

University of Nevada, Reno

**The Lived Experience of Former National Football League Players' Sport Career  
Transition: A Retrospective Grounded Theory Approach**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research is to understand the lived experience of former National League Football player's sport career transition. This study addresses the disparity highlighted by the literature for a sport specific understanding of the lived experience of sport career transition of former NFL players. A further purpose is to aid current, former, and future NFL players, as well as sport psychology practitioners, understand and prepare for the experience of sport career transition. As is consistent with a grounded theory approach, data collection relied on semi-structured interviews (N=14). As a qualitative study, this research allowed former NFL players the opportunity to freely share their experience of sport career transition across the lifespan, enhancing the knowledge of how transition is experienced at any given point in time. Data analysis identified three major constructs of sport career transition as social influence, social-emotional impact, and transition strategies. Implications for the field of sports psychology and directions for future research are discussed.

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## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

The experience of a life lived as a player in the National Football League (NFL) affords the opportunity for elite status, the accumulation of wealth, and for some, celebrity. Each year, billions of dollars are spent as the business of the NFL continues to grow. For many American children, childhood is spent dreaming of achieving a life as a professional athlete. The dream of becoming a modern-day warrior, invincible and living in a world of perpetual play, is indeed alluring. However, while media continues to highlight the glamorous world of the NFL athlete, many players suffer silently off of the field. Sport career transition (SCT) is an aspect of an NFL life rarely discussed. Recent studies have demonstrated that during times of transition from one level of play to the next leaves players experiencing feelings of insecurity and uncertainty about their future. Far from the stereotype of the perfect life of the NFL athlete, research in the area of SCT demonstrates the need for a greater understanding of the reality of the lived experience of former NFL players.

### **Statement of the Problem**

When compared to the general public, participation in athletics brings about experiences, and therefore actions and emotions, that are inherently unique to athletes (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). A life of athletics is often filled with fame, popularity, monetary gain, and social position, which automatically set the sport career apart from a standard more commonplace occupation. In addition, a career in athletics is time limited, requires a great deal of travel and thus distance from family, is outcome driven, and is a career which falls in an area particularly concerned with youth (Mihovilovic, 1968).

Further separating athletes from non-athletes is the social environment surrounding them. It is the nature of the media, and society in general, to speak of athletes as though they are objects rather than individual human beings. This includes praise and accolades when producing a favorable outcome and severe ridicule and scorn when an outcome is perceived as unfavorable (Mihovilovic, 1968). In addition, there often comes a point in time when an athlete becomes aware that their reputation is largely performance based.

The knowledge that sport career transition commonly results in emotional and psychological disruption is only the first step in the goal of understanding the lived experience of transition and the knowledge needed to best aid athletes through such times. Research examining the difficulty many athletes face during SCT identifies the lack of both psychological and social support available to transitioning athletes. Shockingly, only one in seven professional athletes was able to identify possible sources of emotional support (Zucchermaglio & Alby, 2011). While family and friends may offer support, research suggests that professional athletes frequently feel that such individuals are unable to truly understand and empathize with their circumstance (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999).

A career in professional athletics is also uniquely marked by a lack of choice and control over individual circumstances. Research suggests that the awareness of the lack of control over one's career and initiation of a SCT intensifies the difficulty faced by professional athletes as a whole. Associated with varying degrees of pathology from depression and anxiety to substance abuse and dissociative disorders (Garfield & Bergin, 1993; Fortunato & Merchant, 1999), the lack of control felt by a professional athlete over

his career only further demonstrates the need for research in the area of the experience of SCT.

While literature in the field demonstrates the potential for professional athletes to have negative reactions to SCT, perhaps no other athletes in the United States are at greater risk for such consequences than those in the NFL. It is estimated that injury rates for players in the NFL are one hundred percent (Coakley, 2001). Having been called one of the most dangerous and violent workplaces in the world (Ecklund & Cresswell, 2007), a career as a professional athlete in the NFL involves physical demands and brutal body contact unlike any other sport. Furthering separating football from other professional sports is the briefness of an NFL player's career. The average professional football career in the NFL is 3.5 years. As a result of these unique occupational circumstances, the majority of NFL players are between twenty-three and thirty-seven years of age at the time of the transition to withdraw from sport.

The rewards of a life spent as a player in the NFL can be tremendous. However, less attention is paid to the transitions experienced by athletes working to attain the status of NFL player. While much of the current literature in the area of athletics is concentrated on the physical experiences of sport such as concussions, this inquiry is focused on the lived experience of the SCT process and the potential psychological and sociological effects as a result of those experiences.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to address the disparity highlighted by the literature for a sport specific understanding of the lived experience of SCT of former NFL players. A further purpose is to aid current, former, and future NFL players, as well as sport

psychology practitioners, understand and prepare for the experience of SCT. Knowledge gained from this inquiry will contribute to the field of sport psychology and athletic performance consultation by capturing the lived experience of former NFL players' SCT. As a qualitative study, this research allowed former NFL players the opportunity to freely share their experience of SCT across the lifespan, enhancing the knowledge of how SCT is experienced at any given point in time. As such, the following research question was posed:

### **Research Question**

What is the lived experience of former National League Football players' sport career transition?

### **Definition of Terms**

*American Football League (AFL):* A major professional American football league operating from 1960 to 1969 when it merged with the NFL. In 1970, the AFL was absorbed into the NFL becoming the current American Football Conference.

*National Football League (NFL):* The major professional football league in the United States, consisting of the National and American football conferences totaling thirty-two teams.

*Sport Career Transition:* Sport-career transition (SCT) is defined as the act of moving from one level of sport participation to a different level of participation in either a positive or negative direction (Coakley, 2006). For the purpose of this study, SCT has been further defined as five distinct transitions as experienced by former NFL athletes: (i) transition into sport, (ii) transition to regional level sport, (iii) transition from regional level sport to collegiate level sport, and (iv) transition from collegiate to professional

level sport and (v) transition from professional play to withdrawal from sport (Baillie & Danish, 1992).

### **Overview of Dissertation Chapters**

The following chapter, chapter two, presents a literature review to provide background for this research. Chapter two is divided into two major sections: (1) Review of Related Literature, and (2) Summary of Theoretical Understandings and Implications for the Present Study. Chapter three presents a context for the inquiry and a review of research methods. Chapter three is divided into five major sections: (1) Population and Sample, (2) Data Collection and Instrumentation, (3) Procedure, (4) Data Analysis, and (5) Trustworthiness. Results of the study are presented in chapters four, five, and six. Chapter four discusses social influence as a construct of sport career transition. Chapter five addresses social-emotional impact as a construct of sport career transition. As the final presentation of results, chapter six presents transition strategies as a construct of sport career transition. Chapter seven is a discussion of the findings of the study. Lastly, chapter eight is the concluding chapter. It is divided into five sections: (1) Implications for The Field of Sports Psychology, (2) Theoretical Implications: A Grounded Theory of Sport Career Transition, (3) Limitations of The Study, (4) Directions for Future Research, and (5) Closing Remarks.

## CHAPTER II - Literature Review

This chapter will provide background for the study. The chapter is divided into two sections. First, a review of literature related to the study is presented. Review of the literature is to be presented in five sub-sections : (1) Sport Career Transition, (2) Models of Career Identity, (3) Models of Athletic Career Transition, (4) Sport Career Transition Across the Lifespan, and (5) Player Engagement Programs: The NFL's Response to Sport Career Transition. Second, implications for the present study are discussed.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Connecting the individual to the social world, career development across the lifespan has led researchers to investigate the aspects of life that effect change in this important connection (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). Corresponding with both chronological age and life transitions, career transition models have been applied to the study of the sport career to explain consequences and outcomes of transition and aid those withdrawing from sport. America's growing fascination with sport, specifically the National Football League (NFL), has led to the celebrity status of athletes. As a result, reports of the emotional struggles of athletes transitioning to withdraw from the NFL reach far beyond the realm of sport news to news of gossip and entertainment. This has led to an increased interest in the study of sport career transition as well as an increased interest in the field of Sport Psychology.

In recent years, research on professional career transition has begun to focus on the careers of athletes. Historically, literature in the field has focused primarily on a binary collection of individual exclusive stages, current research highlights the need for a sport specific framework of sport career transition (SCT) (Houle, Brewer, & Kluck, 2010).

Sport Psychologists have largely depended on this literature to aid their clients through such transitions. However, models of career identity are being applied to the transitions of athletes without any acknowledgement of the uniqueness of a career in the NFL and the transitions required to achieve such a highly exclusive sporting career. These models also fail to recognize the relationship between the sport career and its tie to society at large. As such, a theory of sport career transition incorporating the lifespan perspective of the NFL athlete is needed.

### **Sport-Career Transition**

Transition is defined as an event or non-event resulting in a shift in an individual's assumptions about the world and themselves, which requires a shift in relationships and behavior (Schlossberg, Water, & Goodman, 1995). More specifically, sport-career transition (SCT) is defined as the act of moving from one level of sport participation to a different level of participation in either a positive or negative direction (Coakley, 2006). It is the navigation of this transition by the individual that determines if the process and its affects are perceived as positive or negative by the individual, and successful or unsuccessful by the other and society. While much of the literature in the area of SCT focuses on the traumatic experience of transitions, several researchers reject the idea that SCT ultimately results in identity crisis and adjustment disorders (Coakley, 1983; Schlossberg, Water, & Goodman, 1995; Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993). Viewed as an opportunity for personal growth and the development of identification with non-sporting roles, SCT has the potential to be a positive experience for the athlete and those around him. While a natural period of adjustment is to be expected with any transition, the process of a particular sport-career transition is highly dependent upon the

internal and external resources of the individual transitioning (Baillie & Danish, 1992). However, each SCT has the potential to bring relief, trauma, or both depending on the athlete's perception of the transition and strength of identification with their current role (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Baillie & Danish, 1992).

While some in the field of SCT argue transitions can be a positive experience, others are not so optimistic. When athletes are forced to make a concentrated effort or take extenuating steps to navigate a SCT, the process is identified by the same researchers as a crisis transition (Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres 2002; Schlossberg, Water, & Goodman, 1995). Characteristics of the crisis transition include emotional discomfort negatively affecting one's life, lowered self-esteem, confusion, disorientation to decision-making, and an increased sensitivity to failure (Schlossberg, Water, & Goodman, 1995; Coakley, 2006).

Although conflicting views on the inherent nature of SCT are common, they are a reflection of the complexity of a sporting career as well as the need for further research in the area. Increasing sensationalism surrounding the behavior of athletes and the potential tie to SCT highlight the desire for answers in the best interest of sport psychologists, the industry of professional athletics, and the athletes themselves.

A review of current literature in the field of sports psychology highlights a pattern of findings that demonstrate the need for a multi-dimensional approach to SCT. While research focusing on a singular transition, most commonly retirement or withdrawal from sport, is becoming increasingly well-studied, such literature often suggests future research explore a lifespan approach to SCT. Although research in the area of athletic retirement is beginning to recognize sport career transitions as processes rather than a

singular event, current literature has failed to conceptualize retirement as a process within the process of the athlete's lifespan. By focusing on a single transition, the field of sports psychology ignores the individual within the athlete and thus reinforces a binary view of the athletic career. Current literature lacks the study of the individual as a whole and the numerous transitions made during the average professional sporting career. Furthermore, current literature also lacks the acknowledgement of the potential impact such transitions have on both individuals and their families. However, by beginning to conceptualize SCT from a dialectic point of view, the field of sport psychology advances to aid athletes through more than just retirement, but throughout the lifespan. As a result of this potential for emotional difficulties associated with SCT, further study focusing on sport-specific transitions across the lifespan is necessary if professionals in the field of sport psychology are going to aid athletes in the preparation, understanding, and meaning of the athletic role throughout their lives.

In reviewing multiple theories of SCT, two categories will be reviewed. First, perspectives based on developmental models such as Super's (2005) Developmental Self Concept Theory and Erikson's Psycho-Social Development Theory (Erikson & Erikson, 1998) will be discussed. As formative theories in the fields of career identity and transition and lifespan development respectively, it has been thought that these perspectives could provide theoretical insight into the experience and consequences of sport career transition. As will be discussed later, alternative perspectives are needed to fill the numerous voids created by the application of these theories to the careers of players in the NFL.

Second, the application of Social Gerontological Theory, Thanatology, and

Transitional Models by sports psychologists and consultants to describe the processes of SCT will be reviewed. Although each of these theoretical frameworks provide insight into many aspects of transition, their origins in the unrelated fields of aging and death grossly ignore the uniqueness of the NFL players youth at the time of SCT and withdrawal from sport as well as numerous additional shortcomings to be discussed.

As will be demonstrated, there is not only a need, but a demand for a sport specific model of SCT. To meet this demand, a new framework for understanding NFL athletes' experience of SCT will be explored.

### **Models of Career Identity**

**Super's Developmental Self-Concept Theory.** One of the most widely recognized and accepted theories of career development and transition is Super's (2005) Self-Concept Theory of Career Development. Stating that the development and implementation of one's self-concept is the primary factor in an individual's career choice, he proposes a lifespan model by which individuals move through five distinct stages: Growth, Exploration, Establishment, Maintenance, and Disengagement (Super, 2005). Given that each stage corresponds with an individual's chronological age range, vocational tasks associated with a specific stage relate to developmental tasks socially expected of a person of that age.

Self-concept is defined as an evaluation of personal competence and worth comprised of a complex product of interactions between personal experiences, environmental characteristics and stimulation, and physical and mental growth (Savickas, 2005). Research indicates that self-concept is fluid in nature in addition to being multi-dimensional (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993; Wiechman & Williams, 1997). It is not

a static concept, but rather an entity that continues to evolve throughout the lifespan as one moves through developmental stages. However, research also suggests that individuals tend to assess their self-concept based on specifically defined roles rather than on a universal level (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993; Wiechman & Williams, 1997). For example, when individuals perceive themselves as performing negatively in a role in which they have placed a low level of importance, the individual's self-concept will not be affected. On the other hand, if an individual perceives poor performance in a role in which they have placed high importance, the individual's self-concept is in jeopardy of severe emotional turmoil (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993). This idea of a self-concept on a multi-dimensional spectrum may offer an explanation as to why certain roles grow to be more strongly developed than others. Applying this idea to individuals in the field of athletics, athletes commonly develop their sense of athletic competence and self-worth around their athletic performance rather than their performance in other life roles (Richards & Aries, 1999). As such, self-concept is correlated with athletic career transition in such a way that perceived self-concept in the athletic role becomes dominant and is highly effected by career transitions (Curry & Rehm, 1997).

The first stage of Super's Self-Concept Theory of Career Development is Growth, which takes place from birth to mid-teens. Marked by the task to develop a self-concept and move from an orientation of play to an orientation of work, the Growth stage includes three sub-stages: Fantasy, Interest, and Capacity (Super, 1990, 2005). Between the ages of four and ten, Fantasy is one's primary developmental task. This includes the need to dominate career fantasies and consists of very little reality. From the ages of eleven to twelve children identify likes, dislikes, and interests as a basis for career

choices in the sub-stage of Interest followed by Capacity at which time more reality is incorporated, vocationalizing the self occurs, and the relation of one's own skills to specific requirements of jobs begins to occur between the ages of thirteen to fourteen years of age (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2002).

As individuals move into their teens and early twenties, Super's second stage, Exploration, takes place. At this time a person's major task is to develop a self-concept that is realistic in order to narrow vocational preference by exploring various roles (Super, 1990, 2005). This narrowing of career choices inevitably leads to vocational preference. Sub-stages include Tentative (15-17 years of age), Crystallization of Preference (18-21 years of age), and Specifying a Vocational Preference (early 20's). During such sub-stages, individuals integrate their needs, interests, and abilities into their career fantasies and part-time or volunteer work. Specific choices supersede preference and reality becomes dominant as one enters college and/or the job market (Super, 2005).

Establishment is the third stage of Super's Self-Concept Theory of Career Development. Taking place throughout one's mid-twenties to mid-forties, Establishment occurs when one finds a secure niche in a chosen field and advances professionally within it (Super, 2005). Sub-stages include, Trial and Stabilization (25-30 years of age) and Advancement (30-40 years of age). Super identifies this stage as being marked by the process of settling down and focusing one's effort on developing skills, superior performance, resume building, and acquiring seniority. It is followed by the theory's fourth stage, Maintenance. Marked by a professional plateau, Maintenance involves established occupational patterns and maintaining professional gains (Super, 2005). This is especially important due to the competition from younger individuals entering the

the workforce (Savickas, 2005).

The final stage of Super's model is Disengagement also known as Decline. Individuals at this stage of their career development are typically coming to terms with the deceleration of their professional career (Super, 2005). Persons in Disengagement are often faced with coming to terms with declining professional capacities. Occurring in the late sixties through retirement, this final stage of the Self-Concept Theory of Career Development is a gradual disengagement from the occupational self, creating the challenge and objective of finding other sources of self and satisfaction (Super, 1990, 2005; Savickas, 2005).

While models of career transition such as Super's Developmental Self-Concept Theory do exist, they fail to reflect the uniqueness of the sport career, more specifically a career as a player in the NFL. As such, models of career transition specific to the sport career have been developed.

### **Models of Athletic Career Transition**

In recent decades, professionals in the field of sports psychology have been forced to draw from the theories of unrelated disciplines in order to conceptualize their client's circumstances due to a lack of theory in the relatively new field of athletic performance consulting. To fill this void, one of three theories is most commonly used: (1) Social Gerontology, (2) Thanatology, and (3) Transition Models. Social Gerontological and Thanatological frameworks view sport transitions through the conceptual lens of a singular event, limiting them even further. While Transition Models acknowledge SCT as a process, they too have failed to adequately conceptualize transitions of athletes ignoring inter-career transition and lacking operational detail. As the literature demonstrates, the

application of such theories to the field of performance psychology leaves professionals in the field of sports psychology and athletic performance consulting with more questions than answers.

**Social Gerontological Theory.** Defined as the study of the aging process, the use of social gerontology theories to conceptualize athletic career transition has been common practice in years past. Traditionally, models of this nature maintain life satisfaction as dependent upon aspects of the sport career experience and the athlete's perception of their career transition (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emphasizing aging, social gerontological models have been most commonly applied to the transition of withdraw from elite amateur and professional athletics. Although strongly lacking empirical support when applied to athletes, several social gerontological theories are commonly suggested as most fitting to SCT.

**Subculture Theory.** Subculture Theory (DeLamater, 2006; Rosenberg & Owens, 2001) asserts that extended social interactions with individuals result in the development of a group consciousness. This aspect of Subculture Theory has been used to describe the process of adjustment to a new role during the transition to withdraw from professional athletics. Subculture Theory suggests that group consciousness produces a set of social norms for the group, in this case an athletic team or organization, and as a result, the dismemberment of such norms upon retirement, leads to mental and emotional deficits for the athlete. However, while athletic teams do develop sets of social norms, commonly referred to as a 'sporting culture,' which can contribute to difficulty with the transition out of sport, subculture theory fails to address the notion that retiring athletes are transitioning out of the team subculture and not into it.

***Disengagement Theory.*** Disengagement Theory (Cummings, 1963), states that disengagement is not only desired by all parties involved in a transition, but is desired and inevitable. By voluntarily reducing social contacts, individuals facing a transition withdraw from society and reduce the number of social roles with which they identify. However, due to the common tendency for athletes, specifically professional athletes, to attempt to maintain their engagement with athletics even when facing a transition out of sport, such a model does not seem applicable to athletes. While a valid tool for the conceptualization of work force transition, Disengagement Theory fails to address the uniqueness of the sporting career and ignores the fact that athletes often do not voluntarily choose transitions.

