games and that makes them forget that we are all getting older. Those are easy stories for people to write.”

What is significant to the findings in this study are the identifications of intersections between an athlete’s relationship with their own exit from sport and the media’s use of the ancient polarizing myths of the changing seasons, young/old and birth/death. As noted, however, further research is required to discern

exactly *how* (im)mortality metaphors and their facilitation in media and by retired athletes might affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. What we do know and was observed in exploration during this project is that the concept of *ubi sunt* (Latin for "where are . . ."), a literary trope dating back to Anglo-Saxon poetry (Pipkin, 2008), as applied to the retired athlete narrative is a common mode of journalistic motif that highlights the transitoriness of life, beauty, and success.<sup>4</sup>

From this study results we can argue that media's depiction of the retiring athlete does have an effect on the public image of the character and their image, often shown in a wistful, melancholic refrain than not, and has a more negative than positive effect on the athlete. In the sections below, I will continue to discuss the role of media in the quality of an athlete's exit from sport by exemplifying another theme often seen in media's portrayal of the retiring athlete—financial health.

### **Financial Health**

Financial health, as noted in Chapter 3, is a significant direct context in the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. Media, however, have offered narratives that suggest a number (relative to retirees in other occupations) of retired professional athletes lose their financial wealth earned while playing soon after leaving sport (Torre, 2009). As was noted in Chapter 2, however, there is little empirical data to support this claim, and much of the popular ideology surrounding this notion is anecdotal. Athlete participants in this study, however, did offer some ideas about the role of media in constructing this particular narrative. One study participant claimed, "I didn't retire broke like the papers

suggested” and later added that “outside influences caused by the newspapers and TV increased my ego and decreased my humility.” While athlete participants spoke of the media’s role in portraying the athlete, there were few comments that directly linked the media’s attention on the financial health of an athlete directly with the quality of their exit from sport. More likely, media uses the theme of financial health in the retiring athlete because consumers of sport have identified the topics of material wealth and compensation levels as areas of interest that fans can relate to (Evans & Wilson, 1999; Marshall, 1997; Quinn, 2009; Turner, 2004). As another athlete participant offered, “Things in the NFL become an issue because the media makes it an issue.”

In the summer of 2009, sports writer David Sheinen of the Washington Post penned a five-part series on athlete retirement by focusing on five different retired professional athletes. While his narratives covered a variety of subjects surrounding the athlete retirement experience, the newspaper described the series with this tagline: “These athletes retired as millionaires. But has money brought them happiness?” (Sheinen, 2009). What this might suggest is that the context of financial health may or may not be a factor in the quality of an athlete’s exit from sport, but media feels that consumers of sport will “relate to the bucks” as one study participant in the sports media group suggested. It was concluded from data in this study that notions of financial wealth in retiring athletes was in fact a subject that consumers of sport used as a referential to both the transitioning athlete (and what they signified to the consumer) and to the topic of materiality-as-identity. Further support of this claim might be found in a project that



identified the myriad media products that utilize rampant and blatant consumerism at a central theme. Commercial sport is often connected to these shows.

Returning to one of my central research questions, that of *how* different contexts affecting the quality of an athlete's exit from sport intersect with each other, what has emerged in the review of the media's use of various themes in the athlete transition narrative is that the intersections are sometimes quite opaque. For example, multiple narratives using the financial health theme are often portrayed as connected to a lack of education and/or preparation for managing one's life after sport. Larson (2009), writing about issues that affect the quality of an athlete's retirement in a mainstream newspaper, spends several paragraphs citing the financial success of the former NFL player, Ron Mix, by referring to his law degree and the benefits it may have offered him. Sokolove (2001) opens his lyrical piece on the travails of former MLB player and convicted drug user Darryl Strawberry by describing a scene where the then 18-year-old Strawberry was being courted (and distracted) by sports agents as he practiced baseball after high school classes. Perhaps the best we can do in this area based on the participant responses and the subsequent *mediatization*, is to suggest that some professional athletes are not as prepared to manage their financial affairs as well as others, including nonathletes. This is supportable for a variety of reasons. As outlined in Chapter 2, the media appropriate the stories of the few that file for bankruptcy or are associated with other postplaying deviant behaviorisms, but certainly we could extend this socioeconomic malady to a nonathlete population.

There is not enough evidence to suggest a direct correlation between the quality of an athlete's exit from sport and the use of the financial health theme by media alone. If anything, the media's use of financial failure by athletes has prompted an *increase* in the financial counseling services provided by team and league entities. Structures of commercial sport can suffer when popular ideology of sport consumers equates the financial failure of athletes (both active and retired) with the treatment of professional athletes by their teams and leagues. There appears an equally contrasting public opinion that professional athletes are responsible for their own failures (Wann et al., 2001). In both cases, sport media benefits from public interest and consumption of the narrative. In the following section, I will explore how the media uses the fallen athlete/hero theme and suggest, based on study results, how these public narratives might affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport.

### **The Fallen Athlete Hero**

About the fallen athlete hero narrative in media there is much to say. The connection between the empiricism in this study and the unique interest in the retired athlete by the engaged-yet-ambivalent, sport-consuming reader, is exposed in the discussion of a fan's relationship with the fallen athlete. I do not suggest at all that exit from sport is or should be considered as "fallen" or failing in any case approach. There are a great number of elite athletes who exit sport, have seamless transitions into the new areas of their lives, and never report any form of emotional trauma. They are in the minority, data suggest however, and this study

is predicated on the understudied details of those athletes who do struggle in retirement.

In this section, I will argue for how the media's production, in concert with fan consumption under the categorization of the "fallen" athlete into suitable roles that project or symbolize the retiring athlete as having failed or fallen, negatively effects the athlete. This study identified that retiring athletes who often fail to fulfill that which the fan desires in their elite and professional athletes are narratively-encoded in mass media as having "fallen." This was seen in a survey of several hundred media pieces and in raw data offered in comments by each participant group. This *production and consumption* is facilitated by media that, in the interest of material gain, encode the athlete's narrative both at various places in their career and in their exit and return to nonplaying capacities (S. Hall, 1980). As Kellner (1995) suggests, "The media are intimately connected with power and open the study of culture to the vicissitudes of politics and the slaughterhouse of history" (p. 35). What this study was specifically interested in is how these intersecting sociopolitical paradigms affect the quality of the athlete's exit from sport.

For the consumers of sport who have produced the athlete hero by virtue of their communal identity and consumption of material goods connected to and symbolized by the athlete (Appadurai, 1988), the *fallen* athlete hero is an unnatural event in what consumers have come to believe is a natural world.<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon is often constituted in part by mass media and their corporate partners in commercial sport.

Through time, the story of the sports hero is often the story of the tenacious individual; a foundational narrative in American history. Sports heroes exist as cultural artifact with fans sharing in the existential nature of their meaning. Supported by (and often constituted in) mass media, consumers of sport grew up and grew close to the men, women, and their mediated myths. The sports hero was a legendary figure, often of divine ancestry with strength of spirit and favored by the gods (Higgs, 1982a). But as we have seen in recent years (1980-2011), the depersonalizing of iconic figures—their reduction/transformation to celebrities, pseudo-types, and fallible characterizations of themselves—have caused a deep division in the cultural historicity that constitutes much of our national ideology (Boorstin, 1987; Vande Berg, 1998). What results from this study suggested is that the mediated sports hero can be subjected to a projected Sisyphean narrative (Camus, 1955) where their lifelong struggles go unappreciated by those that they are paid to entertain. Less than a generation ago, athlete heroes were “conceived in a relativistic or idealistic fashion” (J. C. Harris, 1994b, p. 3). In a post millennium world, our relationships with athlete heroes have twittered into an ambiguous psychosis. The political commentator, Bob Schieffer, talking about the fallen athlete icon as he relates the story of Penn State’s 2011 child sex abuse case on the TV show, *Face the Nation*, catapults the notion that sport can exist at the national level (Schieffer, 2011). And still we are fascinated by the sports hero metaphysically and contextually. When they fall from the sporting dais, we too as consumers of sport are faced with a reflexive

reality that, in the fashion of Pogo, perhaps *we have met the enemy and he may very well be us*.

Comments from all participant groups in this study reflected on the idea that when athletes fail to remind us of all-things-youthful and when their performance declines to explicate that idea, there are feelings among the structures of commercial sport—fans, teams, leagues, sponsors, and media—that they need to be replaced. “Our days are numbered,” the mortality narrative appears to scream, and those days are counted as somatic coffee spoons and belt sizes. So, as sport consumers, we may choose/produce a newer, younger, more vital sports hero to consume. This is made possible with encoded narratives within media of the athlete-as-hero. One study participant in the sports administrator group claimed that “media covers what readers want; the relationship between fan and athlete is made cozy by media stories,” and then went on to also suggest that sports media also drive the fan’s image of the athlete.

I asked several athlete participants if they thought that sports media too often wanted to see athletes retire before their performances decline. In each case, the athletes felt that it was easier for the journalist to create stories about them leaving at their peak and “making room for the next deserving kid” as one athlete said, than it was to write about the decline of an athlete and its intricate and telling subnarratives. A study participant in the sports admin group who had represented athletes as an agent suggested that “increasingly athlete’s understand how the media has appropriated their stories in a storyline that highlights the pathos of the athlete as they leave sport.” Later in the interview, the participant cited several

examples of how iconic professional athletes, even after various degrees of success in life after sport, are remembered for their “failings rather than their nonsport successes.” He noted how NBA Hall of Famer Earvin “Magic” Johnson is known more for his connection to the HIV virus rather than his great success in commercial development of urban-based, low income areas that have resulted in hundreds of new jobs for inner-city dwellers.

In 2009 and 2010, HBO TV produced and syndicated a series entitled *Eastbound and Down* starring Denny McBride as the retired MLB pitcher, Kenny Powers, who returns to his hometown to teach junior high physical education. In the comedic series, McBride’s character is parodied as the crass, uneducated, bitter, ex-ballplayer who lost his talent at a young age and cannot seem to find happiness, meaningful employment, or stable relationships in his postathletic life. I asked several athlete participants if they had seen the show and what their thoughts were. Most commented that it was fictional and based on the most pathetic of cases. However, some also added that its place in popular culture helped to reinforce negative stereotypes about what athletes can or cannot do after professional sport. As noted, some additional research is required to assign an empirical connection between popular culture’s portrait of the failing ex-athlete and any material effects. Based on data from this study, however, it appears that for the most part, popular culture’s treatment of the retiring athlete is both inaccurate, totalizing, and negatively affects the transitioning athlete.

A number of stories in mainstream popular media each year question why athletes do not retire at their peak or why they had unretired or attempted to

reenter their sport (Rhoden, 2010, 2011; Schafer, 2010). On occasion, a popular piece will defend the athlete's decision to retire on their own terms without external influence (R. Cohen, 2002; Tinley, 2010a). Results from this study suggested that sport media often accessed traditional hero narratives when discussing the retiring or failing athlete. These narratives place the athlete hero as someone who embodies ideals, creates vicarious transport, and offers consolation to the fans for their lack. So, for the mediated and aging, injured, or otherwise "failing" athlete hero who cannot fulfill this role as created in media, they are (re)constructed in the media in light of their failures and not their other attributes, successes, or potential contributions to our social and cultural worlds.

Lest we forget, however, athletes often willingly accept this athlete-hero role, though they may or may not fully understand the after-sport implications. As "we chose the hero," suggests Fairlie (1978), "he (or she) is fit to be chosen," (pp. 36-37). At times during this study, I asked athlete participants if they might consider taking more responsibility for their exit from sport, given that they had accepted the role of professional athlete with all its inherent challenges. One participant agreed but claimed that he never fully realized the effects of a "very public end to who I was." This notion of the challenge of seeing your identity as an athlete debated in the popular press was echoed by other athlete participants. I asked several participants if they thought that athlete heroes are produced mostly by stories, images, and other forms of very public information or as Vande Berg (1998) claimed, "the term 'unsung hero' is an oxymoron" (p. 135). I asked of one contemplative retired NFL star player that perhaps there are no real athlete

heroes, only communications about athlete heroes facilitated by media (Strate, 1994). He replied that he did not disagree, stating,

Maybe we are just ideals about ideals; something like that. But that doesn't make it any easier when you're leaving sport and seeing everyone dismiss all that you had done for them; to entertain and thrill them, and then they just diss you. That hurts in ways that few can really understand or feel unless they go through it and are effected.

As was proposed early in this project, I suspected that different study participant groups would respond disparately to similar inquiries. The sport media group participants offered a different reaction to the questions about the media's role in the quality of an athlete's retirement. One sport media participant offered this: "You know that Bruce Springsteen song, *Glory Days*, or that story by Irwin Shaw (*Eighty Yard Run*)? Well, the aging athlete wants those days back. And it's sad because they won't ever get them. But who can ever go back?" In general, sport media and sport admin participants appeared as less empathetic to notions of loss or emotional trauma in retiring athletes (at the hands of media narratives) than the athlete participants. There was, however, a greater interest in the specific topic by media participants, even though a majority of the comments were less favorable towards the athletes. Of the nine sports media participants who offered a total of 270 raw data themes, 48 or 17.7% were coded under the indirect context of media's representation of the athlete. Of the 29 athlete participants who offered 862 raw data themes, 31 or 3% were coded in this same context (see Appendix F). Certainly, the sport media participants will be focused on the direct effects of their work as a journalist more so than athletes who are subjected to the narratives of the media. However, it became apparent in the



interviews that as some of the athletes considered the topic more carefully, they could see why the media would frame them as “fallen,” simply because their skills and contributions to the game of pro sport began to abate. What was missing, I suggest, was their understanding of their role in the modern athlete/hero paradigm.

This is not to suggest an acceptance of the situation but perhaps a resolve to address its structural problematic through education, agency, acceptance, and change. The most common explanation for media’s portrayal by the athlete was centered on media’s use of them as profitable content. Several participants from each group suggested that the public has a tendency, as one athlete said, to “lump all pros together, even though my story is nothing like [Pete] Rose’s or [Tiger] Woods.””

Sokolove (2010) suggests about four top professional athletes whose public images with sport consumers have been tainted for various reason that “in the examples of [Alex] Rodriguez, [Tiger] Woods, [LeBron] James, and [Lance] Armstrong—each of them at the pinnacle of their sports—that [fame and money] is what has changed.” I reject Sokolove’s statement for its totalizing claim and failure to investigate the details, contexts, and nuances of public exposure and elevated compensation given to postmillennium professional athletes. Sokolove continues by claiming,

The immense money and acclaim available to them has a distorting effect. You get the feeling that their goal—and within it, the seeds of their downfall—is to rise so far above the rest of humanity as to be unrecognizable. Even to themselves. (p. WKI)

It's a rhetorical claim used for journalistic purposes but still, a reply to this query may lie in some combination of shifting self-identity, structural ideology of societal *herodom*, and the resulting chasm between athlete and fan facilitated by media. The subject of altered self-identify is well-considered in the literature. But used in the context as noted above, resolves into the hyper-reality of media that, I argue, affects the quality of an athlete's exit from sport.

Deford (1981), in his canonical work of fiction on the retired athlete (*Everyone's All-American*), suggests this about sport heroes: "We [consumers] understand them. It's only themselves they disappoint" (p. 98). Later in the text, Deford cites the work of McClure, *The Life and Death of the Knight of the Golden Spur*, a story set near the end of the American Civil War. "Once a man becomes a hero," McClure's character, Colonel Marshall, offers, "he can never raise his sights any higher . . . but all around him others can, and, ultimately, that is what must bring him down" (p. 229). What Deford is doing with his narrative is suggesting that the hero, necessarily aligned with and at odds with his fandom/worshiper, moves from idol to insignificant without the skills to reconfigure his place in the world. One athlete participant claimed, "TV made me extraordinary but I was average" and went on to say later in the interview that for her, "fame had been a drug, an undeniable lure that had to be negotiated then and forever . . . because once you've been in the spotlight and feel the power flow through your veins, it never completely leaves you." The intersections of media-created fame and how it might affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport are at once both accessible and requiring of further exploration to assign any empiricism. The

ideological frameworks of fame have been explored by many, from Virgil to Kitty Kelly (Halpern, 2007). For this project, I am concerned in the immediacy by what is imputed in Sokolove's question: What tyranny in fame drives athletes to perhaps lose contact with their self-identity, and what effect will that have on them when they exit the culture of fame? To answer that question, I shift my focus closer onto the notion of the athletes-heroes as they are constituted in and by the collective of sport consumers and as they are perceived by those producer/consumers of heroes to have "fallen"<sup>6</sup> as they retire from sport.

Woven within the popular and indirect texts of athlete transition are conversations on the ethics of *herodom*; that netherworld of relational capacities where the human potential is fully exercised. No *fall from grace*, it seems, is beyond our lust for exposing the good, the bad, and the ugly sports star. Questions of moral judgment and ethical considerations are linked to our own self-analysis and consumption of athlete heroes as they are presented to us. "It is impossible to speak of ethics," as Klapp (1962) suggests, "without getting into the realm of these socially produced images of the hero, villain, and fool" (p. 17). The link to sport consumer's mortality is felt as one study participant suggested, "when their sports heroes miss a catch, a payment, a chance to save the planet, and especially when they retire from the active field of play."

The sports consumer might ask if modern heroes can no longer save us from our existential angst. But when addressing that pessimistic suggestion—is the modern hero dead? Higgs (1982b) refers to the sporting kind. "The sports world belies such assertions," he claims. "Here the hero is alive and well. It is

not a question of whether . . . but what *type* of hero is popular at any particular time in history” (p. 137, my italics). Sport heroes—pseudo, fallen, or flimsy—still offer us a popular vehicle in which to connect gods with mortal men. They provide, as critic Victor Brambert suggests, “a transcendental link between the contingencies of the finite and the imagined real of the supernatural” (McGinnis, 1976, p. 141). In identifying with sports heroes, sports fans and consumers relish their achievements, mourn their deviance, and decline much in the same way that we relate to our own passages of the life cycle. This projected relevance constitutes the close proximity of the relationship. And what remains contingent is both the use by media of sports heroes in the paradigm of our relationships with them and the resultant effects on the athlete as they leave sport.

For the consumer of sport, to hold the fallen athlete/hero up to the light of societal examination is to turn the lamp on themselves. “As we tell about heroes,” Fishwick (1969) suggests, “they tell us about ourselves” (p. 1). The star athletes, even as they age and fail to provide what consumers of sport desire, sometimes find themselves concurrently being outgrown by a sport they cannot outlive. And through it all, sport consumers and acting agents, “Great Oz’s behind the curtain of sport” as one sport media participant claimed, producing and consuming sport, are confused about their products, prodigies, and projections. We bear witness to that “lazy relationship,” as Baudrillard (1994) suggests, that reality has to admit to the hegemony in those images and representation. There remains a convergence of the sport stardom and celebrity culture that is made explicit in the commodification and objectification of the body and the self. As Whannel (2009)

suggests, “The symbolic form, though, is not entirely in control of those who seek to transform symbolic capital into financial capital” (p. 78). Public image and its resulting capitalization in commercial sport is an uncertain series of processes based upon myriad factors such as public tastes, corporate and media hegemony, and abilities of emerging technologies to effect the construction of image shaping. This fluid and sometimes saturated culture of celebrity requires a *turnover of product* (Jones, 2009) as any market-based, point-of-purchase distribution system might—athletes as disposable goods with a shelf-life tied to the tastes and distinctions of a consumptive public. While Bourdieu (1984) connects class ideology with distinctions and tastes in consumption, the foundations of his work in linking ideology to consumption offers the researcher of athlete retirement interesting potential directions in the discovery of the effects of indirect contexts as they apply to the quality of an athlete’s transition.

Some of the results of this study remind us that, in a nod to Shelley (1818/1993), sport consumers are the creators of sports heroes, but perhaps the athletes might also be their masters. This is suggested in the growing area of use of new media technology and communicative platforms by athletes to manage and control their own public image. One study participant in the sports media group offered that “the media can still spin stories about famous athletes but increasingly, the athletes have more control over their image and thus their fans.” This change in power base is also of some concern by sports administrators and sport media as they subsequently lose control of public sport narratives to the athletes. One athlete study participant claimed, “Athletes who take charge of their

image through new technologies may feel more empowered.” A sport media participant offered “new media is changing the way sports are covered and may affect the quality of life after sport [for the athlete] positively or negatively, depending on how it’s used.” This is seen in how some professional athletes have taken to the social media platforms, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, in an effort to control their image, their brand, and their relationship with their fan base (Howes, 2009). While little research has been done in an effort to explain the effects of this technology-based relational phenomenon as it extends to professional athletes, results from this study suggest that athletes may gain agency when they endeavor to control their image with the fans. A study participant from the sports admin group suggested that “the media might print anything that sells if it’s half true, but now team managers and owners are in fear of the athletes selling their own image directly.” He went on to claim that the evidence of emerging legislation to curtail “tweeting” in the locker rooms and during games is only the beginning. There is growing resistance against professional athlete’s use of social media platforms for reasons that suggest the corporate structures of sport feel a loss of narrative control (Klemko, 2011).

In other nonmainstream, alternative or *extreme sports* that rely on athletes to participate in the promotion (constitutive production) of their sports and commercial events, the use of Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook is well-accepted if not encouraged. Another athlete participant claimed, “It doesn’t matter if I’m right or wrong, at least it’s me talking and I feel more in control.” What these themes suggest is that the media’s appropriation of the fallen athlete hero theme

may be mediated or contrasted when transitioning (fallen?) athletes are able to retain a sense of agency through new forms of fan connection. Thus, technology, as well, has altered the cultural production and consumption of elite commercial athletes as the roles of producer and consumer of athlete/hero culture, identity, and representation become interdependent in a kind of circuit of culture (du Gay et al., 1997).

Sometimes, however, even more historical media platforms such as film can sustain the narrative that life after sport for the elite and professional athlete has little promise unless an athlete can replace their lost self-identity as that of an elite or professional athlete. In the 1971, Lee Katzin-directed film, *Le Mans*, the protagonist, Michael Delaney, played by Steve McQueen, engages in a dialogue with the narrative foil, Lisa Belgetti (Elga Andersen) about the import of his sport's connection to the themes of social support, mortality, and identity:

Delaney (Steve McQueen): "This [racing cars] isn't just about your one shot. This is a professional blood sport. And it can happen to you. And then it can happen to you again."

Belgetti (Elga Andersen): "When people risk their lives, shouldn't it be for something very important?"

Delaney: "It better be."

Belgetti: "What could be so important about driving faster than anyone else?"

Delaney: "A lot of people go through life doing things badly. Racing is important to men who do it well. Racing is . . . it's life. Anything that happens before or after . . . it's just waiting."

What Harry Kleiner (screenwriter) does with the script is to suggest that elite athletes are essentially beholden to their omnipotent place in sport, while at times consumers do not (or more likely cannot) appreciate what athletes feel. Conversely, athletes may not be able to feel the same way as consumers of sport.

As noted in Chapter 3, social support as a direct context influencing the quality of an athlete's retirement was often noted by this study's participants. Deford's (1981) fictional retired star, Gavin Grey, pretends to understand the separation between athlete and fan, however. "You people in the stands," Grey is speaking to his nonathlete nephew while they sit in the stands watching a football game. "You think the field is flat and it ain't, and you see all the activity down there but you don't hear it. You don't hear the hittin', and it's make-believe when you don't" (p. 358). The success of the text is partially in how the narrator (a college professor and nephew of Grey's) *does* understand the place of the athlete hero as they leave sport, even as the athlete tries but ultimately fails. This functions as a kind of empowerment for the reader and sport consumer/fan who must renegotiate their relationship with their athlete/hero as age, decreasing athleticism, deselection, or choice drives the athlete from sport and catalyzes mutual shifts in their relations. In a moment of deep reflexivity, Deford's Grey tells his nephew later in the game, "I know what they say about the Grey Ghost. They say: He never could make it in the real world. But you see out there, down yonder [pointing to the field], that was the most real I did come across" (p. 359). For Deford's character, this must've been true. But what the astute reader will find is an ideological chasm that is rife with issues of production and consumption, entitlement, costs, benefits, blame, and responsibility.

I will argue that based on results of this study, the vast majority of sport producers and consumers will not accept blame for participating in the production of emotional trauma in retiring athletes. The cost for this denial of responsibility



is substantially higher than a few disgruntled retired athletes having to suffer through the vicissitudes of leaving professional sport. For example, between May and September of 2011, three NHL players, one retired and the other two past their playing prime, were found dead. One was considered a suicide by authorities, while the causes of death on the other two were unclear as investigations continue as of this writing. Each was rumored to be struggling with depression, perhaps as a result of CTE. Branch (2011) claims that, “more than 20 former N.F.L. players have been posthumously found to have had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative disease caused by blunt trauma to the head.” Structural rules of violent power and performance sports such as football and hockey, even as they have endeavored to alter the end result of violent play, appear as of 2011 to have failed to significantly alter the style such that it has shown a change in result. This has come with increasing pressure to change the violence-in-play along with empirical data claiming damage being done to young athletes playing in recreational leagues. Likely, we will see an increase in the number cases of emotional trauma in retired athletes (sometimes with mortal results) due to the nature of fan’s consumption of them—their style of play allowed by teams, leagues, governing bodies, and media’s complicity in the narrative of the fallen athlete star—before seeing the effects of a gradual shift in popular tastes in power and performance sports. I will revisit the topic of CTE and its application to the retiring athlete below when discussing the role of corporate sport’s structures in the transitioning athlete.

