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The purpose of this study was to gain understanding and insight into the dynamics of the sport-career transition experiences of former National Football League athletes and examine how subjective well-being is influenced by this developmental stage. Using the interpretive tradition of phenomenology, and the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition as the theoretical framework, interviews with seven former National Football League athletes were conducted. These individuals retired from professional sport-careers within the last six years (1999 – 2005), were at least one year removed from professional competition and were not actively pursuing a career in professional sport.

Evidence suggests that most athletes, while they believed that they were prepared for the sport-career transition period, admit that when faced with the retirement event realized that their preparation efforts were inadequate resulting in negative feelings of subjective well-being. Participants in this study reported that they experienced moderate difficulty during the sport-career transition period. Findings centered around four core themes: (a) how former players understand and describe the sport-career transition experience; (b) systems of support to help with the sport-career transition; (c) how to prepare for the sport-career transition; and (d) subjective well-being.

Accounts of adjustment difficulties and awareness of the potential for negative subjective well-being allowed participants to advance recommendations for sport-career

transition interventions for current and future professional and elite football athletes to promote positive adaptation to the sport-career transition and subjective well-being.

The sport career transition is a complex, multidimensional process and the outcome is contingent upon the individuals' cognitive, social, behavioral and emotional resources and level of preparation for the sport-career transition. The importance for athletes to participate in sport-career transition programs during their sport-careers is undeniable and has been revealed to be a powerful facilitator affecting the quality of the sport-career transition after the sport-career has ended.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE SPORT-CAREER  
TRANSITION EXPERIENCES THAT AFFECT SUBJECTIVE  
WELL-BEING OF FORMER NATIONAL FOOTBALL  
LEAGUE PLAYERS

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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“Defining myself, as opposed to being defined by others, is one of the most difficult challenges I face.”

Carol Moseley-Braun

I accept the challenge! Peace and blessings.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Retirement and the subsequent transition from elite sport participation are inevitable and can be traumatic, but we know little about athletes' lives during retirement and after retirement from elite amateur (Olympic) or professional (NBA, NHL, NFL) sport participation. For the purposes of this research a transition is described as an event, or non-event that results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships (Schlossberg, 1995, p. 5). Many researchers have described the sport-career transition (SCT) of professional athletes as a difficult and disruptive process, fraught with conflict and mixed emotions ranging from relief (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993) to crisis (Mihovilovic, 1968) resulting from a variety of factors such as age at retirement, lifestyle, income, and ego involvement of individual athletes (Baillie & Danish, 1992, 1993; Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, Stephan, 2002; Drahota & Eitzen, 1998; Mihovilovic, 1968). A crisis transition takes place when an athlete has to make special effort to successfully adapt to the new requirements. Inability to adjust creates symptoms of crisis transition such as lowered self-esteem, emotional discomfort (e.g., doubt, anxiety, fear), increased sensitivity to failure, disorientation to decision-making and confusion. Psychological assistance can prevent such outcomes, as well as drop out from sport. (FEPSAC Position Statement #3).

Coakley (1983) rejects the prevailing belief, which maintains that the sport-career transition is an event that inevitably signals trauma, identity crisis or serious adjustment problems. Instead, he asserts that the sport-career transition is a process and should be viewed as an opportunity for personal growth and development in other life domains. He suggests that focusing on retirement as an event can be detrimental to research attempts in this area. Still, other research findings suggest that professional athletes, like most individuals, experience some period of adjustment after any transition, but that the individuals' internal and external resources determine whether they have positive or negative adjustments (Baillie & Danish, 1993). According to Sinclair and Orlick (1993), every transition has the potential to be a crisis, relief, or a combination of both depending on the individual's appraisal of the situation.

These conflicting views are prominent in the sport-career transition literature, are illustrative of the complexity of the sport-career transition experiences of elite amateur and professional athletes, and highlight the need to continue dedicating research efforts towards further understanding the phenomenon – sport-career transition. Further understanding and consensus regarding the sport-career transition experiences of professional athletes will provide the foundation for applied sport psychology consultants to design and implement specialized programs to help elite amateur and professional athletes during their sport-career transition.