***Social Breakdown Theory.*** Similar to Disengagement Theory, Social Breakdown Theory (Austrian, 2008; Kuypers & Bengston, 1973) poses that during the loss of a professional role, individuals are more often externally labeled by society. Undesirable labels are associated with social withdrawal resulting in a reduction of overall involvement in previously enjoyed activities and social roles. While Social Disengagement Theory does incorporate variables posed by career transition (e.g. shifts in socioeconomic status) that other theories do not, when applied to the sporting career it fails to adequately acknowledge transitions beyond retirement.

As a whole, theories of social gerontology do not address the unique occupational differences of professional athletes. While an occupational transition like retirement most commonly occurs at a mature phase of life, withdraw from professional athletics, specifically the NFL, on average occurs at the age of thirty-three. Furthermore, retirement at such an early age forces former professional athletes to obtain a second career, often

unrelated to athletics, which theories of social gerontology also do not address.

**Thanatological Theory.** Theories of Thanatology, or the study of death, have also been utilized by sports psychologists to conceptualize athletic career transition. Most commonly applied to the transition of withdraw from professional sport, thanatological theories equate the adjustment to the termination of an athletic career to the adjustment one faces when losing a loved one. Although several models of thanatology exist, Social Death Theory (Leach et al., 2008) and the Stages of Grief model (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014) are most commonly applied to SCT.

***Social Death Theory.*** Paralleling a perceived negative transition to a ‘social death,’ the use of thanatological theories attain that although an athlete is biologically alive, they experience the death of a social role during a career transition (Leach et al., 2008). Focusing on the treatment of an individual who has left a group by former group members, when applied to the athletic career, this thanatological model poses that the individual is no longer a team member working toward a common goal and therefore isolation ensues. According to social death theory, at this time feelings associated with death such as isolation, a loss of social functioning, and even ostracism (Leach et al., 2008), are felt by transitioning athletes. However, this specific thanatological theory fails to address the obvious fact that transitioning athletes continue to function in society even if in a different social role. The application of such a theory also ignores the average age at which athletes typically withdrawal from sport therefore needing to identify with new roles to maintain a global self-esteem. This is especially critical when applied to NFL athletes as the average age of retirement continues to plummet.

***Stages of Grief.*** Kubler-Ross’ Stages of Grief (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014)

have also been used to explain the emotional response to a transition event. This thanatological theory has been used to conceptualize SCT as occurring in stages much like the stages experienced when facing death. Kubler-Ross' stages of denial and isolation are correlated with an athlete's tendency to ignore the inevitability of career transitions - most commonly, retirement. The emotional disturbance of a transition is analogous to the anger stage of grief while the attempt to negotiate a longer athletic career is paralleled to the stage of bargaining. Finally, sports psychologists have likened an athlete's distress reaction to a career transition to the grief stage of depression and the final stage of acceptance to an athlete accepting the transition and moving on to the next phase of a career. Having been found useful in conceptualizing psychological and emotional reactions to athletic injury (Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, & LaMott, 1995), the application of Kubler-Ross' stages of grief to SCT continues to remain limited at best.

While the use of thanatological theories seem to be more easily applied to sport transition than the aforementioned gerontological theories, they have been criticized for the lack of analogy between career transition and terminal illness as well as a lack of addressing transitions beyond retirement. Developed using non-sport populations, thanatological models fail to reflect the uniqueness of the sport career. Furthermore, such models ignore shifts, strategies, conditions, and outcomes associated with SCT and thus do not offer comprehensive conceptualizations of a professional athlete's experience.

Both gerontological and thanatological theories are limited by the fact that they are non-sport specific. Although they have inspired research in the area of SCT, they presume transitions are inherently negative and fail to address post-retirement life as well as transitions preceding retirement. While such theories may offer professionals in the

field of sports psychology some understanding of the SCT and an athlete's consequent reactions, such an understanding is simplistic at best. By conceptualizing the professional athletic experience as a binary discrete event, gerontological and thanatological theories perpetuate the existing tendency to treat symptoms of a transition as opposed to preventing them.

**Transition Models.** Research findings outlining SCT, especially retirement suggest the potential for transitions to serve as a social rebirth. Such findings led researchers in the field of sports psychology to begin to view SCT as a process rather than a singular event proposed by gerontological and thanatological theories. Lacking a sport specific model for transition, performance consultants were once again forced to look beyond the athletic domain for a conceptual framework, thus discovering transition models. Transition models describe transitions as a change in assumptions about the self and the world stimulated by an event or non-event requiring a change in one's relationships and behavior.

*Schlossberg's Model of Human Adaptation.* Various transition model frameworks have been applied to the sport career. Among the most widely used is Schlossberg's Model of Human Adaptation to Transition (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2011; Schlossberg, Water, & Goodman, 1995). Schlossberg's original model postulated three major sets of interacting factors during a transition: (1) the characteristics of the individual in transition, (2) the individual's perception of the transition, and (3) pre and post-transition environment characteristics. The original model was then modified to reflect an individual's adaptation to transition in four ways: (1) the situation, (2) the self, (3) the support, and (4) the strategies. This revised model was re-

named the Four S System (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2011). While qualitative research studies (Swain, 1991; Parker, 1994) have found support for the Model of Human Adaptation when applied to the transition of retirement of elite amateur and professional athletes, Schlossberg's theories continue to focus solely on the transition of withdrawal from sport and fail to explore such transitions across the lifespan.

*The Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition.* As the disparity between transition models and SCT is often highlighted in the literature, researchers in the field began to propose more comprehensive adaptations of transition models. Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) domain specific Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition attempts a more holistic view of transition consisting of five developmental stages: (1) cause of retirement, (2) developmental experiences, (3) resources for coping, (4) retirement adaptation quality, and (5) adjustment interventions. Conceptualizing an athlete's response to the transition of retirement as a psychosocial process involving financial, social, occupational, and emotional factors, Taylor and Ogilvie's model provides professionals in the field of sport psychology with a transition model specific to the sport experience. However, while the model makes progress toward a research-based formal career transition model, it continues the trend of conceptualizing transitions as a process within a singular event rather than a process over the lifespan.

Although these transition models allow for a broader conceptualization of SCT than gerontological and thanatological theories, research continues to demonstrate their lack of specificity related to athletics and forego operational detail of the adjustment faced by transitioning athletes. While models such as the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) provide applied sport

psychologists with a framework for understanding transition from the sporting career, literature on the efficacy of the model ceases to exist. Failing to meet the need for a sport specific theory of SCT as outlined by Kim and Moen (2002) and Greendorfer and Blinde (1985), current transition models have yet to reflect transitions across the lifespan or be applied specifically to the experience of NFL athletes. Marked by its extreme briefness, financial uncertainty and hostility, rate of physical injury, and social tie to the community at large, a career as a player for the NFL is distinctly different from that of other athletic careers. As such, a model of SCT specific to the NFL player needs to be developed.

The uniqueness of a career as a player in the NFL and the sport transitions necessary for an athlete to achieve this pinnacle of sport career success, command the need for specific study. Unlike any other American sport, the NFL and its players have captured the hearts and headlines of popular culture resulting in heightened pressure to perform both on and off of the field. Constantly under a microscope, players in the NFL face occupational challenges. Briefness, physicality, financial uncertainty, travel, and in modern times, celebrity, each contribute to the often difficult and emotional sport career transitions. Furthermore, current literature in the field highlights the need for sport specific models of SCT as a means of understanding the complications associated with the transitions of NFL athletes.

### **Sport Career Transition Across The Lifespan**

Sport career transition (SCT) is defined as the psychological, physical, and social changes an athlete experiences while transitioning to a level of sport differing from their current level of play (Baillie & Danish, 1992). Such transitions most commonly occur five times in an athlete's career (Baillie & Danish, 1992): (a) transition into sport, (b)

transition to regional level sport, (c) transition from regional level sport to collegiate level sport, and (d) transition from collegiate to professional level sport and (e) transition from professional play to withdrawal from sport. It was a goal of this research to explore SCT across the lifespan inclusive of each of the five levels of transition, all participants chose to begin his story at the transition to collegiate level of play or later. While a review of each of the five levels of SCT will be presented, results and any further discussion will be reflective of collegiate level of play and beyond as dictated by participants.

**Transition Into Sport.** Transition into sport is often formed early in an individual's life (Tasiemski & Brewer, 2011). The development of identification with the athletic role has been shown to begin on the playground in childhood due to athletic talent often being recognized in elementary school (Tasiemski & Brewer, 2011; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). Participation in sports offers children the opportunity for not only social involvement, but early career development as well. Taking place during Erikson's Latency stage between the ages of six and eleven years of age, the basic conflict of psychosocial development is Industry versus Inferiority (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). The primary task of children at this stage is social interaction as a means to begin to develop pride in their accomplishments and abilities (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). Since this stage occurs at a time when children are entering school, much of this socialization takes place in the classroom, on the playground, and during after school activities such as sports. However, even from everyday actions and activities such as play, children develop new skills, which are identified and evaluated by their caregivers. Such identifications are the basis of an early identity expanded upon and strengthened by increased competence and caregiver recognition, encouragement, and level of value

placed upon said skill by the caregiver (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). Children at this age strive to master new skills (Erikson & Erikson, 1998) not master a competition.

The social aspect of this early development has been shown to begin to take place even before a child's first birthday (Winther-Lindqvist, 2009). Advancement of modern technology has introduced today's children to a rich social life allowing for peer interaction much earlier and more frequently than in generations past, often leading to strong emotional connections early in life (Winther-Lindqvist, 2009). Consistent with the dominant perspective in the field, these emotional connections to the other become more greatly oriented towards and influenced by the peer group as children grow older (Erikson & Erikson, 1998; Winther-Lindqvist, 2009). As a result, this stage of Erikson's model of development is vital in the development of self-confidence and competence. Failure at this stage of psychological development puts the child at risk of a sense of inferiority, failure, and incompetence.

**Transition to Regional Level Sport.** Adolescence is a critical time for development. Taking place between the ages of twelve to eighteen years of age, it is a time of personal exploration, the desire for independence, and the development of a self-concept (Super, 2005; Erikson & Erikson, 1998). Erikson highlights the importance of this stage of life by stating Identity versus Role Confusion as one's basic internal conflict at this time. The formation of a sense of self and personal identity occur during the adolescence stage (Erikson & Erikson, 1998) and are often done through peer relationships, which are paramount to the individual in middle and high school. Tajfel (1981) proposes that the groups (e.g. social class, family, football team etc.) to which people belong at this age are an important source of pride and self-esteem.

Groups give a person a sense of social identity: a sense of belonging to the social world (DeLamater, 2006; Tajfel, 1981). In order to increase one's self-image one enhances the status of the group to which one belongs (DeLamater, 2006). For example, "The West High School football team is the best in the state!" It can also increase self-image by discriminating and holding prejudicial views against the out-group (the group the person does not belong to). For example, "Guys at West High School not on the football team are losers!" Social Identity Theory states that in-group members will discriminate against out-group members to enhance their self-image. Therefore the world begins to be divided into "them" and "us" through the process of social categorization (i.e. people into social groups) (DeLamater, 2006; Tajfel, 1981). The result is what is known as the formation of an "in-group" (us) and "out-group" (them).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) propose that there are three mental processes involved in evaluating others as "us" or "them" (i.e. "in-group" and "out-group"): (a) Categorization, (b) Social Identification, and (c) Social Comparison. Individuals place objects in categories to better understand and identify them. The instinct to categorize is also applied to people, including ourselves, in an attempt to understand the environment. Assigning individuals to a specific category or set of categories allows one to know something about others given their social context. It is also possible to acquire knowledge about oneself based on the categories to which one belongs. Social norms and behavior are born of these categories as well. However, one must know to which group or category he belongs in addition to knowing others who belong to one's group before such norms can be identified. The group or social category of "athlete" is one such example commonly observed in the high school setting.

Once categorization has taken place, social identification begins. It is at this time that the group into which the individual has categorized himself as belonging to is adopted (DeLamater, 2006). An emotional connection to this category begins to develop during this time as well, thus tying self-esteem to group membership. For example, if a person has identified himself as an “athlete,” he will begin to act in ways he believes an athlete would act perpetuating both the social category and the emotional identification with the regional level sport career.

Having categorized oneself, identified with the particular category, and emotionally attached oneself to it, the final step is to compare our group to other groups. Social comparison is the term sociologists ascribe to this process (DeLamater, 2006). If one is to maintain self-esteem by his group category, for example “athlete,” the group needs to compare in a positive way to other groups (Hogg & Vaughan, 2013). Two groups identifying themselves as rivals compete for resources and members in order for their members to maintain self-esteem. As a result, competing identities are created and a binary view of one’s sport career is established.

Research suggests that early involvement in athletics is commonly reinforced by relatives and peers to such an extent that when paired with personal success in sport, adolescents and teens develop a definition and ego-involvement of the self as an athlete (Winther-Lindqvist, 2009; Baillie & Danish, 1992). In addition, the belief that a certain level of commitment to sport is a necessity to achieving success in athletics tends to lead to a narrowing of focus in adolescents and thus an individual’s primary focus becomes athletic achievement eventually resulting in a heightened level of importance placed on athletic activity (Winther-Lindqvist, 2009; Baillie, 1993). Furthermore, internal

reinforcement and external evaluation related to performance in athletics in adolescence also contributes to the strengthening tie to the early sport career by which the primary central focus of the self is defined by the sport-role (Winther-Lindqvist, 2009). As a result, by the time a student-athlete enters high school, the psychological commitment to the athletic role is internalized, often at the expense of other potential life roles (Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). Therefore, a commitment to the sport career at the next level of sport frequently develops into the dominant aspect of a student-athlete's self-concept (Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998).

**Transition to Collegiate Level Sport.** The period of time during which one attends college is a period of development. Although this development varies from person to person, major developmental tasks often include managing relationships, striving for independence, forming goals for the future, and further establishing the self (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000; Cornelius, 1995). This is especially true for the student-athlete.

Research suggests that student-athletes learn valuable life skills as well as gain psychological insight as a result of their athletic experience at the university level (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000; Richards & Aries, 1999). This psychological insight in turn can aid students with the aforementioned developmental tasks, which take place during the college experience. As previously discussed, sociologists hold that individuals categorize themselves and create an idea of the self based around those categories (DeLamater, 2006; Tajfel, 1979). By the time an individual who has emotionally tied himself to the role of "athlete" reaches the collegiate level of play, norms of behavior defined for rather than by the student athlete have formed. For

example, the socially ascribed expectations of a football player are dumb, violent, and aggressive (Visek & Watson, 2005). College football players may choose to act in ways consistent with these expectations in order to maintain their identification with the group (Williams & Anderson, 2007).

Athletes at the collegiate level are expected to train, practice, and compete. This is especially true of the collegiate football player. In 1985, The Center for Athlete's Rights and Education (CARE) conducted one of the first national studies investigating the roles of "student" and "athlete" and the demands individuals feel to fulfill both roles. Results indicated that Division I student-athletes feel forced to register in fewer classes, not attend classes, choose less demanding majors, forfeit exams, and take advantage of additional shortcuts offered to student-athletes. This pressure most often begins to occur at the end of the student-athlete's first academic year when the athletic role begins to dominate all facets of the student's existence to the detriment of other life roles such as "student" (Williams & Anderson, 2007). Even more alarming are the findings of a 2008 study commissioned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The American Institutes for Research (AIR) led the NCAA's investigation of Division I student-athletes. Results revealed that student-athletes had difficulty developing new skills, exploring the self, and assuming a leadership role outside of athletics. Furthermore the study revealed that the personal growth and exploration commonly acknowledged as a great benefit of the college experience, was an aspect of college life that student-athletes found difficult to experience given their athletic role and career.

Often unaware of the missed opportunities for the exploration of life roles beyond athlete, the identification with the sport career strengthens (Williams & Anderson, 2007;

Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000). Once identification with the sport career becomes the student-athlete's "master status," it becomes of greater difficulty to perceive other roles or career opportunities (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000).

**Transition to Professional Sport.** Participation in professional sport often interferes with the development of the individual due to the commitment to the pursuit of athletic excellence (Coakley, 2006). Most professional athletes devote primary, if not exclusive effort to the pursuit of athletic excellence. As a result, whether intentionally or unintentionally, education, career planning, and the fulfillment of life roles beyond that of "athlete" are commonly neglected in favor of and under the pressure to excel (Williams & Anderson, 2007) as an athlete. Unique to professional athletics, athletes' lifestyles are subordinated to their sport, which becomes a way of life (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, 2003). The coaching staff and the association or league are often responsible for making many of the athletes' decisions, including, but not limited to, where to live, when and where to train, and travel arrangements (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003). Hill and Lowe (1974) reported that the team assumes responsibility for managing many day to day worries leaving the athlete free to focus on his performance and the game rather than external pressures, further solidifying the tie to the sport career. As a result, professional athletes who have little time and do not receive ongoing physical, psychological, social, and fiscal support tend to enjoy sport participation less (Bennie & O'Connor, 2006).

A unique tie to the larger community and society at large is a defining characteristic of the sport career. Routinely displaying their athletic prowess to a public audience, the societal pressure to perform is one that is rarely encountered in other

professional arenas (MacCambridge, 2004; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). With the additional presence of social media and online gaming such as fantasy football, the opinion of the public is readily accessible and ominous. Furthermore, the view of the professional athlete as a business commodity by owners, sponsors, and other business entities, intensifies the pressure to excel in an outcome-based world of athletics. These aspects of professional athletics are particularly encouraging to one's identification with the sport career (Leach et al., 2008; Drahota & Eitzen, 1998), thus a positive correlational relationship is inherent between the athlete and society adding to the binary view of the athletic self.

Athletic identity is defined as the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993). In fields such as sociology, a concept such as this would fall into the category of "situated identities" whereby an individual's self-image is tied to a particular role situation (Hewitt, 1984). Athletic identity is developed over time and is not determined by any one specific level at a given point in time (Tasiemski, Kennedy, Gardner, & Blaikley, 2004). Athletic identity theory hypothesizes that as the amount of time spent in a specific athletic role increases, the level of skill and competition will increase as well (Stryker, 1978). Leading to an increased importance of sport to the individual, increased time spent in the athletic role is likely to affect the extent to which an individual is able to assess his athletic identity when out of athletic play (Stryker, 1978). An essential aspect of the self, the athletic role is a key aspect of the social dimension of athletic career transition affecting relationships, experiences, and sport (Cornelius, 1995). Those who develop their self-concept within the athletic context are more likely to place a high importance on this aspect of self and

therefore are likely to demonstrate a stronger sense of athletic identity (Curry, 1993; Horton & Mack, 2000). This strong sense of athletic identity has been correlated with a higher importance of athletics in a person's life (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993). Individuals with a higher level of athletic identity spend a majority of their time with coaches and fellow athletes, which results in further solidification of their athletic identity (Horton & Mack, 2000). One's social group, as well as one's family, contributes to the formation of one's athletic identity. As a result, the significance of athletics as it relates to the development of an athlete's identification is vast (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993).