## Media Narratives and the Retiring Athlete: Conclusions

As a child, I remember watching the great San Francisco Giant center fielder, Willie Mays. I remember his best years playing major league baseball and his worst, desperately trying to separate their context and their meaning as they melded together in the twilight of his years. Mays, perhaps as much as any professional athlete, has been “blamed” by fans and sports media for continuing to play well beyond a period when his performance levels had peaked (Hirsch, 2010; Mays, 1988). And when he turned 80 years old on May 6, 2011, I did not want to remember at all. I couldn’t get past the fact that if *The Kid* was 80, then I was, uh . . . middle aged. The sports pages are rife with pathos narratives; the failed *phenom* whose vast potential was denied at 22 or some “ageless, timeless, diehard who had to be dragged off the ice at forty-four” (Tinley, 2012). Popular media formats such as newspapers, magazines, fiction, film, and myriad emerging digital sources may be plausible enough given the popular sport fan/reader’s low expectations of truth and validation. But I suggest the narratives are more telling when subtexts are peeled back for the reader to reflect upon.

The very notion of the fallen athlete is perhaps best exhumed within the mediated-myths of how and why their narratives resonate so powerfully with consumers. Literary analysts often suggest Irwin Shaw’s (1978) *The Eight-Yard Run* as one of the best pieces of short fiction produced by a 20th century American writer, not for its deftly-controlled prose, but for his visceral use of a fallen athlete hero as metaphor for failure to achieve the dreams of youth. The analog is used by the artist to remind us that we do not always achieve our

childhood dreams and that those who try to sustain their youth sometimes pay a hefty price for failure to follow a traditional hegemonic path along the occupational road.

Or perhaps we might consider why NBA star LeBron James' cultural cache plummeted after he opted to play for a different team in the NBA in the summer of 2010 (Glor, 2010). We might ask if James is not a product of our sport-centric society, honed for greatness and spoon-fed bites of hubris in an effort to bolster his necessary self-confidence. And now, as sport consumers project into his mediated representation, complete with mimetic use of reinforcing language, they are challenged by the callow in his confidence or the perception of ingratiating ignorance. One sports administrator participant in this study suggested, "We love our athletes as long as they maintain the standard story." When asked what that narrative was, the participant claimed it was "ideas that makes fans feel young, feel alive, feel good about who *they* are . . . not the athlete." These and similar themes that reflect ideological content support one of the conclusions of this study—that consumers of sport utilize elite and professional athletes as a vehicle to initiate and support feelings that enable their quest to sustain youth as a form of immortality. What the results also suggest are that due to sport consumer's distinctions and tastes in elite and professional athletes, ideologies constructed in a circuit of culture (du Gay et al., 1997) and beginning with media's representation of them, the culture of athlete disposability cannot be changed without significant alterations in the additional elements of cultural representation (identity, production, consumption, and regulation).

In this next section, I continue with the second of my three identified indirect contexts that affect the athlete as they retire from sport. As noted and referred to in pages above, how the relationship between the athlete and the consumer of sport affects the athlete's quality of experience as they transition out of sport is a challenging area to link to empirical evidence and requires more extensive methods than this study can enable. However, as an indirect context that does affect the athlete, this study produced enough material to support the notion that how an athlete relates to their fans and consumers does have an identifiable link to the quality of their transition experience. The reader will note the intersections in how I argue the athlete's relationship with media and how it affects the quality of their retirement with my discussions below and how the indirect contexts of the athlete/fan relationship and the athlete/team-league structures also influence their retirement experience.

### **Athlete/Fan Intersections**

Sport and society intersections are well-studied across empirical and popular lines (J. Coakley, 2008; Eitzen, 2009). But there remains a consequential disparity when the retiring elite or professional athlete is considered within the fallen hero/fan nexus and is sleuthed down to the humanness by which it is constituted. As has been referred to above, in fandom's production of sport heroes, they idealize and project a quest for a higher self or at least to fulfill a self-perceived lack (Wann et al., 2001). The athlete's physical performance artistry becomes melded with the fan's own on both conscious and subconscious levels. Yet, I argue that while fandom is a social construction with inherited social-

psychological behaviorisms (Gamson, 1994; Klapp, 1969; P. Williams, 1994), it is also an economy with the primary product (and the results of production) being something more transcendent than anomalous entertainment (Crawford, 2004). The relationship between athlete and consumer is contextually bound by the evolving needs inherent to each party. However, that economy, or in a neo-Marxist frame as Guttman (1986) puts it is, “a capitalistically deformed form of play” (p. 148), should be approached as such. Icarusian or not, fans are, as one study participant claimed, “along for that fabulous ride until the fall is imminent and fans look for another star upon where and whom they may hang themselves.” Did sport consumers really expect LeBron James and Tiger Woods and Barry Bonds and Floyd Landis—four “athletes of the apocalypse,” as one sport media participant suggested—to take their considerable physical talents into the realm of high altruism? Commercial sports’ hardscrabble followers often believe, as Tom T. Hall (1974) sings, that “angels don’t have bourbon on their breath.” Sports fan’s expectations of sports stars are among other items, linked to previous performances, ticket prices, hyperbolic displays of sport-turned-phantasmagoric, and the vicissitudes of linking mediated sport and celebrity culture (Wenner, 2006). As commercial sport stars move increasingly into public worlds formerly reserved for celebrity culture, the ways and means of the relationships with sport consumers is necessarily altered. Results from this study suggested that high profile athlete celebrities find it increasingly difficult to rejoin the normalcy of noncelebrities as they retire. What has resulted is a social chasm between the means of production, (the fans) and the product (the athletes). As the athletes

leave sport and many are faced with re-socialization among social groups who themselves feel a kind of separation from the former athlete, the effects are challenging for both groups. Thus, when results from this study indicate “social support and influence” as the most often cited direct context affecting the transitioning athlete’s experience, it appears as mutually supporting of the data. One athlete participant offered, “I just wanted to be normal; to feel like a regular guy who wasn’t painted into a role as a retired ‘jock’ with no other skills or some depressed ‘back-in-day’ type who just couldn’t make it after sport.”

When I retired from professional sports and, not having clear direction of what I wanted to do, it seemed a viable exercise to return to the interests and occupations that I had been involved in when I began competing professionally in 1983. Those included sport facility manager, graduate student, and ocean lifeguard. After 17 years of being my own boss with no regular hours or specific physical place of work to report to on a regular basis, I decided that the transition to sport management and/or marketing would require a painful re-emersion in corporate culture that would be too traumatic if not unsustainable. However, a return to graduate school and ocean lifeguarding, I thought, would facilitate a transition that would allow me to exist in a kind of social anonymity where my new colleagues would treat me based on present and not former performances. In lifeguarding, this turned out to be true. In academia it did not. Perhaps it was my own projection, but I felt that at several points in my graduate school career I was being judged differently—mostly tougher—by my professors and peers. And this was difficult, because I never asked for or felt like someone special; not a hero in

any sense of or iteration of the term. But for me, it “felt” like I was being watched carefully for my ability to add to the body of knowledge in serious graduate school venues. At first, I could not say empirically whether I was treated differently from other students. But as I began to become more objective, analytical, and research-oriented, I learned to read how the messages of difference were perhaps subconsciously created by those in my social and professional circle. That analysis and conclusion began over a decade of work in the area/topic of athlete transition that led to this project.

At times, the constructed athlete hero image rises from the working class found in rock music lyrics and stunted sit-coms. Sport consumers flock to the idealism of sport heroes, while the lines between professional athlete and professional entertainers become increasingly blurred (“Blurring the Lines,” 2006). One sport administrator participant suggested that “consumers invest their feigned prayer for mutuality [with the athletes] while outfitted in player’s jerseys they can’t afford.” Another suggested that they “submit to the tyranny of youth-centrism” where, he argued, in the service of their own attempt to find their higher selves on a glossy magazine or in a nonevasive *lifestyle-lift*, they are “then disappointed when they fail to live up to god-like standards.” I asked him if he thought that sport consumers could be back-shot by the naturalistic hegemony of the modern commercial sport era—*they are not them*.<sup>7</sup> He said, “Everybody wants to be a sport star, or at least close to them. Until that star is no longer a star. And then they toss him or her like yesterday’s news.”

But what I am concerned about in this project is how this relationship affects the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. Of the 862 raw data themes offered by the athlete participants, 42 or 4.8% were collapsed into the indirect context of "athlete's relationship with the fans." Of the 304 themes offered by sport administrators, 55 or 18% were assigned to "athlete's relationship with sport fans." Within the sports media participant group, 67 of the total 270 raw data themes or 24.8% were identified as being linked to the indirect context of "athlete's relationship with fans" (see Appendix F). It is difficult to discern why nonathlete study participants suggested more often than athletes that the athlete/fan relationship was significant in the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. Based upon study results, sports administrators and media participants appeared to have this idea in their minds more often than athletes. One study participant from the sport administrator group offered, "Athletes think fans will love them forever if they earn it, but it's not true." Another study participant from the sports admin group offered,

Most athletes are now trained to be fan-friendly. But they don't realize how this will extend into their retirement. They just think of it as how the fans will react to them while they play and what it means to their marketability.

What emerged from this study was an ideological disconnect between sport consumers (producers) and retiring athletes (product), and in that chasm exists both the unnecessary tumult of many transiting physical beings and the necessary reappraisal of a fan's role in the emotional trauma. While this phenomenon is not confined to recent years—Klapp (1962) suggested that "the public has adopted the



celebrity . . . [and its] ‘rights’ over its image to include the privilege of using the celebrity” (pp. 17-18)—this structural shift is a result of changes to modern commercial sport and has altered the fan/athlete relationship. As sports figures have entered the celebrity culture, the notion of “make-believe . . . into all sports . . . affording a colorful pretense of purpose” (Veblen, 1899/2008, pp. 256-259) fandom has made it increasingly difficult for athletes to return to “regular guy relationships,” as one participant called it, with those whom they socialize with after a career in sports.

What the data have shown is that in the nadir of an athlete’s humanity—an act of “bad judgment” or deselection or some final physiological revolt (age, injury, illness)—the fan’s separation from the athlete hero is both conflictive and rife with the hypocritical sanctimony catalyzed in the Cultural Turn (Clairborne, 2009). The fallen athlete hero becomes that negotiated cultural terrain where few sport fans fully realize their roles in the arc of the production, consumption, and disposal of a sports figure (Schirato, 2007). Mostly they do not realize how the culture of consumption altered the way we think and feel about identity creation. Sport fans have the luxury of forgetting their presence in the immediate history of this relational shift. There are always, many fans believe, new great athletes ready to entertain and inspire them when the older, injured, or underperforming fail in their projected role. I argue that consumers of sport might empower their own lives in the proximity of authentic remembering of what these athletes’ experience might have been like and what they might offer in their life after sport other than a name and a quantified numeric entry.

Too often sport consumers stand on the edge of reason and watch their athlete heroes go down, failing to realize the tether attached to their hearts and minds that was tied as a child; that transistor radio shoved under the pillow; the knot that grew into moral lapse explicated as they abandoned their favorite star after they retired. And the athlete hero-cum-entertainer-icon who has felt the white hot spotlight of success move into publicly-acclaiming arenas she or he never thought possible, must negotiate their way through the darkness, often sans psychological tools.

As has been said, too many of us think, “Well, they made a lot more money than I ever did and were on TV . . . so let them figure it out.” Their new role(s) as an ex-professional athlete is inextricably linked to the very occupation they are leaving. “Roles that are highly visible in society and which involve social support and social acceptability,” Fuchs Ebaugh (1988), suggests, “tend to be roles that are very difficult to exit from in a complete fashion” (p. 175).

When I left professional sport in 1999, I had to negotiate my relationships with those around me who failed to see me as anyone other than a professional athlete. For several years, as I became increasingly involved in nonsport related occupations, arenas, and social groups, I hid the fact that I had spent nearly 17 years as a professional athlete. As I wrote:

I finally tired of answering questions about my next race or how my training was going, even years after I’d left the pro ranks. . . . I would push the questions away, saying, “I don’t know. I don’t live in that world anymore.” But for many of them, I still did. My old identity was changing with each day of my acceptance [in new roles]. Now, if only others could accept the fact that athletes change. (Tinley, 2003, p. 228)

As we revere our athlete heroes and negotiate their failures, we must confront them individually, not as an idealized collective. As has been noted in previous chapters, sometimes better seen crafted in fiction than fact, writers such as Bouton, Delillo, Exley, Harris, Kahn, Malamud, Roth, Shaw, Sillitoe, Shaara, Updike, and others have borne out in literature what has failed in the popular press. With nods to Bissinger, CLR James, Michener, Moehringer, and Oriard (see References), the creative and fictional structure of the fallen athlete has often connected more powerfully with the fan populist than the attempt at realism. The best—those rare athlete/writer/academics who experienced sporting herodom, left that lofty occupation and role but were seen scribbling notes on a yellow legal pad through the thickening atmospheres—they might hold the biggest keys to understanding.

When I decided to enter the world of academia after retiring from sport, I undertook an exhaustive search for any justifiable former professional athlete who had achieved tenure in their position and had written about it reflexively and intelligently. While I realize now there are more than few, I was only able to identify one person—Michael Oriard,<sup>8</sup> a Professor of English in the Department of English and Associate Dean in the College of Liberal Arts at Oregon State University. Prof. Oriard had played professional football in the NFL for 7 years, working on his Ph.D. at Stanford University in the off-season. His book, *The End of Autumn* (1982b) struck me for its honesty and candor and, in some small way, I *herocized* him for his unique transition out of sport, for his very difficult path to reinvent himself in such a disparate occupational milieu as academia can be from

elite athletics. It seems odd now, over a decade later when he and I have become friends and colleagues, that I would seek and secure this (then) singular example of such a challenging transition. But what this anecdote represents is the powerful lure of the hero figure—regardless of our intellect, rationality, or intent—and how we place them in our subconscious frame of reference. I never looked upon Mike Oriard as “fallen” from sport or anything. He lived a successful life of the physical body and followed it with a successful life of literature and intellect. I never thought that I could be considered as “fallen” even though articles were written about my sudden disappearance from the ranks of professional triathletes and refusal of offers to do television commentary, provide personal coaching, or endorse products. I had my model and set about following it.

Few of us fully understand the perils of a vaulted existence (Plimpton, 1966). Many of the athletes interviewed in this study admitted to having surrendered wholly to the pursuit of earthly greatness, exposing themselves to the terrifying process of possible public ruination when the structures of sport and/or the ravages of physical decline come to collect. They had suffered both in their boot-strapped quests for athletic greatness (decades of preparation to be the best) and their ignominious return to regularity; all for “the chance to be king” as several participants claimed. When asked “was it worth it?” most said they would not change a thing. I doubt that I would either.

While this theme (and the purposeful melodramatics in syntax choice) might appear as Faustian in some regards, it resonates because we, too (as sport consumers), are human and make decisions of consequence, bleeding over

spread-sheeted corpses of cost/benefit analyses. To fall, we might remind ourselves, is to risk it all (Campbell, 1949). And get caught. But no one wins big or dies spectacularly from just getting out of bed in morning. Fallen athlete heroes often give great pleasure to everyone but themselves. The world is full of suffering geniuses, this study proved, vital ghosts who are greatly admired but can never absorb and appreciate the collective admiration of fandom. The tormented baseball great, Darryl Strawberry, once told a reporter that he never had a problem hitting; he had a problem living (Sokolove, 2001). We are engaged with the fallen because in the trinity of their sod busting mistakes, their occasional mea culpas, and their second chance comings, we too are faced with the rise and fall and return that necessarily constitutes the human condition. *Father, son, holy shit. How do I get back in the game of regularity?* But what is lost in translation is empathy for the fallen.<sup>9</sup>

Too often we call for athlete stars to go out on top, to save us, the sport fan from the tectonic self-conflict of “what would *I* do, if *I* got caught growing pot, growing old, or photographed with hairs growing out of my nose?” Failed athletes are too often older unlucky versions of our dreams caught red-handed, believing that grand falsity that in life . . . anyone can ever go out on top (Raglan, 1956). And those older athletes who deny logic mark the very edge of resistance, jaggging the arc from then until now. “I will play until they pull the bat from my cold dead hands,” some athletes may have suggested. But are these athletes *truly fallen*, we ask, or just tempting fate, milking one more long July of *jouissance* found in the luckiest of careers? Wanting to play just a little longer, please,

because they must know, as I felt, that life after decades as a sports star might be *okay* . . . but it will never be as pleasurable, as rewarding, and as “immortal” as anything else they would do.

In the end and in the fall, regardless of their temporal connection, is where we are given the true measure of a transitioning athlete. To watch a Woods or a Phelps or a McGuire read a slick apologia and see the rehearsed remorse in their eyes, but not feel it in their hearts, is to watch grace mocked in the service of a cereal box cover. To watch a reified Michael Vick talk and act and play as if recast in some enlightened version of a former self, is to witness a transformation of some repute. How the hero addresses their humanness is more telling than how they displayed their godliness. As fans, however, how can we ever know how they truly feel about leaving sport or, in the same regard, trading an exalted position for a lesser one? This is what this study has done—sleuthed down the feelings offered by the participants to help us, the mass of consumers—to better understand what it must be like and what we can do to make the transition better. And in that effort, I argue, we will empower our own significant life transitions.

Still, to be sure, there is something pathetically voyeuristic about watching the greats go down hard in a public way (Rank, 1956). *Just let them leave*, we think, oh, but can you just show me the *White Bronco Chase*<sup>10</sup> once more? The iconic athletes always take something with them when they exit sport. Like a special guest leaving the party, the air is not as breathable as when their photosynthetic personalities danced across the floor. Our relationships with the retiring athlete are situated in the fluid confines of a malleable memory. We

necessarily ask if their exit can ever be separated from their play. And are told “Well, that depends.” In the case of playing years beyond greatness—the Willie Mays and Muhammad Ali’s and Ricky Henderson’s—we harken to their brilliant youth because it unfolded on our own youthful front with the future all wide open. And in the case of the inflicted—the Lou Gehrig’s and Roy Campanella’s and Arthur Ashe’s—we are pulled into that aphoristic projection, *there but for the grace of God go I*. But still, an inevitable physiological decline must be set apart from a morally decrepit act. Gehrig fell neither from grace nor history, while Barry Bonds fell into a skeleton outfit hanging in a back closet. Tonya Harding fell into a circus act, and Little League World Series phenom, Dominican-born, Danny Almonte Rojas, fell because he was risen from birth 2 years too early. Some are pushed, some jump, but most, like the atmospheric event of a falling star, are noticed as their ancient reflection stirs an immediate emotion.

Fandom’s relationships with fallen sport stars are linked to the shifting sands of cultural ideology. Muhammad Ali, stripped of his title and his best years, lighting the Olympic torch in Atlanta, 1996; Smith and Carlos running from death threats after Mexico City ’68, then offered honorary doctorate degrees from their alma mater; Pat Tillman’s memory appropriated by the U.S. Army PR machine now standing as an icon of integrity; and Big Mark McGuire, not wanting to talk about the past as if history has no import . . . a pitching coach in St Louis. Sometimes tripping in one era is a leg up in another.

What fans require of their retired athletes in payment for their own failure-to-be-anointed is the denial of hubris—that essential trait that helped to mold their

greatness—or at least the ability to squirrel it away until enough memory has been mediated. How selfish, though, to *ask for an athletic lobotomy*, as one athlete participant offered, when it is us, the fans, that feed the fires of empowerment. We have become a society of planned obsolescence and addictive consumerism that becomes a means of personal empowerment, subversion, or resistance to aging (Horne, 2006). Sport fandom who dispose of retiring athletes when they no longer offer them what they ask for or are subjected to higher moral standards when judged for deviant behaviorism beyond what could be expected of the Everyman are hypocritical on several fronts. Or as I mused in an article in 2011:

Thus we might question if we [fandom] are playing Pontius Pilate for convicting Lance Armstrong [of PED use] in the court of public opinion as we sip scotch and sodas before a sleep-insuring *Ambien* night. We call for a simultaneous cure for cancer and a drug free sport but always and already the necessary omnipotence of victory; that reinforcement of our national ideology. And in the wake of our diametric demands, I can't help but wonder if the gold medal winners of the 2024 Olympics are training in a petri dish at a lab *to-be-named-later*. Lest we forget, emerging and effecting social milieus, if not myths, begin and end in the fabric of flesh and bone. (Tinley, in press)

What I am suggesting above and what is supported by the data from this project, is that the image of the immortal, ethical, aesthetically-pleasing athlete, failing the projected narratives of the sports fan, is summarily disposed. The embodied myth of immortality, sustained by the professional athlete and their corporeal status, is denied in the minds of the consumer as they exit sport. But as has been argued repeatedly, what is at stake is not a failed story but the emotional stability of the protagonist as they find themselves removed from the pages in a real world.



On the rare occasion, however, an athlete self-steps off the ledge and is lifted by their chosen elevator. *Sports Illustrated Magazine* 's first Sportsman of the Year, Sir Roger Bannister (1954/2004), the first man to run under 4 minutes for the mile, has noted that his contributions to medicine as a leading British neurologist far outweigh his singular four laps around the Iffley Road Track on May 6, 1954. Fifty years after his biography, he confessed that his words in the text were “a farewell to athletics but not to exercise” (p. 210). The fan/reader or athlete looking for guidance is necessarily stuck by the grace, the confidence, and humanness of the athlete. And we ask, “Where does this come from and how do I access those traits?” The best that I can offer as a researcher (having communicated with Sir Bannister but not for this project) and an athlete is that Bannister’s success beyond sport coalesces with data from both established literature and this study. Bannister was (a) not overidentified in the role of athlete, (b) he had substantive social support for his chosen pursuits beyond sport, (c) he found a way to be “unaffected” by media and other sport-structural influences at the time, (d) he had a clear vision of what his next occupation might look like, (e) he was appreciative of what sports had given him, and (f) he had a sense of enabling self-reflexivity (as evidenced by his insightful biography produced shortly after his record performance in May, 1954).

The retiring athlete narrative appears to resonate with the sports fan because it synthesizes with other essential tropes. For the same reason that popular sport films such as *The Natural*, *For the Love of the Game*, and the first and last iterations of the *Rocky* series are successful in the same way that nonsport

films such as *The Lion King* and *Star Wars* succeed: they are equal parts hero's journey, aging-star-giving-way-to-youth, and the clichéd *circle of life*. These are not just feel-good films but religious iconography that takes the viewer from original sin through heaven's gates, from playground to paradise with a few really big screw-ups in between. "For the righteous falls seven times and rises again," Proverbs 21:16 tells us, "but the wicked stumble in times of calamity." And on the other side of failure might be the narrative of institutionalized *redemption* as was seen in writer/director, Quentin Tarantino's character, *Jules* (Samuel L. Jackson) from his 1994 crime film, *Pulp Fiction*. Jules cites the Bible's Ezekial in the character's attempt at finding redemption from a life of murder and mayhem. Other roles in popular films appropriate the redemption narrative: Robin Williams in *The Best of Times*, Keanu Reeves in *The Replacements* and *Point Break* (along with Patrick Swayze), Russell Crowe in *Cinderella Man* and *Gladiator*, Jan Michael Vincent in *Big Wednesday*, Paul Newman in *The Hustler*, Kevin Costner in *Field of Dreams* and *Tin Cup*, and most of the key actor/players in *Major League* are all written and cast as looking for redemption. Lest we forget even more, artistic fielding offers second chances perhaps because other gods have offered them to us and we are happy to consume that story. Or maybe we just never got caught on the wrong side of redemption.

In my own freshman fame, I sat in the back of a large ballroom on the good ship, *Queen Mary*, fittingly one of the only British luxury transports to avoid being sunk by German U-boats. It was the annual awards dinner for triathletes and I had swapped a seat on the champion's dais to blow off some postseason

steam in the back of the room with my peers. What I ended up blowing was thick smoke from a thin joint into the heaving face of the sleeping president of our international governing body. My alcohol-fueled hubris could have served a hefty fine or suspension or a night in jail. But in some simple twist of fate, nothing happened but jaw-dropping shock. Our IGB President slept on through the thank-you-very-much speeches in the wake of his Euro-travels and I walked, not redeemed but lucky; fallen in moral judgment but risen in lore of a pre *drunkenathletes.com* world. Lucky is as fortune does. It was at this moment in time that I began to understand that the relationships between retiring athletes and fandom were always and already contextual and fluid within the confines of shifting tastes, rules, and social distinctions.

Ultimately, the retiring athlete is connected to sport consumerism under the banner of legacy. Modern sport is a world of quantifying numbers that define a career but not a person. Our own charitable chips too, are counted on tax returns but can never tell us how we might have left a positive mark in an all too negative world. A retiring athlete can erase a lifetime of great records by one bad decision. And then lie about it for years; an adult-child we all know digging their own grave deeper into the grass upon which they were exalted. Ben Johnson, O. J. Simpson, Marion Jones, Pete Rose, Floyd Landis . . . the list grows with technology and our lust for ubiquitous sport narratives. Legacy matters because it may be one of the last true currencies of cultural value that can increase beyond the grave. *Larga vida a Roberto Clemente, el salvador del pueblo y Gandhi de Puerto Rico.* Roberto Clemente, the great humanitarian from Puerto Rico, fallen from the sky<sup>11</sup>

but whose shining star continues to remind us of what we too *have* or *have not* done to erase the pain of suffering of the less fortunate.

Structures of modern societies' relationship with commercial sport have been foundationally altered in such ways that future generations may not look upon pro athletes in the same way as they presently consider athletes as gods; retired, "fallen," or otherwise. In our retired athletes, however, the results from this study suggest that fandom will not always look contextually at the act of an athlete as they transition out of sport but what their behavioral choices do to our quest for some authenticity in a simulacra world (Baudrillard, 1994). And over time, fandom's best years considering an athlete are tethered to their stars, the athletes and fans struggle mutually to rise up through the choking seaweed of failure (under some ethereal definition) and find the sweetness and the light that the best in sports and the best in life can reflect. And then they too are heroic.

In the next section, I explore the third of my identified direct contexts that affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport—a transitioning athlete's relationship with corporate sports' structure, inclusive of its strategy for means of production, legislative rules, and guidelines that directly affect the health and well-being of an athlete as they leave sport. The reader will note the overlap in content and thematic presentation from the first two indirect contexts—athlete's relationship with mass media and with fans.