Since the early 1980's, the area of sport-career transition has gained increasing attention in the sport psychology literature. Counseling and clinical psychologists, career counselors, sport psychology consultants and researchers have examined the sport-career

transition of elite athletes, including their reactions to retirement and their adjustment into other roles, in an attempt to understand the process of sport-career transition, and to assist elite athletes in acquiring the necessary skills for making the sport-career transition a less difficult and less disruptive period. Due to the complex, multidimensional nature of retirement and the sport-career transition, researchers and practitioners still have a great deal to learn in order to accomplish this goal.

For many athletes sport participation is a source of joy, identity and love; thus, leaving it (or just the thought of leaving it) may be confusing and emotionally distressing (Anderson & Morris, 2000; Drahota & Eitzen, 1998). De-socialization from the role of professional athlete to “regular person” may be especially difficult for several reasons, making this topic especially difficult to study. First, athletes’ lifestyles are subordinated to their sport, which becomes a way of life (Stambulova, 1994; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, 2002). Second, 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 (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Hill and Lowe (1974) reported that the team assumes responsibility for managing many day to day worries leaving the athletes free to focus on their performance, and the game rather than external pressures (Hill & Lowe, 1974). Finally, sport-career transition marks a time when athletes are faced with dramatic changes in their personal, social and occupational lives (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

The impetus for sport-career transitions has been found to be a function of several voluntary and involuntary factors (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). Four major factors,

related to sport careers determine when the decision to retire from professional or elite sport participation is made: career-ending injury, chronological age, deselection (being cut) and personal choice (Koukouris, 1991; Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). In contrast with individuals in the general population with the traditional retirement age of 65, professional athletes routinely retire from active sport participation at a relatively young age (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998). In the National Football League (NFL) the average professional football career is 3.5 years, which means that professional football players usually retire between 23 and 40 years of age. With the majority of their lives ahead of them, former football players must find something meaningful to do with the remaining years of their lives. In addition to the young retirement age, professional athletes earn exorbitant amounts of money to play their sport, with the average salary in the range of \$1,169,470 (USA Today 6/8/01). After retirement when in their new occupational roles, they no longer command the type of salary that they became accustomed to as professional football players. In many instances, athletes fail to prepare financially for life after football and are forced to make significant adjustments to a more modest lifestyle. Another barrier often implicated in negative adaptation to sport-career transitions is the athletes' exclusive identification with the role of athlete. Athletes who have been immersed in sport participation to the exclusion of other activities will have a self-identity that is composed almost exclusively of their sport involvement (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). These lifestyle changes, along with other emotional and psychological adjustments are just some of the potential barriers that

can affect the disposition of the sport-career transition of National Football League players.

The purpose of this research is to use a qualitative research design and methods to explore the sport-career transition experiences of former National Football League players. Qualitative methodologies are ideal for use in understanding the individual's subjective experience regarding a particular phenomenon. The goal is to provide evidence in the form of accounts individuals share about their experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005). Paramount to this study is identifying specific behavioral characteristics, social elements and cognitive processes that may contribute toward subjective well-being for former athletes and a positive sport-career transition from professional football. Positive transition has been defined as: a transition that takes place when an athlete makes a relatively quick and easy adjustment to the demands of the given sport career change. Positive transition usually happens in cases where the necessary preconditions (e.g., theoretical and practical knowledge, skill, attitudes) have been created during a previous stage. Other factors that can ease the course of transition are: athletes' giftedness, high motivation, positive attitude towards training, competitions and sport career as a whole, active coping with difficulties, trust in coach and psychological climate (FEPSAC Position Statement #3).

Career transition theories from the counseling psychology literature have been used in several studies in an attempt to explain the process of making the transition from professional athlete to other familial, social and professional roles (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, 2003). There is a void however, in the sport psychology literature

regarding sport-specific career transition theories and models, valid measures and correlates of success. Diverse study outcomes and the lack of data pertaining to athletes' perceptions, orientations and feelings when leaving sport have forced investigators and practitioners to rely heavily on anecdotal case studies (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). In addition to these limitations, a great many of the sport-career transition studies have used athletes from multiple sports (Koukouris, 1991; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Swain, 1991; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), and therefore these studies cannot be directly applied to specific populations of athletes. Nevertheless, these studies have advanced the study of sport-career transition and continue to generate new interest and research in the field.