Research suggests that a strong athletic identity is correlated with a strong sense of self-identity. Furthermore, it is suggested that greater confidence, greater social interaction, and a greater positive athletic experience are correlated with a strong athletic identity (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993). However, literature in this area tends to support the idea that the benefits of a strong athletic identity are dependent upon the identity being non-exclusive (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993; Wiechman & Williams, 1997). Athletes with too strong of an athletic identity tend not to experience the perceived positive benefits of an athletic identity as described above. It is suggested that athletes who place too strong of a centrality on athletics have a greater chance of encountering physical and psychological difficulties (Griffith & Johnson, 2002). Such disadvantages include jeopardizing psychological and physical health as a result of excessive training and a lack of connection to an entity other than athletics. The psychological disadvantages of a centralized athletic identity can often be seen during times of sport transition (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993). Examples of such

transitions include injury, being cut from a team, and retirement. Research indicates that athletes involved in activities other than athletics during a sport transition were able to more effectively cope with the transition by shifting out of their athletic role (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993; Wiechman & Williams, 1997). Conversely, the athlete who identifies solely as an athlete has an increased risk of severe emotional disturbance when faced with a sport transition (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993; Cornelius, 1995). This risk increases dramatically when an athlete with a centralized athletic identity lacks the support and resources needed to cope with a transition (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993; Cornelius, 1995). Furthermore, individuals who solely identify in an athletic role and cannot separate athletics from other roles of self are also at an increased risk of depression and isolation during times of sport-transition (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993). Sources of self-identification other than those related to athletics are essential in the sport transition process. Furthermore, an exclusive athletic identification places the individual in the position of possibly restricting the development of roles in the self other than that of athlete (Wiechman & Williams, 1997).

The presence of both a public and a private athletic identity is an additional aspect of athletic identity. According to personality theorists, the private aspect of athletic identity refers to the facets of an individual's identity that may be potentially unavailable to public opinion (Miller, 1963; Tedeschi, 1986). Much like a cognitive structure, examples of private athletic identity include values, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and feelings (Horton & Mack, 2000). This private aspect also includes an individual's own analysis of their behaviors and thoughts (Tedeschi, 1986). In contrast, the public orientation relates to the way individuals are perceived by others (Miller, 1963; Tedeschi,

1986). This aspect of identity originates from various social roles and is outwardly demonstrated by an individual's public reputation (Miller, 1963; Tedeschi, 1986).

Research in this area suggests that a negative relationship exists between athletic identity and self-esteem due exclusively to the public aspect of identity (Webb, et.al., 1998).

However, a relationship between private athletic identity and self-esteem also exists and is shown to be vulnerable to alteration with counseling (Webb, et.al., 1998). Furthermore, data indicates that both public and private athletic identities are divergent paradigms each contributing differently to the psyche of an athlete (Webb, et.al., 1998).

Viewed in relation with various other aspects of athletic career transition, athletic identity is significant in gaining awareness as to an individual's sense of self and cognitive structure (Horton & Mack, 2000). However, questions pertaining to the implications of career transition and athletic identity remain unanswered at the present time. Investigations surrounding the possible connection between the athletic role and athletic identity in individuals who identify themselves as "athletes," is limited in psychological literature and is even more rare for athletes of the NFL. In decades past, the available research has painted a picture of the development of athletic identity yet it has failed to describe the relationship between athletic identity and SCT across the lifespan.

Like most individuals, professional athletes experience some period of adjustment after any transition, with the individuals' internal and external resources determining if such adjustments are positive or negative (Kim & Moen, 2002; Baillie & Danish, 1992). However, active elite athletes face additional challenges when transitions arise. For example, a negative view of the decline of their sporting capacities adds to the perception

of the deterioration of the body, the athlete's primary tool (Phoenix, Faulkner, & Sparkes, 2005). After years of investing time and effort, the decline of the body is particularly stressful and threatening for the self-esteem of the athlete (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003). Unsatisfactory transitional bodily experiences tend to negatively affect one's global self-esteem via the decrease of the general feeling of pride, satisfaction, happiness, and confidence (Stephan, Torregrosa, & Sanchez, 2007). This in turn affects the feedback received by the athlete from the community, both the athlete's team and society in general, and further focus is applied to the pursuit of athletic excellence to the detriment of non-athletic roles. Furthermore, such an exclusive tie to the sport career may cause athletes to experience crises when faced with career-ending injuries (Phoenix, Faulkner, & Sparkes, 2005; Fortunato & Marchant, 1999).

**Transition to Withdrawal From Sport.** When exploring professional athletics, the area of greatest concern lies with sport transition, more specifically, retirement. The process of leaving a specific role is called "role exit" (Tajfel, 1981; Settles, Sellers, & Damas, 2007). This exit from the identification with a particular role identity is initiated by doubt and the exploration of alternative roles (Settles, Sellers, & Damas, 2007; Tajfel, 1981). While the idea of role exit was not created for sporting roles specifically, research suggests its application to withdrawal from athletics is fitting due to the unique focus on mid-life transitions, which is more reflective of an NFL athlete's experience of retirement than concepts created for individuals of advanced age (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998; Settles, Sellers, & Damas, 2007).

The assumption that retirement from professional athletics corresponds to the termination of connection to the sport career and role is dangerous (Grove, Lavalley, &

Gordon, 1997; Kim & Moen, 2002). Elite athletes in particular encounter challenging times during the transition years (Bennie & O'Connor, 2006). Research suggests that individuals with a strong connection to the sport career tend not to lose or lessen the strength of their connection the sport career upon retirement (Kadlick & Flemr, 2008; Grove, Fish, & Eklund, 2004). This combined with a lack of preparation for retirement has been identified as one of the primary reasons that a large percentage of athletes experience extreme personal disruption upon termination of their professional sport careers (Lavallee, 2005; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). As a result, these individuals are more likely to experience psychological difficulties post-retirement (Kadlick & Flemr, 2008). The imprint left on an individual by a lifespan spent in the athletic role contributes to the potentially difficult psychological adjustment to retirement for a professional athlete. This transition is further made difficult by the perceived isolation that is experienced by many transitioning athletes. Literature in this area states that only one in seven professional athletes were able to identify possible sources of emotional support (Baillie, 1993). In addition, athletes struggling with the loss of their sport career named the loss of intrinsic values related to athletics as the primary loss when retiring from professional sports (Baillie, 1993; Williams & Anderson, 2007). Similarly, questions regarding the possibility of finding an alternate source of pleasure, intensity, and passion other than athletics is a primary concern for those withdrawing from sport (Baillie & Danish, 1992). When athletes retire they are generally quite young, often being in their 20s and 30s. Financial restrictions become an issue possibly for the first time, and often a perceived loss of identity, status, and self-esteem occurs (Williams & Anderson, 2007). For many professional athletes, the focus required to maintain professional status interferes with the

development of other life roles such as spouse or parent (Super, 1990, 2005). This poses a unique challenge for athletes faced with a transition such as retirement due to the intensity of involvement related to achieving athletic success (Baillie, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001).

### **Player Engagement Programs: The NFL's Response to Sport Career Transition**

In response to the recent sensationalized reports of actions and troubled state of affairs of former NFL players, the National Football League enacted the Player Engagement Program (PEP). Enacted in 2010, the PEP program is comprised of several individual programs for student athletes as well as, current, and former NFL athletes. As the Player Engagement Program does not list its own mission statement, a brief review of its individual resources will be presented.

The NFL PREP program provides high school and college student-athletes of all sports with tools to assist them to succeed in life, focused on awareness, prevention, intervention and education. The NFL PREP website lists resources for college information, stress management, emotional intelligence, and financial literacy, among others. While the aim of the program is admirable, further exploration of the resources listed revealed sub-par assistance in the form of one-page documents primarily comprised of pictures.

As a professional resource for current players, the NFL offers the NFL LIFE program. NFL LIFE's mission is to provide current NFL players with personal and professional development resources, while supporting and educating players' families to take full advantage of the opportunities afforded to them by their NFL experience. Offering professional resources specific to NFL player benefits and articles highlighting

the successes of NFL athletes outside of sport, charities and resources for fathers are also listed.

Finally, the NFL NEXT program has been developed by the NFL to assist former players. According to the NEXT website, the program aims to challenge former NFL players to think about the “next step” in their lives and provides services and resources that foster a successful transition to life after their NFL playing experience. Of specific interest to the current inquiry, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is an aspect of NEXT. Between 2010 and 2013, TAP reports to have assisted over 250 NFL players transition to withdraw from sport. As a primary program component, Transition Coaches comprised of former NFL players help guide transitioning players through the process of retirement from professional sports.

### **Summary of Theoretical Understandings and Implications for the Present Study**

As demonstrated by the specific challenges unique to SCT described above, NFL athletes are a crucial subgroup to study. While the application of preexisting frameworks of SCT have been applied to the experience of NFL athletes, they fail to address the aspects of transition that directly impact the behaviors professionals in the field strive to explain, identify, and prevent. Left without a theory to accurately understand the lived experience of SCT, literature in the field demands the need for a sport specific understanding addressing the unique circumstances of each individual sport career, especially one as socially constructed and time limited as the NFL.

Social Gerontological and Thanatological theories were initially thought to be useful in identifying characteristics of SCT leading to the undesirable behaviors and psychological difficulties NFL athletes may experience. However, these theories assume

that all reactions to transition are inherently negative as a result of being constructed to understand life transitions completely unrelated to athletics. While some reactions to SCT may be relatively similar to the psychological experience of grief, conceptualizing transition in this way does not honor its complexity nor its nature as a process rather than an isolated event.

More recently, transition models such as Schlossberg's Model of Human Adaptation (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2011) and Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition have been applied by sport psychologists as a means of conceptualizing the transition process. However, although transition models allow for a broader conceptualization of SCT they fail to reflect a NFL player's lifespan experience in its entirety and acknowledge each individual SCT. While it is the aim of this research to understand SCT across the lifespan, each of the participants chose to begin to share his experience of SCT at the transition to collegiate level of play or later in the transition process. However, by expanding the exploration of SCT beyond withdraw from sport, this research achieves the goal of a lifespan perspective and advancement of the field of sport psychology. To meet this end, a Grounded Theory research design was utilized to generate a framework of the lived experience of SCT grounded in data collected from former NFL Players. The use of this qualitative methodology allows for an in-depth understanding of this unique experience and is to be presented in chapter three to follow.

### CHAPTER III - RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of former National League Football (NFL) players' sport career transitions (SCT). Goals of the inquiry were to address the disparity highlighted in the literature for a sport specific theory of SCT, to explore SCT across the lifespan, and to aid current, former, and future retired NFL players as well as sport psychology practitioners understand and prepare for SCT. While transition models such as the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) address the elite sport career specifically, they fail to examine transitions beyond retirement from professional sport and do not incorporate fluctuations in causal conditions, context and intervening conditions, and consequences of an athlete's transition. Because the uniqueness of the NFL career is ignored by current transition models it is the intention of this research to develop a theory of SCT grounded in the lived experience of former NFL players to address this dearth in the literature.

A review of the literature highlights a pattern of using non-sport specific thanatological, social gerontological, and transition model theories to conceptualize the lived experience of SCT. However, notable shifts in the current literature point to a correlation between SCT and personal outcomes or consequences (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011; Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993) demanding the need for a sport specific theory addressing the multifaceted nature of the former NFL athlete and his career. As such, the following research question was posed:

Question: What is the lived experience of former National Football League players' sport career transition?

#### **Research Design**

### **Retrospective Research**

A retrospective approach to research focusing on SCT have been successfully preformed and is considered an acceptable alternative to longitudinal studies (Aaron et al., 1995; Durante & Ainsworth, 1996). Researchers in the area of the self and memory pose a predominant theory called the Life Span Retrieval Curve occurring when autobiographical memories are recalled beyond the age of 35 years (Rubin, Wetzler, & Nebes, 1986). The Life Span Retrieval Curve consists of three parts: (1) Childhood Amnesia (birth to approximately 5 years), (2) Reminiscence Bump (10-30 years), and (3) Recency (present declining back to the reminiscence bump) (Rathbone, Moulin, & Conway, 2008). For the purposes of the current study, the reminiscence bump is of particular interest.

The tendency of individuals to recall information from their adolescent and early adulthood years in relatively large quantities is known as the “reminiscence bump” (Fitzgerald, 1998; Rathborne, Moulin, & Conway, 2008; Robinson & Swanson, 1990). In a free recall task, people recall the greatest number of memories from this period of time (Rathborne, Moulin, & Conway, 2008). Literature in area of recall suggests that due to the development of one’s life schema, identity, and self-image, individuals remember a great deal of information about the period of time when they were between the ages of 10-30 years of age (Fitzgerald, 1998; Rathborne, Moulin, & Conway, 2008; Robinson & Swanson, 1990). In turn, the retention of memories related to this period of time in one’s development is strong and quite easily recalled (Fitzgerald, 1998). The athletic role is one such important aspect of the self during this period of time. Critically, the ability to recall memories created during the ages of 10-30 years is significantly based on the age of the

individual at the time of encoding, not on the age of the memories themselves (Rubin, Wetzler, & Nebes, 1986; Rathborne, Moulin, & Conway, 2008).

Research focused on the experience of SCT has been conducted retrospectively in at least three previous studies (Shachar, Brewer, Cornelius, & Petitpas, 2004; Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Grove, Fish, & Eklund, 2004). In research performed by Shachar et al. (2004), former athletes were asked to recall their experience of SCT during the time of their retirement from sports. Ages of participants in the sample ranged from 20 to 44 years requiring many participants to reflect upon transitions taking place during their sport career. In a similar study examining transitions among retired professional athletes, Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon (1997), asked participants to remember SCT during the time of their retirement. In this particular study, the period of time between data collection and the athlete's retirement was an average of 3.44 years.

### **Grounded Theory**

The intention of Grounded Theory research is to expand upon the description of a phenomenon by cultivating a theory or analytical schema of a process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This theory is shaped by a number of participants, generating a general explanation of an action, process, or interaction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An integral aspect of this form of qualitative inquiry, theory development is guided by the recounting of participants who have experienced the phenomenon and is therefore “grounded” in data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

An extension of sociological science inquiry, Grounded Theory holds that theories should be generated from or “grounded” in data from the field as opposed to a priori theoretical knowledge (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This is of stressed significance

when such inquiry involves the social processes, actions, and/or interactions of people (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The systemic approach to Grounded Theory research outlines an analytic process for theory development. Categories identified from interview data are utilized to create hypotheses about the process, ultimately providing the generation of a theory (Creswell, 1998).

Analysis of field data begins during the data collection phase. Inferences and hypotheses are created and redefined as the researcher works to saturate the field. Referred to as theoretical sampling, participants interviewed are chosen based upon their experience with the phenomenon being examined (Creswell, 1998). Individuals selected for participation are chosen for their indirect ability to help best form the inquirer's theory. Similar to a snowball method of sampling, theoretical sampling relies on the sharing of contacts by the research participant to recruit additional participation (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010).

During data collection, the Systemic Grounded Theory inquirer typically conducts fifteen to thirty interviews based on one or more visits to the field to saturate categories (Creswell, 1998, 2006). The number of field visits are determined by saturation of categories as well as the quality of theory elaboration and description of complexity (Creswell, 2006). A category is defined as a unit of information composed of happenings, instances, and events (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Although not commonly used, the collection and analysis of documents and participant observations are allowed. The comparison of information derived from data to emerging categories is referred to as the constant comparative method of data analysis (Creswell, 1998).

A systemic approach to grounded theory research was implemented as suggested

by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) for inquiries with the aim of developing a framework of understanding a process, or core phenomenon, shaped by a common experience.

Consistent with a systemic approach, interview questions were formulated with the focus of understanding the participant's experience of the process of SCT. With this focus and the research question in mind, three participant questions were created:

1. Throughout your lifetime, what has been your experience of athletic transition?
2. Tell me about what happened after you made those decisions.
3. Tell me about how these athletic transitions have impacted you.

Grounded theory allows for the inquirer to return to each participant to help shape the axial coding phase by asking additional in-depth questions focused on the core phenomenon, causal conditions, strategies, and consequences if required for saturation.

However, for the purposes of the current inquiry, participants were not contacted for follow-up questioning due to the population's skepticism of the authenticity of academic research inquiries as well as respect for their personal time.

### **Participants**

Criterion for participant inclusion in the study were identified by a review of sport career transition literature. Athletes who met the following inclusion criterion were recruited:

- Retired (or released) as an athlete from the National Football League
- Not actively pursuing a career as a professional football player
- Experienced the 5 points of athletic career transition
  1. Transition into sport
  2. Transition to regional level sport

3. Transition from regional level sport to collegiate level sport
4. Transition from collegiate level to professional level sport
5. Transition from professional play to withdrawal from sport

### **Participant Recruitment Strategies**

Participants for the study were recruited in three different ways: (1) Through personal contacts with professionals in the field of NFL broadcasting, reporting, and athletic performance consulting, (2) Contacting NFL Alumni Clubs/Chapters, and (3) Contacting collegiate Halls of Fame with former players largely represented in the NFL. Such recruitment methods were selected after a collaborative brainstorm effort with professionals in the field of athletics and chosen for their ease of contact and likelihood of producing study participants.

During data collection, a theoretical sampling strategy was used. An important aspect in the development of a grounded theory, theoretical sampling is the process of selecting participants on the basis of their potential representation of a particular phenomenon or theoretical construct. Spanning a range of settings and conditions, this approach to sampling aims to create a deep understanding of various dimensions of a concept. As an additional method of participant recruitment, a snowball strategy was applied to best identify potential research candidates. A form of convenience sampling, “snowball” or word-of-mouth sampling occurs when research participants suggest additional potentially interested parties for participation (Kirk & Miller, 1986). A potential risk when utilizing a snowball sampling approach is the potential for a bias sample which becomes compounded as a result of participants suggesting individuals demographically similar to themselves (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005). However, due to the

nature of the current inquiry, such a risk is diminished as a result of the presence of a small sampling pool of former NFL athletes as well as the need for a matched population sample. Thus, at the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked to provide the researcher with names and contact information of individuals meeting the research criteria who might have been interested in participating in the study.

Two key informants were contacted via email and telephone in an attempt to obtain the names and contact information of former NFL players. In the tradition of full disclosure, the researcher has personal relationships with the informants. Informant One is a professional colleague specializing in athletic performance consultation. Working primarily with Division I collegiate football athletes and being contracted with individual teams within the NFL. Informant One played a critical role in obtaining research participants. Informant Two is a top professional in the field of sports broadcasting and journalism with a leading sports broadcasting network. The researcher and Informant Two are former family members who have continued to maintain a casual acquaintance. Through personal and professional contacts in the sports industry, more specifically the NFL, Informant Two was an integral part of recruiting participants for the current study.

A second method of participant recruitment consisted of contacting NFL alumni chapters for potentially interested parties. Through a web search, alumni chapters were identified and contact information for representatives were obtained. Once contacted via telephone and/or email, each chapter representative was informed of the current study, including its methodology and potential risks to participants (see Appendix A). After answering questions, NFL alumni chapter representatives were asked to be granted permission to contact members via the method of the representative's choosing and/or

attend a chapter meeting to present a brief overview of the inquiry and recruit potential participants. With permission granted chapter members were contacted via email and telephone. Individuals choosing to participate were screened for inclusion criteria.