## **Direct Contexts: The Transitioning Athlete's Relationship With Corporate Sports Structure**

As I will put forth in this chapter, the indirect contexts of an athlete's exit from sport have shown to be significant in affecting the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. I have also suggested and have shown how the intersections between applied ideologies of how media's appropriation of the retiring athlete and the sport fan's consumption of that narrative are significant in the consideration of an athlete's transition. In this last chapter section, I will add an additional layer of consideration for the reader—that of how the actions and ideologies of corporate structures of commercial sport—the teams, leagues, sponsors, agents, governing bodies, postplaying networking services, and associated medical personnel—have a quantifiable import on the quality of an athlete's exit from sport.

Of the 142 raw data themes offered by athlete participants in this study that were coded as indirect contexts affecting the quality of their exit from sport, 69 or 48% of the athletes suggested that their relationship<sup>12</sup> with the corporate structures of sport that helped to constitute their role in commercial sports affected the quality of their exit from sport. Of the sport media participants, 41 raw data themes (of 124, or **33%**) were identified as a factor in an athlete's relationship with structural sports. Of the sport media participants in this study, 39 or 154 (or **25%**) noted raw data themes that were collapsed into the category.

While it is difficult to make assumptions based upon these numbers, a reader might assume that the indirect contexts of an athlete's exit from sport were “more on the radar,” as one athlete participant offered, of the athletes than the

structures that enabled their opportunities. Or there exist ideological differences between what athletes, sport administrators, and sport media feel are essential rights and responsibilities as each enter the structure of commercial sports in a particular role. Since nearly one-half of all athlete comments coded as indirect contexts suggested that the quality of an athlete's exit from sport was effected by their relationship with corporate or for-profit structures of sport, in this section I will focus on the athlete's comments and their possible meanings.

To begin, the corporate structures of sport might be exemplified in such entities as team or league ownership and management, sponsorship association, or legal representation of the professional athlete (since media and its corporate partners are discussed above, I refrain from placing too much emphasis on it in this discussion). While each of these entities might contribute specifically to the quality of an athlete's exit from sport based upon such areas as the nature of the relationship between the corporate entity and the athlete or the entities' (kinds of) support of the athlete, results from this study suggest that it is the athlete's agency or feelings of control relative to the entity that affect the quality of their transition. As has been noted in previous chapters, economic factors, social support, and self-identity are significant factors in the athlete retirement experience. In this area, we see quite plainly the intersections and mutual affectations that this study hypothesized. Athlete participants in this study spoke about "wanting to see if and how my sponsor would stick with me after I retired" and "my agent worked really hard for me when I was on my way up but let me down when I could no longer demand a lot of money." They spoke of feelings of failed expectations

when their sponsors, managers, friends, and fellow players had begun to treat them differently as their performance declined. A central idea, however, was as noted above, feelings of being in control of one's exit from sport. Literature has supported the notion that unexpected or unplanned exit from sport results in higher levels of emotional trauma (see Chapter 2). But what this study contributes to the area is that the data proves all too often athletes are lulled into a false sense of security of after-sport support. And when they are faced with the fact that they are not going to be treated differentially by the structures of commercial, the result is a period of emotional trauma as they reframe their identity in an after-sport world. One athlete participant said,

The NFL claimed they would take care of me, train me, and prepare me for life after football. But I knew they were feeding me a line. So I never bought into that shit, and I think it helped me when I retired.

Other athletes spoke of tenuous and evolving relationships with their sponsors as they moved past their ability to represent the product or service in a fashion that merged with marketing strategies. One athlete claimed, "As a tall, smart, black, female, I came to learn exactly how the corporate game was played . . . and I played it to my advantage." A headline posted on the business social media networking site, *LinkedIn*, posted on February 15, 2010, claimed "Ex NFL Pittsburgh Steller icon, Levon Kirkland signs with remBrand Sports to develop, extend, and manage his brand. "I'm committed to remBrand, because they are committed to my future," said Levon. There was no mention of what the athlete's brand was in the headline. but one might surmise that ownership and control of a "brand" might offer the athlete a sense of agency in their life beyond sports.

This area of the study asks for further research and inquiry to determine what kinds of socialization processes, behavioral traits, or additional direct or indirect contexts might affect a sense of agency when an athlete must deal with the structures of sport as they transition. Results indicate that athletes who are not overly-effected (according to their comments) by the media's control of their image or the fan's relationships with their image, appear to experience less emotional trauma upon exit from sport. Sometimes, however, it is a matter of intuition or luck. For example, the year before I retired from sport, I was offered a small remuneration with a sunglass company that I had been associated with (and done marketing work) for over 15 years. It was a cursory offer based on our past relationship. The company had grown to be worth several hundred million dollars. I declined the offer and, in kind, asked them to compensate me with a "lifetime deal for free product—within reason—for my family and I in return for a lifetime of wearing their product in public," if they were still in business. They accepted my offer and my resultant feelings of control, agency, respect, and mutual loyalty have been of a psychological value that has no comparison to the few thousand dollars I might have gleaned in a 12- or 18-month period. This may have been connected to my investment sense or education in the area, my behavioral traits, the nuances of my relationship with one company and its key personnel, or just a lucky hunch. My gut instinct suggests it was a combination of all.

Several athletes, when asked about the role of commercial sport in their transition experience spoke about their sport's connections between media,



governing bodies, and corporate support. What became evident were the differences based on the particular place of that sport in the over-arching market of commercial sport. The NFL and the NHL, for example, under public scrutiny for examples of brain trauma as a result of high impact play action (Branch, 2011; Nowinski, 2006), began structured programs under the auspices of their respective leagues to address the issues that athletes face in a violent game. These issues, as noted in Chapters 1 and 2, include chronic depression, higher rates of suicide, and other medical challenges. National Football League and NHL athletes who have been retired for many years, however, and some of whom are faced with physiological and psychological maladies likely as a result of their involvement in the game have taken economic issue with the highly profitable leagues in hopes of financial compensation (Sheinen, 2009). What these legal claims represent, however, is a challenge to what I call the “agency-as-empowerment” theory. Retiring athletes want to feel a sense of self-control over their environment. This desire might stem from innate behavioral traits or it might have been developed along the socializing years as an elite athlete. A control of one’s own immediate special environment has positive implications in the world of physical games and commercial competition. But at times, their litigious actions, well ipso facto their playing days, have suggested that they rely paternalistically on the team, league, or sponsor for education, training, protection (from the activity that most realized was violent and consequential) and generalized support when they exit sport.

In late 2011, the Associated Press polled 44 active players, at least one from each of the NFL’s 32 teams at the time, to inquire about concussion safety

and current attitudes toward head injuries and player safety. More than half said the game was safer than in previous years, but more than half also claimed that they would still try to hide a concussion to remain in a game. Thirty-one of the 44 agreed that there should be an independent neurologist at the games, suggesting that the athletes wanted someone to protect them from their own competitive instincts (Fendrich, 2011). While the sample size is too small to generalize, I find it interesting that the details of the study chosen for the AP story are offered so that the NFL appears as the benevolent protector and the athlete as the child unable to think rationally and make mature decisions in the interest of their long term health. More empirical research is required to expand and properly support this idea. It does not, however, reduce my central claims that athletes are often “gladitorialized” in the service of for-profit entertainment of the sport consumer. If anything, I might suggest that for the life-long athlete who misses out on socializing experiences that would elevate their critical thinking skills, this diametric ambiguity is a further symptom of what they sacrifice to be an elite or professional athlete. What can be taken from the results of my study is there remains confusion on whose responsibility (if anyone) it is to prepare professional and elite athletes for life after sport.

What is firmly supported here and through a review of popular culture, is that an athlete’s retirement from sport, in particular the iconic player, can become a visible event through the media structures of commercial sport for the sport consumer (Vaccaro, 2006). As was noted above, the media’s portrayal of the transitioning athlete has a psychological and material effect on the athlete. What

is not known, however, are the roles that commercial sport structures play in exactly how either sport media or, by extension sports fans, affect the athlete's transition. There appeared no real consensus by the athlete participants in this study as to what the specific and documented role(s) of the commercial sport structure might be in media's involvement. As has been noted, we know there are overlaps and interdependencies. Commercial sport as we know it would not exist without the level of media partnership. Where there was consensus, however, was in the claim that athletes were placing themselves willingly at long term health risks, the opportunities for education about those risks were not as forthcoming as they should be, and there was a pedagogical gap that permeated many aspects of commercial sport.

Adelson (2009) writes about Jason Lezak, a four-time Olympic gold medal winner in swimming, and his failure to find a well-paying job. While the popular article is slanted toward the notion of "how could this be happening to our country's sports heroes?" what the reader might miss is that Lezak wants to keep swimming at the world class level, an effort which requires 30-40 hours per week of training; much more than will effectively allow him to focus all his time and energy on a new career. At 32 years old with perhaps 20 years of a primary focus on competitive swimming, if Lezak wants to compete in one more Olympic Games his title and duties would likely be more in line with "Corporate Spokesperson" than a day-to-day position in sales, marketing, or production, requiring a lot more focus on the free market of sports business rather than the freestyle stroke. Elite and professional athletes face these questions all the time:

How much time can or should I devote to my education, training, and relationships—areas that I will certainly have to face when I retire—and how much do I devote to my sport? Within this study’s primary research question, I want to know what role the structures of sport might take in helping the athlete achieve the best of both worlds and, in the process, stabilize their exit from sport.<sup>13</sup> Lezak might retain a beneficial relationship with his new employer/sponsor. They might pay him enough to train full time until the next Olympics or they might, along the way, offer him training or insight into an occupation, if not an interest in the business of sport, when he can no longer swim at a world class level.

There exist a number of job training programs and assistance programs within the established commercial sport leagues and teams. Dee Becker, an executive at the NFL Player’s Association, told me in 2002, “We gave away close to \$5 million dollars last year to ex-players in need, all through PAT [Player’s Assistance Trust].” However, a former NFL player and former SuperBowl winner from the late 1960s and early 1970s told me during the same period that his transition out of sport was eased not by compensation or league-offered training. Don Maynard told me that he made more in the off-season as a licensed plumber (approx. \$7,500) than he did playing for the New York Jets several months each year (approx. \$6,000). For Maynard, it was the fact that he could not rely on leaving sport with financial wealth, and any training for a postplaying career was his own responsibility. The last time I spoke with Maynard in 2002, he had a successful career as a financial planner.

In 2002, I also interviewed one of the most powerful men in all of U.S. sports television and athlete representation for a previous study (Tinley, 2002b). I asked him if he thought that sports agents should take more time and effort to insure that their clients were prepared for life after sport. His response was that they were not in the counseling business, but if the athletes needed someone to manage their money, they would do so, for a fee. At the time I thought it was an honest, fair, and unmitigated comment, even if I did not agree with its possible meanings.

### **Indirect Contexts and the Retiring Athlete: Conclusions**

Results from this study have shown that the identified indirect contexts do affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. As was shown above, there are both obvious and ambiguous intersections and overlaps between the retiring athlete's relationship with media, fans, and commercial structures of sport. And while the social constructivist might differ to Weber's (as cited in Geertz, 1973) claim that "human beings live in webs of meaning they themselves have spun" (p. 5), results from this study have shown that structural applications of commercial sport can and do have an effect on individual athletes, even under the personal auspices of meaning they create.

If there is a singular theme or consistent thread between these contexts that might act as a bases for claims I make about the role of indirect contexts in an athlete's exit from sport, it is that of *redemption*. Some athlete participants in this study spoke of wanting to be "forgiven" by fans for not playing as well when their bodies aged compared to their youthful peak. They were longing to be rescued

from emotional trauma that came with the extended transition out of sport. Others spoke of fans wanting to trade them in or *re-purchase* them for a newer model. They suggested that they were not necessarily being *offered* redemption, but their careers or illusions of greatness were being *redeemed* in a trade for another athlete. Some athletes suggested that their lives on the field were reduced to quantifiable impressions, memories that were cataloged by those who had consumed them as inspirational entertainment or something greater but only in meaning to the fan, not the athlete. Athlete narratives and biographies are rife with self-reflexive notions of wanting to be taken back and accepted for their nonathletic roles (Tinley, 2007b).

Sport media participants spoke of converting the failing athlete narrative into a tangible and resonant product that would appeal to consumers of sport, that the transcendent theme of replacing the failed product with a newer better one is a saleable, even mythic narrative. Thus, the notion of *redemption*, of looking for atonement from others who were close or not close to the athlete, redemption as in feeling like one had become a redeemable product but that was not the same as being given salvation or delivered from failure works dialectally in my argument.<sup>14</sup>

The notion of redemption in athlete retirement and indirect contexts also functions on a thematic spiritual level. Athletes want to believe they are forgiven for their human failures as earthly-gods. Fans, in the elevated popular culture of athlete *celebrityhood*, project god-like expectations on their sport heroes. And sport media, always ready to appropriate resonant thematic content, professionally

package, sell, and deliver the transitioning athlete as religious iconography which runs the biblical gamut from fallen anointed to prodigal son to tempted man-child to redeemed and born again super star.

In the next chapter, I offer conclusions to this study's findings, summarize the previous four chapters, discuss results comparisons from a previous study that utilized several of the same athlete participants, and offer suggestions for addressing some of the problems identified in the study.

CHAPTER SIX  
CONCLUSIONS, EMERGING CONTEXTS,  
AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“What are you going to do tomorrow?” asks Hallie Martin [Jane Fonda]. “Oh, I don’t know,” Sonny Steele replies. “Get on down the road, find something simple, hard but plain . . . quiet” [Robert Redford as Sonny Steel, *The Electric Horseman*].

(Pollack, 1979)

**Introduction**

This project was primarily interested in the ways in which direct and indirect contexts and processes affected the quality of life in a retiring elite or professional athlete. It was also interested in the socially-constructed and cultural ideas about these athletes, combining considerations of micro and macro social processes of athlete commodification (especially the immediacy in production and consumption by the sports corporate/media/fan nexus). This was extended to view the cultural mythologies about athlete heroes—including ways in which the athletes themselves internalize these ideas about themselves—and produce a system in which elite athletes are under- or unprepared for life after sport and often suffer unnecessary and negative consequences. I asked and addressed questions about both the cultural placement of the topic and the contributions of the social institution of sport toward the transitioning athlete. I commented on motive, influence, acculturation, and interaction between the subject participants and the institutions they represent.



A sample of my primary guiding research questions included:

1. What (and how) are the contexts within athlete retirement contributing to the quality of their retirement and transition experience?
2. How have the corporate structures of modern commercial sport contributed to the quality of the athlete's experience as they exit sport?
3. How have consumer society and all types of media representations of the athlete leaving a career in commercial sport contributed to the athlete's retirement experience?
4. How are these contexts—the athlete's individual contributory conditions and the current sociocultural conditions placed upon modern sport and the athlete—connected to affect the athlete's retirement experience?
5. What understudied and/or emerging contexts of the athlete retirement experience might evolve from this study and how do they contribute to both this study and the options for further investigation? What might these other contextual data tell us about the direct and indirect contexts of athlete retirement?

I have addressed these and other questions through the data/results and discussed them at length in previous chapters. I argued that looking at the qualitatively-induced contexts that influence the life of the retiring elite or professional athlete will reveal a deeper, more complex and revealing level of understanding of the challenges so many athletes face as they exit sport. Findings in this study supported this thesis. I also suggested that an exploration of contexts

would reveal a unique view of the interdependency between these influencing factors (see Figures 3 and 7). This also was supported. In this chapter, I will remind the reader of why the subject of athlete retirement, this study, and the results are important in social and cultural worlds. I will also (a) highlight some of the results and the connections, (b) discuss emerging concepts that resulted from this study (but were beyond the scope of available inquiry in this project), (c) offer some longitudinal conclusions on several ( $n = 7$ ) athlete participants who were interviewed in a previous study (Tinley, 2002a) in the same topic area and how their responses have differed in the interim, (d) suggest how the results might be applied and how the data are transcendent across other areas of life transition, (e) offer general and specific contributions how this study contributes to the literature, (f) identify the limitations of the study, and (g) provide suggestions for further research.

As was noted in previous chapters (see primarily Chapters 1 and 2), the subject of athlete retirement and transition is of general interest in both popular and academic exposure. But as I have noted, the layperson/sport consumer may not understand their attraction to this occupational movement and what it represents. The social researcher, as well, may not see far enough beyond the documented emotional struggles noted in retiring athletes. In many popular and some academic examinations, this study concluded that misperceptions about retired and transitioning elite and professional athletes remain. (Weir, Jackson, & Sonnega, 2009).

For me, this study firstly expanded the topic into previously undocumented areas. But more importantly, it provided clear evidence that our socioeconomic and cultural worlds in the area of sport consumption have failed to realize that a product of our consumptive behavioral patterns is the life quality of an iconic human population. As introduced in Chapter 1, this is but one part of the tyranny of *celebrityhood* that I have worked to expose. This group of professional athletes is a collective that, given more opportunities in our social worlds, could contribute more to what we know about the social institution of sport, the details of popular culture heroes, and the specifics of health issues gleaned from a life immersed in high degrees of physical culture.

As has been noted at various junctures in this project, a macro-question that has helped drive the project regards what a qualitative and contextual study of retired athletes can tell us about our post-Cultural Turn consumptive sociocultural practices. If we can soon forget a highly-signifying group of athletes whose social capital has been reified within the structures that are supported by sports fandom and their media supporters, then is it not possible—data would suggest—that structures of *any* multinational commercial entity (including sport and its media partners) and their wide ranging affectations can summarily dismiss other populations when they no longer are of value to the complex? Can the reader imagine a *social dismissal* of the soldier returning from theaters of war? (Well, perhaps the reader has some knowledge of the effects of how returning veterans were treated after their deployment in Southeast Asia in the middle 1960s and

early 1970s and how that has altered the way military personnel were treated after the Middle East Wars of the early 2000s).

Can the reader imagine the *social dismissal* of the mother who has raised her children and sent them off into the world to find their own way? The captain of industry whose creative input and contribution to the Corporation ceases to be of value? Or, as this project might suggest, studying the contexts of the athlete retirement paradigm would remind us that, in many ways, these kinds of consumption/disposal have already been in place, and research has failed to bring them into the world of empirical dissection?

This was a driving question that necessarily had to be addressed in smaller investigative units in an effort to support this wide ranging and admittedly-bold explorative inquiry. In the following sections, I review some of the key findings that lend support for these macro-questions. The findings themselves contribute to the literature and extend the investigative arm of athlete retirement. But I remind the reader again that the scope, relevance, and urgency of this study moves well beyond identifying nuanced details of the sports retirement experience. If more specific indictments are suggested in this final chapter, then I suggest that the reader consider all the evidence provided forthwith. I also challenge the reader to discern if their own preconceptions about the subject/topic may have influenced their reading of this study. For it is in considering the who, what, where, when, and hows of this unique paradigm that may explain some very troubling and potentially catastrophic tendencies in our societies.

## **Review of Significant Findings in Direct**

### **Contexts—Economic Factors**

In Chapter 1, I offered a preview of findings, suggesting that the data offered by study participants yielded revealed that the direct contexts of social support and influence and gender were significant in discerning the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. An expanded review including results and conclusions of these two contexts, as well as the other 11 direct contexts explored in this study, is found in Chapter 4. In this concluding review of direct contexts, I will offer my additional summary conclusions and thoughts in the four second order categories, Economic Indicators, Physical and Psychosocial Factors, Characteristics of the Sport Experience, and Individual Characteristics (of the athlete; see Figures 1, 4a-4d).

Within Economic Indicators, for example (Figure 4a), I found that many athletes recognized that retiring with money would not guarantee them fulfillment and postathletic life satisfaction, if not pleasure. A smaller percentage reported that having money would offer them choices as they tried new experiences and occupations, while others who retired without financial security were comfortable in the fact that having to find a new career was a positive thing. I was surprised that only one athlete thought that money would be the key to “a great life after sport,” as he offered, “where I can do whatever the hell I want.” Still, I also found it revealing just how important financial means were in creating (the perception of) social capital for some players. Even for the players who understood that money “could be a distraction,” as one athlete offered, and then expanded by

saying, “just too many hangers-on, wanting something from you even if you don’t have anything to give,” they also realized that the *illusion of wealth* could be manipulated to their advantage. The challenge here, as was deduced in reviewing the data, is that it takes time, experience, and certain behavioral traits in the world of business and commerce to gain a skill set that eventually equated to either increasing or at least retaining an athlete’s standard of living through current levels of compensation and earning. Athletes also spoke of equating feelings of identity with financial capital, an area of contextual interdependence that requires more exploration to develop any claims.

It was not surprising to see that Education Level was associated with Financial Health and Socioeconomic Status (SES). But I would have thought that athlete participants would have placed more import on their SES than the 4% who made comments that were coded in the context. My feelings now are that many athletes do not preconceive their choices in sport based on a self-defining SES and, instead, look toward other contexts when determining their options for upward social mobility in sport. These might include direct contexts as skill, social support, education, and gender. Education Level, for example, was noted twice as often (at 8%) in the athlete participant’s responses. What was interesting is that some athletes referred to “education” as both formal and informal, any pedagogical application that offered them knowledge in how to deal with their life after sport. Additionally, the role of financial status was revealed in the indirect contexts of journalism content, film, and fictional narratives. As was noted in Chapters 4 and 5, the clichéd narrative of the retired athlete losing it all due to

poor management and failure to control one's finances (a la *Rocky 3*) is too often used to support the popular stereotype. That narrative, I have suggested, might contribute negatively to the athlete's exit from sport, regardless of their financial situation. This occurs when the retired athlete is stereotyped into a role propagated by popular culture's depiction of the athlete as unable to properly manage the substantial amounts of money he or she earned while competing, or when as a marketed image used by commercial entities has declining value after they leave sport. This image, I would hypothesize for future research, is steeped in how we project professional athletes as immortal children playing games—a self-validating image we as consumers utilize to facilitate our own desires for immortality.

### **Review of Significant Findings in Direct Contexts—**

#### **Physical and Psychosocial Factors**

The second level category of Physical and Psychosocial Factors (*Health, Social Support and Influence, and Pre-retirement Counseling*—see Figure 4b) offered extensive and revealing data that concluded several contributory ideas. These three contexts reflected the first, second, and fourth most often cited themes by the athlete participant group. *Health*, for example, as a significant context was viewed by athletes who failed to take into account the toll that playing sport at the highest level would take on their body and their mind. In Chapter 4, I offered data and results on how advancing science has enabled doctors and clinicians to diagnose early onset brain damage linked to Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) and to indict the structural parts of modern sports—fandom, commercial

sport entities, organized for-profit youth and collegiate sports—as complicit in the cost of how our games are played. My consideration of *health* as based on subject participant comments also reframed the notions of responsibility by asking who is responsible for the athletes as their health fails and they must rely on other social structures for basic and ancillary needs.

Issues of health necessarily return us to important questions posed from the onset of this project—Are we *gladitorializing* our elite and professional athletes? Are we using them to entertain and inspire, and then summarily disposing of them when they can no longer offer the consumers of commercial sport what they seek in the athlete? The data from this project offered by all three participant groups fully support the idea that yes, we are consuming and disposing of our professional athletes under the various theoretical approaches offered here. Additionally, if we are “disposing” of these athletes, we might ask what it tells us about our societal values and how we might stand to better the lives of these men and women in sport and our sociocultural worlds by treating them differently after the lives in sport. Issues surrounding health also concluded that there is little agreement on responsibility of care and very few successful, well-functioning programs in place that address these issues. The ones that do exist are rife with polemical challenges and constituted in personal gain.

Data from this area also illustrated how the athlete’s body has become an iconic and contested terrain for public use, projection, and consumption. The effects of this paradigm on the retiring athlete are that their own somatic image is not a sustainable product for either public consumption or personal idealization.



The athlete's comments showed that this negatively affects the quality of their exit from sport. Sport consumers want and expect a certain body image in the athletes they consume. When that image is effected, so too is the person who constitutes it.

The area of *social support and influence* as a significant context was concluded in this study as a key factor in the quality of the athlete's transition, especially if the support is of a positive and contributory nature (Figure 4b). While this area has been studied in the literature, conclusions from this study illustrate both its import and of how much it intersects with other contexts such as health, preretirement counseling, and sport played. Over 26% of all athlete participants noted *social support* as a factor in this study (see Appendix F). What was interesting for me were the range of comments and feelings about the kinds of social support. Generally, most athletes felt that they were treated differently after they left sport, and many noted that they appreciated those who treated them the same as when they were playing sport. This kind of needed stability intersects with notions of dynamic identify shifts in response to projected roles and perhaps the comfort of a stable immediate social world. As athletes who have identified in their role for an extended period look for next vehicles for self-identity; even a few stable relationships can be of great value. Overall conclusions in this area also include that the athletes who were wary of the kinds of fluid relational changes as they left sport (and their former role) and those who knew how to leverage their fame or success in sport to provide training or new after-sport opportunities and occupations, experienced better transitions.

It was also shown in some detail in Chapter 4 that an athlete's relationship with family and friends is a dynamic and oft-misunderstood connection. It is placed in a challenging situation as roles, boundaries, and other contexts of an athlete's lifeworld shift as they exit sport.

This study concluded in the area/context of Pre-retirement Counseling (Figure 4b) that while there are increasing options for active and retired players to access retirement counseling, and that more players are utilizing these services, there is little if any data available to support their efficacy. Several athlete participants spoke about the team's and league's efforts at providing them education on what to expect after sport. But most of the comments were not favorable and several suggested that the counseling was intended to maintain good off-field behavior patterns while they played in an effort to protect the brand of the team or league. This study concluded that the great majority of programs and services designed to support, educate, or counsel a transitioning athlete were in the financial services sector, and these services were intended to profit from investing the athlete's money or networking them to other entities looking to retain the image that the athlete represents and not his or her skill-set in a nonsport competition industry.