Conducting rigorous, meaningful studies in the area of sport-career transition from professional sport is necessary if we, as sport psychology consultants, are going to help individuals understand, prepare and successfully adapt to life without a sport career. We especially need sport-specific studies to gain a better understanding of the sport-career transition process (crisis, positive, both, or neither) and to develop more effective program interventions designed to enhance the quality of the sport-career transition for elite amateur and professional athletes. The National Football League and The National Football Leagues' Players Association have developed several programs (degree completion, career-internship program, financial education) to address this issue, however, programs have been developed based on anecdotal accounts from former players without the benefit of methodologically rigorous research to support their program interventions.

Moreover, the research has predominantly focused on athletes who have experienced adjustment difficulties (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). To date, I have yet to review any studies whose main goal was to identify characteristics, behaviors, circumstances, and/or cognitive processes associated with positive sport-career transition and subjective well-being in football athletes. In this study, subjective well-being is a marker of positive sport-career transition. This study was designed to address this issue, fill this empirical void in the sport-career transition literature, and to help professional football players in the National Football League and National Football Leagues' Players Association understand, explore, learn to prepare for and positively adapt to their sport-career transition.

#### Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to gain understanding and insight into the dynamics of the sport-career transition from the perspective of former National Football League (NFL) players. This leads to two further purposes: 1) to acquire information to help National Football League players understand and effectively prepare for the adjustment to life after football, and 2) to help applied sport psychology consultants and other practitioners provide better services to professional and elite amateur football athletes.

The absence of a universally accepted theoretical model has led to inconsistencies in sport-career transition research. Not only has the lack of sound theory hampered research efforts, but also the lack of coordination and fragmentation in research approaches has led to diversity in research conclusions (Stambulova, 1994). A great deal is left to learn about the unique combination of developmental, environmental, and social

assets needed in order to navigate the pathways to and through retirement and the sport-career transition of elite amateur and professional athletes.

Using the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Appendix B) (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998) as a guide, the goal of this research is to develop a better understanding of the sport-career transition experience of National Football League players. The Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998) is a multidimensional, sport-specific model that emphasizes individuality of experience and includes the potential for numerous influential variables related to the sport-career transition of former National Football League players. The Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition is the first and only sport-specific model that considers the entire course of the career transition process of elite amateur and professional athletes.

Since no evidence exists in the literature to support the credibility and dependability (Lincoln, 2002) of this model it is the intention of this researcher to examine the efficacy of this model using data gathered from former National Football League players. By conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with former National Football League players, I expect to discover behavioral characteristics, social circumstances and/or cognitive processes that enable an athlete to experience subjective well-being in their life after retirement from professional football participation. By using this model as a guide this phenomenological exploration seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do former National Football League athletes describe and understand the sport-career transition and its effect on subjective well-being?
2. What factors do former National Football League athletes perceive to influence the quality (positive/negative) of the sport-career transition?
3. How do former National Football League athletes prepare to make the sport-career transition, and how does preparation affect subjective well-being of former NFL players during and after their sport-career transition?
4. Who plays a role in preparing the athlete for the sport-career transition?
5. How do athletes learn to cope with the sport-career transition?
6. What do professional and collegiate football players need to make the Sport Career Transition successful?

#### Subjectivity Statement

I am an experienced counseling psychology professional, and counselor/health educator for sickle cell programs in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Winston-Salem, North Carolina. My academic training and employment experiences are steeped in pathology and my research interests are in creating intervention programs that focus on potential problems and preparing individuals to reduce, prevent, and cope with future difficulties.

Throughout this entire research process, I must set aside all preconceived notions that I may have about football players, professional athletes, and privileged individuals, and listen in order to understand the phenomenon as experienced by the participants (Creswell, 1998). All judgments about the nature and essence of people and events in the

world of professional football are released (Holstein & Gubruim, 1998) so that I can focus on the ways in which the research participants view themselves, interpret their experiences and how they then articulate this information.