The final method of participant recruitment consisted of identifying and contacting departments of Hall of Fame at colleges and universities with a large population of alumni represented in the NFL during the 1990s and early 2000s. This period of time was selected as a result of inclusion criteria outlining the need for former players. Due to the briefness of an athletic career, more specifically a career in the NFL, players from these decades were believed to be more likely to be retired and have experienced the five stages of inclusion criteria. As a result of financial restraints as well as restrictions of time, colleges and universities located on the west coast were targeted. Through a web search and verification from the NFL, universities identified as having a large representation of alumni holding the status of former NFL player were identified. Halls of Fame were contacted via telephone and email. The purpose and methodology of the research was described including potential risks to participants. Once provided with contact information of potential participants, the researcher used the method(s) of contact to reach out to former players for possible participation in the study, most commonly email. However, individuals selected for participation as a result of this method of recruitment were not identified by their status as an alumnus, but rather their alumni status was used as an avenue for access to the target population only. As with recruitment methods one and two, Collegiate Hall of Fame participants were also asked to provide the names and contact information of additional individuals meeting the research criterion as is consistent with a snowball method of sampling.

Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study in its entirety. All information pertaining to both potential participants and participants themselves remained confidential. In an effort to ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned an identification number rather than be identified by name. Corresponding numbers were used on any and all records. Any and all research materials were kept in the researcher's locked home office, in a locked file cabinet, with the researcher being the sole individual with access to the key.

### **Participant Demographics**

A total of 14 participants were recruited for the study. All participants were male. The average age of the participants was 49.9 years. The average participant played 6.14 seasons in the NFL. Table 1 illustrates research participant demographics by percent.

Table 1

#### *Research Participant Demographics by Percent*

<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Marital Status</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Employment Status</u>	<u>%</u>
African American	50	Married	64	Employed	64
Caucasian	43	Single	7	Unemployed	7
Mixed Race	7	Divorced	22	Retired	29
		Widowed	7		

All 14 participants earned a high school diploma and a 4 year degree from the university where they played football. One participant earned his Masters degree and one participant earned a Juris Doctor degree after retiring from the NFL. Participant sporting background is reflected in Table 2 by level of play and number of years of participation at each level.

Table 2

#### *Sport Background of Participants by Type and Years of Participation*

	Elementary Sport	High School Sport	College Sport	NFL
none	7	0	0	0
1-2 years	4	0	0	0
3-4 years	2	0	8	4
more than 4 years	1	14	6	10

The average number of NFL teams on which participants played was 2.71 teams during their careers. Ten of the participants were drafted in the NFL draft and 4 participants entered the NFL as undrafted free agents. Positions played were vast. A total of 18 positions were played in the NFL among the 14 participants. The position most frequently played was wide receiver. Other positions included, tight end, long snapper, fullback, nose tackle, defensive end, defensive tackle, right tackle, offensive guard, guard, offensive line, running back, cornerback, receiver, defensive back, back-up quarterback, linebacker, and offensive tackle. The sample included 2 Super Bowl champions and 1 Super Bowl participant. The sample also included three members of the NFL Hall of Fame, two members of the College Football Hall of Fame, and four Pro Bowlers. Several participants were from families with multiple individuals playing in the NFL. Three participants had sons who currently play or were retired from the NFL.

Of the 14 total participants, 5 participants continued to play professional sports after withdrawal from the NFL including, 1 Canadian League player, 2 Arena Football League Player, 1 World Football League player, and 1 NFL Europe player. One participant was convicted of a violent crime and possession of an illegal substance. Reason for retirement is reflected in Table 3 by cause of withdrawal from sport and number of participants experiencing each cause. Post NFL careers included several entrepreneurs, a politician, an attorney, salesmen, and individuals actively working as

retired NFL player advocates. Several participants have created non-profit organizations and/or charitable foundations in their local communities since retiring from the NFL.

Table 3

*Cause of Withdraw from Sport by Type and Participant Number*

Cause of Withdraw From Sport	Number of Participants Experiencing Cause
Voluntary Retirement	2
Cut Due to Injury	6
Released from Contract	3
No Contract Renewal	1
Other	2

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

#### **Potential Participant Log Sheet**

This log was utilized to record contact with potential research participants. Data recorded included date of initial contact, name of potential participant, their affiliated organization if applicable, phone number, and email address. A notes section was also included as an aspect of this document to record follow-up contact and miscellaneous research notes pertaining to each potential participant. (see Appendix B).

#### **Research Participant Log Sheet**

Individuals participating in the research study were recorded on the on the Research Participant Log sheet. Each participant was assigned a participant number to be utilized on all research documents as a means of identification. The Research Participant Log Sheet is the only document identifying the research participant's name as well as their contact information, and date of participation. In order to maintain participant confidentiality, access to this log sheet was restricted to the principal investigator and the researcher exclusively (see Appendix C).

### **Consent Form**

Prior to administration of the questionnaires, each participant was given a consent form approved by the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) and the UNR Internal Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix D). Interviews were conducted in-person by the researcher whenever possible. If unable to conduct an in person interview, a telephone interview was utilized to complete the interview process. If data was collected in-person, participants were asked if they completely understood the content of the form including the potential risks of participation prior to signing the consent form. When it was clear that the participant understood the form in its entirety and all questions were sufficiently answered, participants were asked to sign the consent form, which was labeled with an identification number for confidentiality. In the event an individual participated via telephone, an electronic version of the consent form was provided for participant review prior to the participant giving their consent electronically.

### **Demographic Questionnaire**

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix E). The questionnaire was intended to gain basic demographic information about the population sample and was intended to take less than five minutes to complete. The demographic questionnaire was comprised of two sections: Demographic Information and Sport Background. Section one, demographic information, consisted of questions regarding the participant's age, current occupation, race/ethnicity, marital status, and level of education. Section two, sport background, consisted of questions pertaining to the participant's athletic career. Specific questions include, years played at each level of sport over the lifespan, professional franchises the

participant played for, number of years employed by each franchise, and positions played. Information obtained from the demographic questionnaire was used for research and description purposes only and was not used to identify individual participants. Each demographic questionnaire was coded with a participant number, which corresponded to each piece of research material to maintain confidentiality. If participation took place via telephone, demographic questions were asked by the inquirer and recorded on the questionnaire accordingly.

### **Interviews**

Participant interviews were the primary method of data collection. Participants completed one interview, the length of which varied from approximately 30 to 65 minutes (see Appendix F for interview schedule). When possible, interviews were conducted in person, however, due to restraints of travel and time, the majority of interviews were conducted over the telephone. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. To allow for the flexibility to expand upon the three specific interview questions posed, a semi-structured interview format was used.

Guided by a Grounded Theory approach, several interview questions were developed to explore the lived experience of former NFL players' sport career transition. Question one was created to prompt participants to discuss the causal conditions precipitating sport career transitions throughout their lifetime. Question two was formulated to explore strategies enacted by participants as a result of experiencing sport career transition. Finally, question three was designed to understand the participants experience of the consequences of SCT (see Appendix G for interview questions). Table 4 illustrates the three primary interview questions.

Table 4

*Interview Questions*

- 
1. Throughout your lifetime, what has been your experience of sport career transition?
  2. Tell me about what happened after you made those decisions.
  3. Tell me about how these sport career transitions have impacted you.
- 

**Inquirer Memos**

Essential to Grounded Theory research, memo writing is fundamental to transforming data into a theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). Consisting of recording ongoing thoughts and reflections about the evolving theory as data is collected, memos reveal patterns consequently aiding in the identification on emergent categories. Memos are not intended to describe data, but rather to conceptualize data in a narrative form (Charmaz, 2006). Such memos may take various forms including field and theoretical notes.

During each interview theoretical notes were taken as a part of the memo process. Each theoretical note was coded with the participant number to maintain confidentiality and included the date and time of the interview. Theoretical notes were taken during the interview as themes began to emerge when exploring the lived experience of each participant's SCT. At the conclusion of each interview, field notes were used to record immersing constructs and properties as well as general impressions of the participant's lived experience.

**Data Analysis**

Consistent with a Grounded Theory research design described above, data analysis consisted of three different types of coding data: open coding, axial coding, and

selective coding.

### **Open Coding**

Information obtained from participant interviews was segmented into categories during the open coding phase of the inquiry. Organizing raw data into categories was achieved by identifying and discovering concepts and grouping the concepts into categories. With categories created, several properties of the category were identified resulting in the identification of a continuum of extreme possibilities for SCT. The process of open coding was the first step in understanding the experience of former NFL players' lived experience of SCT. Open coding began by reviewing each of the fourteen participant interview transcripts. With a sense of the data, transcripts were reread and themes were noted. Words, phrases, and quotes were highlighted and marked as a specific theme. In the left column of the page, a description of the word, phrase, or quote was noted. These notes became categories.

### **Axial Coding**

The second phase of data analysis was the axial coding phase. This was the first phase of creating a theory of former NFL player's SCT. To start, a list of categories identified during open coding was created. This list was referred to often during the axial coding process. Participant interviews were once again examined and any category that could be combined to form a more significant category was deleted or absorbed into a new category. With major categories identified, a coding paradigm was created to identify central constructs of SCT. These "core constructs" became the central focus of which additional categories were created. Strauss and Corbin (1990) prescribe four types of categories identified around the core phenomenon: (1) Causal Conditions, (2)

Strategies, (3) Interviewing Conditions, and (4) Consequences.

Causal conditions consist of factors that caused the core phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A review of demographic and interview data resulted in the identification of causal conditions. With categories of conditions that influence SCT identified, strategies, or the actions taken in response to the core phenomenon, were explored and identified by returning to interview data and field notes. Interviewing conditions were then identified. Defined as the broad and specific situational factors influencing strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the context of the interviewing conditions were considered. Finally, strategic outcomes or consequences of SCT were explored by examining field notes and interview data paying particular attention to responses to interview question three. With categories relating to and surrounding SCT, a visual model or axial coding paradigm was created (see Appendix H). Also known as a logic diagram, this visual representation of the core phenomenon and its corresponding categories was used as an aid in the selective coding phase during which propositions or hypotheses were created.

### **Selective Coding**

The final phase of data analysis was selective coding. During this phase themes were transformed into a theory of SCT by identifying correlating categories and assembling a theory portraying their interrelationship. Selective coding consisted of writing out the process of SCT that was presented in the axial coding paradigm. As a result of themes being clear and apparent from the data, it was concluded that saturation was achieved.

### **Trustworthiness**

A critical aspect of any research inquiry is the validity, or trustworthiness, of the

research findings (Creswell, 1998). In order to examine the trustworthiness of conclusions, researchers must take into account the collection of data, analysis of data, and the method of data interpretation utilized. Questions to consider when establishing trustworthiness include, the extent to which the experiences of the participants are accurately captured, if the study allows for variations in experiences, the degree to which other inquirers would conclude similar findings, and the extent to which research results can be compared to similar inquiries. Techniques to increase the trustworthiness of the current inquiry include, theoretical sampling, triangulation of data, thick description, and auditing, and are discussed below.

#### *Theoretical Sampling*

Noted as one of Grounded Theory's hallmarks, theoretical sampling is the continual process of gathering data with the aim of validating emerging research themes (Fassinger, 2005). For the purposes of this research, theoretical sampling took the form of returning to the data continually to identify, confirm, and expand upon emerging themes.

#### *Triangulation*

Triangulation is the process of validating conclusions by comparing them to research results from various sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is a technique aimed at increasing the trustworthiness of research. The current inquiry utilized the strategy of triangulation by comparing and contrasting data from one participant to the field of data collected from all participants. By doing so, theory development is based upon the lived experience of an accumulation of similar sport career transition experiences and is therefore of significant trustworthiness.

#### *Thick Description*

A detailed, or thick, description of the research elements is an additional way to increase the trustworthiness of the inquiry (Creswell, 1998). The strategy of thick description also allows for individuals analyzing the study to determine for themselves if findings may be transferred to similar research populations (Creswell, 1998).

### *Auditing*

As cited by Lincoln and Guba (1985) perhaps the most effective technique to increase a study's trustworthiness is the process of auditing. The audit process consists of continually reviewing documentation and adherence to the methodology selected by a peer auditor. In an attempt to strengthen trustworthiness, an auditor continually reviewed all aspects of the study. The auditor was provided with raw data, field notes, and emerging themes. As suggested, the researcher and the auditor met continually during the process of data analysis to review insights and address concerns.

## CHAPTER IV RESULTS - Social Influence as a Construct of Sport Career Transition

The purpose of this inquiry was to understand the lived experience of former National League Football (NFL) players' sport career transitions. Discussed in depth in Chapter Two, sport career transition (SCT) is defined as the physical and social changes an athlete experiences while transitioning to a level of sport differing from their current level of play (Baillie & Danish, 1992). To create a framework for understanding SCT, a systematic Grounded Theory was utilized to analyze data derived from participant questionnaires and interviews. With the goal of generating a theory of a process, action, or interaction, Grounded Theory uses individual participant experiences to shape the new framework created by the researcher (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For the current study, theoretical and snowball sampling strategies were employed. Participants were chosen based on the following three inclusion criterion: (1) Retired (or released) as an athlete from the NFL, (2) Not actively pursuing a career as a professional football player, and (3) Experienced the 5 points of athletic career transition:

1. Transition into sport
2. Transition to regional level sport
3. Transition from regional level sport to collegiate level sport
4. Transition from collegiate level to professional level sport
5. Transition from professional play to withdrawal from sport

With the aim of understanding the experience of SCT as lived by former NFL players, three constructs consisting of Social Influence, Social-Emotional Impact, and Transition Strategies were identified. Each theme is to be discussed in a separate chapter with properties of each theme to be identified and explored within those chapters. Data derived

directly from interviews were integrated throughout each of these chapters and are to be compared and contrasted with information obtained from the demographic questionnaire as was appropriate.

In this chapter, the first of the three themes, social influence, will be presented. As is consistent with a Grounded Theory approach, three corresponding properties comprising the experience of social influence during SCT were identified and will be discussed within this chapter. Properties of social influence identified were, Status, Connection to Community, and Time.

### **Social Influence as a Construct of Sport Career Transition (SCT)**

The experience of social influence was a theme reflected throughout the majority of stories shared by participants. Social influence is defined as a change in an individual's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviors that results from interaction with another individual or group (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Regardless of demographic factors, including time spent playing in the NFL, former players expressed feelings of a loss of a sense of self as defined by society and ultimately adopted by the participant during the transition to collegiate play as well as transition to professional play. As such, the theme of social influence will be discussed within the context of the properties of status, connection to community, and the role of time.

### **Status as a Property of Social Influence**

Beyond the world of professional sports, the uniqueness of the NFL career and participant feelings of status associated with being a player in America's most watched game impacted transition. The withdrawal from sport left a large number of participants feeling unable to gain the same sense of status as when they were an active player. This

was perhaps best reflected in the words of this participant:

“... and it’s [referring to his current job] nothin’ like the feeling of runnin’ out on that field and tryin’ to beat that guy across from you. It’s just not that feelin.’ No one’s cheerin’. No one’s yellin’ ya name. No one gives a crap about their insurance guy.”

The following quote also expressed a loss of feelings of pride and status:

“I’m retired now so I really don’t do much. Nothing to be super proud of anyway. Just a normal day. The day of a normal person. I guess I’m normal now huh?”

Feelings of a loss of status also took the form of the experience of a decline in physical body. While a loss of physical aptitude and athleticism was not reported by all, those who were retired from the NFL for longer periods of time acknowledged this decline in their physical self. Retired from the league for six years, one participant described his feelings regarding the loss of physical perfection:

“I used to think I could do anything. My body was perfect. I was fast. Unstoppable. I thought that for a long time. Even when I wasn’t playing anymore, I still worked out, kept things up. Then I realized. My body wasn’t gonna do that anymore. I could still lift, but I was never gonna be in the shape that I was. Of course that didn’t stop me from trying ya know (laughs). I thought one day the league might call and I’d be ready.”

This sentiment regarding the importance of maintaining their physical body in preparation of a return to play, mirrors literature that recency is a critical factor when exploring issues of pride in physical appearance and ability. More recently retired players either did not mention their physical selves at all or reported the maintenance of their

bodies. Former players withdrawn from the sport for a longer period of time, expressed the decline of their physical selves as a factor contributing to their experience of transition more frequently.

### **Connection to Community as a Property of Social Influence**

A career in sports is largely about a connection to community. Results indicated that community was comprised of more than a geographic region. In addition to a geographic area, participants reported feeling that the league, their specific team(s), and NFL fans in general represented by social media were each forms of community with which they felt connected. These feelings of connection to the larger community were reported by the majority of participants. Expressed as a sense of belonging and brotherhood, the first form of community was expressed by participants as a connection to the league as a whole. This connection was commonly expressed by statements similar to the following:

“People love football. I love football. I loved being a part of that machine and feeling like I was part of why people love the game.”

Highlighting the idea that a connection to the league as an organization is ultimately a connection to the global community of NFL fans, feelings of love for the game of football were also reflected in the emotions of several participant’s feelings of the love for their connection to their team as a second form of community.

“I miss those guys. Those guys are family. They are my family and that’s part of why it’s so tough to leave. You’re not just leavin’ a job you love, but guys you kinda love in a way.”

The expression of one’s team as a communal family was a common sentiment

among participants across a range of levels of play perhaps best expressed by the following statement:

“Leaving [school] was hard. I was excited, but it was like leaving something that was fun and not done. Not all the guys were going somewhere and that was hard too. Like breaking-up or something. I was happy for me and feelin’ the struggle other guys were having [not making it to the NFL].”

These feelings were also shared by several other participants:

“It’s a one sided relationship. You love the game, but you don’t get anything back. I think that’s part of why you have love for your team. It is a relationship and they [teammates] can actually be a family to you. Not to mention the time you spend with them. Travel. Practice. It’s constant. Like a family.”

“Football is a family, ya know. It’s a real family. Ya play for the guy next to ya if ya love it. It’s hard when that’s over.”

Irrespective of demographic differences, the connectedness former players felt and in some cases, continue to feel to not only the NFL as a league, but their teammates as well, was a theme that evoked a range of emotion in participants. Most commonly, feelings of nostalgia followed by loss. While an athlete’s tie to their role as both a football player and teammate provided them with a sense of community extending beyond that of a geographic region, it also provided them with a sense of self. When the sport role was lost, denial was the common reaction. Difficulty with adjustment to the loss of a daily tie to the sport community was a standout theme in the experience of SCT.

Participants reported feeling a sense of connection to NFL fans via a social media community. While not a geographic community, the impact of social media forums on

the NFL athlete was greatly felt and was reported as impacting their experience of SCT. Such mediums transcend location and were reported by participants to allow NFL fans to form a type of community bonded by a love of professional football and its players. Social media forums such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, allow sport fans the opportunity to directly connect to athletes at three levels of play: (1) Transition to collegiate level of play, (2) Transition to professional level of play, and (3) Transition to withdraw from sport. Although at times relaying messages of praise and encouragement, society at large was also reported to send messages of judgment, ridicule, and even hate. This modern day connection between players and fans was described several times by participants during the interview process.

“I see it with my own sons who play college ball. One of them is always worried about how many Twitter followers he has and checks that after every game.”

A similar sentiment was also expressed:

“When I got traded I got some good messages [on Twitter], but I got some bad ones too. Some people said ‘welcome’ and others said ‘we paid too much for you’ or ‘you better be worth it.’ Like I’m something that they themselves bought at the store. At some point ya get used to it, but uh, some people are nasty.”

The treatment of athletes by football fans as objects or individuals separate from the common man, contributes to the ease at which the public at large freely scorn today’s athletes. The ability of fans to directly contact players via social media also contributes to the development of the participant’s tie to the sport role.

“... like no one cared anymore. No more love for [Participant’s nickname]. It wasn’t exactly overnight, but it felt like it. Tweets flew away.”