Athlete participant and sports administrator participant response to the context of preretirement counseling were similar at 12% and 10%, respectively. Sports media offered 4% in coded raw data themes. It was concluded by reviewing the comments that there was a difference in opinion by groups as to the quality, need, and use of the counseling. In the next section, I offer conclusions to

contexts collapsed into Characteristics of the Sport Experience: Sport Played, Region, Reasons for Retirement, and Level of Success.

### **Review of Significant Findings in Direct Contexts—**

#### **Characteristics of the Sport Experience**

Conclusions from this study identified how the context of *sport played* explicated how the contexts of athlete transition intersected each other (Figure 4c). As was discussed in Chapter 4, *sport played* had direct bearing on other contexts such as health, financial status, self-identity, and professional opportunities beyond sport. Each sport can be considered for its specifics in how the sociopolitical, economic, and physiological factors affect the transitioning athlete. It was concluded that some differences in sport were more obvious than others. The health of retired NFL players, for example, is assumed to be different than an Olympic swimmer. What is less obvious is how these health and access-to-sport issues might extend into the quality of the athlete's life after sport. A swimmer or tennis player or cyclist or golfer might be able to participate in their sport recreationally or with family and friends, while a football player or boxer or even a skateboarder may never experience their craft after leaving the sport in an unhealthful manner.

Body type and gender imaging were also found to be associated with sport specificity. Corporeal subjectivity is unexplored as it relates to athlete retirement and is suggested for further research either in connection with other sport studies or as a singular topic of interest. An additional finding of this study is within the area of emerging alternative or nonmainstream sports. As these nonmainstream,

“extreme,” or X-style sports grow in popularity more research is required to determine how athletes, many of them in their early or middle 20s, will be affected in retirement. Athletes from this study who had competed in alternative (often individual as opposed to team) sports noted that they had not attained skills that would enable them in life after sport while others were frustrated due to injuries and lack of financial opportunities.

Only 3.8% of the athlete participant comments were coded as *Region* (where played) in the direct contexts associated with the quality of athlete retirement (Figure 4c). Conclusions in this area suggest that region is also an interdependent context that reflects other areas and contexts such as job opportunities, fan and corporate relationships, and media-constructed imaging of the athlete-in-retirement. While beyond the empirical scope of this particular study, data did suggest, however, that areas in Europe often include a higher degree of team structure loyalty to the transitioning athlete. If this could be verified and collated with a higher quality of transition out of sport, pedagogical if not ideological shifts in how retiring athletes are “treated” by sports structures would offer data to support a shift in how our domestic consumption of athletes might be altered for the betterment of both athlete and our social institution of sport.

*Reasons for retirement* as an influencing factor have been considered in previous literature (see Chapter 3). Conclusions from this study can be broken down into four areas: achievement, timing, agency, and health. Athletes who had accomplished either higher levels of success or goals that offered them a sense of

satisfaction noted that they were more secure in their retirement experience, while others who were forced to retire prematurely due to health or deselection, spoke of feelings of frustration and regret. Timing and agency are connected in how athletes from this study spoke of wanting to control their exit from sport, “to know when it’s time to retire and make my own decision” as one athlete said. Often this was connected to either level of achievement or health. Athletes noted that if they had done everything they set out to in sport, it was easier for them to embrace life after sport, while those who were forced out of sport due to sudden injuries before they had achieved their goals faced higher levels of emotional trauma. These findings reflect those from other studies and extend them by connecting reasons for retirement with issues of self-identity. As was discussed in Chapter 4, retirement from sport can occur when an athlete no longer self-identifies with the role of elite or professional athlete. Depending on other contexts in the athlete’s exit paradigm, this can be a positive, negative, or neutral factor in the quality of their exit from sport. Generally, the more an athlete *feels* in control of their occupational movement, the less trauma they will face.<sup>1</sup>

The direct context *level of success* in sport revealed two conclusive ideas in this study. First was that *level of success* is a fluid and dynamic idea that is inherent to the person connoting “success.” Study participants within and across different groups had unique ideas on what success was and how it might be measured. Even athletes who had been retired for some period spoke of having changed their view of what they had achieved both in performance and other aspects of a professional sports life. Second, participants from all groups

suggested that the benefit of having achieved a certain externally-defined level of success were beneficial in the career options that “success” would provide the transitioning athlete. Even though these were mostly confined to commercial entities, the data suggested that there were some psychological benefits gleaned from how sport consumers responded to the athlete who had achieved a higher level of performance success. These appeared to come most shortly upon retirement but also over time when media and other structures of commercial sport sought to “honor” retired athletes. Athletes who saw some of these occasions for what they were, as one participant claimed, “marketing-driven events to increase ticket sales and roll you out on stage like some crazy uncle,” most appreciated being given the kudos. I continue with the conclusions of the final three direct contexts of sport—age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

### **Review of Significant Findings in Direct Contexts—**

#### **Individual Characteristics**

The direct contexts constituting the *individual characteristics* of sport—age, gender, and race/ethnicity (see Figure 4d), revealed interesting findings and conclusions. In this study, *age at retirement* was concluded to have three revealing findings. One, age at exit from sport, was also connected to other contexts such as health, financial health, and sport played. If an athlete retired in questionable health at a young age, but their age would enable a full recovery, it is different than leaving sport much later in life when recovery is more challenging. Athletes in their early to late 20s are expected to be in good health, while those in their early to late 40s are not subjected to the same scrutiny by family, friends, and

society. Second, data from this study concluded that the direct context of *age at retirement* was often correlated to what others in society—primarily the athletes socializing agents—felt about their age. *Age at retirement* was extended to the context of sport played since, as was noted in Chapter 4, emerging alternative and nonmainstream sport forms tend to be constituted by the teen and youth demographic, and early evidence has shown both in anecdotes and this study that athletes who retire from elite or professional sports at a relatively very young age are subject to the vicissitudes of unexplored contexts. At this point, we just do not know what it must be like to retire from a profitable 5- or 6-year career in sport at 21 or 22 years old.

The conclusions in this study that focused on the direct context of *gender* contribute to the few studies focused on gender in athlete retirement literature. First, the female athlete in transition is an understudied area with less than 2% of the resources accessed for this study focused on the athlete experience by gender. Second, findings from this study concluded that there is a disparity between anecdotal or popular thought on how or why female athletes have different experiences than male as they exit elite or professional sport. What was concluded from the data in this study and which corroborates an earlier study (Tinley, 2007a), is that female athletes generally experience less emotional trauma when exiting sport due to two factors. First, female athletes appear to have higher levels of appreciation for the benefits of having played sport at the elite and professional level, and many of them have retained skill sets that enable them to understand and weather significant challenges in life transition and change. This,

I would argue, is an ironic benefit for the female athlete existing in the largely male-dominant world of elite and commercial sports. It was also suggested by female athlete participants in this study that the social influences they experienced both while playing and leaving sport were a positive aspect in enabling them to move into the next phases of their lives after high-level sport participation. As female sport participation increases generally, and as correlative professional opportunities increase, more research will be required to understand this area of athlete retirement.

The final direct context and Individual Characteristics examined in this study was *race/ethnicity*. As was noted in Chapter 4, it was concluded from data in this study that race/ethnicity was not a significant context in determining the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. While several athletes did suggest that career opportunities for white players might be greater than players of color, there were equal and contrasting data that suggest otherwise and that others direct contexts as noted above played a greater role in affecting the athlete's retirement experience. The few athlete participants who suggested that race influenced their retirement experience were convincing in their argument. But the low number of responses were not enough to offer any general support other than to remind the reader that racial discrimination and profiling still exists in all aspect of society, including how the professional athlete is treated as they leave sport.

I would argue that the access barriers to sport by race or ethnicity are greater and more obvious in early sport experiences rather than upon leaving sport. This study did not stratify responses by race/ethnicity, gender or age. The



athlete participant demographics are available if future study of these details is indicated.

General conclusions from this study in the area of direct context include the concepts that studying the contexts of athlete retirement advances the body of knowledge in the area and reveals data that are usually not ascertained in noncontextual studies. It was concluded that several direct contexts are more significant than others in affecting the athlete, in particular social support and influence, preretirement counseling and education, and health (financial and physical). It was shown that many of these direct contexts are interdependent and affect each other in varying degrees with myriad results (see Figure 1). This transcendence, it was also concluded, might be applied to other areas of significant life transition and change in our social, behavioral, and cultural worlds. When the contexts of a movement, place, or experience are identified, not only can we better understand how the negative aspects of that shift can be ameliorated through various pedagogies, but we begin to see how our sociocultural worlds function interdependently.

Cobb (1976), for example, talks about social support as a moderator of life stress and illustrates how this context functions within social and behavioral world. Hennessey et al. (2009) conclude that social buffering or the use and influences of positive relationships can act as stress modifiers in emotional trauma. This kind of knowledge transferred may help us in making life choices in advance. If retired athletes, like retired soldiers, speak of the human costs in terms and contexts that can be offered to those who are considering such

occupational commitments, then we have advanced how our capacities weigh benefits with consequences. And we have honed our distinctly human ability to reason, consider, and choose.

In the next section, I will offer conclusions from this study in the area of indirect contexts as they affect the quality of an athlete's exit from sport. I begin with media representation of the athlete.

### **Significant Findings in Indirect Contexts—**

#### **Media Representation of the Athlete**

This study concluded that the media's representation of the athlete, both while they are active in sports, as they begin their exit from sport, and after they have left sport, does affect the quality of the retirement experience. This conclusion was based on data that were derived from this study and its 46 participants among three groups, an extensive literature review, field work, ethnography, and media analysis (see Chapter 5 for methodology). These conclusions were focused on how mass media had appropriated specific narrative themes that frame the retiring athlete in such a way that their image became a material barrier for them in areas that range from changing self-identity to occupational opportunities to body image or what I referred to as *existential corporeality*, to the quality of social support and influence. Data from this study identified three primary narrative treatments under the themes of mortality (or a kind of death of youth, wealth, health, or fame), the lost wealth (as signified through loss of financial capital), and the fallen hero (with modern connections to mythic references). It was concluded and suggested by the participants (athletes,

sports administrators, and sport media) that few of these themes (depicted in mass media) offered the transitioning athlete in a positive light. The mortality themes, in particular, some rampant in both popular media and extended into fictional literature and film, often suggested the effect of playing at the highest performance levels of sport (and for being well-compensated for it), was that life after sport offered at best, an average, unexciting, and emotionally difficult existence.

Some readers may think that it is a conceptual leap to suggest that media are simply responding to what they feel are the narrative entertainment demands of the sport consumer, and the onus of fault in these inaccurate and damaging image constructions are inherent within the structures of a consumptive, market-based political economy. And an attack on how we consume commercial sport, regardless of the costs to the retiring athlete, is an attack on capitalism. However, this study concluded that it is a supportable argument regardless if capitalism's inherent structural capacities are indicted or not. Four hundred twenty of the total 1,436 raw data themes or 29% in this study (see Appendix F and Figure 3) from all study participants were assigned to indirect contexts. Chapter 5 offers several supporting examples of how media functions within the conceptual framework, as noted above.

As noted in Chapters 2 and 5, a significant and interesting conclusion surrounding the concept of media, voice, agency, and their effect(s) on the quality of an athlete's exit from sport is in how powerful a reflexive autobiography can be in improving the athlete's transition out of sport. This reflects other literature in

nonsports related behavioral sciences. Haddock (2001) suggests, when speaking of dissociative identity disorder, that “normalization is a means of giving persons permission to tell their stories” (p. 126). What was concluded in this area after extensive hours interviewing subject participants who discussed the role of their self-narratives—whether in written or oral form—was that these stories of their lives as athletes and the way they projected their career in retirement were a form of “healing” or “reversal” (words often used) from the emotional trauma as result of mass media’s negative depiction of them. It also functioned as a kind of “identity bridge” to link personal and professional lives as they adjusted to life after sport. Athletes felt that media often portrayed them as facing a life after sport that had little promise and, in some mythic reference, made them feel as if this was the price they must pay for having been treated to such heroic acclaim (and compensation) as an athlete.

To further support my claims and conclusions in this area, I will address the second indirect context affecting the athlete—the contextual roles of the sport consumer fan as they influence the athlete in transition.

### **Significant Findings in Indirect Contexts—**

#### **Fandom and the Retiring Athlete**

Conclusions from this study in the area of how the indirect context of fan relationship with the transitioning athlete revealed a number of significant findings. They are capsulized below from the larger discussion seen in Chapter 5.

1. How sport fandom feels about and acts toward the real life narrative of the retiring elite or professional athlete does have an effect on the

quality of an athlete's exit from sport. How this functions is part of a complicated but cogent structural process that may begin with early socializing through sports for those who end up as actors in both the role of sports fan/consumer and/or professional/elite athlete. The elements of the complicit structure include, but may not be limited to, media portrayal of the athlete (including reportage, film, fiction, drama, song, and verse). The degree of awareness of this paradigm by the athlete varies though further research is required to identify what kinds of influences affect their knowledge and awareness.

2. The roots of these relationships appear to be grounded in the for-profit media but also in some other sociocultural catalyst that creates desire for production, consumption, and disposability of the retiring athlete. Results from this study suggested that the well-studied *identity-through-consumption* theory (Chamalidis, 1997; S. C. Coakley, 2006; Giddens, 1991; Neal, 1972) that began earlier, after the Cultural Turn, helps us to make sense of why sports fandom would shift the essence of their relationship(s) with ex-professional and elite athletes toward a position where their essential humanness—regardless of the material benefits they are perceived to gain—has replaced a thinking among sport consumers that athletes, their branding, and their reputation<sup>2</sup> are treated as more of a material commodity than a human figure who happens to exist in a role that provides similar and overlapping needs to fandom as an inanimate signifying object. This is not to suggest that

the roots of commercial sport and the athletes who constituted it were not rife with abusive owner/athlete relations. What I found in this study was that the fans' relationship with athletes (and retiring ones in particular), have shifted toward less empathy for the transitioning player. I remind the reader that this study's participant groups were athletes, sport administrators, and sport media personnel. While the methods allowed for field work, observations, random interviews with sports fans, and a literature review, the bases for this claim was mostly from the athletes and those working in commercial and media sport, not the sports fan.

3. Based upon the extensive data developed from this project (1,434 raw data themes), to understand the conclusions above related to indirect contexts, we have to move outside normative approaches to the athlete retirement paradigm and extend our explorations of contexts by considering additional narrative, conceptual, and theoretical approaches. It was concluded in this study, for example, that re-thinking the way our postmillennium social world considers, produces, consumes, and disposes of the athlete hero offers us an intuitive approach in our effort to understand. This theoretical shift and its success herein are itself a conclusion.
4. The quality of the athlete retirement experience is connected to popular culture, media and its evolving technologies, standard narratives, and something about how the fan/athlete relation (that this study has

concluded) is interdependent but requires further investigation to fully develop. For example, it was concluded in this project that athletes who utilized new social media platforms to create their own image, brand, and nondiscernible kinds of relationships with fans will most likely feel a kind of agency or control over their life after sport. Jerry Sherk, for example, a four-time Pro Bowl participant in the NFL during the middle 1970s, has utilized his extensive photography skills and posted his work on a Facebook site. It has given him a way to both connect with older fans and to secure his identity beyond professional sport. “It’s a circular journey,” he tells a reporter, “where you move from the ordinary world to a mythical world, fighting battles, and you have to return to an ordinary world” (Huler, 2011, p. 1).

5. Results and conclusions from this study, while not identified as a direct context and a noted limitation of this study, suggest that “time since retired” may be a significant and understudied context. The media tend to offer more empathy for the “long since retired” players, offering them such profitable structural opportunities as “old timer’s days” and “card or poster signings. See the section below on longitudinal results.
6. Perhaps most significantly, this study in its focus on the athlete/fan relationship, by virtue of synthesized data, addressed one of the primary research questions: What is the significance of studying athletes in retirement and, if it is determined that sports fans summarily consume and dispose of retiring professional athletes, what does that say about

our social worlds and how can or should they be addressed? A brief summary of the conclusive answer to that is that the way our society treats the retiring or transitioning elite athlete is symptomatic of a more structural problematic. In considering the contexts of athlete retirement, this study has shown that the sociocultural institution of sports has become a barometer for how we identify (and create our own identities) with iconic and elite sports figures as heroic, exemplary, inspirational or contrasting. As noted in Chapter 5, what we take from our heroes (and how we relate to them), tell us about us. This unique, relational, fluid, and interdependent coaction between sports figures and sport fans is mostly facilitated through the media and its corporate partners.

In the next section, I will offer conclusions to the final indirect context, the athlete/sport structure relationship.

### **Significant Findings in Indirect Contexts—Commercial Sport Structures and the Retiring Athlete**

Conclusions from this area of inquiry noted that the quality of a retiring athlete's life after sport was related to their relationships with the structures that control commercial sport. While this study did not prompt the participants to identify which parts of commercial sport were most influential, the athlete participants noted a wide variety of entities including teams, leagues, corporate sponsors, agents, and athlete services companies. What was generalized in their response was that there was often a difference in motives between the “business



folk and the guys on the field” as one participant claimed. The data suggested that athletes who either had control over most off-field aspects of their lives, or at least felt like they did, experienced less emotional trauma in their exit from sport.

What was concluded is that due to the differences in motive—often diametrically opposed between athlete and commercial entity—there was ideological conflict that challenged the athlete’s need for agency and the emotional stability that came with it. This is not to say that athletes, agent/representatives, sponsors, events, teams, leagues, and NGB/IGBs do not all share a common goal of wanting to see the financial success of elite and commercial sport. The data from this study indicated that conflict, negotiation, and compromise existed on a constant basis. Where it became problematic for the *athlete-as-product* was in their exit from sport and the correlating devaluation of their product—their ability to produce entertainment.

It was concluded that the more commercially successful athletes experienced less emotional trauma mostly because they were presented with options, not always but often because they had earned more money or had better relationships with fans. Still, there were conclusions as noted above that direct contexts such as “level of success” were a positive factor in their exit.

The structures of commercial sport vary, among other things, by sport specificity, region, media focus, levels of physicality, financial compensation, and fan involvement. With these contextual variables in play (no pun), without a more focused research analysis it was challenging to offer context-specific conclusions on the influence of commercial sport structures on the quality of an

athlete's life after sport. However, following established qualitative analysis and inductive reasoning, it was concluded that (a) athletes who were more in control of their careers before and after retirement had better transitions, (b) elite and professional athletes can and will find themselves in ideological conflict with structures of commercial sport as seen in motive and operational interest, (c) commercial sport and its relationship(s) with its athletes is a fluid and dynamic conundrum, (d) some commercial sport structures have endeavored to address the questions of preparing an athlete for life after sport, and (e) commercial sport asks for and facilitates the assumption of roles that are in concert with the economic ideology of the commercial structure. Those roles intersect with changing images, branding of the athlete, and their shifting self-identity.

While some of the events, leagues or teams offer cursory and poorly-attended series of seminars on topics such as financial investing, image protection, and job preparation, results from this study concluded that for the most part they were either underdeveloped or created as a result of legal or public pressure to counter the building case of "gladitorialization" against commercial structures. However, in the case of the NFL, for example, alterations to existing rules intended to reduce the long term effects of a violent game, regardless of motive, appear to be changing the way athletes play and are effected by the physicality. In the NHL, the league Commissioner in late 2011, Gary Bettman, after a meeting with the NHL Board of Directors, told the press that, "Our fans tell us they like the level of physicality in our game," (Crouse, 2011a). Fighting has long been a cultural staple of the NHL, and the late 2011 inquiry by the mainstream press is

largely a result of the premature deaths of four NHL players who acted in the role of “enforcer,” all of whom had their brains studied by Boston University’s Center for Traumatic Encephalopathy and their Director of the brain bank, Dr. Ann McKee. In most cases, it was reported, the athlete’s brain showed signs of early onset CTE (Roberts & Ward, 2011). The significance of these notations is to remind the reader that the structurations of commercial sport and their ideological positions do affect the quality of an athlete’s exit from sport. It also supports my thesis that many contexts of an athlete’s exit from sport are interdependent.

Regarding counseling of the active, transitioning, or retired athlete in general, more research is required to discern how the elite or professional athlete might be better addressed through counseling. This study revealed some directions for possible exploration. Athlete participants, for example, when speaking of their efforts to reconnect with former players through established player’s groups, noted on average that they waited between 1 and 5 years postretirement before seeking others. This intent to share old narratives, in some ways, was noted as a kind of counseling and supports other conclusions regarding the supportive role of sharing one’s life story, in particular with others who have led similar occupational lives.

In the next section, I offer conclusions on the three Emerging Philosophical Contexts—(a) Mortality: Bodily Awareness and Shifting Identities, (b) Positive Ideology: Appreciation and Desire to Give Back, and (c) Predisposed Conditions: Realistic Perspectives and Knowledge of Self.

### **Emerging Philosophical Contexts: Conclusions and Suggestions**

As was noted in earlier chapters, these emerging contexts that affect the quality of an athlete's transition out of sport were developed from the data produced in this study. I have commented on each of them in prior chapters. While it is beyond the scope of this study to offer detailed and empirical conclusions in these specific areas, the data suggest the following conclusions.

When study participants spoke of themes that were coded as *mortality*, it was often concluded that they were speaking metaphorically about other issues experienced in their retirement from sport. These feelings often overlapped with issues of identity and changes in role exit and assumption (Fuchs Ebaugh, 1988). Athletes spoke of wanting to be in control of their life after sport, to want to understand the things they were feeling and to control them. However, there is a unique kind of internal conflict in play here. Elite athletes are trained and socialized to assume control of their immediate athletic environment; everything from their percentage of body fat to the level of inspiration found in their teammates. I conclude from the data in this project, my extensive review of the literature, and my own experiences, that at times the transitioning athlete must surrender emotional control in an effort to find some "peace with who I was supposed to be after sport," as one study participant noted.

When I retired from professional sport, I endeavored to "take control of my next life," as I told my family and friends. But what I concluded after many months of emotional trauma and counseling was that there were things well

beyond my control and my athlete-as-controlling-agent sensibilities were in conflict with the psychological stance I required to find resolution.

“Scott, you can’t out-run or out think this particular challenge,” Dr. Mikel Weinberg (personal interview, March 14, 2001) told me. “The sooner you stop trying to be in charge of a feeling that you cannot control, the sooner you will find a reduction in the feelings of vacuity you are experiencing.” What I conclude from this comment, in concert with the study data, is that there is often a necessary period of “letting go of the old athlete-self” as one study participant said, before the foundations of a new self-identity can be established and, if necessary, that identity found in a new postathletic occupation.

This is made explicit in a comparison of comments to similar questions by the athlete subjects who had participated in earlier research (Tinley, 2002a), as well as this project, and who noted that they, as athlete subjects, were gradually able to shed their specific daily ties to the most overt expectations associated with the former role. However, as Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) explains, often the role of the “ex” (and all of its nuances) can be carried around with them for decades (see Longitudinal Results section below). It was also concluded that notions of mortality were associated by the athlete participants with the death or loss of a certain self-image of the body, as athletes spoke of how they felt seeing their body morph away from its somatic image connected to the elite sport culture and toward that image more often connected with the regularity of other nonathletes in their age bracket. Athletes used the theme of mortality to “try and make sense of my first death,” as one athlete said, in an effort to understand the feelings they

experienced upon leaving sport. They used the notion of “death of one occupational role” as a way to begin considering that if and when they could let that role die, would it free them to accept a new role and/or occupation?

Beyond the athlete, the narrative theme of mortality noted by nonathlete study participants was used as a narrative trope to help explain some of the nuances of the athlete retirement paradigm. These comments helped to support the larger macro-centric questions of this study. As was suggested in Chapter 2 and concluded in Chapter 5, mortality as a way of accessing one’s sensibilities in why elite and professional athletes often experience emotional trauma and why we as sport consumers (and extended to generic social worlds) should care about them, takes on a more substantive connotation (see Figure 7). I noted that the retirement of a professional athlete was often a public event, as if it was a kind of obituary in the mainstream press. This adds an additional layer of challenge to the athlete. I noted that the mortality theme is connected to our youth-centrism and that the athlete’s identity is necessarily connected to immortality: when the athlete-person retires and/or the athlete body fades from physical greatness, the sport consumer self-envelopes that demise as their own; they too see and feel their own mortality in the *ideal of the immortal athlete*. This is, in part, why I concluded that previous models of thanatology in the literature were difficult to apply—they failed to be extended into the context of the *athlete-as-ideal*; a signifying, corporeal body that on one hand represents a macro consideration of denying death and, on the other, a human being suffering the effects of his or her occupational choice.

We, as social scientists, see this unfolding in late 2011 as the public and academic conversations about the place and role of the affected elite athlete increase.<sup>2</sup> The dialogue is often shot through with notions of significant change at the corporeal, socioeconomic, and metaphysical levels.

In addition to notions of mortality, within the Emerging Philosophical Contexts it was concluded that *Positive Ideology: Appreciation and a Desire to Give Back* were areas that were both noted in previous studies (Tinley, 2007a) and suggested for further research. Several athlete participants noted how their involvement in and return to sport reduced the emotional trauma they experienced. These results also supported my hypothesis that contexts were interdependent, since athletes who returned to their sport in an advisor role often found increased physical connection,<sup>3</sup> financial health, and enabling virtues of social support and influence. However, it was also concluded that there was a necessary period of separation before a retired athlete could return to his or her sport. Five-time Olympic medalist in diving, Greg Louganis, who retired in 1988, “became a phantom presence in USA Diving, ubiquitous in the record books but otherwise invisible” claims Crouse (2011b, p. D3). This notion of leaving one’s emotional and physical place in sport before eventually returning was also manifest in comments where athletes regaled the benefits of returning to sport specific duties (coaching, advising, and commentating) but not until they had processed the feelings of leaving sport first. Louganis, for his part, returned to coaching in early 2011. Female athletes, in particular, noted comments of appreciation, and athletes in general, it was concluded, and were better able to

adjust to life after sport when they returned and offered their skill and experiences to current and younger athletes.

The final area of Emerging Philosophical Contexts—Predisposed Conditions: Realistic Perspectives and Knowledge of Self—suggests that there may be predisposed conditions and/or behavioral traits that enable a better exit from the occupation of elite or professional athlete. While it is beyond the scope of this study to conclude empirically what those conditions or traits might be, I cannot dismiss that 1.4% of the 862 raw data themes offered by athletes were coded as Predisposed Condition: Realistic Perspectives and Knowledge of Self (see Appendix F). These results overlap with other contexts including notions of self-identity and appreciation. I would suggest that athletes who had been socialized to understand the role of the elite/professional athlete in society, inclusive of their own gender, level of skill, region played, and education, would enjoy less emotional trauma than those who had not enjoyed realistic perspectives of who they were, how their role in society mattered, and what behavioral traits they possessed that enabled their exit from sport. To better understand the idea that some athletes have innate traits that support their exit from sport and other athletes acquire these skill sets over time, I continue by comparing the research results of several ( $n = 7$ ) athletes over an extended period ( $n = 8$  years).

### **Longitudinal Results**

As noted in previous chapters, this study included 7 of 29 study participants (24%) within the athlete group who had contributed to a previous study (Tinley, 2002a). Their comments, as analyzed and coded, are offered as part



of the additional conclusions from this project. While it is beyond the scope of this study to move into great detail in comparing results (suggested for further research), I was able to conclude the following based on the data results that compared athlete subject responses to similar lines of inquiry. First, athlete's overall acceptance of their roles in new occupations after they retired appeared to increase over the period. Athlete comments included, "It took a while, but I finally got used to my new job and my new role that wasn't a pro, a star, someone who people differed to." Second, athletes gradually adjusted to their changing body shapes but not without challenges. Several athletes spoke of having to "look in the mirror and adjust to someone less than a chiseled figure," while others noted "I'm okay with who I am now, but for a period I hated to add weight and lose muscle mass." Thirdly, athletes spoke of "having to detach from their sport" for a period before they could successfully return to their relationship with sport. This often took months, years, or decades to unfold.

Finally, my longitudinal view concluded that how an athlete related to the contexts of their exit from sport—their feeling and acceptance—had a direct bearing on the quality of their retirement. In other words, as an athlete realized that they would never garner the same degree of public adulation or financial remuneration or somatic physical form as when they were an active professional athlete, they began to find some comfort, if not acceptance, in their new role and new Self. This conclusion was based on a change in comments made to similar questions made by athletes who had responded 8 years earlier (2002—2010/11). The athlete participant comments also reflect those offered to me personally when

I was experiencing the challenges of transition. As noted in earlier chapters, I was told by fellow athletes who also had experienced the athlete transition experience, to “hang on, it will get better after a period.”

This is not to suggest that every athlete will finally experience less emotional trauma after some temporal period has expired. As noted, some athletes suffer through emotional challenges for many years and some have seamless transitions out of sport. And some retired professional athletes never fully leave the athlete identity behind and suffer the consequences of a stunted developmental crisis that extends well into their postplaying careers; perhaps into their legacy. Identifying the social costs of this situation helps to reinforce the central arguments in this study; that to understand the subject of athlete retirement and transition, one must explore the contexts that contribute to the athlete retirement experience. In the following section, I continue with general conclusions from this study not outlined above.

### **Additional General Conclusions**

This study focused on how the direct and indirect context of athlete retirement affects the quality of an athlete’s exit from sport. While as noted above, there were results that stood both within and outside the hypothesized concepts. The following general conclusions help the reader to see beyond the identified contexts and to appreciate the additional findings that emerged as a result of exploring contextual aspects of the athlete retirement experience. These include the following:

1. The responses to similar questions varied by participant group, often based on personal and professional ideologies. This confirmed my early hypotheses that the concept of exploring the topic by contexts would extend into the ideological infusion of raw data. Or perhaps to extend that idea, all responses might be shot through with personal opinion, sociohistoricity, and cultural implications.
2. As noted above, the notion of “appreciation” for the opportunities provided in a professional sports career, regardless of the length of tenure, appear to be a positive aspect in the quality of an athlete’s exit from sport. As noted, transitioning female athletes had a propensity for this appreciation. I will suggest that the idea of *appreciation* signifies access to other aspects of the sport retirement paradigm that positively affect the athlete’s exit from sport. This might be linked to personality traits or time-since-retirement as noted above in Longitudinal Results.
3. It was concluded that fame and public adulation of elite and professional athletes affect the transitioning athlete in unique but significant ways. The notion of fame was seen in data connected to contexts such as identity, level of achievement, and relationships with both sports media and sports fandom. How this functions exactly within the mind of the transitioning athlete is beyond the scope of this study. But it is suggested here that external validation does have a bearing on the transiting athlete, and it is left for the reader to defer to previous chapters (see Chapter 5) to make connections in this regard.

4. It was concluded that there is significant power in the use of metaphor by active agents addressing the subject of athlete retirement. As was noted above and in previous chapters, both athlete and nonathlete participants spoke of the athlete retirement paradigm by utilizing other referential themes. Most notably in this area of self-narrative reflexivity, it was concluded that athletes who engaged in an autobiographical process often benefitted from the experience and were able to use their time spent in recording their history in sports to support the role transition required to adapt to a life after sport. Additionally, athletes spoke of needing to “be as far away from my sport as possible,” as one participant noted, for a period until they felt compelled to return to sport. This footnote coalesces with notions of changing roles, self-identity, and region where sport is played.
5. It was concluded that some athletes possessed personality or behavioral traits that affected the quality of their exit from sport. These traits could impact their exit in a positive or negative way. For example, some athletes whose ability to rationalize and “think my way through every challenge,” as one athlete claimed, found this trait to be a negative influence when he could not control, construct, or manipulate his feelings in his role change. The athlete then spoke of finding some comfort in “letting go of my desire to be in total control.”
6. Many of the supportive narratives offered within this study—mostly by athlete participants—are connected to mortality themes of varying

meaning and significance. It was concluded after analysis that athletes felt that retirement from a career in elite of professional sport represented a kind of death and this “passing away of that person” as one participant said, made it possible to allow a new identity to emerge that found possibilities and validation in new relationships and occupations.

7. Finally, it was concluded that likely there is a direct connection between the emotional challenges an athlete faces when exiting sport and the physiological shifts they experience as a result of leaving a life that requires extensive commitment to the physical rigors of professional sport.<sup>4</sup>

In the next section, I offer some suggestions as to how the results of this study might contribute to the body of knowledge in the topic area of athlete retirement.

### **Contributions of This Study**

The contributions from this study include the following: (a) I have identified, analyzed, and discussed 13 direct contexts that contribute to the quality of an elite or professional athlete’s exit from sport, (b) I have identified, analyzed, and discussed 3 indirect contexts that affect the athlete retirement experience, (c) I have identified 3 emerging philosophical contexts that are both discussed in here (see Chapter 5) and are suggested for further research, and (d) I have utilized a large ( $n = 46$ ) section of study participants to create the data base to support my conclusions. Previous studies in this subject have failed to access as many

qualified subjects who could be identified as having fit my criteria for contributing their thoughts and ideas as a former elite or professional athlete. Additionally, this study offered comparative results from three unique participant groups. The discussion of how these subjects responded differently to similar questions helps to illustrate the kinds of polarity-in-motive that contributes to the myriad challenges faced by retiring athletes. It also supports my early hypothesis that the commercial structures of modern sport have reached such levels that they are now distinct from their constitutive elements—the players as product and the fans as consumers—and function with a primary motive of material gain with little regard for the human costs. Concurrent to this are my conclusions of the role of sports fans and consumers who are complicit in the disposability of the retiring athlete. These kinds of social tastes in consumptive entertainment illustrate that our society has devolved in its use of human capital (the athlete) for personal and social use. I was able to conclude this mostly by exploring the indirect contexts affecting a retired athlete while triangulating my data along the lines of established qualitative analysis.

In this study, I offered personal and reflexive comments, experiences, and previously understudied materials that help to support my conclusions. While the reader might feel the intrusion of these personal reflections, material offered in previous chapters support an additional layer of conclusion not seen in many other empirical studies within the subject. This study has expanded the area of self-reflexivity into the subject topic of athlete retirement, inclusive of synthesized and coded data that suggested findings from this study (and perhaps other literature in

the area) might be extended into other sociobehavioral events that are a result of significant life transition and change. This applicant transcendence extends the findings of this study into previously-noted areas such as the returning veteran (from theaters of war) and the matriarchal figure whose own children (who constituted her identity) have left the home, resulting in similar feelings of vacuity (to the retiring athlete).

This study contributes to the body of knowledge because it allowed the primary researcher to combine the rigors of empirical qualitative analysis with the rare and reflexive opportunities of when that researcher meets subject inclusionary qualifications, and he or she is able to take the material graciously offered by those subjects who project confidence in the researcher and combine it with their own memories of a life in and after sport. This project extended the review of athlete retirement into both personal (micro), structural (macro), and popular aspects of life transition and change as seen and experienced by the retiring elite and professional athlete. And, in these results, it was shown that there is an interdependence between the direct and indirect contexts that affect retiring athletes. The significance of this is that we can conclude, based upon the results of this study, that in studying this example of life transiting and change, many factors, influences, and contexts of that significant transition must be explored and understood before developing mediating forms of intervention, pedagogy, or counseling intended for the athlete, the commercial sport structure, or the fans that consume sport.

Conversely, this study contributes to the body of knowledge in the area by illustrating that the athletes themselves are not entirely the victims, as some of my commentary (and earlier literature) may suggest to the casual reader. Results from this study indicated that the elite or professional athlete does have choices and increasingly so with emerging forms of new social media may be able to control their brand/image in such a way as to positively affect the quality of their retirement experience.

Still, as I have argued here, the modern professional athlete—inclusive of their observable choices and values—are a product of a largely powerful and profitable commercial sport structure that includes kinds of partnerships with mass media and sports fandom. In some ways, this was made explicit as I noted and discussed how the subject of athlete retirement was illustrated in popular forms such as fictional literature, film, song, verse, and drama (see Chapter 5). A significant contribution of this project was in the inclusionary identification of the subject into these popular areas, in the process identifying the power and significance of commercial sport in the multiplicity of our sociocultural worlds.

### **Possible Applications of Findings**

As is often the case with significant and multidimensional findings that are both the result of qualitative analysis and that suggest a material effect on human actors, the researcher may feel challenged in suggesting applications of their findings. How results, data, and conclusions from this study are suggested for application is significant to this researcher. However, as I have made claims to the effect that some of the catalyzing agents in the emotional trauma seen in



transitioning athlete are of a structural nature, I cannot be so naïve to think that significant shifts in our social tastes in sports-as-entertainment are easily addressed. Still, I argue that conclusions from this study support a re-consideration of how modern commercial and elite sport is produced, placed, and consumed if we are to hope that the plight of many retiring professional and elite athletes is to be improved. Since the *ideology of victory*, a way of approaching the world formulated in precolonial periods, is foundational in performance sports, it would require an ideological shift of some proportion. While implausible at this period (based upon the ingrained socioeconomic power), history has shown shifts in social tastes, made explicit through sporting practices and physical culture. Part of the success in this project is in suggesting that our *gladitorialization* of professional athletes signifies that ideology of victory in and through sports illustrates a need to rethink our values in entertainment. I refrain from offering specific strategies at this time. I will suggest, however, that based on results from this study, there are indications that our society's omnipotent focus on performance and victory have catalyzed elements of resistance to this sometimes costly ideology. This claim is supported in part by the recent rise in noncompetitive mass participation sporting events such as walking, cycling, and general fitness, as well as youth sport programming and pedagogy that suggests less competitive approaches to sport participation.

Any application of findings and conclusions from this study are partially based on my claims that athletes who leave a significant role in sports are not always given the same kinds of social, economic, occupational, and familial

difference, or as one participant labeled it, “general respect,” as other contributing members of society. As I have noted in this project, the retiring elite or professional athlete has occupied an interesting and unique place in our sociocultural worlds. As I have endeavored to support,<sup>5</sup> I suggest that in light of the role that we allow elite and professional athletes to occupy in our sociocultural worlds, we might also allow them to extend the significance of their roles in postplaying days. While the scope of this study does not support specific occupational roles, based on the data retired athletes could serve our social worlds well as teachers, mentors, coaches, and sociocultural commentators; existing roles that athletes have noted enable a more positive transition.

The purpose of this suggestion, as I propose, is fivefold. First, professional and elite athletes are often well-versed in advantageous health-oriented topics from which others could learn. Second, the virtues of sport, as well-chronicled as they are (Eitzen, 2009; Mandelbaum, 2004), might be better practiced and applied if those who play at the highest level of games could pass on their knowledge to others who aspire for simple associative results. Third, if we can allow the retired professional athlete a voice in the public sphere, we may move towards a better understanding of how we (as sport producers/consumers) have come to increase the level of import of commercial sports in our societies, inclusive of the costs of such social tastes. Fourth, as we study and come to know our retiring elite and professional athletes, we, as a society, might come to know and empathize with others in nonsport roles who are facing significant challenges of life transition and change. Finally, as was concluded from comments made by

athletes in this study, the quality of the athlete's lives after sport were often improved when they felt that other members of society were interested in their ideas and thoughts about sport (among other things). Athletes spoke of appreciating when they felt they could offer more than an athletic performance or as more than one athlete has noted, they possessed "a warrior's heart—the need to be needed."<sup>6</sup>

Connected to this suggestion of finding a "place" for the retired athlete is the question of responsibility. If data from this study suggest the need for mediation within the population of retired professional athletes, then the question of responsibility enters the discussion. How should their sport-specific challenges be addressed and by whom? What kinds of structures are currently in place that could be conscripted to participate in these efforts? However, these are empirically unanswerable question within the scope of this study. Concepts of responsibility for a specific population widen the theoretical bases. Still, based upon the data concluded within this study, the following generalized suggestions about responsibility are offered.

1. Each participant group in this study had its own set of motives, illustrated in the style and content of their replies. While at times there was some overlap,<sup>7</sup> more times than not the reader would be able to discern the underlying motive.
2. There remains some ideological conflict amongst athletes—they spoke of wanting agency in their own control of life after sports, but we see

evidence of others relying on commercial sport structures for kinds of support.

3. For foundational changes in how our society “treats” retired athletes, inclusive of taking responsibility for their various sport/occupation health issues, I argue that we will require a change in social tastes for kinds of entertainment.
4. A contribution of this study is that it helps bring to light the ambiguities and lack of personal and structural responsibility for the health issues that retiring athletes face. While popular opinion among the mainstream might be that professional athletes live a desirable, coveted, and well-remunerated life, any broad social responsibility falls on them, not the entities that admire or produce the opportunities for their occupational stature. However, findings from this study indicate that the problematic is as much institutional as it might be personal.
5. Applications of the findings in this study would best be applied if utilized across the same stratifying participant groups—athletes, sport media, sport fandom, and commercial sport structures. At the root of any proposed applications would be the knowledge gleaned from empirical research. Specifically, in the case of the individual athlete, this might include a wider variety of educational opportunities in preparation for life after sport; areas well beyond financial advising and into sociocultural pedagogy based on findings from contextual analysis on the subject topic. From a more structural basis, we might question

our omnipotent import on winning and success ideology as applied to sport. The applied sensibilities might include reduced or differed compensation for the professional athlete and a re-focus on sport-related areas as health, character development, leadership skill development, and the generic benefits of social engagement through sport and physical culture.

6. A final suggested area of application of data from this study would be in a continued focus on the specific physiological results of a career in professional sports. While the more current interest in results from physically violent sports (Nowinski, 2006) offer some indication of the focus on the health issues suffered by athletes, this should be expanded to consider other less obvious health issues that will likely be seen in the long term wake of the movement towards endurance sport participation where the neuroendocrine systems are at risk (Seeman & McEwen, 1996).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations of this study include the following:

1. This study did not consider the context of gender within other contexts. For example, I did not cross reference gender with the direct contexts health, social support, and influence or sport played. While the data have been reserved for possible future research, the cross referencing of my 13 identified direct contexts would complicate this project to a degree as to limit its timeliness and readability.

2. It became apparent during my synthesis of data that an additional layer of context that would be valuable for future research is length of time since retirement. I had considered this as a possible direct context in the study design and early hypotheses, but since it did not emerge in pilot versions and results offered by athlete participants, it was not included.
3. An additional limitation of this study was that it did not develop the concept that theories of play might have an influence on the quality of an athlete's retirement, even though it was noted as a conceptual path that may yield fruitful results. Perhaps it is more of a suggestion for future research than a limitation, but I note it here since I offered it in early chapters as an area I wanted to explore in later ones but did not.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

While suggestions for further research based on study results have been offered through the chapters, I summarize my suggestions here and offer additional ideas. The emerging philosophical contexts *of Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness and Shifting Identities, Positive Ideology, Appreciation and Desire to Give Back, and Predisposed Conditions, Realistic Perspectives, and Knowledge of Self*, are perhaps the most fruitful places for additional research into contexts of athlete retirement and transition. I have commented on each of these areas in previous chapters and suggest the reader review these areas for possible research ideas.

A success of this study is in providing a groundwork and various sensibilities for the application of data from athlete retirement and transition studies to other significant nonsport periods of life transition and change. Additional research is required to develop the details on applicability towards, for example, returning soldiers from theaters of war or early retiring captains of industry. As was noted (see all chapters), I do not suggest the creation of models as much as arguing for universality when both direct and indirect contexts of life transition and change appear similar.

I have spoken of the psychological implications of a physically-taxing career in professional sport. The results are wide-ranging and vary from short term depression to early onset cognitive dysfunction such as Alzheimer's disease and suicidal tendencies. The noted iconic cases of athletes suffering the effects of CTE and other undiagnosed physiological maladies offer the reader a more palpable support for some of this study's central arguments regarding the *gladitorialization* of the modern professional athlete. However, as was argued in my discussions on the role of sports media, there is a degree of empiricism lacking in making widespread and generic connections between the emotional trauma of retiring athletes and the specificity of their physical states (Cobb, 1976).

Increasingly, we have seen an increase in empirical valuation through established medical procedures. I would argue in support of these efforts and suggest that additional resources be allocated to further support the concept that there are physical costs to pay by the professional athlete, but there are social costs that

should not be ignored nor differed by the consumers and producers of modern commercial sport.



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## CHAPTER FOOTNOTES

### Chapter One

<sup>1</sup>Throughout the data collection portion of this project, I was faced with various levels of response from colleagues, researchers, and personal acquaintances regarding the need to explore athletes in transition from a life in sport. The responses themselves were telling of the places that the subject inhabits in our social world. The readers necessarily suspend their disbelief about the role of transitioning athletes in society to fully appreciate the content and results of this project.

<sup>2</sup>Fuchs Ebaugh, for her part, exited the Roman Catholic Church where she had the role of an ordained nun. Her 1977 book, *Out of the Cloister: A Study of Organizational Dilemmas*, was based on her doctoral dissertation while studying at Columbia in the early 1970s. In the preface to her 1988 book *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit*, she discusses how her (then current) role as a nun allowed her access to material that an “outsider” could not attain.

<sup>3</sup>A more definitive description of study participants and their qualifications are noted in the Participants section of Chapters 4 and 5. Each athlete interviewed for the portion of the study exploring Direct Contexts of retirement competed as either a professional athlete (defined as having relied solely on their sport for compensation), competed at and won a medal during an Olympic Games, held a national record within his or her sport, or had been selected to an elite national-level team that would signify their position as one of the best in the country at the time. The criteria were established so as to study the athlete retirement process in athletes having reached the very apex of their sports. Nonathletes interviewed in the portion of the study exploring indirect contexts of athlete retirement include sport business professionals, sports journalists, and general consumers of sport. Criteria for inclusion will be explained in Chapter 5. Essentially, they were required to have been gainfully employed in either the business of sport or sport media for a minimum of 5 years.

<sup>4</sup>For clarity, I am using the terms “retirement” and “transition” interchangeably. It has been argued in the literature (J. Coakley, 1983; Lerch, 1981) that an athlete’s retirement from sport is better described if not facilitated, as a *transition* to a different form of life-world, inclusive of new relationships, occupations, and significantly, a new identity, then as a *loss* inherent to the retirement experiences that constitute the myriad challenges facing athletes in this transitional mode. Most athletes suffering from emotional duress focus first on

the *loss* and then on the notion of *transitioning* to some other way of *being* in the world. How, why, and in what order athletes experience various kinds of experience, whether self-framed as loss, transition, opportunity or something else, will be derived from the athlete's own detailing within the ethnography processes.

<sup>5</sup>I was intrigued by the disparity of response to this project from both academics, sports industry personnel, sport media pundits, and sport consumers and nonfans of sport. Many people were able to relate to my brief explanation and hypothesis, while others were unable to comprehend in the immediacy the import of studying the retirement experiences of elite and professional athletes. This disparity itself became a point of interest in my data collection. I address these disparities in greater detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>6</sup>The subject of athlete retirement within academic publications has appeared in various periods. The early 1990s witnessed a number of articles and was followed by a dearth of contributions until the early 2000s. I consider all material published after 2004 as "recent."

<sup>7</sup>As will be explained in Chapter 3, subject inclusionary criteria is defined here (and extended in the Chapter 4) as having identified one's primary career description as a person engaged in elite or professional sports for compensation and other commercial remuneration.

<sup>8</sup>The notion of "community" has been approached through myriad disciplines and hypothetical bases. For our purposes, I will utilize the participant's usage of the term and the extracted raw data theme(s) to determine meaning of the term. Generally, athletes referred to "community" in various ways including immediate family, former athletes, and local regions.

## **Chapter Two**

<sup>1</sup>Since I refer to *indirect contexts* in several chapters and as part of several approaches, the reader should be aware that these approaches themselves are often telling in the project, if not the author's intent in this study. In Chapter 1, I introduce the term and its use in my research. In Chapter 2, I suggest how direct contexts may intersect. I also note the historical uses of context in published literature.

<sup>2</sup>I am well aware of the changing social and economic definitions of "elite or professional" athlete since the late 1960s. However, I argue that not only is the topic best catalyzed when accessing those who have achieved the highest levels of sport, but in most cases I have found the readers to make the assumption that the study participants are not "casual or recreational" sporting participants and are likely to be aligned with my inclusion criteria as explained in the chapters.

<sup>3</sup>In Chapter 5—Indirect Contexts, I explore the place of popular literary treatments of athlete transition. There are dozens, perhaps hundreds of popular texts in the form of fiction, film, and journalism that might be examined both for their approach to the subject but also for their effect on the production and consumption of the athlete transition paradigm. What might validate my theses in this regard are the comments by the study participants for their often-referenced themes that are also exposed in popular depictions.

<sup>4</sup>Throughout the study, I strive to protect the identity of subject participants. On occasion I will use a subject's real name when I have their expressed permission to do so; they are a public figure, I am following university Institutional Review Board guidelines, and the knowledge of their person supports the project.

<sup>5</sup>When making someone's introduction for the first time, consider how often we try to "place" them, into preestablished categories based on occupation. Thus, our first question is often, "So, what do you do?"

<sup>6</sup>While the design of methods was focused on direct and indirect contexts, as was noted in Chapter 1, a larger than expected percentage of athlete participant responses were identified outside these contexts and placed in *Emerging Philosophical Contexts*. These findings do not alter my hypotheses as much as both contribute to the body of knowledge and offer opportunities for further study.

<sup>7</sup>Of the 280 raw data themes offered by the nine Sports Media Participants, 72 were located in Direct Contexts while 157—more than twice as many—were collapsed into indirect themes. Certainly, this has to do with the nature of their relationship to sport (athlete vs. media pundit) and, to some extent, the way that the interview processes was structured; but I took great effort not to lead the participant, and the questions were essentially the same for all participant groups. Still, I recognize that a minor limitation of this study may be my own past relationship to sport: as an ex-athlete were athletes willing to speak more openly to me? As a part-time sports journalist, were some media types less inclined to offer me detailed information? As a former sports marketer, did participants working in the business of sport expect me to understand their coded language? This will require a clear consideration of the methods and data to come to any conclusions and will not be included in any suggested findings for this study.

<sup>8</sup>Jim Bouton's (1970) *Ball Four* has been hailed as the breakthrough "tell all" sports memoir that exposed the debauchery of MLB players. Other journalists had tried to expose the obscene underbelly of deviant behavior patterns of many players but were often coerced by fellow journalists into controlling the public image of MLB players.

<sup>9</sup>While I use the term “commercial sport” rather diffusely and generically, in most cases I am referring to the corporate entities that manage professional sports teams. In the case of the NFL, for example, there are myriad legal corporate entities that constitute the political economies of the National Football League. The same can be said for the MLB, the NBA, the NHL (National Hockey League) and other more global corporate structures of commercial sport.

<sup>10</sup>Shields (2004) writes deftly about the “body politic,” offering numerous individual cases of professional athletes and their corporal representation in the athlete/fan relationship. In his chapter, “Heaven is a Playground,” he addresses thematic gestures in sports films, suggesting that “the first crucial gesture many sports movies make is for the protagonist to say . . . ‘We once strode the earth as gods’” (p. 67).

<sup>11</sup>Not surprisingly, the Disney Corporation, further explicating the commodification of physical culture through popular mediation, applied for a trademark patent for the term “SEAL Team Six” within days of the bin Laden’s death. Disney withdrew its application after the U.S. Navy made it clear they would fight the application.

<sup>12</sup>Here, I am taking a somewhat liberal use of de Certeau’s (1984) “tactical” versus “strategical” use of explaining production and consumption. When I use the term “acceptable,” what I am referring to is the negotiation that both a sports fans and athlete must undertake in their construction of the relationship with each other. Of the 862 athlete participant raw data themes, 142 were assigned to Indirect Contexts that addressed either the athlete’s relationship with their structured team/league/sponsor, the fans who follow and produce them, or sport media.