Another former NFL player described his connection to social media and the sport role:

“People used to recognize me around town. I used to get messages and fan mail. Eventually it ended and now the only person who recognizes me is my ma (laughs)... I used to be somebody. People used to want to know what I was doing.”

Whether described as a connection to fans via social media, teammates, or the NFL in general, participants described the experience of SCT as the gain and loss of multiple forms of community. Ultimately, this connection shaped the way many former NFL players saw themselves and their value as an athlete. During times of transition, specifically the transition to collegiate level of play, the transition to professional level of sport, and withdraw from sport, this connection was reported to have a greater influence on former NFL players’ experience of transition.

### **Time as a Property of Social Influence**

Time was a property of social influence identified by the data. A career in the NFL was found to be time limited, unpredictable, and dominated by youth. Success was concluded to require the dedication of all of the athlete’s time to the devotion of their craft.

“It’s not like we have breaks. For a longtime, I didn’t even know what that [a break] was. They call it an ‘off-season,’ but there’s nothin’ off about it.”

Another former NFL player echoed this by saying:

“People think just because we ‘play’ and it’s called a ‘game’ that it’s not REAL work. Like just because we aren’t in a cubicle or something we aren’t working.

People don't know. They can't relate to what we do."

The devotion of an athlete's time to the pursuit of attaining and maintaining a career in the NFL was found to be a unique aspect of a sport career.

"As an athlete, being an athlete is all you do. That's how you get to be an athlete."

This myopic focus on the goal of being a professional athlete was experienced by several participants who stated, "... all I did was workout, eat, and then workout again," and "It's a full time job. Stayin' in shape. Films. Runnin' plays. It never ends. There's always something' you could be doin' to give ya an edge." The prevalence of a routine was also expressed by participants in the following ways, "The schedule is crazy. Uh, everything is planned out and ya just do whatcha gotta do. It's a grind.," and "When I got cut, it was like, so now what do I do with my day? For a while I just kept doin' what I did when I was playin'. Gettin' used to a 'normal' day was tough."

The impact of a lifetime of routine contributed to difficulty experienced by former NFL athletes during the transition to withdraw from sport. Participants reported feelings of discomfort, confusion, and a general sense of uneasiness when routine was disrupted by retirement. Contributing to the loss of a sense of self, issues related to time and structure greatly impacted the SCT experience.

### **Summary of Social Influence as a Construct of Sport Career Transition**

The influence of society on the experience of SCT as experienced by former NFL player is a central theme of this phenomenon. As described by participants, the experience of transition from one level of sport to the next in either direction can be wrought with emotion, stress, and confusion. Data suggested that one aspect of the

experience of SCT contributing to these emotions is the influence of society. Ideas and feelings about the self were found to be both constructed by society and athletes themselves resulting in varying levels of difficulty when withdrawing from sport. Generalizations about the role of “athlete” were concluded to be influenced by social rules and expectations.

Shifts in the level of identification with the socially constructed sport role during SCT, was a property consistent with the theme of social influence. Tied to various forms of community by name recognition as well as by social media, former NFL players were commonly connected to status and therefore experienced difficulty when status was no longer available. The opinion of the other was found to be a critical aspect of status.

The experience of social influence was strengthened by the factor of time. Time as an identified property of social influence was predominately defined by the lack of time. As data showed, achieving the role of professional athlete in the NFL required a level of focus and discipline to sport often to the detriment of other aspects of life. As a result, the life of an NFL player is one of schedule and routine. While the average career in the NFL is brief, data reflected the impact on the lifestyle of an athlete. Consequently, when faced with transition, more specifically withdraw from sport, former NFL athletes experienced difficulty adjusting to the lack of structure and routine associated with a non-athletic life.

## CHAPTER V RESULTS - Social-Emotional Impact as a Construct of Sport Career Transition

In the previous chapter, social influence as a factor of former National Football League (NFL) players' lived experience of sport career transition (SCT) was discussed. Properties of social influence were identified as status, connection to community, and time. Chapter four argued that during times of transition to collegiate play, the construct of social influence and its properties were assets as experienced by former NFL players. However, during the transition to withdraw from sport, social influence was argued to contribute to the difficulties experienced by former players. Properties of social influence were found to both positively and negatively affect the experience of transition to professional play of former NFL athletes.

This chapter presents the second of three identified constructs of SCT, Social-Emotional Influence. While social-emotional health is commonly associated with childhood development, the social-emotional health of adults is equally as imperative. Defined as the expression of integrated feelings about the self, others, and the world (Parrott, 2002), the social-emotional impact the former NFL player experiences during SCT was a commonly reflected in the data. Further analysis suggests that the construct of social-emotional influence consists of two properties: Psychological Impact and Emotional Impact.

### **Social-Emotional Impact as a Construct of Sport Career Transition**

#### **Psychological Impact as a Property of Social-Emotional Impact**

The psychological property of the social-emotional impact of SCT as experienced by former NFL athletes, is comprised of thoughts regarding transition. Data revealed

former NFL players' thoughts were primarily centered on perceptions of the thoughts of the other. Therefore, thoughts were not about the experience of transition as a whole, but rather thoughts reflective of what the participant believed other individuals were thinking about the transition. This result further confirmed findings that the SCT of former NFL players is largely influenced by society and the role of the other.

Interview data suggested that judgment was a primary element of the property of psychological impact of SCT. During the transition to professional play as well as while acting as an active player in the NFL, former players believed they were being judged. This feeling was commonly described when discussing fan commentary on social media:

“... people said, ‘we paid too much for you’ or ‘you better be worth it.’ Like I’m something that they themselves [fans] brought at the store. ...People are nasty.”

Several other participants also described the experience of being judged during the transition to professional sport by saying, “People would throw things. I got hate mail. You’d look up in the crowd and see [negative] signs.” And “I’d have a good game and I was a great player. I’d have a so/so game and people would be pissed. I’d have a terrible game and I was the devil reincarnate.” Another participant stated, “That’s just sports. People either love you or hate you. Ya gotta get a thick skin to play this game.”

Adding to the perception of being judged by fans and society in general, were thoughts of being judged by individuals with whom they had personal relationships.

Interview data revealed that during the experience to professional level of sport participants thought they were being judged by those close to them. For example:

“Yeah, I cared what people thought. Coaches, players. It matters. My paycheck depended on what those guys thought.”

One participant reported his experience with teammates by stating, “Guys give ya hard time. We laugh, and sometimes it’s actually funny, but we beat ourselves up about it [bad plays] too. Sometimes ya just wanna punch ‘em [teammates].” Another former player from a long line of NFL players described his experience of judgment by saying, “My dad was the worst. He’d raz me all the time. If I messed-up, I heard about it.”

Beyond societal judgment during the transition to professional sport, data analysis also suggested that thoughts of judgment took place during the experience of transition to withdraw from sport.

“I remember one a\*\* hole reporter said ‘it’s about time’ when I got cut. I still remember that.”

Data indicated that several other participants had similar memories of being judged during the experience of withdraw from sport. One stated:

“My own local hometown paper reported that I was ‘finished.’ I thought, finished? I didn’t want to be finished. Like people were implying that I was uh, dead.”

Another former NFL player described his thoughts:

“Ya know, people say this and that. It used to bother me. You grow outta that. My friends gave me a hard time. Those guys. They had their jokes about it [retirement].”

Psychological impact as a property of the social-emotional impact of SCT also took the form of believing that the experience of transition could not be understood by those not living a life of professional sport. The uniqueness of the occupation of player in the NFL was reported to contribute to perceptions of a lack of understanding of the

experience. As a result, former NFL players' experience of transition to withdrawn from sport was psychologically isolating for the majority of participants. When asked if he reached out to anyone when experiencing difficulty with retirement, a former player stated:

“Not really. I mean who would understand? It's not like this whole thing [playing in the NFL] is normal. I guess it's more normal for me because ya know, my family plays [in the NFL], but most people don't get how hard ya work and what you're workin' for.”

Supporting this finding, another former player stated:

“This is a great life, but it's a tough life too. I don't think a lot of people get that it's tough too.”

A similar sentiment confirmed these thoughts by saying:

“People see money and girls and all that stuff. They don't see the sweat. The times that aren't so great. When ya get hurt and then hurt all of the time. They just see the pretty package.”

A lack of understanding of the experience of the withdraw from sport was further described by following statement:

‘I mean, it was just me. Just me with my house and nothing to do. People don't wanna hear about that. Poor lonely jock.’

The psychological impact of SCT as experienced by former NFL players identifies this property of social-emotional impact as a critical aspect of the transition experience. Whether socially reinforced or derived from those in the athlete's inner circle, the perception held by players that they are being judged and cannot be

understood, should not be underestimated when discussing transition. Particularly as an aspect of withdraw from sport, the psychological impact of transition was identified by the data to be a part of former NFL players' SCT experience.

### **Emotional Impact as a Property of Social-Emotional Impact**

In addition to a psychological impact, an emotional impact was also identified as a property of the social-emotional impact of SCT. Emotion is defined as a natural instinctive state of mind deriving from one's circumstances, mood, or relationships with others (Parrott, 2000). In an occupation where an individual is competing for his job each week, it is not surprising that data indicated feelings of stress and anxiety as emotions experienced during SCT.

Study results suggested that former NFL players experience feelings of anxiety and stress when transitioning to a professional level of play. The achievement of a lifelong goal, former NFL players expressed anxiety and nervousness at the attainment of their goal. Several participants expressed that the transition to professional level of play brought with it the realization that attaining the status of NFL player would likely be the ultimate height of their career. This experience was described in the following statement:

“Playing in the NFL was always the goal. Always. One game was called the best of my life and I thought, yeah, maybe it was and now every other game is downhill.”

A second participant described his feelings during transition to professional level of sport in a similar way:

“I remember my first game. We all do. It was an honor just to be in the stadium wearing the uniform. I was nervous. Anyone who isn't is just lying. We're

living the dream and you could wake-up anytime.”

Emotional impact as a property of social-emotional impact also took the form of feelings of loss and anger when experiencing the transition to withdraw from sport.

Whether players reported choosing to retire, retired due to injury, or were dropped from their team, feelings of anger were part of the experience of withdraw for the majority of participants. Reflective of the emotional impact of anger during transition to withdraw from sport, a former player stated:

“I was pissed. Yeah, I was pissed. I worked my whole life for this [to be a NFL player] and then they just let me go?”

While another participant said, “I didn’t know what to be other than mad,” another shared his experience of being cut:

“I reported to practice and was told that I was cut [from the roster] so yeah, uh, I was mad. Real mad.”

Furthermore, one participant reported feelings of anger toward himself:

“...even angry at myself. Like I could have done more. Worked harder. Shown them I could’ve been the best.”

While anger was a piece of the immediate experience of withdraw from sport for former NFL players, anxiety was revealed as the emotion that followed during this time of SCT. As discussed above, data suggested that anxiety is an aspect of the experience of professional play taking the form of stress regarding level of performance. During the transition to withdraw from sport however, results indicate that feelings of anxiety are derived from the unknown of what comes next.

Achieving and maintaining a career in the NFL requires an almost myopic focus

on athletic skills and knowledge as discussed in chapter four. While this is prudent in pursuit of the goal, when the goal is reached and the sport career has ended participants felt anxious about the next part of their lives. As a career in the NFL often does not allow for the acquisition of skills beyond football, anxiety ensues as the following participant reported:

“When that happened [being released from his NFL contract] I was worried. I never did anything, but play ball.”

Another former player described his anxiety by saying:

“I didn’t give it any thought. What would come after [the NFL]. Then I was there and it was like, oh shit.”

A participant who also has sons who play football and works with former athletes in transition stated:

“I see it all the time. Guys think there’re invincible... They often don’t have other skills and don’t know what else to do.”

Former NFL athletes transitioning to withdraw from sport were found to experience a great deal of anxiety once the end of their sporting career was accepted. Analysis of data identified the emotions of stress and anxiety as the two most significant feelings of the property of emotional impact.

### **Summary of Social-Emotional Impact as a Construct of Sport Career Transition**

Review of interview data suggest an impact of a social-emotional nature experienced by former NFL players during SCT. As such, social-emotional impact was concluded to be a construct of SCT. Two properties of social-emotional impact as a construct were identified: (1) Psychological Impact and (2) Emotional Impact.

Psychological Impact as a property of social-emotional impact was concluded to be an aspect of former NFL players' lived experience of SCT during the transition to professional sport and transition to withdraw from sport. A grounded theory analysis of the data revealed that the perception of being judged by society via social media and news reports contributed to the psychological impact of transition. In addition to thoughts of being judged by society, participants also reported judgment from those with whom they maintained close relationships. Psychological impact was also concluded to take the form of not being understood. During the time of withdraw from sport, former NFL players reported believing that they were isolated in their unique experience of professional sport and transition. This belief contributed to second property of social-emotional impact, emotional impact of SCT. Transition to professional level of play was found to be correlated with feelings of stress and anxiety as a result of an emphasis on occupational performance. Emotions concluded to be related to the transition to withdraw from sport were anger and loss followed by anxiety.

## CHAPTER VI RESULTS - Transition Strategies as a Construct of Sport Career Transition

Thus far, Social Influence and Social-Emotional Impact have been presented as constructs of former National Football League (NFL) players' lived experience of sport career transition (SCT). This chapter will present the final of three constructs, the category identified as transition strategies as they pertain to former NFL players' experience of SCT. First, a review of strategies employed by players during a given transition period will be presented. Properties of transition strategies identified as, Support, Resources, and Coping Strategies will then be discussed.

### **Transition Strategies as a Factor of Sport Career Transition**

The lived experience of SCT by former NFL athletes was found to be influenced by transition strategies. Defined as the conscious actions, reactions, and plans in preparation for or reaction to change (Wylleman, 2002), the experience of SCT was grounded in the availability and implementation of various transition strategies.

### **Support as a Property of Transition Strategies**

Support was identified by the data as a property of transition strategies. Results indicate that varying levels and types of support were associated as either positive or negative during a given SCT. An analysis of the interview content revealed two sub-properties of support to be presented: (1) Personal-Social Support and (2) Professional Support.

Personal-Social support is comprised of positive support and negative support. A distinct difference in type of personal-social support felt by former NFL players at the time of SCT impacted their experience. Participants reported that positive personal-social

support, whether in the form of personal support or community support, positively impacted their experience of SCT at the collegiate level of play and beyond. Identified by the data as an aspect of transition relating to adjustment to the new level of play, participants overwhelmingly experienced a greater ease of transition when able to positively identify a system of personal-social support. Four participants specifically described this result. For example, the experience of familial support during the transition to collegiate level of sport was described as:

“They [his family] were so excited for me to play ball at that [college] level. Excited for me to be there [college] at all really. It was uh, as big for them [his family] as it was for me I think. I mean, my mom helped me move in, came to my games, and uh, all that mom stuff.”

A similar sentiment was echoed regarding the experience of familial support during transition:

“She [the participant’s mother] was always there. She’s a tough lady. Always had my back. She was my person. Ya know, the person always lookin’ out for me and makin’ sure I was okay. Yeah, my mom for sure.”

Interview data revealed that not only can family be a support during times of SCT, but they can also be a motivating factor of support. A former NFL player described this concept in the following way:

“I worried about my family. I felt like I had to do good for them, so I did. They helped me get to this place [the NFL] and I couldn’t let them down. I played because I love football, but I played for them too. They probably didn’t know it, but they made me better.”

Another described how his father, a former collegiate football player himself, and his brother, a current player in the NFL, were sources of positive support during times of transition:

“My family is tight. I had a couple of chats [regarding transition] uh, with my dad. My brother [too].”

However, while data revealed that the majority of former NFL players felt that they had positive support from their family, data also showed that negative support can be an aspect of SCT, specifically the transition to withdraw from sport. When asked if he was able to reach out to anyone other than his family or if anyone reached out to him during transition, a participant replied:

“Not really. I mean who would understand? It’s not like this whole thing is normal. I guess it’s more normal for me because ya know, my family plays [football], but most people don’t get how hard ya work and what you’re workin’ for.”

Another former player discussed his experience with his peer group:

“Who would I talk to about stuff I was going through? Guys on the team? I’m competing with them. I’m not gonna tell them that I’m hurt or whatever. That gives them room to take my spot. They were my boys (laughs), but uh, we didn’t talk about that stuff.”

Although data reflected that personal-social support was overall a positive and highly helpful aspect of SCT, data also revealed a glaring lack of professional support at the time of transition. Not one participant mentioned seeking support from a professional such as a therapist or sport psychologist during times of difficulty with SCT. While

participants described feelings of depression, loss of a sense of self, stress, and anxiety, data did not suggest that any professional support was offered or received. While questions specifically pertaining to the option of seeking professional support during difficulty with SCT, data did not reflect any indication that it was an option for participants.

In summary, as a property of transition strategies, support was both a positive and negative contributor to the lived experience of SCT of former NFL players. Personal-social support, such as the support of family, played a predominantly positive role in transition to collegiate level of play, transition to professional level of play, and during the transition to withdraw from sport. However, data highlighted the lack of professional support across all SCT experiences, even during times of emotional distress felt by former NFL players during the transition to withdraw from sport.

### **Resources as a Property of Transition Strategies**

Resources are a key aspect of any successful transition. However, as this study demonstrates, resources are an especially integral part of the SCT experience for former NFL players. In a given circumstance, resources may include financial resources, psychological resources, educational or employment resources, etc... However, results indicated that formal resources such as these are not utilized by former NFL players during times of SCT. Alternatively, data showed that transition resources were perceived as unnecessary and in some cases a source of weakness and shame. Demographic data revealed this attitude was significantly more prevalent in participants under the age of 35 years. Regarding the use of resources, former NFL player age 30 stated:

“Like a shrink? Nah, that would never happen. If guys found out, it would never

end. Nah, never.”

A similar stigma with regards to utilizing formal resources was expressed as:

“It [formal help with transition] never really crossed my mind. It’s just not my thing. I was taught not to talk about that kinda stuff. Just be a man and deal with it [difficulties].”

While another participant, age 49 years, did not employ formal resources during his experience of SCT, he did not hold the stigma associated with their use. When asked about the use of resources, he stated:

“I probably should have. Didn’t though. I didn’t know how to go about it really. I think it would have been good though. Made things easier in some ways. Who knows?”

As reported in this chapter, data revealed a lack of psychological support for former NFL players experiencing SCT. An analysis of the data also showed a lack of psychological resources available for participants during times of distress caused by a specific SCT. However, results showed the utilization of such resources by younger generations of former players to be associated with a negative stigma. While negative perceptions of resources were not indicated by former NFL players above the age of 35 years, the use of such resources were not an aspect of participant transition experience.

### **Coping Strategies as a Property of Transition Strategies**

Transitions often require the implementation of coping strategies. While many coping strategies are considered to be adaptive thus reducing the stressor, maladaptive strategies, or strategies which increase the stressor, were shown to be a more prevalent aspect of the former NFL player’s SCT experience. Maladaptive coping is described as

non-coping or a lack of coping behavior. Analysis of data suggests that former NFL players utilized maladaptive coping strategies during their experience of SCT. This was shown to be true during the time of transition to professional play and overwhelmingly true during the transition to withdraw from sport. The experience of entering the NFL was anxiety provoking for two participants. When asked to describe his feelings, a former NFL player responded:

“I remember thinking, I made it. I really made it. I was so excited and then, later, I thought, well, now what? This [becoming a professional football player] is the goal. What I worked for. I remember thinking, it can only go downhill from here. It’s scary. Living your dream and then being nervous just waiting for it to end. How would it end? When would it end? I had so much anxiety with it.”

When asked how he dealt with these feelings of anxiety, he replied:

“I just did. Deal with it I mean. There’s no time to do anything else but just deal with it.”

As demonstrated, by this participant’s “just deal with it” coping strategy for feelings of anxiety during his transition to professional level of play are clearly maladaptive and psychologically unhealthy. While he was one of two participants to describe these feelings during transition to professional play, several participants reported adopting a “just deal with it” mentality to cope with nerves, stress, and anxiety while actively playing in the NFL:

“Ya’d never know it, but I used to get so nervous before games. Freaked out that I’d fuck-up. Ya just get it done though. Stuff it down and play.”

Another participant expressed similar feelings:

“You put your whole body on the line. Everything. Every time. That was our thing. That doesn’t mean that you aren’t worried about it being your last game. Every time. Every time I worried it was my last game. If people only knew. We get it done regardless. Every time, we ignore it and get it done.”

Data also showed that this maladaptive coping strategy was most often employed during the experience of transition to withdraw from sport perhaps best reflected by this statement:

“When I got cut, I was in denial. I didn’t want to talk about it or think about it, but really, it’s all I ever thought about. I didn’t talk to anyone about it and just pretended it wasn’t happening.”

Reflecting upon the time of transition to withdraw from sport, a former player stated:

“I was always taught that men just deal with things and move on so when I didn’t make the roster, I just dealt with it.”

Analysis of interview data revealed substance use as a second maladaptive coping strategy. Two of fourteen participants reported substance use during transition to withdraw from sport. Substance use was found to be correlated with career ending injuries. As reported by one participant, the use of alcohol became a coping strategy for navigating feelings of boredom and confusion during retirement from the NFL.

“It’s like you go from being so busy and never having anytime, to only having time. I couldn’t keep-up my normal routine [due to injury] so I got bored. I started drinkin’ with buddies to fill my time and then just kept drinkin’.”

Further supporting this finding, substance use as a maladaptive coping strategy to deal with a career ending injury was described as the following:

“I was pissed. Super pissed. I felt that I got cheated. [laughs] When I got mad I’d hit the bottle. I got mad about it a lot. [laughs] That probably wasn’t the best way to deal with it huh?”

Maladaptive coping strategies were predominantly identified to be a part of the former NFL player’s transition experience to withdraw from sport. Participant’s overwhelmingly reported adopting maladaptive strategy of denial. Data indicated that the most common attitude towards feelings of anxiety and stress due to transition to professional play and transition to withdraw from sport was the maladaptive coping strategy of “just deal with it.” An aspect of the experience of transition to withdraw from sport, substance use, specifically alcohol, was shown to have a relationship with transition when transition was initiated by injury.

### **Summary of Transition Strategies as a Factor of Sport Career Transition**

Grounded Theory analysis of demographic and interview data identified transition strategies as a factor of the lived experience of former NFL players’ SCT. Consequent analysis revealed three properties of transition strategies: (1) Support, (2) Resources, and (3) Coping Strategies. The experience of transition to collegiate level of play was shown to be associated with positive support from former NFL player’s family. Specifically personal-social support reported by participants during this transition was perceived as contributing to a positive transition experience. However, support during the transition to professional play was reported to have both a positive and negative impact. Former NFL players experienced greater feelings of pressure during professional play as a result of personal-social support. Support as a property of transition strategies, specifically personal-social support, also inspired feelings of motivation in participants during active

professional play. Most significantly, research findings indicate a lack of professional support across all former NFL players' experiences of SCT.

Resources were identified as an additional property of transition strategies. Data demonstrated that resources are not considered a major aspect of former NFL players' lived experience of transition. Analysis of interview and demographic data indicated a relationship between age of former NFL players and their perception of professional resources. Participants aged 35 years and younger were shown to hold negative perceptions of professional psychological resources. As a result, professional psychological services were not reported as an aspect of the lived experience of SCT at any level. Participants over the age of 35 years did not report negative feelings of professional psychological resources. However, participants over the age of 35 did not report the use of professional resources during transition indicating that they were not a part of the experience of SCT.

Coping strategies were identified as the final property of transition strategies as a factor of SCT. Data suggested that maladaptive coping strategies are more often a part of the experience of SCT than adaptive coping strategies are activated. This was shown to be true of two sport career transitions. During transition to professional level of play, former NFL players employed the maladaptive coping strategy of denial when experiencing feelings of stress and anxiety. Participants also reported denial as a maladaptive coping strategy during the experience of transition to withdraw from sport. When such a transition was precipitated by injury, the maladaptive coping strategy of substance use, specifically alcohol, was reported to be an aspect of transition in two of fourteen SCT experiences.

## CHAPTER VII - DISCUSSION

This study explored the lived experience of former NFL players' (N=14) sport career transitions. A Grounded Theory analysis of data derived from both a demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews revealed three major constructs identified to be aspects of SCT: Social Influence (Chapter Four), Social-Emotional Impact (Chapter Five), and Transition Strategies (Chapter Six). This chapter will present major findings regarding the experiences of sport career transition (SCT) by former National Football League (NFL) players. A brief review of each of these categories and their properties will be presented in the following subsections.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

#### **Social Influence as a Construct of Sport Career Transition**

Social influence was identified to be a theme reflected throughout participant interview data. Social Influence theorists Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament (1971) define social influence as a change in an individual's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviors that result from interaction with another individual or group. Findings from this study revealed that irrespective of demographic characteristics, including time spent in the sporting role, the social influence properties of status, connection to community, and time, influenced former NFL players' experience of sport career transition (SCT).

A review of SCT literature revealed that the majority of research has focused primarily on social influence as an aspect of SCT during the transition to withdraw from sport. However, the current study revealed that social influence may be a significant factor in the experience of transition to collegiate level of play as well as the transition to professional level of play. The properties of status and connection to community were

especially significant contributors to this finding and are to be discussed below.

Identified as a property of social influence, status was recounted by former NFL participants as impacting their experience of SCT. Loss of pride in occupation when transitioning from a player in America's most loved game to a retired NFL player was commonly reported. The aspect of status also took the form of pride in physical appearance and athleticism. Feelings related to the physical body were correlated with length of retirement. Participants retired for longer periods of time were more likely to discuss a decline in their physical self than those who more recently transitioned to withdraw from sport. As a result of the emphasis placed upon the perfection of the physical self as required by the occupation of NFL athlete, feelings related to the perception of one's body were included in the property of status. Additionally, this was reflected in the discussion of the physical self by participants during interviews.

Connection to community was also identified as a property of social influence. Due to the high visibility of athletes as a whole and the NFL players specifically, conscious and subconscious connections to the community at large is inevitable. Community was reported by participants as an entity transcending a geographic location. Former NFL players expressed community as a league, a team(s), and a community of professional football fans as well as their geographic city. The current study revealed that for former NFL players experiencing the transition to withdraw from sport, connection to community took the forms of a connection to the league as a whole, connection to their individual team, and largely, a connection to the title or role of "NFL player" as constructed by society. Congruent with Social Influence Theory, results suggest that this identification with the sport role greatly impacted the transition to collegiate level of play,

professional level of play, and withdraw from sport.

Time as a property of social influence contributes to the construction of the sport role. The life of an athlete is highly rigorous, scheduled, and controlled. As a result, there is very little time, if any, to develop other roles. This was supported by the data derived from participant interviews. Time also contributed to the intensity at which their sport roles developed as well as contributed to feelings of confusion and discomfort during the experience to withdraw from sport. While the element of time is not often an occupational concern, for the former NFL player, time was demonstrated to be of the utmost of importance.

The influence of society was identified as a major theme when exploring the experiences for former NFL players' experience of SCT. The properties of status, connection to community, and time, each contribute to the impact of social influence in related and often interconnected ways. As discussed in chapter four, social influence is defined as a change in an individual's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviors that result from interaction with an individual or group (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Differing from the concept of conformity or authority, social influence requires an actual shift in feelings and behavior. Fitting for the current inquiry, Social Influence Theory was formally introduced by French and Raven (1959) as a means to understand workplace behavior.

Self-Categorization is a major concept of Social Identity Theory. Defined as the process by which the self is a reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications (Stets & Burke, 2000). Self-categorization may take place in two stages:

Evaluative Categorization and Psychological Categorization (Stets & Burke, 2000). The evaluative stage of the categorization process is the aspect of allowing ones self-esteem to be tied to a particular socially constructed role. Data showed that this took place relatively early in the life of the current study's participants. Consistent with psychosocial development discussed in chapter II, interviews revealed that as early as high school, former NFL players began to allow the opinions and expectations of the other to impact the way they felt about themselves. However, data also revealed that former NFL players increasing valued the opinion of the other and society in general as they transitioned to collegiate level of play and professional level of play. Social Identity Theory states that this aspect of the data reflected a psychological commitment to the role. It is through this process that an identity is formed (Stets & Burke, 2000).

While the development of this identity proved to be of benefit during the transition into regional level of play, former NFL players reported mixed feelings regarding the role during times of collegiate and professional transitions. Identity theory holds that the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role and the self-incorporation of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance (Stets & Burke, 2000). It was this aspect of social influence that both positively and negatively affected the experience of former NFL players' transition to collegiate and professional level of play. Positive experiences were reported to include feelings of status, pride in the role, and a connection to one's community and environment. However, experience of negative emotions related to the construction and internalization of the role of collegiate and NFL athlete felt by participants included feelings of pressure, anxiety, and stress as related to the maintenance of the role as an

active player. Such feelings are consistent with the aspect of role identity in which one has qualitatively committed to the identity of collegiate and /or NFL player.

Identity commitment is comprised of two aspects: Quantitative and Qualitative (Stets & Burke, 2000). Quantitative commitment is primarily comprised of the number of individuals to whom one is tied to an identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). As such, the greater the identity was embedded in the social structure (i.e. the university or the NFL as an organization), the higher the probability of salience. The strength of the one's tie to the other is said to be its qualitative aspect of identity commitment (Stets & Burke, 2000). When salience becomes a characteristic of a particular identity (i.e. football or NFL player) rather than the situation (i.e. football practice or game), the identity becomes problematic. This was reflected by the experiences of former NFL player's reported negative feelings and emotions during the transition to collegiate and professional levels of play as described above.

Having a particular role identity means acting to fulfill the expectations of the role (i.e. NFL player), coordinating and negotiating interaction with role partners (i.e. teammates), manipulating the environment to control the resources for which the role has responsibility (Stets & Burke, 2000). This particular aspect of Social Identity Theory was similar to the aspect of social influence that contributed to the experience of emotional difficulty for former NFL players during the transition to withdraw from sport. Feelings of denial and loss of the role they filled as a professional athlete were felt by former players at the time of retirement. This was found to be true irrespective of the circumstances that led to retirement from the NFL and well as the level of control over the transition to withdraw from sport. Social Identity Theory identifies this as salience

hierarchy or the choice of role an individual will enact in any given situation when one or more role is appropriate (Stets & Burke, 2000). Applied to the experience of former NFL players during transition to withdraw from sport, participants unknowingly reverted to enacting the role of NFL athlete in a situation when the role was no longer appropriate as a retired or former player thus causing feelings of discomfort and negative emotions.

### **Social-Emotional Impact as a Construct of Sport Career Transition**

Former NFL players identified an impact of a social-emotional nature when experiencing the SCT of transition to professional level of play and transition to withdraw from sport. As discussed in chapter five, social-emotional impact is defined as the expression of integrated feelings about the self, others, and the world (Parrott, 2000). This construct was identified as having two properties: Psychological Impact (thoughts) and Emotional Impact (feelings) of transition.

The psychological impact experienced by former NFL players as a result of sport career transition consisted primarily of thoughts of being judged and misunderstood. Largely influenced by the perceptions of the other, the transition to professional level of play was experienced by former NFL athletes as being judged. Whether judgment was presented in the form of social media messages, fans attending a game, or people in their lives such as friends or coaches, becoming an NFL player was associated with the perception of being judged on the basis of performance. As a result of this emphasis of on performance, former NFL players also began to become aware that they were being objectified by society, which contributed to thoughts of being judged. This also contributed to the development and increased strength of the socially constructed sport role discussed in chapter four. Such results indicate that players adopt the social role in

part to deflect perceptions of judgment. By doing so, players give themselves the opportunity to allow judgments to be made upon the role rather than the personal or true self. This was also found to be true during the experience of withdraw from sport.

While the uniqueness of the occupation of player in the NFL has many qualities to be celebrated, it was also correlated with thoughts of being psychologically isolated when withdrawing from sport. During withdraw former NFL players expressed thoughts of being misunderstood as a result of the uniqueness of the athletic career. Retired players believed that individuals around them were not capable of fully understanding their experience of withdraw from sport. Although people retire from their careers every day, a very small percentage of those individuals have a true understanding of the process of retiring from a career in the NFL. Defined by briefness of career, social tie, and a lack of control, retirement from the NFL is exceptionally different from the average American's retirement experience. Evidence of this is further supported by participant's identification preference as the current study revealed that former NFL players prefer to be referred to as "former" NFL player rather than "retired" NFL player.

The property of emotional impact of sport career transition identified new findings in the field of sport psychology. Parrott (2000) defines emotions as a natural instinctive state of mind deriving from one's circumstances, mood, or relationships with others. Analysis of interview data revealed the new finding suggesting that the emotion of anxiety is associated with the experience of transition to professional level of play. Former NFL players expressed this feeling as being associated with reaching the height of their professional career and the achievement of a lifetime goal. While players were confident in their athletic skills, the thought that they had reached their peak by just

becoming an NFL player was anxiety provoking. Feelings of anxiety were exacerbated when perceived as playing the “game of their lives” as this sentiment was associated with the decline of their sporting abilities going forward. Although a small percentage of former NFL players expressed such feelings, results related to the relationship between anxiety and transition to professional level of sport were considered significant as it was a potentially groundbreaking contribution to the field. While not all participants experienced anxiety as a result of achieving their goal of professional athlete, this finding was the first of its kind in professional sport literature and so it was deemed a significant reporting. An important experience of the SCT process, anxiety provoking feelings that one had reached not only the height of their career, but possibly their lives, is a finding relevant to the study.

The emotional impact of transition to withdraw from sport as experienced by former NFL athletes was lived as feelings of anger and loss, followed by stress and anxiety. Feelings of anger were most closely related to career ending injuries. When the transition to withdraw from sport was initiated by injury, former NFL players experienced feelings of anger. This result was concluded to be associated with feelings of a lack of control over environment. The emotions of stress and anxiety closely followed the emotion of anger when moving through the process of withdraw from sport. These emotions were concluded to be a result of a lack of knowledge as to what the next phase of life would be. The focus needed to maintain a career in the NFL leaves athletes without the time or desire to plan for the future. Due to the briefness of the athletic career, professional players withdraw from sport at the average age of 33 years. As such, planning for retirement is often a secondary concern to performance or ignored

completely. A lack of control over the timing of retirement also contributed to feelings of stress and anxiety regarding the next phase of life during the transition to withdraw from sport.

A career in professional sports, specifically the NFL, is performance based. Pressure in the NFL to meet and even exceed expectations of performance are unlike that of any other profession. Planning for the future is an often a stressful and anxiety provoking task for any individual transitioning to retirement however, given the age, lack of control, and lack of a plan for the next phase of life, NFL player in particular, have a difficult time.

The rate of injury in the NFL is estimated to be 100% (Coakley, 2001). For a player in the NFL, injury is not a matter of if, but rather when will they experience injury and to what extent will the injury have on their professional career. However, the commitment to a life as an NFL player has become synonymous with ignoring this fact further contributing to the impact of an injury. As suggested by results of the current inquiry, when an injury is career ending, the social-emotional impact greatly influences the experience of withdraw from sport.

Literature in the area of sport career ending injuries is limited. Research is even further limited when narrowed to the impact of career ending injuries on the NFL player. However, it is estimated that between 14 and 46% of professional athletes retire from sport due to a career ending injury (Pitts & Popovich, 1994). It can be safely assumed that the NFL athlete would lie on the latter end of this statistic due to the physically violent nature of the sport. The process of retiring from sport due to circumstances beyond one's control is referred to as involuntary retirement or forced exit. Discussed by Taylor and

Ogilvie (1994) as the result of an athlete being injured, released, or deselected from sport due to reaching a chronological age or state that makes him less efficient during games, forced exit is potentially devastating to former players.

Supporting the finding that involuntary withdraw from sport results in a greater social-emotional impact that results from voluntary retirement, literature suggests that anxiety often occurs due to the fear that a satisfying second career is possible (Lavallee, 2005). The abrupt end of the sport career also has the potential to impact the identity of the NFL player as they work to merge their former role as an athlete, with their new role as a former professional athlete (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). While individuals retiring from a more common career generally have the time to plan life in retirement, professional athletes who suddenly find themselves without a job are at greater risk of experiencing anxiety and stress when adjusting to their new occupational status. Literature specific to the career ending injury also suggests that feelings of depression may accompany feelings of anxiety (Werthner & Orlick, 2006). Furthermore, substance use is also reported as a potential reaction to the experience of career ending injury (O'Brian & Lyons, 2000). This finding is supported by the conclusions of the current inquiry as withdraw from sport due to injury was associated with alcohol use as a maladaptive coping strategy.

While injury has been found to not be the primary reason for withdraw form professional sport, it has been found to be one of the most devastating to the athlete's social-emotional health. However, research suggests that those retiring from sport due to injury may have a less traumatic adjustment to identification with a new non-sporting role (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). This is thought to be a result of the ability of the player to

disassociate the loss of career with their personal physical ability or performance skills (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

Considered involuntary retirement, withdraw from sport due to chronological age is the most common cause of transition to withdraw from sport (Werthner & Orlick, 2006). As discussed by Taylor and Ogilvie (1994), retirement from professional athletics as a result of age has the potential to have a greater social-emotional impact than a career ending injury. This is thought to be a result of the aging athlete working to maintain their place on the roster, but being unable to do so as a result of the decline of the sporting body and the emphasis on youth in the NFL. Furthermore, the impact on the former player's social-emotional health may be greater in that the athlete may be devalued by fans (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werhner & Orlick, 2006) and discussed in chapter four as a social influence construct of SCT. As a result of this social impact of involuntary withdraw related to age, players often find themselves being compared to their active peers, feeling devalued, and ultimately leaving professional sport with a negative association (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Ultimately resulting in de-selection, the player who remains in the league despite their aging commonly denies the inevitable and thus fails to prepare for the transition to withdraw from sport.

### **Transition Strategies as a Construct of Sport Career Transition**

The exploration of former NFL players' lived experience of SCT identified transition strategies as a category of the SCT experience. Defined by Wylleman (2002) as the conscious actions, reactions, and plans in preparation for or reaction to change, transition strategies employed by former NFL players were found to be an aspect of the transition experience with no direct relationship to demographics. Properties of transition

strategies were identified as, Support, Resources, and Coping Strategies.

Aspects of support during times of SCT were found to be personal-social support and professional support. Participants described a positive experience of personal-social support at every SCT level from collegiate level of play and beyond. Familial support was most often identified as the primary source of personal-social support. Participants experienced more positive transitions when able to identify and utilize this type of support. This was especially significant during transition to collegiate level of play and transition to professional level of play. Personal-social support was also found to be a source of motivation for former NFL players as they described feelings of pride and accomplishment when playing in the spirit of their family. However, such findings were not consistent with literature in the field. In a study conducted by the National Football League of 1,219 former players, financial and family problems were found to be the primary cause of life dissatisfaction during the first three years of withdraw from sport (Pitts & Popovich, 1994). Research conducted by Tinley (2002) validated and expanded upon these findings. While not solely specific to the NFL athlete, research conducted with the elite athletes in transition found that former athletes who had once relied on support from family and friends while active in sport, felt unfilled by the same relationships during retirement (Tinley, 2002).