<sup>13</sup>James took pointed aim at his detractors and suggested that many of the most negative sports fans had “personal problems,” while Vecsey (2011) reminded his readers what they knew all too well: that “they paid his salary” by attending his games, buying his jersey, and generally showing interest in and consuming the NBA player.

### **Chapter Three**

<sup>1</sup>To my knowledge, no one has compared retirement experience by period, i.e. “how is it different leaving collegiate sport versus professional sports?” At some point the sheer number of possible contexts would appear tedious. This explains the early focus on development of models rather than looking closer at the individual athlete. Academics were being overly deductive with small subject groups, and single sport sampling. Anecdotally, there are many narratives that suggest “time” as a great healer of emotional trauma. This study helps to make

this more empirical by comparing longitudinal data from seven athlete participants over an 8-year period.

<sup>2</sup>Lally and Kerr (2008), in their examination of the effects of sport transition on parents, do much to advance the discourse of athlete retirement into contextualization. While some readers might find this level of inquiry too tightly focused, I argue that some well-studied deduction of explicit cases extend the overall conversation.

## **Chapter Four**

<sup>1</sup>Due to the sometimes necessary semi and unstructured interview format, I was not always in a position to ask an athlete their age without jeopardizing the flow of the interview. My data indicate that I was able to secure actual ages in 20 of 29 cases (from the athlete participants) and less so with female athletes than men. The remaining 9 athletes' ages were either estimated or found through third party sources, such as their online information sites. Since I do not have an empirical basis for noting all athlete participant's true age at the time of inquiry, I make no hard claim to its empirical bases.

<sup>2</sup>Transcendence of data across stratifying layers of sport experience is discussed briefly in Chapter 6. I do not suggest that only elite or professional athletes are subject to emotional challenges upon sport but do argue that as study participants, based upon their "investment" in a life of competitive sport, offer richer data than athlete participants with less time, effort, experience, and overall commitment to sport would offer. That said, I do argue in several places for how the data can and might be (in future projects) compared to other nonsport life transitions.

<sup>3</sup>Qualitative studies can be and are extended for lengthy periods (years and decades). However, I felt that a 12-18 month timeframe would allow for an accurate depiction of the state of athlete transition, while allowing for both the timeliness and the challenges of extended inquiry.

<sup>4</sup>In several areas of discussion, I focus my results on the athlete who has played in commercial sport. But the inclusion criteria did not state that athlete participants had to be employed by a mainstream team or league, only that their primary source of income was associated with their participation in sport. Being able to access data from 15 different sports, where some players were compensated in the seven figure per year level and some were barely earning a living wage, allowed for the uniqueness in this study where different sports are identified as offering different kinds of experience in an athlete's exit from sport.

<sup>5</sup>Barker (2008) extends this idea by suggesting that "consultation with 'subjects' of ethnography . . . become less an expedition in search of 'the facts'

and more a conversation between participants” (p. 33). Patton (2002) also offers guidance through his fieldwork strategies claiming that “personal experience and engagement” (p. 40) and “voice, perspective, and reflexivity” (p. 41) help to facilitate the gathering of qualitative data.

<sup>6</sup>An online search for “athletes and transition” will reveal mostly for-profit services that target retired professional and Olympic athletes. The majority of the businesses are financial consulting and management or job recruitment/placement.

<sup>7</sup>Some sports appear to offer little performance-based compensation, while the “marketable” athletes can earn substantial monies in the sale of their image to corporations who utilize the association to increase sales. This for-profit image construction and management of the athlete may have an effect on the quality of their retirement from sport. Suggested for further investigation is any direct correlation of an athlete’s self-image and the image as constructed by corporate and media structures.

<sup>8</sup>Part of the challenge of writing qualitative results is in relying on the data itself to provide conclusive evidence. The researcher has the advantage of seeing facial expressions and hearing voice intonation to provide their own conclusions that the reader does not. I avoid these methods traps whenever possible but allow my opinion to breath in a few places. This is one of them. See Figures 2a-2b in Chapter 6 for a comparison of raw data themes by participant group.

<sup>9</sup>Bourdieu (1990) offers a well-developed theoretical approach to subjectivism and the role of the body; what he calls “dispositions of the meaning-made body” (p. 42). However, an in-depth discussion of his theories in this chapter and section complicate the text in a manner such that I refrain from moving in this direction. Some conclusions—or at least additional developed thoughts on this matter—can be found as I discuss other direct and indirect contexts of athlete transition.

<sup>10</sup>Cooley’s canonical essay from 1902, “The Looking Glass Self” is particularly informing here.

<sup>11</sup>The physical health context becomes increasingly layered here as sometimes the athlete’s perception of their physiological condition is contrasted with medical findings. As a fellow athlete once told me, “Most professional endurance athletes are very, very fit but not that many are healthy.” What she was referring to was the sometimes necessary reduction/depletion of certain bio-markers that served sport-specific performances but compromised (according to accepted medical data) essential homeostatic health. The athlete has come to see their fit and well-developed body as a primary signifier of their involvement in elite, professional, or Olympic sports. When they retire and their somatic typing is less-than-god-like, there is a period of reflexive adjustment toward acceptance



when they gradually allow themselves a morphing of body type more indicative of nonelite athletes.

<sup>12</sup>Harrison's (1975) futuristic and fictional piece, *Rollerball Murder*, paints a world where corporations have replaced nation states as controlling structures. The professional athlete protagonist (played in the 1978 film version by James Caan and directed by Norman Jewison) offers an apocryphal depiction of the possible role of commercial sport in a corporate-controlled society.

<sup>13</sup>Repeated requests to the four major commercial team sports' controlling organizations in North America (basketball-NBA, baseball-MLB, football-NFL, hockey-NHL) over a 5-year period for data on divorce rates in retired players were denied on every occasion.

<sup>14</sup>Retired or transitioning athletes have offered personal information when they discover that the researcher was a professional athlete. This fact, as has been noted, supports my thesis that narratology or the study of telling a story—in particular one's own biography—might help explain why emotionally-traumatized individuals will often offer personal information suggesting the root of their distress only to those whom they perceive will understand by nature of the listener's own experience.

<sup>15</sup>Here we put to question the notion of physicality in sport, a rather complicated idea that has its roots in the very definitions of sport.

<sup>16</sup>The evidence here is mostly pointed to soccer or "futbol," the most widely practiced sport in Europe and the world. Several athletes interviewed suggested that if an elite athlete played for a club or a team in Western Europe, upon retirement they would be "guaranteed a job with the organization." The type of position offered would be dependent on a variety of factors, including athlete skills and team or club resources.

<sup>17</sup>Several studies have noted the *length of retirement* as a factor in the direct contexts of the quality of athlete retirement. I do not include this context as an integral area of focus, since for most athletes, let alone anyone experiencing episodes of significant life change, success or failure in adaptation to change is essential to the long term processes. This study focuses mostly on the immediate and mid range direct and indirect contexts that affect athlete retirement. However, in Chapter 6, I do include some discussion in comparing results across two studies several years apart. This will include a comparison of similar question responses from the same study participants, and themes offered by the participants will be compared for how they might have changed over the period.

<sup>18</sup>One of the logistical challenges in studying retiring female athletes is acquiring a large enough sample size to support validity. The majority of

female-focused studies in the literature used between four and eight study participants. As is noted in earlier chapters, this study included 11 females (of the 29 total athlete participants). My experiences in finding female study participants who fit inclusion criteria did not indicate resistance to participation but was more a matter of fewer numbers of athletes.

## Chapter Five

<sup>1</sup>The reader will note that there are interesting and informative overlaps between these three identified and supported indirect contexts. I will endeavor to make note of them, but in the interest of allowing for some critical thought, will allow the reader to make connections along the lines of their own ideology and experience.

<sup>2</sup>It also is noted here that active and retired players are a kind of labor capitol that can, under certain Marxist ideology, dictate trends and shifts in ideology surrounding sport as a popular cultural form. The athlete's total reification to commodity appears overly-fatalistic here. Even the most commodified areas of sport exist, in part, as functioning meritocracies when compared to the vagaries of other social institutions. The problematic of theorization here must be directed in part by the emerging data and the application of any theory toward experience-defining contexts and must not stray too far from the individual athlete and one of this project's central problems—the challenges that person encounters upon leaving sport.

<sup>3</sup>When the Barry Levinson-directed film of Malamud's story was released, many of the reviews were not favorable. Even after four academy award nominations, it took many years for consumers and pundits of sports films to appreciate the film for its qualities. It regularly is ranked now as one of the top five sports films.

<sup>4</sup>One of *Sports Illustrated Magazine's* best-selling issues each year is entitled "Where Are They Now?"

<sup>5</sup>Appadurai suggests that the commodity is not so much a thing as a situation or phase. There is an interesting intersection here with Giddens' (1991) "self-identity as project" that requires much more thought and exploration to find how the two ideas might feed off each other.

<sup>6</sup>How sport consumers negotiate the idea of retiring athletes is suggested for further research. A project that accesses fandom's feelings toward transitioning athletes by surveying a large sampling of sport consumers might offer results that contribute to social investigation beyond the athlete retirement literature. One area of concern in such a project would be why a large number of fans have come to think of retiring athletes as having "fallen" from hero status.

<sup>7</sup>In this section of the chapter, I alter my syntax on occasion to something more colloquial, less academic in an effort to illustrate to the reader and to emphasize how language can function in sharing codes and maps of cultural meaning. The learned conventions of sport metaphors function on both sides of the athlete/fan relationship. Sometimes, the meaning is shared and sometimes the codes are altered to insure the identity of the subject. My point is simply to alter the researcher's voice to reflect the topic of this subject. I apologize for any confusion imputed by the momentary shift.

<sup>8</sup>As time progressed, I came to know and communicate with a larger number of ex-professional athletes who were successful teachers and academics. I still consider Oriard's (1982b) transition as exemplary, particularly now that I understand better the decades of his focused work in literature of sport and the occupational hurdles of the Academy.

<sup>9</sup>At times in writing this project, I struggled in using language choices acceptable within academic literature and opted to revert to creative syntax that, I assumed, better transferred the message. I ask the reader to excuse this diversion and hope they see it for my attempt to offer a richer colloquialism to reflect the topics in this chapter.

<sup>10</sup>The accused murderer and former NFL star, O. J. Simpson, fled from his Brentwood home after being accused of killing his ex-wife and her friend. The vehicle was a white Ford Bronco, a car now signified in popular culture references as a vehicle referencing escape or flight.

<sup>11</sup>Clemente, himself, may be subject to a more mortal form of *gladitorialization*—martyrdom. What is suggested in the results of this study is that if mortality is a significant theme in the contextual study of the quality of an athlete's exit experience, and fandom's relationship with the athlete is an identifiable and significant indirect context, the notion of "martyrdom" in how fans consider athletes (and the material effects on the athlete) is a suggested and interesting topic for future research.

<sup>12</sup>An athlete's relationship with the commercial structures of sport are contextual in and of themselves. Without additional and extensive research on what kinds of personality traits and socialization skills an athlete possesses, I am offering a generic purview when I speak of an athlete's relationship with structures of sport. However, I remind the reader that as Weber (as cited in Geertz, 1973) claims "human beings lived in webs of meaning they themselves have spun" (p. 5). At some point, a quest for considering too many contexts in research can stifle the discourse itself.

<sup>13</sup>An analogy might be created in military personnel suicide and the military's work to address the problem. The behavioral traits of successful

warriors are not always the same as those who succeed in the regular occurrence of daily nonmilitary life. In 2008, there were a documented 41 successful suicides out of 146 attempts, the highest level since 1993. Cmdr. Aaron Werbel, Behavioral Affairs Officer for the Corps said, “The underlying issues that prompt Marines to take their own lives are failed romances or marriages, legal or financial troubles, health problems and job dissatisfaction” (Kovatch, 2010). Werbel was commenting on the notion that perhaps PTSD is a stand-alone cause for suicide. The thread to sport retirement is similarly paradigmatic and a significant justification of further research beyond this study into the arena of contexts within emotional trauma and life transition and change.

<sup>14</sup>The Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, J. R. Moehringer, wrote about the homeless felon and ex-boxer, Tommy Harrison, who had taken on the identity of another greater period boxer, Bob Satterfield. The essay titled, *Resurrecting the Champ*, first seen in the *Los Angeles Times* (May, 4, 1997), was made into a feature film starring Samuel L. Jackson. When tennis Hall of Famer Andre Agassi was considering writers to help him with his autobiography, *Open* (2009), he sought out Moehringer after reading his 2005 memoir, *The Tender Bar*. Much of Moehringer’s work is infused with compassionate aspects of redemption.

## Chapter Six

<sup>1</sup>The notion of an athlete knowing when it is time to leave their career in sport is shot through with other contexts. For example, perhaps they were socialized to read the signs which might signify their need to leave sport. Or perhaps they possess personality traits, were offered what appeared to be a good transitional vehicle (in the form of a new career), or they “just guessed because I had a hunch,” as one athlete noted, and in hindsight it was the correct move.

<sup>2</sup>While I cannot say empirically that there have been more mainstream articles focused on athlete retirement in late 2011 than in previous periods, I suspect that the popular press have addressed the ancillary issues such as the state of retired athlete’s physical and financial health in more scope and detail than in previous periods. I do conclude, as was noted in Chapter 2, that there is a documented increase in studies within the academic literature.

<sup>3</sup>The import of how the athlete body is self-identified in its role cannot be overstated. Even the former NFL lineman with “bad knees and worse hips,” as one athlete noted, who can find a place for themselves in the sport of football working with younger athletes is offered a vehicle to ease their transition challenges if they feel that their body is a contributory element.

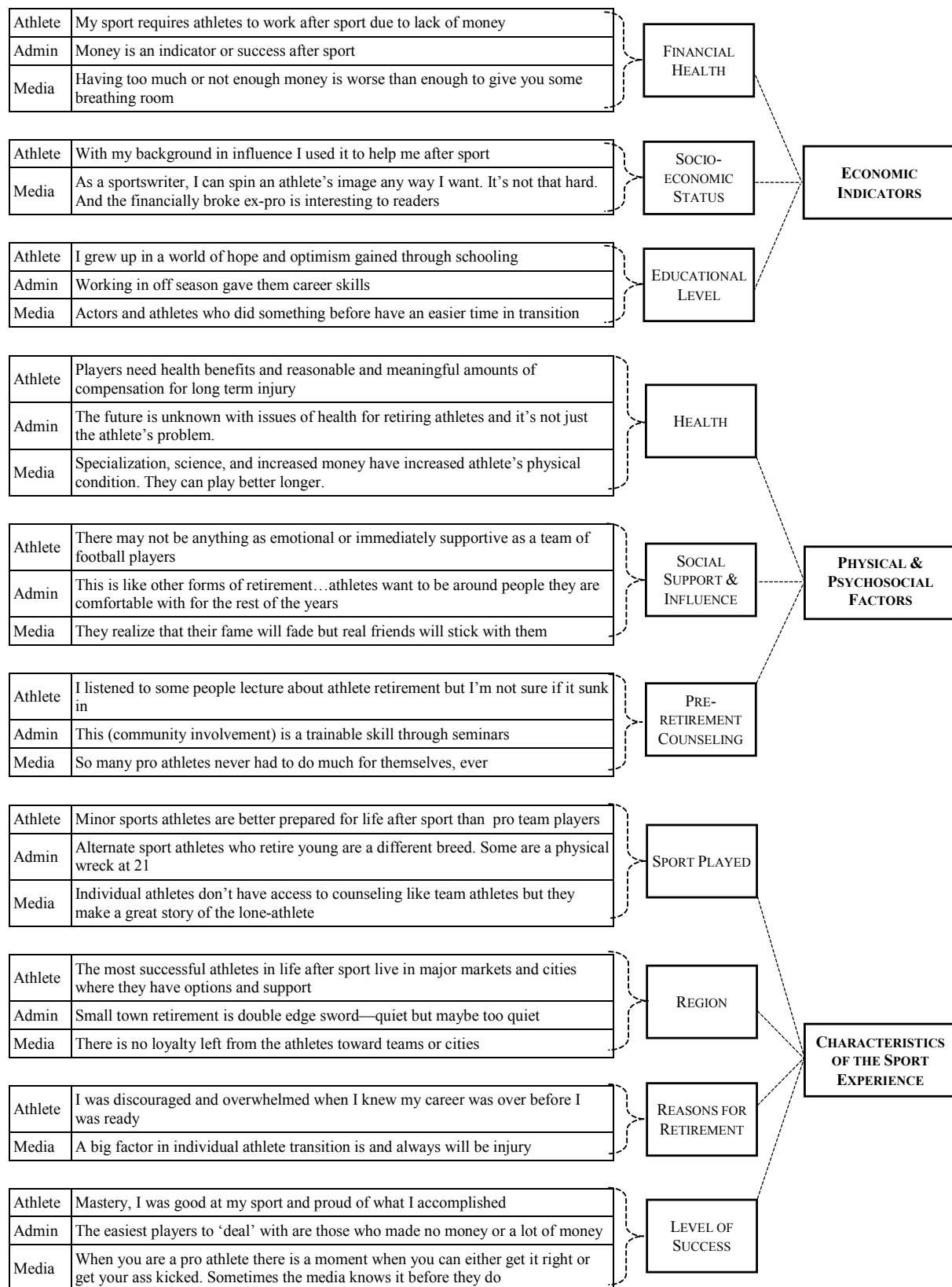
<sup>4</sup>As noted in previous chapters, my own exit from over a dozen years competing in professional sport was laced with emotional challenges proven to be partially the result of physiological shifts. While there exists ample data that connect the feelings of a transitioning person with their physiological state

(Seeman & McEwen, 1996), little has been done to connect the physiological effects of the retired elite or professional athlete with their emotional states.

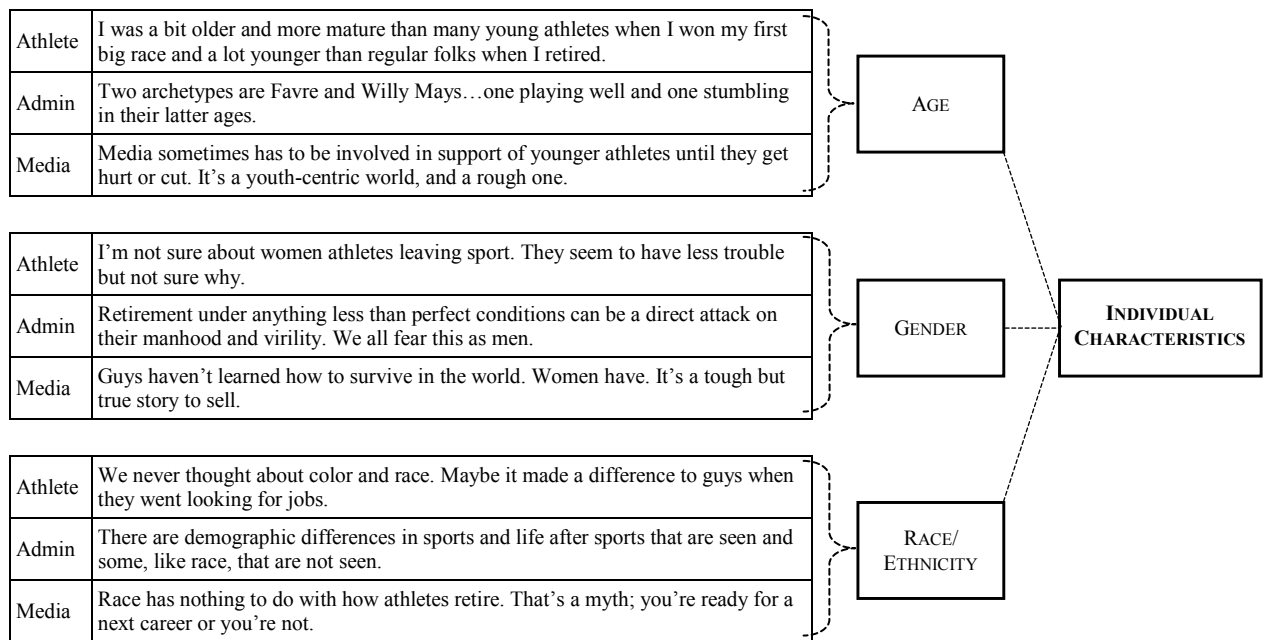
<sup>5</sup>I suggest that the reader would concur that the life of a professional athlete, while demanding in many ways, would still be considered interesting and worthy of some consideration. Certainly, we heroicize these women and men and, as such, as they inspire, thrill, disgust, entertain, and make us wonder, we might find a way for them to educate us as well.

<sup>6</sup>The reader might ask why I suggest the retired athlete deserves preferential treatment from other retirees. I would respond that in a meritocratic society, all occupations would award retirees commensurate with their contributions to the job, the structure, and the social world. The differences for the athlete, as noted previously, is that their retirement may, among other things, come unexpectedly, at a young age, in very public fashion, and is mediated by the projective factors associated with their role and fan's expectation.

<sup>7</sup>Weir et al. (2009) offer a view of the state of many recent and longer retired NFL players that stands as contrasting much of the existing literature on athlete retirement. Through the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, their project offers a more positivistic view of the social, familial, and psychological health of the retired NFL player than other studies. Focusing on the contributions of the NFL's Player Care Foundation, the ISR at UM was approached by the NFL who, it appears, funded the project. The NFL's Foundation was established in 2007. Since that time, numerous lawsuits by retired NFL players and groups have been filed against the NFL, attacking their complicity in the declining health of former players.



*Figure 1.* Example of raw data themes by participant group, collapsed into direct contexts then second order categories of context.



*Figure 1. Continued.*

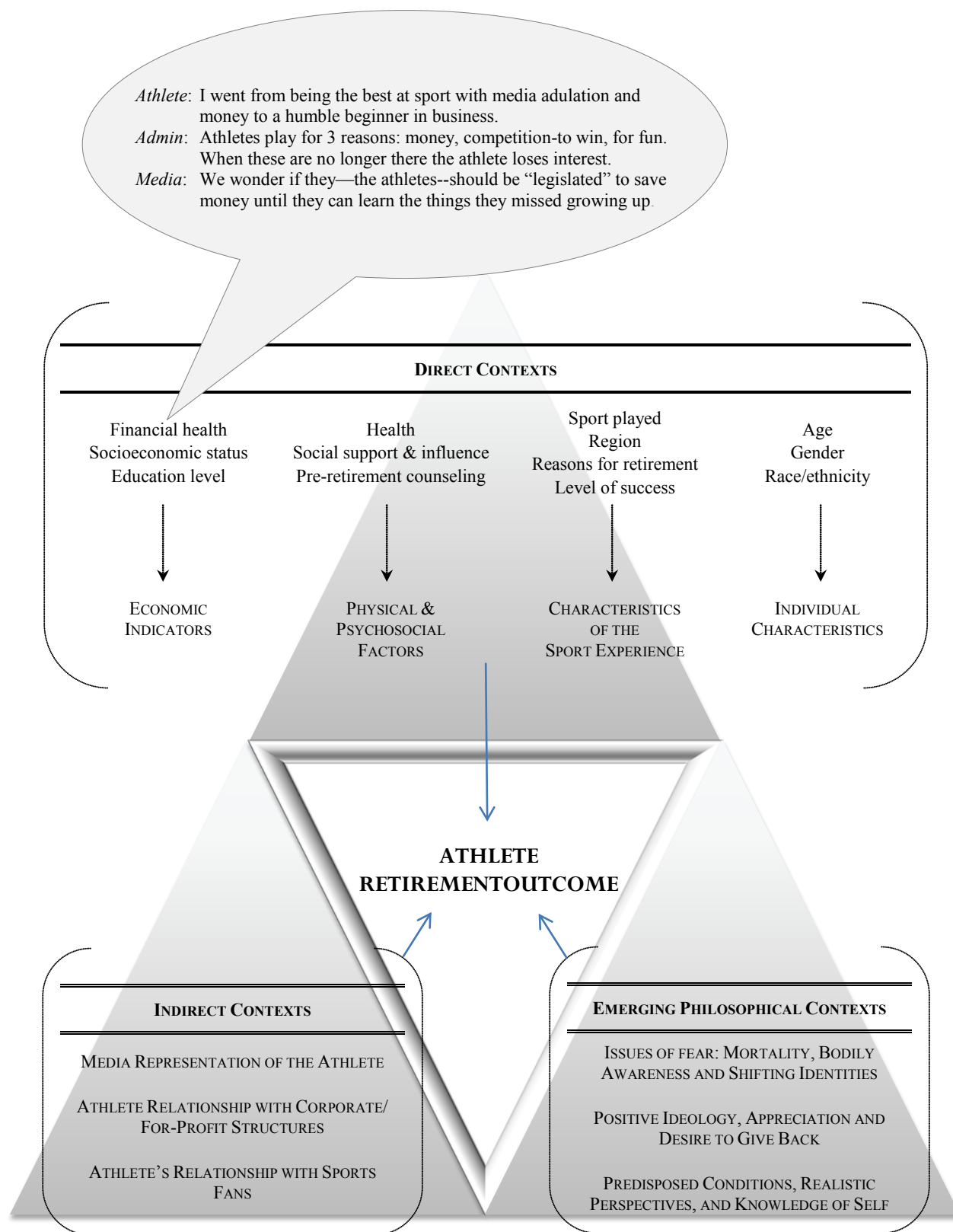


Figure 2a. Direct contexts: “Economic Indicators.”