Professional literature did support findings related to feeling misunderstood and isolated by the uniqueness of the process of SCT. Negative personal-social support was an aspect of the participant experience of transition to withdraw from sport due to a perceived lack of understanding by others of the unique experience of retiring from the NFL. Although negative feelings and emotions were felt by participants at times of SCT,

a lack of professional support such as mental health professionals and sport psychologists were not an aspect of transition at any level. Further supporting the conclusion of this inquiry that formal resources are not an aspect of former NFL players' lived experience of sport career transition, two participants were identified as trained NFL Transition Coaches yet data did not reflect the NEXT Program as a resource for participants.

Resources as a property of transition strategies were demonstrated to have some correlation with participant age. Participants under the age of 35, reported negative stigma around the idea of seeking help for difficult feelings during SCT, specifically withdraw from sport. Irrespective of age, the utilization of formal resources during any SCT was not discussed unless prompted as an aspect of the semi-structured interview process. As a result, the conclusion was made that participants were not willing to voluntarily discuss their experience with psychological resources during transition further supporting the reports of negative stigma around seeking help for difficult emotions initiated by transition regardless of age. Findings related to attitudes toward the use of professional resources were unable to be validated by literature in the field. This is most likely due to the lack of professional support sought by professional athletes as well as the negative stigma associated with professional resources, thus research in the area is difficult to conduct.

Specific to former NFL athletes, Coakley's (2006) research qualitatively explored the SCT of seven retired NFL athletes. Findings of the qualitative inquiry identified themes centered on systems of support utilized by players during times of transition. Utilizing the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition, results of the inquiry suggest that former NFL players employ coping mechanisms of denial when withdrawing

from sport and as a result, do not seek professional resources during transition to withdraw from sport (Coakley, 2006). Results also indicated that former NFL athletes experience a lack of personal support as they are no longer a part of a team or community, which provided their primary sense of support. Such a finding further supports outcomes of the current study regarding the feelings of loss of community and a lack of personal-social support during withdraw from sport.

The element of objectification of the professional athlete and the sporting role as presented in chapter four, contributes to the lack of personal-social support experienced during the transition to withdraw from sport. Reported as one of the largest difficulties with transition experienced by former NFL athletes, the realization that individuals with whom they believed they had personal relationships were based on their professional athletic standing is devastating (Kane, 1991). Discovering that those around you are not genuinely interested in you as a person, but in what you can do for them as a professional athlete incites not only anger, but a loss of self-esteem (Kane, 1991). At a time when personal-social support is needed such as withdraw from sport, former NFL players are at times left without such support.

Coping strategies were largely only reported as experienced during the transition to professional play and the transition to withdraw from sport. Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) define coping strategies as conscious efforts employed to minimize stress and conflict during a time of change. Taking either the form of adaptive (successful) or maladaptive (unsuccessful), coping strategies as experienced by former NFL players at specific times of SCT were identified as using the later. Maladaptive coping strategies employed by participants were identified as denial and substance use.

The most significant theme to emerge from interview data was the idea of “just deal with it” when faced with emotional difficulties at the time of any SCT. This maladaptive coping strategy is otherwise referred to as denial. In some cases being derived from family culture or societal norms, negative perceptions of seeking formal resources for aid with the experience of SCT was theme highlighted by participants. Denial was most often employed as a maladaptive coping strategy to quell feelings of anxiety and stress when making the transition into the NFL. While mentioned as an aspect of the experience of transition to professional play, the majority of discussion of denial was reported when relaying the experience of withdraw from sport. Participants shared attempting to ignore negative emotions occurring as a result of being cut from their current NFL team or not offered a contract to continue to play football professionally.

In his book, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*, Michael Messner (1995) discusses how the “just deal with it” attitude of denial is greatly impacted by American cultural gender norms. Influenced by societal norms, Messner poses that professional athletes are unwilling to recognize the decline of their skills and their eventual fate of retirement. Greatly affected by an athlete’s natural competitive nature and perceived pressure to be successful and push the limits, he suggests that denial of withdraw from sport is a common experience of the withdraw from sport (Messner, 1995) supporting research findings.

Hypermasculinity is defined psychologically as the exaggeration of stereotypical male behavior (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984). In his study of masculinities, Anderson (2010) states that men construct hierarchies, which decline as they move farther from the

archetypal man. When applied to the institution of sport, Anderson (2010) argues that this type of hegemonic masculinity is the primary influence on the four basic rules of male elite sport: (1) “No sissy stuff,” (2) “Be a big wheel,” (3) “Be a sturdy oak,” and (4) “Give ‘em hell.” These basic rules of male elite sport reflect the hyper masculine American ideals of masculine societal norms, physical stature, physicality of male sport, and the encouragement of an aggressive attitude.

Traditional ideals of masculinity have been shown to impact the use of maladaptive coping strategies among professional athletes as concluded by this research. The most commonly employed maladaptive strategy among male athletes is denial (Kane, 1991). Having been shown to begin as early as transition to collegiate level of play, denial has become necessary to excel as an athlete. Elite athletes including players in the NFL, often deny feelings of pain, repeated failure, effects of aging, intense loneliness due to travel, and a general disconnect to the world outside of athletics (Kane, 1991). Many in the field of sport psychology believe that these attitudes of denial carry over into their personal life even after withdraw from sport (Kane, 1991; Swain, 1991; Newcomer & Perna, 2003). As such, denial as a maladaptive coping strategy leaves players with a great deal of unexpressed emotion and very few socially acceptable modes of release of that emotion as dictated by society’s standards of masculinity.

Athletes commonly express their emotions through physical activity and sport. If unable to participate in such activities, due to injury or withdraw from sport, professional athletes may experience feelings of anxiety, irritability, isolation, and/or depression (Newcomer & Perna, 2003). Such feelings have the potential intensify as male professional athletes have few socially acceptable ways to express emotion beyond

physical expression (Newcomer & Perna, 2003). If denied for an extended period of time, emotions such as anxiety may exacerbate insecurities, relationship issues, or other difficult life issues and result in maladaptive coping strategies (Rotella & Heyman, 1993).

A concerning maladaptive coping strategy identified during the data analysis process was substance use as a part of the experience of transition to withdraw from sport. Several former NFL participants described feelings of confusion and boredom when retiring from sport. These same participants also discussed the use of alcohol as a coping strategy to attempt to ease such feelings. Further analysis revealed a correlation between participants who were forced to withdraw from sport as a result of injury and those reporting substance use as a coping strategy. As such, the conclusion was made that when withdraw from sport was the precipitating event leading to the transition to withdraw from sport, former NFL players are at greater risk for substance use, specifically alcohol, as a strategy for coping.

As a group, players in the NFL are at greater risk of injury than players of any other professional sport (Coakley, 2001). The game of football has been described as one of the most dangerous workplaces in the world (Ecklund & Cresswell, 2007). As a collision sport by nature, is laden with medical related risk and injury (Selden, Helzberg, & Waeckerle, 2009). In 2008, the NFL released a report stating that 68% of active NFL players are injured in a given season (Halchin, 2008). This occupational hazard leaves professional football players experiencing pain at a larger percentage than that of the general population. While literature related to athletic injury, specifically as experienced by NFL athletes, has largely focused on concussion research, the misuse of substances for the treatment of pain and other injury related consequences, has gone ignored. Lack of

literature combined with the potential for former players' reluctance to discuss substance abuse for fear of retribution, judgment, or other consequences, result in difficult analysis of this particular issue. However, results of an exhaustive review of literature pertaining to former NFL players' substance use during withdraw from sport due to injury is limited.

In 2011, the Journal of Drug and Alcohol Dependency published an article specifically investigating the substance abuse behavior of 644 former NFL athletes (Cottler et al., 2011). Recruiting participants from the same pool as the current inquiry, the NFL Retired Players Association, research findings indicated that opioid use was the most prevalent substance misused by former NFL players at 71% reporting misuse during their career (Cottler et al., 2011). Among these participants 7% reported currently misusing opioids in retirement, reflective of three times the rate of the general population. Predictor variables of opioid misuse were suggested to be significant pain, undiagnosed concussions, heavy drinking, and being an offensive linemen (Cottler et al., 2011). Specific to the misuse of alcohol, the study suggested that 95% of participants reported drinking heavily in the past week, which was defined as drinking 20 or more drinks containing alcohol in one week (Cottler et al., 2011). Pain resulting from injury sustained during NFL play was also highly reported at 93% by former players.

Findings of this study were further supported by the conclusions of a study commissioned by the World Health Organization (O'Brian & Lyons, 2000). Specific to the use of alcohol consumption by elite athletes, including NFL players, correlations between alcohol use and abuse and injury were explored. Findings specific to NFL participants revealed that of the NFL players participating in the study, 70% reported that

they consume alcohol with a mean consumption rate of 17.3 drinks per week (O'Bryan & Lyons, 2000). However, alcohol use was only found to be significantly correlated to injury among active players with 54.8% of active players experiencing an injury when consuming alcohol at least once per week compared to a 23.5% injury for those who consumed no alcohol (O'Bryan & Lyons, 2000).

Alcohol and the reputation of “the jock” often have been linked as one. While at one time alcohol was reported to be the number one drug consumed by athletes (Gilman & Goodman, 1985), current research indicates that it has become more significantly correlated with athletic injury (Cottler et al., 2011). As suggested by the current inquiry, former NFL players have employed the maladaptive coping strategy of utilizing alcohol to adjust to the experience of transition to withdraw from sport when prompted by athletic injury.

## CHAPTER VIII - CONCLUSION

### **Implications for the Field of Sports Psychology**

This study was a qualitative inquiry with the purpose of exploring the lived experience of former National League Football (NFL) players' sport career transition (SCT). The research sought to answer the question: What is the lived experience of former National League Football players' sport career transition? The answer to this question is reflected in the three major constructs of Social Influence, Social-Emotional Impact, and Transition Strategies, as discussed in chapters four, five, and six respectively. Goals of the inquiry were to address the disparity highlighted in the literature for a sport specific theory of SCT, to explore SCT across the lifespan, and to aid current, former, and future retired NFL players as well as sport psychology practitioners understand and prepare for SCT.

This research contributed to current literature in the field by capturing the lived experience of former NFL players' SCT. By allowing former NFL players the opportunity to share their story of transition across the lifespan, this research advances the knowledge of how these athletes experience transition at a given point in time. Furthermore, this research takes one step closer to the development of a framework for understanding transition and begins to address the need for a theory of SCT specific to the experience of NFL players.

Implications from this research for the field of sport psychology and athletic performance consultation include, (a) The stigma of counseling, (b) "Just deal with it," and (c) Sport career transition is a process.

### **The Stigma of Counseling**

Finding of this study highlighted the stigma surrounding counseling and the mental health field in general. Although many participants described emotional and psychological difficulty during SCT, they were unable to identify a source of help with such feelings that they perceived as appropriate. In a few instances participants were asked directly about seeking professional help for negative thoughts and feelings regarding transition to which the reply was overwhelmingly 'no' followed by suggestions of negative associations. It is thought that the hyper masculine nature of sport culture, which is particularly dominated by traditional ideals of masculinity, is the major contributor to the origins of this stigma. It is also suggested that the inherent culture of the NFL perpetuates this negative perception of counseling as a resource for the weak.

While education programs, further research, and the like may not change the stigma regarding mental health professionals and the seeking of their services, it is important for practitioners to understand this perception. Armed with the knowledge that such biases exist, sport psychology practitioners and consultants can begin to approach their craft in a new way allowing for a more modern and less stigmatized application of traditional practice. This is of particular importance when attempting to gain an understanding of the former NFL player as a client as psychological isolation and a lack of understanding of the SCT experience was reported by the vast majority of participants.

### **“Just Deal With It”**

Whether derived out of necessity from the brutality of a career spent in the NFL, from family culture, or from a culture of hyper masculinity, former NFL players have adopted a “just deal with it” attitude. Due to the physical nature of football, players commonly play with injuries and physical pain. Constant competition for his position

each week seems to leave players no other choice than to ignore pain and keep training and playing. Thus, denial of discomfort and even pain has become part of the culture of football. As many participants shared, a family legacy of professional sport perpetuates the “just deal with it” attitude as fathers, uncles, and in some instances grandfathers, pass down the culture of sport. Furthermore, the perception of NFL athletes as modern day warriors by the American public and emphasis on performance outcomes validate the maladaptive coping strategy of denial.

While a “just deal with it” attitude may allow for NFL athletes to continue to perform through physical pain in order to maintain a professional status, the attitude of denial is dangerous when applied to alternative forms of pain such as emotional pain. Findings of this research highlight a wide range of psychological and emotional impact during times of SCT. Findings also indicate that the “just deal with it” attitude is more commonly than not, applied to the thoughts and feelings experienced during SCT leaving the athlete dangerously vulnerable to psychological disturbances.

As a discipline, the field of sport psychology must strive to understand this attitude and more importantly, its origins. By doing so, healthy and unhealthy applications of this attitude can be identified and negative implications in the culture of sports can begin to be changed. Understanding the philosophy of denial is also critical to the practical application of sport psychology and athletic performance consultation. Practitioners in the field must be aware and mindful of this attitude when working with current, former, and future NFL athletes. Knowledge of the “just deal with it” culture can shape the manner by which questions are posed, thoughts and emotion is explored, theory

is applied, and hypotheses are made allowing for a greater catalyst for understanding and change.

### **Sport Career Transition Is a Process**

Literature in the field of sport psychology pertaining to SCT commonly conceptualizes transition as a singular event. Most often the event explored is retirement or the transition to withdraw from professional sport. However, as this research demonstrates, SCT is not an event but a process. Taking place several times throughout the lifespan, each transition contributes to the manner in which the following transition will be experienced. While it was the aim of this research to explore all five SCT across the lifespan of a former NFL athlete, all participants began the description of SCT at the transition to collegiate level of play or later. Although this result was not the ideal outcome for exploring the lived experience of SCT across the lifespan, it does demonstrate that SCT is not an event solely occurring at the time of withdraw from sport.

Beginning to conceptualize SCT as a process rather than a single event is critical to field of sport psychology and counseling professionals working with NFL athletes. This understanding can help to shape interventions, counseling strategies, and the general approach to working with this population. Understanding SCT as a process also shifts the manner by which professionals understand their client's experience of and reaction to each SCT. In addition, conceptualizing SCT as a process allows for earlier intervention strategies and preparation for younger athletes to potentially have more psychologically successful experiences of transition.

### **Theoretical Implications: A Grounded Theory of Sport Career Transition**

Figure 1 represents a visual model of the Grounded Theory of Sport Career Transition.

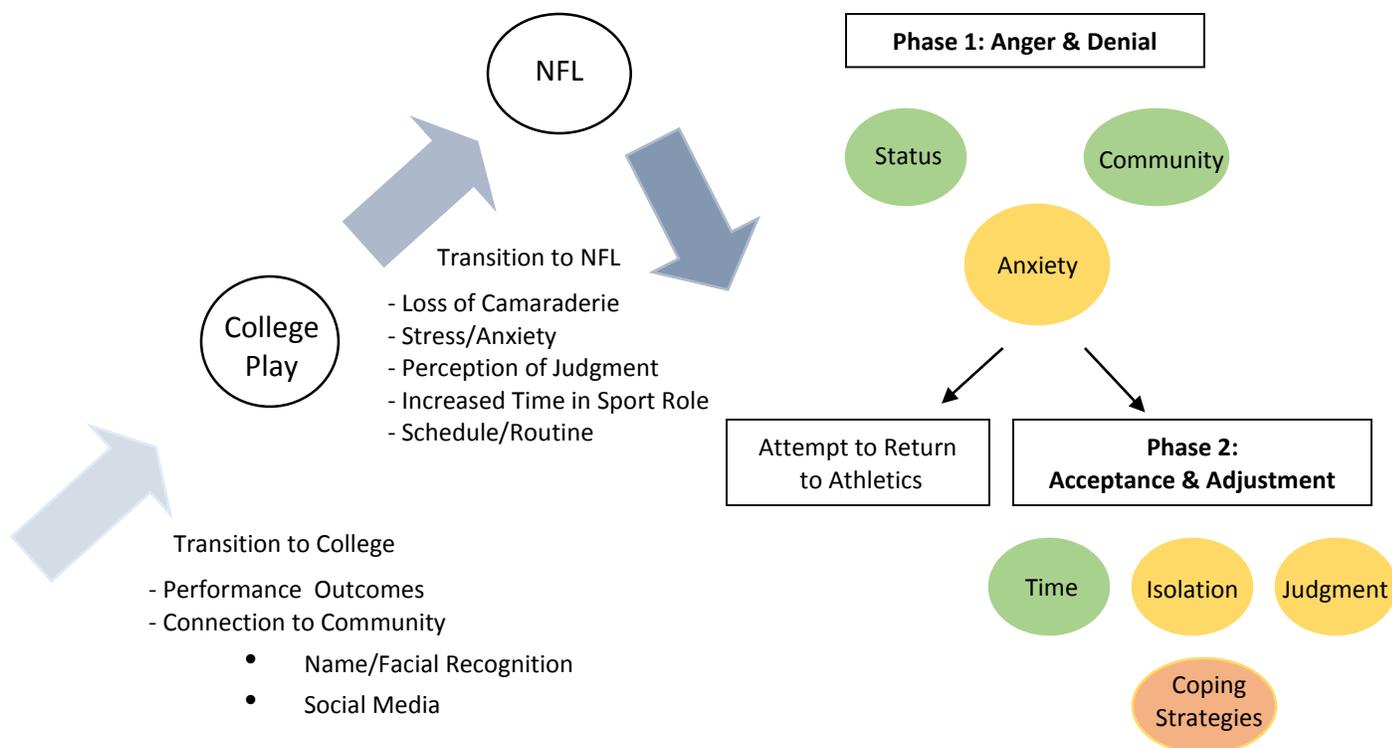


Figure 1. Grounded Theory of Sport Career Transition

### Transition to Collegiate Level of Play

Former NFL players' experience of the transition to collegiate level of play is most significantly marked by the first experience with a connection to the community in a substantial way. For the first time, players are being recognized by name and receiving positive reinforcement for sport performance. College football players are receiving attention in the community for the first time in the form of facial recognition, print media, and/or social media. A relatively new aspect of connection to community, social media mediums such as Twitter and Facebook, begins to influence the athlete's perception of

himself and his value. During the transition to collegiate level of play, the influence of society and the other marks the first presence of objectification of the athlete.

### **Transition to Professional Level of Play**

Immediately, the transition from collegiate level of play to professional level of play incites feelings of loss of the camaraderie of the collegiate team as a family. This transition may trigger feelings of stress and anxiety initiated by the realization of a lifelong dream and the perception that the attainment of a dream is (a) the peak of life and (b) all consequent accomplishments will be a depreciation from the current status. As visibility increases at the professional level, name recognition increases as does the frequency and intensity of social media on the impact of the athlete. As a result, objectification of the NFL player solidifies causing a greater identification with the sport role as a means of deflection of perceived judgment from both society and those with whom the athletes has personal relationships. Awareness of a state of constant competition and positive performance outcomes to maintain a place on the NFL roster may cause feelings of anxiety. Anxious feelings are most commonly denied by the player in favor of a “just deal with it” attitude. Familial support increases the drive to perform successfully and maintain a professional athletic status. Professional success requires a greater devotion of time to sport. The NFL player becomes accustomed to routine and predictability of schedule. Greater time spent in the sporting role increases identification with the sporting role.

### **Transition to Withdraw From Sport**

Transition to withdraw from sport occurs in two phases: (1) Anger and Denial and (2) Acceptance and Adjustment.

**Phase One.** The experience of transition to withdrawn from sport is marked by immediate feelings of anger regardless of the voluntary or involuntary cause of the withdraw. Feelings of anger are primarily external although in some cases may be aimed at the self in the form of regret. This time is also associated with feelings of loss of the sporting role, most significantly a decline in status, decline in occupational pride, and a decline of pride in perceived physical body. Feelings of loss are also experienced as the loss of camaraderie with teammates and loss of connection to the NFL as an entity greater than themselves. While feelings of anger commonly dissipate quickly, loss may be felt for an extended period of time. The emotion of anger is followed by anxiety as to what the next phase of life will bring. At this time, one of two actions occur: (1) An attempt to return to professional sport is made as a coping mechanism for feelings of anxiety or (2) withdraw from sport is psychologically accepted.

**Phase Two.** Phase two of the transition to withdraw from sport is classified by acceptance and adjustment. Acceptance of withdraw is defined by the lack of seeking occupation as a professional athlete. When this occurs, adjustment to a new lifestyle is the primary task of the former NFL player. Acclimation to a less routine and scheduled daily experience is one such task. Critical to the process of adjustment is the emancipation from the tie to the sport role. This is often a difficult and emotional task as society continues the objectification of the athlete via press and social media perpetuating the perception of judgment described in phase one. However, judgment during phase two is defined by criticisms of the event or non-event ultimately leading to withdraw rather than performance outcomes. For many former NFL players, the decline in name and facial recognition contributes to the emotional difficulty of dissociating oneself from the

sport role. Psychological isolation is common during the process of adjustment to withdraw from sport as a result of the belief that non-athletes are unable to understand the adjustment process. Denial is the most common coping strategy for emotions experienced during the adjustment period. However, if withdraw from sport is initiated by injury, substance use may be a coping strategy employed by former NFL athletes.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Most notable, the first limitation of the current study is the lived experience of SCT that was not heard. Major informants assisting with participant recruitment were able to identify a pool of potential research participant candidates. However, those who responded and were ultimately selected for participation, reflected a population of former NFL players whose lived experience of sport career transition was overall, relatively positive. This is the result of several factors.

First, the general population of former NFL players is a particularly cautious group of individuals. As was expressed several times during the participant recruitment process, populations of former NFL athletes have been taken advantage of by persons acting as legitimate inquirers of research. Media and other large business groups have approached this population falsely claiming to be associated with academic research institutions and have violated rights to privacy and confidentiality. As a result, the population of former NFL players is rightly skeptical of individuals seeking participants for academic research.

Second, as the target population is a skeptical one, those agreeing to participate in the current inquiry, are likely former NFL players whose lived experience of SCT was more positive than tumultuous. While this is an assumption on behalf of the researcher, it

is reasonable to infer that experiences of sport career transition on the negative end of the spectrum were not captured by this inquiry. As such, any conceptualization of a theory of the experience of SCT may only be reflective of those with a generally positive lived experience.

Sample size (N=14) is a further limitation of the study. While Grounded Theory allows for a typical range of 15 to 30 participants per inquiry, the current study may not have achieved saturation for the population in question. The NFL estimates that there are 6,983 living retired NFL players in the United States. However, this number is only reflective of former vested players or those who were active in the league as players for more than three years. Thus, the actual number of living former NFL players in the United States and elsewhere is likely to far surpass the reported 6,983. As such, the current study is reflective of only a minute sample of former NFL athletes' lived experience of SCT.

Sample size limited the exploration of correlations between data derived from the demographic survey and the lived experience of SCT of former NFL athletes. Due to a relatively small sample size, a lack of demographic data was obtained. As a result, any relationship identified as correlated with age, position played, length of professional career, or other demographic data, is limited in its significance.

A further limitation of the study was the average age of the participants – 49.9 years of age. The majority of participants played in the NFL in the mid to late 1990s. At this time, the experience of being an NFL athlete may not be reflective of the experience of being an NFL athlete today. Additionally, the impact of social media on the development and maintenance of the participant's identification with the sport role may

be a conclusion that is not applicable to several participants as social media was not an aspect of the NFL experience in the 1990s.

The primary focus on the experience of transition to withdraw from sport is a further limitation of the study. While semi-structured interviews allow for shifts in questioning as a result of participant response, in an effort to avoid being suggestive, the researcher did not prompt participants with questions specific to a particular level of SCT. Reflective of the current trend in sport related literature to focus on withdraw from sport or retirement from professional athletics, participants in the current study, tended to express their experience of withdraw from sport most frequently without prompt. Perhaps the natural desire of the population's desire to share this aspect of their experience has contributed to the surge in literature focusing on this area of athletic inquiry. While knowledge in this area is vital to the understanding of the complete experience of SCT, the current study lacks the exploration of SCT taking place early in one's life.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Limitations discussed above highlight the need for areas of future research. Most notably, future research should aim to gain a greater understanding of the lived experience of SCT occurring early in one's life specifically transition into sport and the transition to regional level of play. Early experience of sport influences the manner by which subsequent transitions are experienced. By understanding how such early transitions are experienced, sports psychologists and athletic performance consultants may better serve their clients during any SCT thus enhancing the field.

Future research is also suggested to focus on exploring the possible relationship between the experience of SCT and demographics. While the current study included a

demographic questionnaire and attempted to establish a relationship between specific demographics and the experience of SCT, sample size prohibited any significant inference to be made as discussed above. As a result, future research should focus on understanding if a relationship between specific transition experiences and participant demographics such as, length of professional play, reason for retirement from sport, positions played, ethnicity, age, etc... exist. Such findings have the potential to advance the field of sport psychology and consultation and may provide more efficient ways of assisting athletes in transition.

The objectification of NFL players should also be further explored. Data suggested that by the time one becomes an NFL player, they have identified with the sport role to the extent of abandoning other life roles. As a result, players believe they are their physical selves as defined by society contributing to emotional difficulty when withdrawing from sport. The indication that objectification and identification with the sport role is significantly impacted by various forms of community such as ones college and NFL team, the global NFL fan base, the league as a whole, and ones geographic community is a relationship suggested for further study. Future research should explore the theme of objectification further to understand the impact of this element of SCT.

Findings of this study indicated that substance use may be a maladaptive coping strategy utilized by former NFL players during the experience of transition to withdraw from sport. Based on this result, it is suggested that future inquiry investigate this potentially destructive relationship further. While literature in the field of substance use and abuse has primarily focused on the abuse of prescription medication, specifically pain relievers such as opioids, literature regarding alcohol abuse by former NFL athletes

was scarce. As a result, it is suggested that further inquiry focus on the use and possible abuse of alcohol by NFL players transitioning to withdraw from sport.

Finally, inquiry exploring the attitudes held by athletes regarding seeking professional resources and/or support during SCT is suggested. Results of the current study suggested that former NFL players hold negative perceptions of professional resources for SCT, thus preventing them from seeking professional assistance when experiencing disruptive emotions. By understanding the origins of such perceptions as well as their significance in preventing athletes from seeking their use, we can begin to reduce barriers to professional resources and perhaps provide greater assistance to those who suffer in silence.

### **Closing Remarks**

The intent of this research was to understand the lived experience of former NFL players' sport career transition. A relatively new population of study, literature in the field of sport psychology commonly conceptualizes the experience of these elite athletes as a single event to be understood, often ignoring the journey required to attain such an extraordinary goal. This research takes one more step towards understanding sport career transition as a process rather than a single event. Furthermore, by exploring the lifespan experience of former NFL players' professionals in the field of sport psychology are better able to serve their clients at each stage of their transition.

While much is made of NFL players' physical strength, as this exploration progressed, I was humbled and inspired by the inner strength and self-awareness of the men society labels as "jocks." I thank each of the fourteen men involved in this study for not only for their trust, but willingness to be vulnerable in a culture that so often tells

them they should not. This is just one example of a message that needs to change. The discussion of a life lived as a professional athlete must begin to include all facets of his life including what will come after sport. By doing so, young men with the aspiration of becoming a NFL athlete will understand that professional sport is an extraordinary opportunity for a head start in life and not the pinnacle of it.

The glorification of the NFL player as an invincible modern day warrior is exciting. The perception of these men as archetypes with fame and fortune sells millions of tickets and is worth billions of dollars in revenue nationwide. However, as a society, we must be aware that behind each helmet is a mortal man with value far exceeding our entertainment. While it may be difficult to empathize with men who seem to have achieved the ultimate dream, it is hoped that this research and the research it inspires will bring awareness and understanding of the lived experience of the player and appreciation and support for the process of the man.

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## APPENDIX A

**Letter to Participants**

Dear [*insert name*],

My name is Jessica Nelson and I am a doctoral candidate from the Department of Counselor Education and Supervision at the University of Nevada, Reno. I obtained your contact information from [*name of source*].

I'm writing to invite you to participate in my research study about exploring the lived experience of sport career transition to aid current, former, and future NFL players, as well as sport psychologists, in the understanding of sport career transitions. You're eligible to be in this study because you are a former NFL player, are not actively pursuing a career as a professional football player, and have experienced the 5 points of sport career transition.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire and will be interviewed regarding your feelings about your experience with sport career transition. I will then use the information to create a theory of sport career transition specific to NFL athletes. All information will be kept confidential.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at (310) 704-8679 or [Jessica.Nelson@girlsontherunsierras.org](mailto:Jessica.Nelson@girlsontherunsierras.org).

If you have friends and/or family members who are also retired NFL players who may be interested in learning about this research study, please share their contact information with me via the phone number or email address above. You are under no obligation to share this information and whether or not you share this information will not have any affect.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Jessica Nelson, MA





## APPENDIX D

**University of Nevada, Reno  
Social Behavioral Research Consent Form****Title of Study:**

The Lived Experience of Former National Football League Players' Sport Career Transitions: A Retrospective Grounded Theory Approach

**Principle Investigator:** Thomas Harrison, Ph.D.; (775) 784-4345

**Co-Investigators / Study Contact:** Jessica A. Nelson; (310) 704-8679

**Study ID Number:** 707483-1

**Sponsor:** N/A

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**Introduction**

Before you agree to be in this study, please take time to read this form. It explains why we are doing the study; and the procedures, risks, discomforts, benefits and precautions involved.

You do not have to be in this study. Your participation is voluntary.

Take as much time as you need to decide. If you say yes now but change your mind, you may quit the study at any time. Just let the one of the researchers know you do not want to continue.

**Why are we doing this study?**

We are doing this study to enhance the field of sport psychology by attempting to understand the lived experience of sport career transition among former National Football League (NFL) athletes. The goal of this inquiry is to provide NFL athletes and the professionals with whom they work, a framework for understanding and preparing for sport career transition.

**Why are we asking you to be in this study?**

We are asking you to be in this study because you are a former National Football League (NFL) athlete who is retired (or released) as an athlete from the National Football League, are not actively pursuing a career as a professional football player, and have experienced the 5 points of sport career transition. A minimum of 10 total participants is needed to complete this study.

**What happens if you agree to be in the study?**

If you agree to be in this study you will be asked to complete a brief demographic survey with questions regarding both your personal demographic information as well as information regarding your sport background and time as a player in the National Football League (NFL). You will then be asked questions regarding your experience of sport career transitions throughout your lifetime. Once you have completed the questionnaire and interview, you will be asked if you are able to provide the name(s) and

contact information of additional individuals who you believe may be interested in participating in this study. The total time of participation is approximately 60 minutes and will take place in 1 day. Outcomes of the study will be made available to you in August 2015 via email if requested. Your participation in this study can be terminated without your consent if found that you do not meet the participation criteria or due to incomplete forms, or questionnaires.

### **How long will you be in the study?**

The study will take about 60 minutes of your time, scheduled on 1 day.

### **What happens if you do not want to be in the study?**

Nothing will happen if you decide not to be in this study. However, you may be asked if you are able to provide the name(s) and contact information for individuals who you believe may be interested in participating in this research. If you cannot, or choose not to provide this information, nothing will happen.

### **Is there any way being in this study could be bad for you?**

If you agree to be in this study, you may experience feelings of discomfort, stress, anxiety, or other uncomfortable emotions due to being asked to recall memories related to your participation in sport throughout your lifetime. There may be unknown or unforeseen risks to participants associated with participation in this research study however, this risk is minimal.

### **Will being in this study help you in any way?**

There is no benefit to you directly for participating in this research. However, we hope to learn how current and former NFL players, as well as sport psychology practitioners, understand and prepare for sport career transitions. Furthermore, we hope to help ease any negative affects of such transitions and better prepare NFL athletes for life after the NFL.

### **How will we protect your private information and the information we collect about you?**

We will treat your identity with professional standards of confidentiality and protect your private information to the extent allowed by law. We will do this by replacing personal information with codes. The list linking participant names and the codes will be stored securely and separately from the research data. Any and all research materials are to be kept in the researcher's locked home office, in a locked file cabinet, with the researcher being the sole individual with access to the key. Any electronic data will be stored on a stand-alone password-protected laptop.

We will not use your name or other information that could identify you in any reports or publications that result from this study.

**Who will know that you are in this study and who will have access to the information we collect about you?**

The researchers, the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the University of Nevada, Reno Social Behavioral Institutional Review Board will have access to your study records.

**Will it cost you anything to be in the study?**

There will be no costs to you to be in the study.

**Will you be paid for being in this study?**

You will not receive any payment for being in this research study.

**What happens if you agree to be in the study now, but change your mind later?**

You do not have to stay in the study. You may withdraw from the study at any time by contacting Jessica Nelson via email at [Jessica.Nelson@girlsontherun.org](mailto:Jessica.Nelson@girlsontherun.org) or phone at (310) 704-8679. There are no consequences for withdraw from the study.

**Who can you contact if you have questions about the study or want to report an injury?**

At any time, if you have questions about this study or wish to report an injury that may be related to your participation in this study, contact Dr. Tom Harrison by calling (775) 784-4345 or by contacting Jessica Nelson at (310) 704-8679.

**Who can you contact if you want to ask about your rights as a research participant?**

You may ask about your rights as a research participant or talk (anonymously if you choose) to the University of Nevada, Reno Social Behavioral Institutional Review Board by calling (775) 327-2368 or sending a note from the *Contact Us* page of this website: <http://www.unr.edu/research-integrity>.

**Agreement to be in study**

If you agree to be in the study, please sign this document. We will give you a copy of the document to keep.

By signing the document you are saying:

- You agree to be in this study.
- We talked with you about the information in this document and answered all of your questions.

You know that:

- You may stop participating in the research at any time.
- You may call the University office in charge of research at (775) 327-2368 if you have any questions about the study or about your rights.

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Participant's Name Printed

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

---

Date

APPENDIX E

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Completing this demographic survey is voluntary and should take approximately 5 minutes. Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers. If you have any questions feel free to ask the researcher to clarify and feel free to include any additional information that you believe might further assist us in better understanding the sport-career transition experiences of former professional football players.

**Demographic Information**

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Current Occupation/Employer \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity:     Caucasian                       Hispanic/Latino                       African American  
 Native American                       Mixed Race                       Other \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status:     Married                       Single                       Divorced  
 Widowed                       Other \_\_\_\_\_

Level of Education: (please check all completed)

- High School or GED                       Bachelor’s Degree (BA or BS)
- Junior College (AA)                       Masters Degree (MA or MS)
- College/University – no degree                       Ph.D. / MD / JD

**Sport Background**

Please indicate the number of years you played in EACH level of sport: *(please circle)*

Elementary Sports (pee-wee football, pop warner)	none	1-2 years	3-4 years	more than 4 years
High School Sports (football, soccer, etc...)	none	1-2 years	3-4 years	more than 4 years
College Football	none	1-2 years	3-4 years	more than 4 years
Professional Football (NFL)	none	1-2 years	3-4 years	more than 4 years

If more than 4 years in the NFL, please specify # of years played: \_\_\_\_\_

Which NFL team(s) did you play for? \_\_\_\_\_

What primary position did you play? \_\_\_\_\_

Other positions played \_\_\_\_\_

Reason you retired from the NFL (i.e. injury, not offered contract...) \_\_\_\_\_

Thank You For Your Participation In This Research Study

## APPENDIX F

## Research Participant Interview Schedule

Participant ID Number	Date of Participation	Interview Format	Duration of Interview (in minutes)
1	3/21/15	Telephone	54: 00
2	3/21/15	Telephone	46:00
3	3/22/15	Telephone	41:00
4	3/22/15	Telephone	36:00
5	3/22/15	In Person –Location of participant’s choosing (public)	60:00
6	3/23/15	Telephone	35:00
7	3/23/15	Telephone	45:00
8	3/24/15	Telephone	65:00
9	3/25/15	Telephone	40:00
10	3/25/15	Telephone	45:00
11	3/26/15	Telephone	35:00
12	3/26/15	Telephone	40:00
13	3/26/15	Telephone	50:00
14	3/26/15	Telephone	65:00

## APPENDIX G

## Main Participant Interview Questions

Question Number	Question
1	Throughout your lifetime, what has been your experience of sport career transition?
2	Tell me about what happened after you made those decisions.
3	Tell me about how these sport career transitions have impacted you.

## APPENDIX H

## Axial Coding Paradigm

## Constructs, Main Categories, Properties, and Concepts

Constructs	Main Concepts	Properties	Concepts	Sport Career Transition
Social Influence	Identity	Status	- occupational pride - name recognition - decline of physical body	- NFL, WD - college, NFL, WD - WD
Social Influence	Identity	Community	- connection to league as a whole (NFL) - camaraderie of a team - connection to school or city where played - connection to society via social media - objectification	- NFL, WD  - NFL, WD - college, NFL, WD  - college, NFL, WD  - NFL, WD
Social Influence	Structure	Time	- time limited contributes to intensity - unique in its briefness - narrow focus of time - highly scheduled/routine	- NFL, WD  - WD - WD - WD
Social-Emotional Impact	Psychological (thoughts)	Psychological	- judgment - lack of understanding of experience	- NFL, WD
Social-Emotional Impact	Emotional (feelings)	Emotional	- anxiety - stress - loss/sadness - anger	- NFL, WD - NFL, WD - WD - WD
Transition Strategies	Support	Personal-Social Support	- community support - familial support - familial support as motivation during play - lack of understanding of NFL experience	- college, NFL, WD - college, NFL, WD - college, NFL  - WD
Transition Strategies	Support	Professional Support	- emotional distress - no professional support sought	- WD - WD
Transition Strategies	Resources	Formal Resources	- negative perceptions - perceived as not masculine - perceived as unnecessary - stigma derived from family	- WD - NFL, WD - NFL, WD - WD

			- shame - >35 years = increased level of negative perceptions	- WD - WD
Transition Strategies	Resources	NFL Specific Resources	- transition counselors - unacknowledged	- WD - WD
Transition Strategies	Coping Strategies	Maladaptive	- denial - “just deal with it”	- NFL, WD - college, NFL, WD
Transition Strategies	Coping Strategies	Maladaptive	- Substance use - Substance abuse - Injury trigger for substance use	- WD - WD - WD