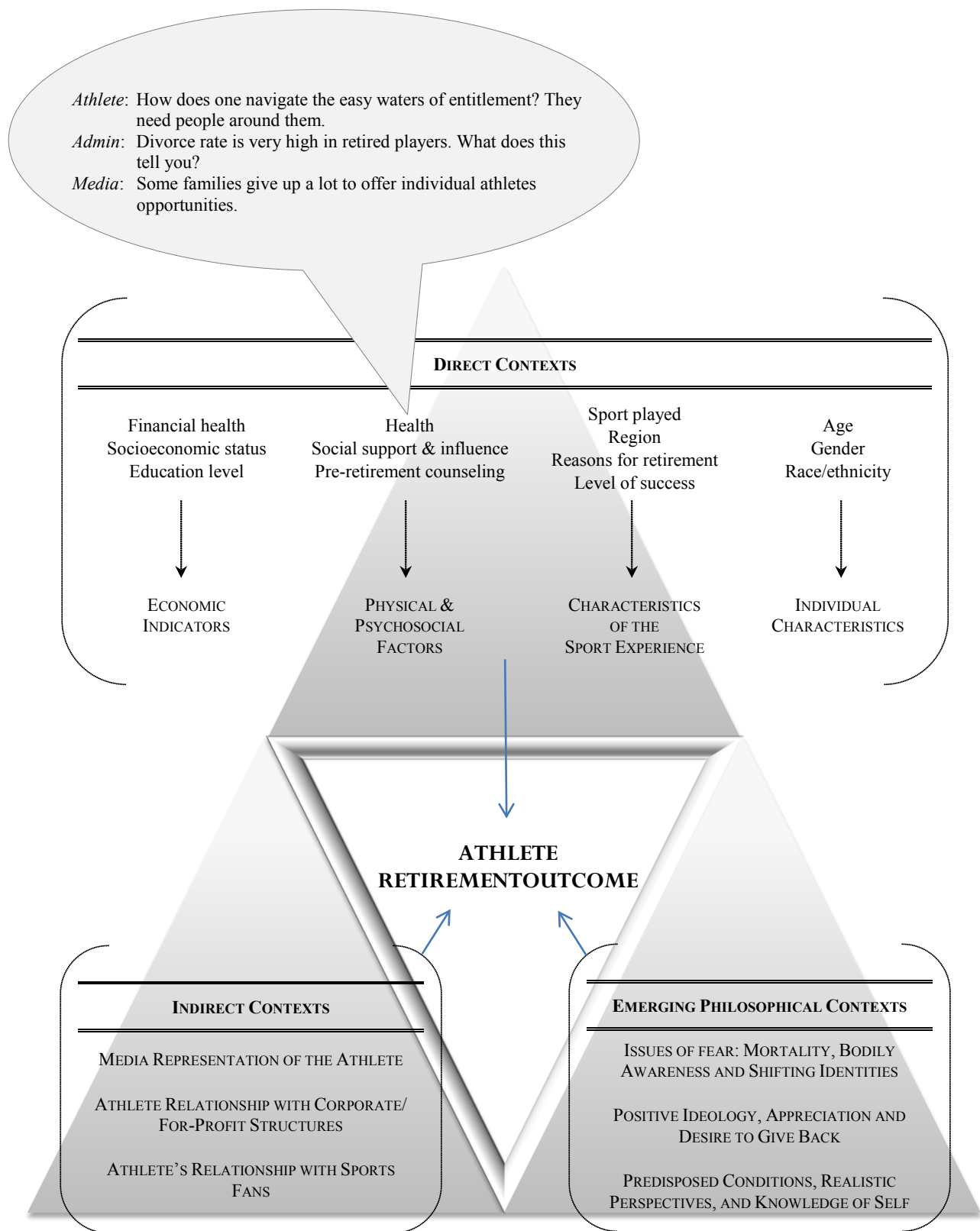


Figure 2b. Direct contexts: “Physical and Psychosocial Factors.”

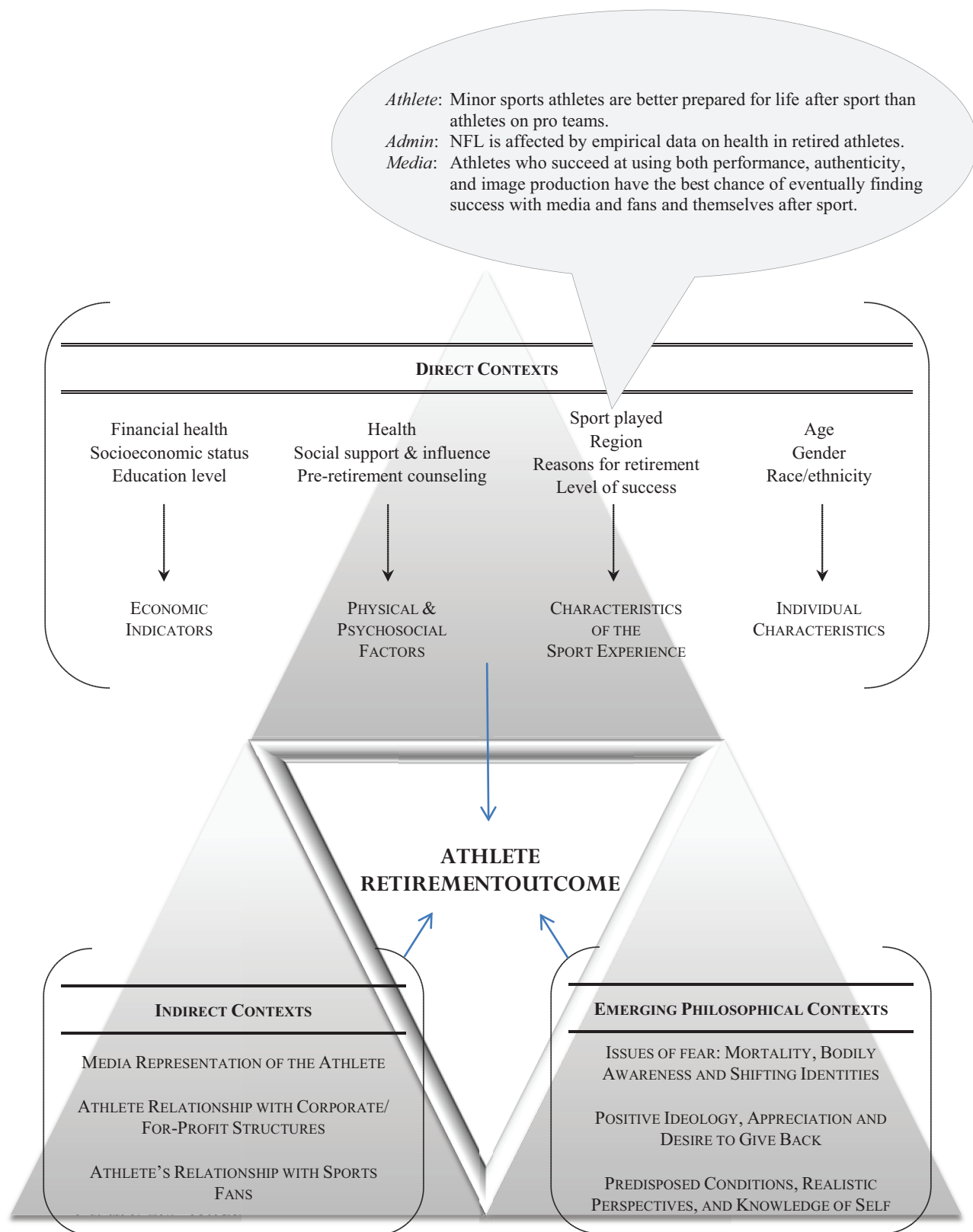


Figure 2c. Direct contexts: “Characteristics of the Sport Experience.”

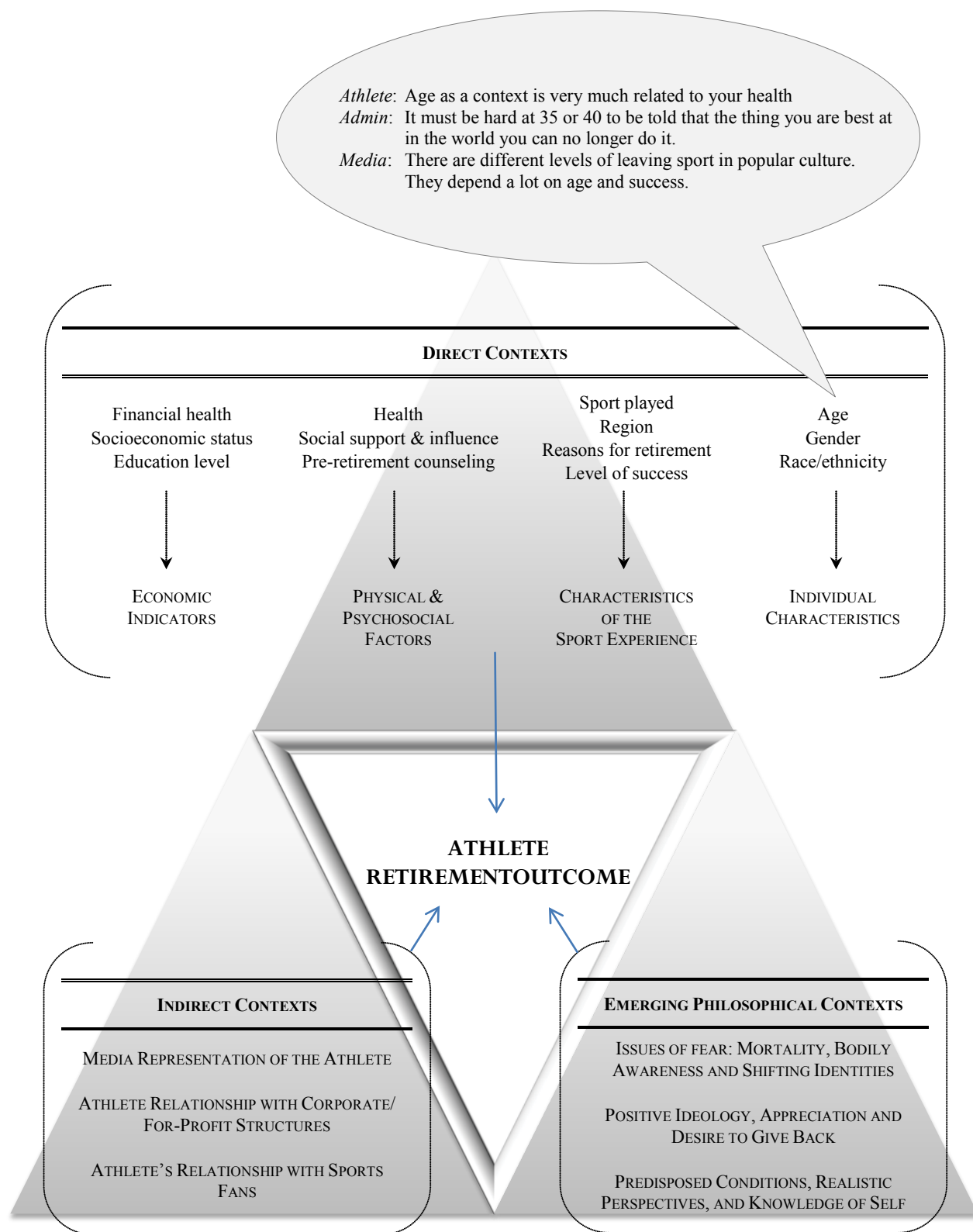


Figure 2d. Direct contexts: “Individual Characteristics.”

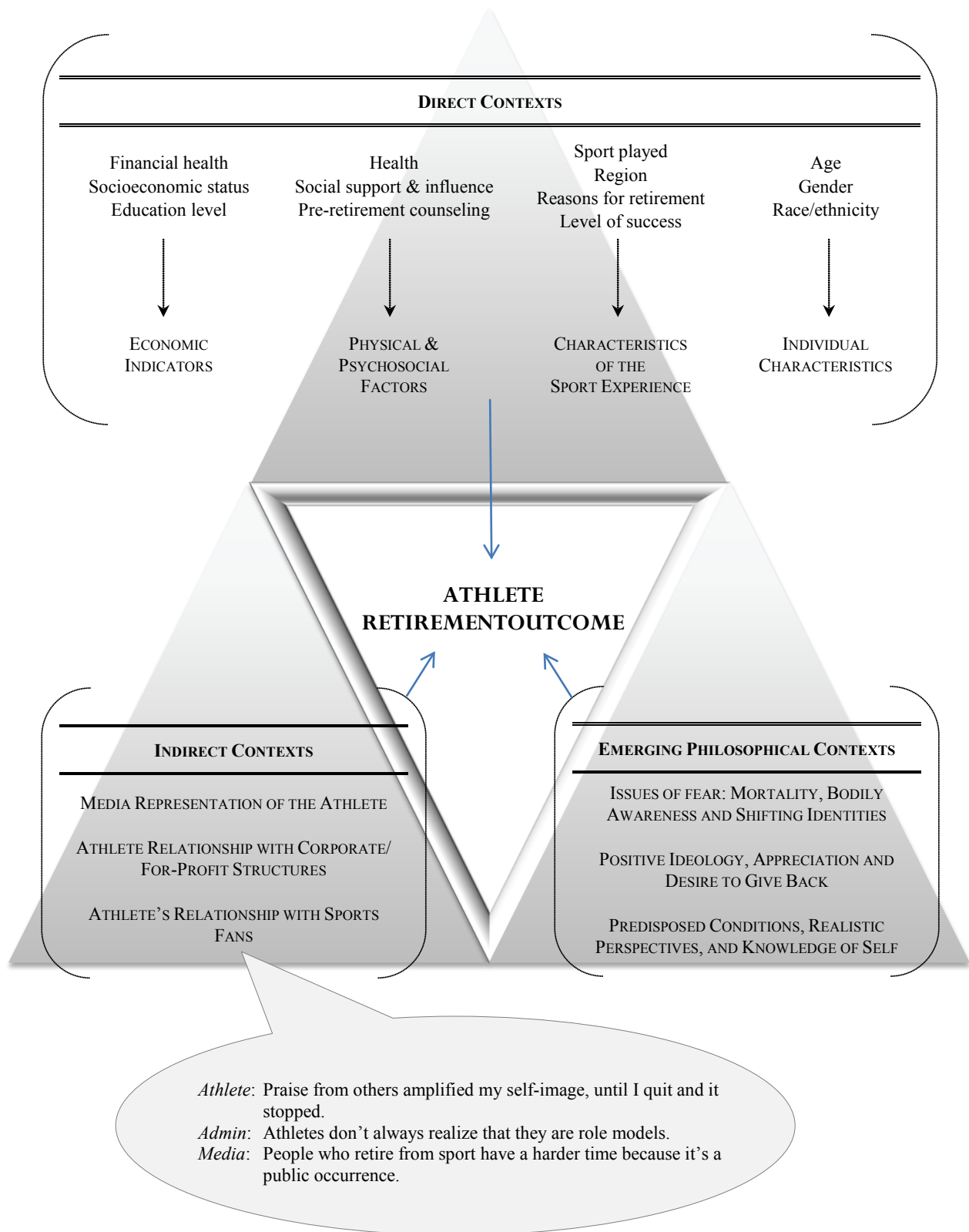


Figure 3. Indirect contexts.

Athletes				
Raw Data Themes	I was one of the best ever in my sport and only made a small amount of money.	I went from being the best at sport with media adulation and money to a humble beginner in business	It's an oddity to be catered to because you have money	FINANCIAL HEALTH
	Athletes have no exit strategy where business people do	I was able to let go of the sport's frustrations after retirement when I made the transition to a meaningful job that paid well	Financial health is very important for your self esteem when you retire	
	I identified myself more with my other job – it paid more than my sport.	My expectations increased with monetary success but when I left sport I made hardly any money	I was maturing faster in some ways because I was making money sooner than my peers.	
Raw Data Themes	The financial rewards are so high; you focus on sport-related activities and ignore the rest of your life.	When they have more money they think less about what they will do after sport	When I left sport I didn't even have a regular paying job.	SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS
	I came from a rich, influential, and supportive family so I was used to money.	When you are retired and you have to pay bills, it's a shock	I wished I had invested more wisely.	
	I played at a small school that had no money	We knew that we had to work and it helped to ease our transition.	I didn't want to risk all the money I had earned in sport on a risky new venture not tied to my hard earned identity	
Raw Data Themes	I had an education and that helped. I had a degree.	Athletes can use their knowledge of sports if they work in a business that does sport.	A real education is different than a tribe of team players	EDUCATIONAL LEVEL
	Most athletes today can benefit from the college experience and provide some learning experiences.	I had won easily and more important, beaten someone who wasn't as smart as me. That confidence carried over beyond sports	I became street smart, but not as mature mentally and physically	
	My self-education helped me to learn about the realities of sport as a business.	I had a few mentors who pushed me in the direction of advanced education	My ability to have relationships and develop a healthy ego did not mature at the same level maybe because I missed a regular school life	

*Figure 4a.* Sampling of raw data themes from Athlete participants, collapsed into the three direct contexts that fall under the second order theme “Economic Indicators.”

Athletes				
R a w D a t a T h e m e s	Most athletes have poor health when they leave sport.	We are never in that good of condition again.	Health is everything, the rest is just stuff.	HEALTH
	For some the pain never goes away.	I couldn't even throw the ball around with my kid.	I had a nagging injury and it was almost a relief when I knew it would end my career.	
	The Parkinson's took a big hit on me.	An athlete's body represents immortality.	As your body changes, your whole identity shifts.	
R a w D a t a T h e m e s	Athletes today need to be careful of who they associate with.	Coaches and hangers-on often have alternate motives.	How does one navigate the 'easy waters of entitlement?' They need people around them.	SOCIAL SUPPORT & INFLUENCE
	Parents and coaches put pressure on me to be mature and act like an adult when I was still a kid. It took the fun out of it.	The pressures of work, family and kids are life stresses a successful athlete is protected from	I missed the guys in the locker room.	
	Having another family member who was an athlete motivated me and gave me a feeling of support.	My wife was not very understanding at first but she was always there	The guys in the locker room didn't miss me. I represented their own end.	
R a w D a t a T h e m e s	I don't see what the big deal is about counseling. I'm more interested in support of my family and friends.	I was never offered any counseling.	I was not given any pre-retirement counseling...I simply survived D-1 athletics.	PRE- RETIREMENT COUNSELING
	We needed skills for a professional career.	I wish I would've had some old guy to tell me how it was going to be	But still most athletes are way behind the regular non-athlete in social skills. Someone needs to teach us this stuff	
	My dad always worked hard and it showed me the value of work.	I never really looked at what was important to me outside of sport.	The athletes just aren't given enough skill training for after sport jobs.	

*Figure 4b.* Sampling of raw data themes from Athlete participants, collapsed into the three direct contexts that fall under the second order theme “Physical and Psychological Factors.”

Athletes				
Raw Data Themes	I transferred my daily athletic fix from cycling to XC skiing.	You play polo for the love of the sport; there's no money.	At the time I didn't know everything but I did know that speed skiing wouldn't give me all that I wanted in life.	SPORT PLAYED
	I grew up with other athletes around me and we had unique opportunities to grow up together while traveling the world. My sport was like that.	Individual sports are unique in retirement.	Because my sport was new, minor and did not pay exceptionally well, I never thought of it as a career. Therefore, I always worked at other jobs and prepared for retirement from sport.	
	Not enough tennis players get the right kind of education before they leave the sport.	Team sports coddle you and don't allow you to develop basic skills like cooking.	A lot of guys in the NFL, these athletes are very black and white and aren't touchy/feely guys.	
Raw Data Themes	Fame is regional. Nashville don't care about sports stars.	It is difficult for women in Latin American countries when they leave sport.	Region is important if you have a good relationship with your community	REGION
	I think playing in the same town for a long time was a great career move.	Europeans look after their retired athletes better Europeans look after their retired athletes better	Others seek just the opposite and seek the support that connected them to the past.	
	But if you have behavior traits you can put down local roots that extend to a national reputation that's helpful in retirement.	Some parts of the country are just different with retired athletes based upon how they and sport are considered.	It's very different being a pro athlete in my town. We aren't given differential treatment and that helped me when I left sport.	
Raw Data Themes	I knew that I had to play it all the way into the end.	After 40, I encountered physical problems and I lost confidence. And that was an important implication.	I was just ready to leave in any case. I had played long enough.	REASONS FOR RETIREMENT
	I wanted to leave on my own terms.	For me to leave the sport was the best thing I could do because I (could not have improved)	I quit playing sport because I was burnt out.	
	I quit because I couldn't win anymore.	After 40, I encountered physical problems and I lost confidence. And that was an important implication	I gradually became interested in non-sport matters while my sports performance declined to the point that I had to retire.	
Raw Data Themes	I was just a 'lunch pail worker' but even the stars don't last all that long in pro sports.	I expected to retire well because of good prior performances against good opponents	I was happy that I hit my goals in sport	LEVEL OF SUCCESS
	People measure victory in different ways	I never expected that I would accomplish any of my goals and when I did if felt grateful.	Collegiate soccer was my highest competitive level – but it was not the most enjoyable.	
	The best part was when I achieved mastery and that recreated the simple joy I felt as a child.	I liked to know my limits and test myself against them. That's what helped my best performances that I relish.	Winning was not as big of deal as I thought it would be and I still don't put as much stock in it now.	

*Figure 4c.* Sampling of raw data themes from Athlete participants, collapsed into the four direct contexts that fall under the second order theme “Characteristics of the Sports Experience.”

Athletes				
Raw Data Themes	There is no cash out when you retire young and unexpectedly.	It just seemed like at that age it was time for me to move on.	It turned into an 18 year career so I just retired in my late 30s, it seemed like time.	AGE
	You're still young when you leave sport, even in your 30s and 40s.	It felt strange to return to college as an older student after I finished sport.	The older guys sometimes nurtured the younger ones who never thought about their retirement.	
	I was happy that I made a choice to focus on sport when I was young. Still, it was hard to achieve some balance after I was forced to retire because of my age.	Because of privileged lifestyle, athletes they don't mature as quickly as others so you can be 40 with the skills of an 18 year old.	I wasn't young when I left, so I didn't have a lot of options.	
Raw Data Themes	Early in my career, I knew female athletes would face a different way out of sport same as the whole experience is different.	As a girl I was confused about my body image but grew out of that as I became successful in sport.	I always thought women had it easier because they weren't subjected to the whole sports hero thing like guys.	GENDER
	I felt more confident about what might come next than the guys.	The women think about having children and the "biological clock."	The guys sometime leave after they think they have reached their peak and they can't do anything else. I kept going because it was fun.	
	As a young girl, there seemed only a remote chance of a pro soccer career – my main goal was just college soccer.	Female consumers of sport are more forgiving and nurturing.	Females project the failed athlete as possible mate because they understand.	
Raw Data Themes	Part of my motive was propelled by how my class and race never moved from what they believed about sport as upward social mobility.	We were all the same on the team but you could see where some of the white guys and had more good job offers than the blacks and the women in their league when they got cut.	We never thought about things like color and race. But maybe it made a difference to some guys in getting jobs.	RACE/ ETHNICITY
	Race don't seem like a big deal when you played but later on looking for a good job I think it was.	Some guys get stereotyped for their position in sport that aligns with their ethnicity.	Because of my dark features I just didn't fit the stereotype of an Olympic water polo player.	

*Figure 4d.* Sampling of raw data themes from Athlete participants, collapsed into the three direct contexts that fall under the second order theme “Individual Characteristics.”



	Sports Administrators	Sports Media	
R a w D a t a T h e m e s	Sports Media just keeps people amused.	Actors are drawn to the role of the hero athlete because of its tragedy.	MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF THE ATHLETE
	Media focuses on controversial aspects of player's behavior because that's what the readers want.	There is an attraction to the role of athlete and storyteller for its transcendence.	
	There is a lot of good stuff that goes on by athletes that isn't newsworthy.	The youth consume sports images.	
R a w D a t a T h e m e s	For some athletes even if they have a lot of money when they retire they still want to work within pro sports.	People are just loving the Michael Vick story right now because it has all the elements of redemption and the teams are feeding it because it makes them look like saviors.	ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP WITH CORPORATE/ FOR-PROFIT STRUCTURES
	Some athletes, they just think they will always be in demand by the business of sport.	The teams and leagues are looking at how to still be relevant to athlete image creation.	
	When they're finished they don't get the same respect from the management.	You have to use the fame to open new doors.	
R a w D a t a T h e m e s	The original relationships of warriors and fans starts in history.	Consider the fan. After not loving the prowess and achievement of the failing athlete the fan can separate their now former love of them into disrespect or even hate.	ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP WITH SPORTS FANS
	People who will later become fans are learning to idealize their (star high school athletes) behavior patterns.	The fan that loves and then dislikes is just at fault in a failed relationship as the athlete hero who skidded into failure due to injury or age or whatever in the eyes of that fan.	
	Fandom is reverting to early relationships within their childhood.	Athletes can now control their own image and perhaps their profitability with new social media platforms.	

*Figure 5.* Sampling of raw data themes from Sports Administrator and Sports Media participants, collapsed into indirect contexts.

	Athletes	Sports Administrators	Sports Media	
Raw Data Themes	No one in sports ever wants to leave.	Trouble comes when athletes don't realize that the best time of their life is over from a physical standpoint.	When you're young you think you will live forever.	ISSUES OF FEAR: MORTALITY, BODILY AWARENESS & SHIFTING IDENTITIES
	I thought I'd never retire and never grow old.	Some guys keep trying to hold onto the things that they once had and it's a shame.	It bothers me if people only know me for one role.	
	Leaving sports is clearly reflective of its certain reality, a kind of death after playing.	The athlete represents youth and the struggle for immortality.	You gotta' get your fix of somebody recognizing you. And then gradually that addiction goes away.	
Raw Data Themes	Now, I help others leaving sport or preparing to transition out of sport whenever I can. It helps me too.	The only nobility is in giving back for mediated gain.	There is an opportunity to mine what makes us human.	POSITIVE IDEOLOGY, APPRECIATION, & DESIRE TO GIVE BACK
	Athletes are mostly the same as everybody else but are temporarily affected as anyone could be in their circumstance.	Some people are better at using their fame for more than fringe benefits.	Athletes who succeed at using both performance, authenticity, and image production have the best chance of eventually finding success with media and fans and themselves after sport.	
	Sport only provides you a foot into the door but you will have to prove yourself after.	Some guys just love to play.	We should appreciate all the great things that we had.	
Raw Data Themes	I seriously reduced my other interests to focus on my sport.	Athletes play for 3 reasons: money, competition-to win, for fun. When these are no longer there the athlete loses interest.	Human nature wants us to look forward to something.	PREDISPOSED CONDITIONS, REALISTIC PERSPECTIVES, & KNOWLEDGE OF SELF
	Although it was a team game, my competitiveness was driven more by high expectations of myself.	It's hard at 35 or 40 to be told that the thing you are best at in the world you can no longer do.	There is a point that you have to let it all go.	
	We knew what we were getting into and we knew that there were going to be consequences.	As an agent I know their pre-existing emotional challenges and crisis.	Some actors and athlete/entertainers are drawn to this role because it preambles their own exit from acting as the pro athlete as entertainer must do.	

*Figure 6.* Sampling of raw data themes by participant group, collapsed into emerging philosophical contexts.

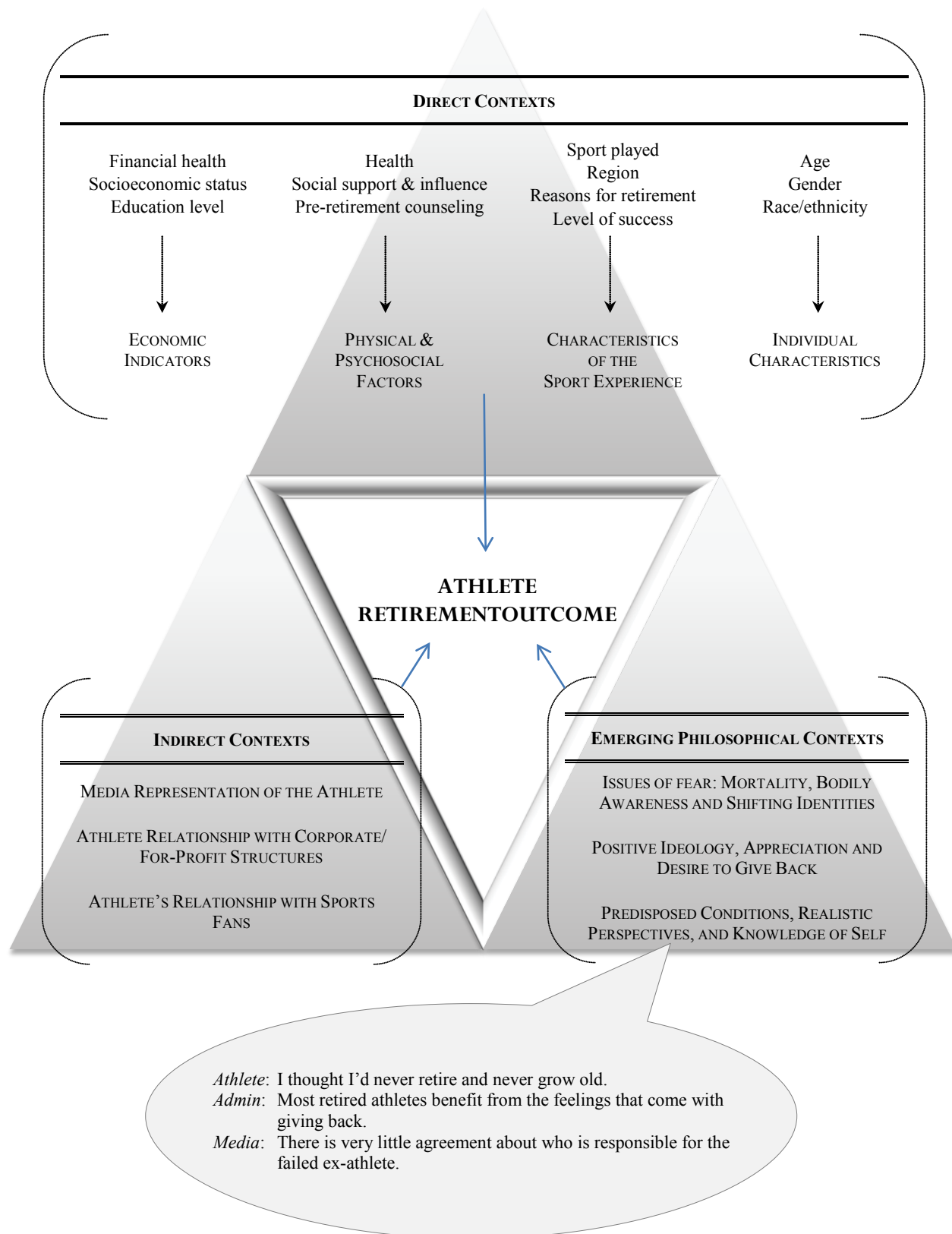


Figure 7. Emerging philosophical contexts.

## APPENDIX A

### SPORTS ADMINISTRATOR PARTICIPANTS:

#### SAMPLE OF RAW DATA THEMES

##### Ad1.

1. Most athletes are under contract to do community service. B2, B3
2. Community service is not a unique idea. PR is a standard thing for the clubs.  
B2, B3
3. But most people believe (community connection) it's the right thing to do. B3
4. Athletes don't always realize that they are role models. B3
5. Athletes should be trained to work with community services. B3
6. Teams have made efforts to have players sign autographs and throw balls into the stands. B2
7. Most athletes are now trained to be fan-friendly. B2, B3
8. Some athletes want to be beloved in their hometown. A10
9. This will help their lifestyle after playing. A10
10. They sacrifice money for closeness to a home town. A10
11. Hoffman's leaving his old team for a few extra bucks put his life after sport at risk. A5, A10
12. This is a trainable skill through seminars. A11
13. Younger players see the benefits gained by older players who are loyal to a community. A10, A11, A1
14. Most retired athletes benefit from the feelings that come with giving back. C2
15. This is an extension of their community, a desire to connect with local fans.  
B3, A1
16. Most of them realize their fortune and the benefits—adulation, good looking women. C3

17. Most guys realize they have a duty to give back. C2
18. Media focuses on controversial aspects of player's behavior. B1
19. Lots of athletes who do commit to community are not known for it. B3
20. There's a lot of good stuff that goes on that isn't newsworthy. B1
21. It's trainable but you have to have it in you. A11, C3
22. Some people are better at using their fame for more than fringe benefits. B3, C2
23. Too many guys resist being involved.<sup>1</sup>
24. Alternate sport athletes who retire young are a different breed. A3
25. Baseball and hockey players are more normal people than football and basketball. A3
26. Football and basketball coddle you from when you are very young. A3
27. Baseball and hockey has a longer process of finding stardom than other sports and this affects their exit from sport. A3
28. MLB guys, they have ridden buses and it helps with a return to humility. A3
29. Baseball players know how to express and appreciate sport more than football players. A3
30. Baseball players have had better training to be appreciative. A3, A11
31. There are demographic differences in sports that are not seen or discussed. A8
32. Hockey players are often from small towns. A10
33. NBA guys grow up in big cities and are catered to . . . they expect things. A10
34. Money has dictated the way people retire in many ways. A5
35. Example: Athletes play for three reasons: money, competition-to win, for fun. When these are no longer there, the athlete loses interest. A5, C3
36. Some guys just love to play. C2
37. Other guys play for the money. C3

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<sup>1</sup>Raw data themes without an assigned code fell outside the emerging contexts, both direct and indirect. They are left in the list to illustrate raw material offered by all participants that was not collapsible.

38. They just want to have their stuff and then go back to their small time lives.  
A10
39. For some athletes if they have money they still want to work to be involved.  
B2, A7
40. Ex. “I’ve got to do something . . . I’m too idle.” They are 40 years old and bored. A7, A5
41. It must be hard at 35 or 40 to be told that the thing you are best at in the world, you can no longer do it. C3, A1
42. It doesn’t fit regular retirement models.
43. Divorce rate is very high in retired players. What does this tell you? A7
44. There’s a psychological impact of losing a revenue stream. A5
45. No one is applauding you anymore. B3
46. Wives’ identity are also involved. A7
47. Your whole social world is turned upside down. A7
48. As an agent, I know their preexisting emotional challenges and crisis. C3
49. These are often buried until retired and then they come out. C3
50. Small town retirement is a double edge sword—quiet but maybe too quiet.  
A10
51. Trouble comes when athletes don’t realize that the best time of their life is over from a physical standpoint. A4, C1
52. Some guys keep trying to hold onto the things that they once had. C1
53. Two elements that they miss the most—the competition and camaraderie. C3, A7
54. Guys replace those with golf and gambling. C3, A7
55. What they are losing is their community. A7
56. We all fear this loss of community. C1
57. This is like other forms of retirement . . . we want to be around people we are comfortable with for the rest of the years. A7
58. Competition signifies youth, that we can live forever. C1
59. Athletes feel like the old Indian warrior. No longer of the real men. B3

60. Retirement is a direct attack on their manhood and virility. We all fear this as men. A7, A2

APPENDIX B

SPORT MEDIA PARTICIPANTS: SAMPLE OF  
RAW DATA THEMES

**Med1.**

1. I don't like it when someone thinks I'm not working anymore just because they have seen me on TV. B3
2. I'm glad I have other interests. C3
3. Fame is very fleeting. C3
4. I realized that my fame will fade but my friends will stick with me. A7
5. Fame isn't the same as ego. C3
6. When you're young you think you will live forever. C1
7. The end of one's career is more clear for an athlete than it is for an actor. B2, C3
8. Actors and actresses are always hoping for one more big role and this depends on how the media and fans perceive you. B1, B3
9. There is always that 'maybe.'
10. Actors rarely leave at the peak of their career. A13
11. At some point they can't earn a living in the performing arts.
12. Actor/athletes who did something before have an easier time in transition.  
A12, A11
13. I felt like a failure when I wasn't working as much. C1
14. There is so much more to life than one career. C3
15. I am planning my financial future. A5
16. The waiting for another job in my field is really tough.
17. It's like a break up.
18. Fame from sports or media is not tangible in so many ways. C3



19. It's painful when people forget about me. B3
20. Actors and athletes are disposable. B2, B3
21. Fame, money, and work are all somehow connected. C3
22. There is validation in working.
23. The turn-over in sports and fame is much faster due to media. B1
24. It doesn't bother me if people don't know me as well as they did. B3
25. It bothers me if people only know me for one role. C1
26. It bothers me that I still care about this. C3
27. It's actually easier now to not be as famous. A6
28. It's a relief not to be recognized all the time. C3
29. I was always about wanting to be famous. C3
30. I wanted to be seen and validated. C3
31. I wanted to work and make money and be famous. A5
32. Now I want more to be an artist.
33. Now the industry is a playground for me. B2
34. It's ironic that I got so much fame and money out of a nonartistic show and sports. A6
35. I had people I respected tell me that it, the fame, wouldn't last and I believed them. A7, A12
36. I had a family that helped me to understand the shallowness of fame. A7
37. I had other interests beside work. A11, C3
38. I appreciated all the great things that I had. C2
39. I've been able to gradually let all the fame go. C2
40. Human nature wants us to look forward to something. C3
41. A lot of the fame and benefits are connected to societal tastes. B3
42. I think it helps to stay somehow connected to your industry. B2
43. You have to use the fame to open new doors. B2
44. There is a point that you have to let go. C3
45. Success is the love and admiration of strangers. B3

## APPENDIX C

### ATHLETE PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When you were playing, what kinds of experiences did you have that made you feel different from other players?
2. These differences, how did they affect the way you played?
3. When you were playing and had contact with or saw older retired players, what did you think of them? Did you ever see yourself in that place? What was that like?
4. When you saw news articles about your performances, what kinds of things went through your head?
5. When someone asked for an autograph, what was that like? How did it change over time?
6. What about when your image was used in fantasy sports leagues or a video game . . . can you remember what went through your head? Is it different now than it was back then?
7. Can you reflect on the people who were around you when you played? Tell me about the kinds of relationships that you had then.
8. At the peak of your career, what kinds of other people were influential to you?
9. If you and the other athletes talked about life after sport, what kinds of things came up? Can you tell me about any experiences or individuals that stand out when you thought about what you'd do after sport?
10. Tell me about your relationship to your fans at that point? There must be some interesting stories.
11. And your relationship with your team managers or owners and corporate sponsors . . . how did that influence your playing experience?
12. Can you remember what it felt like when you decided to leave sport? What roles did the various factors in retiring have on your decision?

13. How did you see yourself leaving the sport? Did you have any kind of plan and how was it developed?
14. If you felt an urge to remain involved in your sport in some other capacity after your retirement, what sort of role did that look like?
15. Looking back now, was it a helpful role in the sport such as assisting new kids find their way in the sport or something more about your own career like hanging on to the fame and your identity as an athlete?
16. Going back to any differences that you had with other athletes, how did they effect your exit from sport?
17. When you were getting out of sport, what kind of concerns did you have at that period? Were they what you expected or somehow different?
18. Can you describe the kinds of influences that affected your experience then? If there were other athletes who you looked toward or spoke with, can you remember what they said and how it affected you?
19. Tell me about the reasons why you left sport. Were you healthy?
20. Thinking back on the period that you left sport, what were the circumstances like?
21. What's your opinion on 'going out on top' rather than playing beyond your most prolific years as an athlete? Did you ever feel the pressure from others to leave before you were ready, and if so what was that like?
22. What did you miss most when you first left sport? Were there things that you did to try and find replacements for them?
23. How did you see yourself living and working in a life after sport during that period?
24. When you saw others retiring at that point, what kinds of things went through your head?
25. When you read stories in the media about you leaving sport, what kinds of experiences and feelings went through your head?
26. What kind of advice were you offered to assist you in your transition out of sport? Can you describe how it felt to hear these things?

27. How do you respond to people who claim that athletes are not heroes but just entertainers and celebrities? And your thoughts on athletes as role models?
28. What about when great athletes fade away from the spotlight after years of incredible performances . . . what does that make you think about your own career?
29. What would it be like now if someone came up to you and said that you'd been a hero to them?
30. How do you feel now when watching the athletes play your sport? How are they different than when you played?
31. You once were one of the best in your sport. What goes through your head when you think about the physical condition that you are in now?
32. Going back to the contexts in which you played and then left sport, what have you learned in this time since you left sport?
33. What role do you see yourself fulfilling in society as a retired elite athlete? Do you think that role is the same as what society wants for you?
34. When you see articles in the media now about athletes then and now, what goes through your head?
35. What about all these ways that athletes connect with their fans . . . things like Facebook and Twitter, what are your thoughts on those? Would you use them if you were playing now?
36. When you see the retiring or transitioning athlete depicted in films, songs, or other popular places and forms, what comes to mind? How does this make you feel?
37. What kinds of things come to mind when you think about famous professional athletes that live compromised lives, die young, or even take their own life?
38. Do you have any relevant stories that might help explain how successful athletes fail to achieve similar levels of success beyond sport?
39. Do the fans that you played for 'owe' you anything for all your efforts? Do you owe them anything for what you gained out of your life in sport? Talk about that.

40. What does it feel like now when you see your image or likeness in a fantasy sports league or a video game or in magazines or books or referred to on TV?
41. If you could offer some advice to sports fans about the role in society of an ex-pro athlete, what would it be?
42. What else would you offer that I've not asked you?

APPENDIX D

SPORTS ADMINISTRATOR AND SPORTS

MEDIA INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When you were watching and managing players, what kinds of specific experiences and factors did you see that made you notice a difference in how players transitioned out of sport?
2. These differences, how did they affect the way you thought about or managed players?
3. When you had contact with or saw retired players, what did you think of them in determining the quality of their life after sport?
4. If you and the other sport managers or journalists talked about life after sport, what kinds of things came up? Can you tell me about any experiences or individuals that stand out when you thought about what they expected to do after sport?
5. Tell me about your relationship to your athletes at the point when they knew it was time to step away? There must be some interesting stories.
6. And your relationships with other media persons, managers, administrators, and corporate sponsors . . . how did that influence the way you presented life after sport to your players?
7. How did you see specific athletes that made an impression on you leaving the sport? Did you have any kind of preconceived ideas about how your ideas were developed for individual athletes?
8. Do you think it's helpful to assist new kids find their way in the sport or identify something more about their own career beyond playing? When is the best time for this counseling? Whose responsibility is this, if anyone?

9. What's your opinion on athletes 'going out on top' rather than playing beyond their most prolific years as an athlete?
10. Do many athletes today realize the exact role in the world of commercial sport?
11. When you see athletes retiring before they've had a chance to accomplish what they would like, how does that make you feel?
12. Does the media understand the retiring pro athlete? Are they depicted correctly?
13. How do you respond to people who claim that athletes are not heroes but just entertainers and celebrities? And your thoughts on athletes as role models?
14. What about when great athletes fade away from the spotlight after years of incredible performances . . . what does that make you think about the "system" of commercial sport?
15. Going back to the contexts in which you saw athletes play sports and then left retired, what have you learned that might be considered a pattern?
16. What role do you see a retired elite athlete playing in society? Do you think that role is the same as what society wants for them?
17. What about all these ways that athletes connect with their fans . . . new media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, what are your thoughts on those? Would you use them if you were playing pro sports?
18. When you see the retiring or transitioning athlete depicted in films, songs, or other popular places and forms, what comes to mind? How does this make you feel?
21. What kinds of things come to mind when you think about famous professional athletes that live compromised lives, die young, or even take their own life?
22. Do you have any relevant stories that might help explain how successful athletes fail to achieve similar levels of success beyond sport?
23. Do the fans that your athletes played for 'owe' the athletes anything for all their efforts? Do the athletes owe them anything for what they've gained out of a life in sport?

24. If you could offer some advice to sports fans about the role in society of an ex-pro athlete what would it be?
25. Do we “gladitorialize” modern athletes?
26. What would be the single most important piece of advice for the retiring athlete?
27. What else would you offer that I’ve not asked you?



APPENDIX E

ATHLETE PARTICIPANTS: SAMPLE OF  
RAW DATA THEMES

**Ath1.**

1. I feel there were influential people in my life when I left sport. A7
2. There were a lot of people . . . coaches, buddies, etc who took me under their wing. A7, B2
3. People helped me at the expense to themselves. A7
4. Now I help others leaving sport or preparing to transition out of sport whenever I can. C2, A11
5. I am both obliged but I enjoy it as well. C2
6. If I can be of assistance I will. C2
7. I was totally lucky to have great people to help me deal with the changes. A7
8. Athletes today need to be careful of who they associate with. A7
9. Coaches and hangers-on often have alternate motives. A7
10. Most athletes today can benefit from the college experience and provide some learning experiences. A12
11. After college is where athletes get stuck.
12. It's hard to find quality-building people. A7
13. A coach has to work on an athlete's mind and spirit. A7
14. To become a star a coach has to work on all aspects of the athlete. A7
15. I believe we need to legislate coaching certification programs for USAT. A11
16. Credentialing will help to eliminate those people who aren't taking the athlete's best interest. B2
17. There was a lot of resistance to the coaching certification. B2
18. Human nature hasn't changed, even back 20-30 years ago there were shady

- characters. A7
19. Track and Field then tried to bribe me to do a different race. B2
20. They made up false quotes in the paper. B2, B3
21. The national governing body has purged many coaches of sexual improprieties. B2
22. The public might think that athletes need to be held to a higher standard, but we are only humans that are made out to be heroes by fans who need something from us. B3
23. Athletes are mostly the same as everybody else but are temporarily affected as anyone could be in their circumstance. C2
24. Minor sports athletes are better prepared for life after sport than athletes on pro teams. A3
25. But still most athletes are way behind the regular nonathlete in social skills. Someone needs to teach us this stuff. A11
26. Sport only provides you a foot into the door, but you will have to prove yourself after. C2
27. Athletes can use their knowledge of sports if they work in a business that does sport. A12
28. It's like a guy coming out of the army; a lot of the skills are not transferable but some are. A11
29. I'm not sure about women athletes leaving sport. They seem to have less trouble, but I'm not sure why. A2
30. Athlete skills don't always transfer to nonsport jobs but networking from sport involvement will. A7
31. I appreciate running now more than ever since I left sport. C2
32. There is no pressure, and I have returned to my roots of running for pure pleasure. C3, C2
33. I didn't do things right after I left sport. C3
34. I take pride in the success of American athletes. A10

35. Still, too many athletes, coaches, and NGBs complain and take a defeatist attitude about sport. C3
36. When I worked on my book it really put my life in sport in perspective.

## APPENDIX F

### ALL PARTICIPANT GROUPS' RAW DATA THEMES

#### ASSIGNED TO CONTEXTS

##### **I. Athlete Participants ( $n = 29$ ) Coded Responses**

Emerging RDTs assigned to 19 contexts (13 direct, 3 indirect, 3 emerging philosophical contexts) noted below. Number of assigned themes per category in parentheses.

##### **A. Direct Contexts of Retirement from Sport**

1. Age (12)
2. Gender (34)
3. Sport played (22)
4. Health (36)
5. Financial health (52)
6. Level of success (30)
7. Social support and influence (103)
8. Race/ethnicity (6)
9. Socioeconomic status (19)
10. Region (17)
11. Preretirement counseling (53)
12. Education level (35)
13. Reasons for retirement (19)
- Category (RDT) Totals (438)

##### **B. Indirect Contexts of Retirement from Sport**

1. Media Representation of the Athlete (31)

2. Athlete Relationship with Corporate/for-profit Structures in Sport (69)
  3. Athlete's Relationship with Sports Fans (inclusive of sport hero paradigm (42)
- Category (RDT) Totals (142)

### **C. Emerging Philosophical Contexts in Athlete Retirement**

1. Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness and Shifting Identities (79)
  2. Positive Ideology, Appreciation and Desire to Give Back (80)
  3. Predisposed Conditions, Realistic Perspectives, and Knowledge of Self (123)
- Category (RDT) Totals (282)\*

### **Totals: Athlete Participants (n=29)**

Total raw data themes from athlete participants below assigned to 19 contexts noted above (Direct, Indirect, and Emerging Philosophical Contexts\*)...**862**

\*Of the 862 RDTs noted in athlete participant's responses 282 or 32.7% were assigned to *Emerging Philosophical Contexts*

## **Second Order Categories of Direct Contexts in Emotional Quality of Athlete Retirement**

### **I. Economic Indicators**

1. Financial Health
2. Socioeconomic Status
3. Education Level

### **II. Physical and Psychosocial Factors**

1. Health
2. Social Support and Influence
3. Pre-retirement Counseling

### **III. Characteristics of the Sport Experience**

1. Sport Played
2. Region
3. Reasons for Retirement

4. Level of Success

#### IV. Individual Characteristics (of the athlete)

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Race/Ethnicity

### **II. Sport Administrator Participants ( $n = 8$ ) Coded Responses**

Emerging RDTs assigned to 19 contexts (13 direct, 3 indirect, 3 emerging philosophical contexts) noted below. Number of assigned themes per category in parentheses.

#### **Emerging raw data themes from sport administrators coded:**

##### **A. Direct Contexts of Retirement From Sport**

1. Age (5)
2. Gender (2)
3. Sport played (18)
4. Health (22)
5. Financial health (14)
6. Level of success (8)
7. Social support and influence (26)
8. Race/ethnicity (1)
9. Socioeconomic status (0)
10. Region (15)
11. Preretirement counseling (14)
12. Education level (5)
13. Reason for retirement (0)

Category (RDT) Totals (130)

### **B. Indirect Contexts of Retirement from Sport**

1. Media Representation of the Athlete (32)
2. Athlete Relationship With Corporate/for-profit Structures in Sport (41)
3. Athlete's Relationship With Sports Fans (inclusive of sport hero paradigm)  
(55)

Category (RDT) Totals (124)

### **C. Emerging Philosophical Contexts of Athlete Retirement**

1. Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness, and Shifting Identities (22)
2. Positive Ideology, Appreciation, and Desire to Give Back (6)
3. Predisposed Conditions, Realistic Perspectives, and Knowledge of Self (22)

Category (RDT) Totals (50)

### **Sport Administrator Participant Totals**

Total raw data themes noted from sport administrator participants below and assigned to 19 contexts listed above...**304**

## **III. Sports Media Participants ( $n = 9$ ) Coded Responses**

Emerging RDTs assigned to 19 contexts (13 direct, 3 indirect, 3 emerging philosophical contexts) noted below. Number of assigned themes per category in parentheses.

### **A. Direct Contexts of Retirement from Sport**

1. Age (9)
2. Gender (2)
3. Sport played (8)
4. Health (2)
5. Financial health (8)
6. Level of success (10)
7. Social support and influence (10)

8. Race/ethnicity (1)
9. Socioeconomic status (5)
10. Region (1)
11. Preretirement counseling (4)
12. Education level (7)
13. Reason for retirement (3)
- Category Totals (70)

### **B. Indirect Contexts of Retirement From Sport**

1. Media Representation of the Athlete (48)
2. Athlete Relationship With Corporate/for-profit Structures in Sport (39)
3. Athlete's Relationship With Sports Fans (inclusive of sport hero paradigm)  
(67)
- Category Totals (154)

### **C. Emerging Philosophical Contexts of Athlete Retirement**

1. Issues of Fear: Mortality, Bodily Awareness, and Shifting Identities (18)
2. Positive Ideology, Appreciation, and Desire to Give Back (6)
3. Predisposed Conditions, Realistic Perspective, and Knowledge of Self (22)
- Category Totals (46)

### **Totals: Sport Media Participants**

Sport media interviewees' raw data themes noted from participants below and assigned to 19 contexts above...**270**

### **Totals: All study participant's (46)**

RDTs from athletes, media, and sport administrators\*\* assigned to 19 contexts (13 direct, 3 indirect, 3 emerging philosophical)...**1,436**

\*\*Each participant group in this study had RDTs that were assigned to more than one context.