I am a sport and exercise science researcher, and as such, I am committed to creating a quality research design, asking relevant questions, and producing rich and meaningful knowledge. My research design is flexible allowing for changes that may emerge during the research process. In this research I am the primary instrument of data collection. I am responsible for the research design, conducting the interviews, transcribing the voice recordings, organizing and interpreting the data. The data that I have collected consists of words, behaviors, and attitudes. I engage in this process using interpretive research methods that are rigorous and systematic. As the investigator, I am the ultimate author of the research and serve as the ultimate arbiter of inclusion, emphasis and integration (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). I am respectful of and grateful to those individuals whom I interview, always mindful of the intrusion that my inquiry may impose upon subjects, and attempt to keep the inconvenience and discomfort to a minimum. I strive to have readers hear the voices of the participants so that the research may convey trustworthiness and authenticity. My position is not of the all knowing researcher, but instead one of active learner, open to the entire research process.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of literature presents research findings that inform the issues regarding the sport-career transition experiences of elite amateur and professional athletes and reinforce the need for continued research in this area. The review includes social gerontological models, thanatological models, transition theory and models of adaptation from several disciplines; general counseling, career/vocational and sport psychology. Finally, this review delineates the function of the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998) and why it was used as a guide for this research design.

In a review of the literature, several seminal studies were found, including Mihovilovic's (1968), the *Status of Former Sportsmen*, Sussman's (1972) *An Analytical Model for the Sociological Study of Retirement*, and *Retirement from Professional Sport: The Process and Problems of Occupational and Psychological Adjustment* by McPherson (1980), one of the first scholars to refer to the phenomenon of athletic career termination. Many scholars have attempted to provide insight into the intricacies of retirement from sport and the sport-career transition of high-level athletes. Most, if not all, of these earlier studies were motivated by concerns about the fate of ex-athletes after withdrawal from elite amateur or professional sport and the belief that the withdrawal may be a source of distress (Coakley, 1983). The studies cited in this review vary in terms of theoretical and methodological approaches, sport, level of participation, sample size and

percentages of athletes reporting problems related to retirement (outcomes). In recent years, however, researchers have expanded their field of interest from retirement and career termination to sport-career transition (Torregrosa et al., 2004). Interest and support regarding this topic has been so overwhelming that scholars in sport psychology have organized a special interest group dedicated to sport-career transition (symposia and oral communication) and sessions were held for the first time at the 2001, 10<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Sport Psychology.

#### Models and Theories For Sport-Career Transition of Elite Athletes

A theoretical link between sport-career transition and social gerontological theories of aging, thanatological models of death and dying, career transition models and models of human adaptation to transition (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000) features prominently in much of the sport psychology literature on sport-career transitions. Much of the initial research in the area of sport-career transition from amateur elite and professional sport, in North America, has applied these accepted and validated non-sport career transition theories in an attempt to understand and explain the process of making the sport-career transition to another career and other social roles. Although some studies have demonstrated that these theories and models may have some relevance to the area of sport-career transition, these theories and models fail to: adequately address many of the diverse and complex variables experienced by athletes during and after their athletic careers, or provide researchers with a comprehensive theoretical foundation from which to advance this particular branch of research. They also focus exclusively on the notion that the sport-career transition is a time of crisis, rather than acknowledging this period as

a developmental milestone (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) to be experienced and negotiated by all elite amateur or professional athletes.

In a critical examination of social gerontological and thanatological models used in the sport psychology literature, Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) strongly recommended that sport psychology researchers develop sport-specific models and theories to explain the sport-career transition of professional athletes. While these theories may assist researchers, on a very sophomoric level, in understanding some of the nuances of the sport-career transition period, they erroneously perceive the sport-career transition as a discrete event; are too narrow in their focus; and therefore should not be applied to the study of sport-career transitions of elite amateur or professional athletes.

#### Social-Gerontological Models

Traditionally social-gerontological models have emphasized aging and consider life satisfaction as being dependent on characteristics of the sport experience, the individual and their appraisal of their career transition (Lazarus & Folkman, 1982; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Six social gerontological models have been suggested as most applicable to retirement and sport-career transition of amateur elite and professional athletes. Although they are severely lacking in theoretical or empirical support for athletes, and have had little broad utility in application to sports retirement (Baillie & Danish, 1992) they provide a nice springboard for the study of sport-career transitions of high-level athletes.

**Disengagement Theory** (Cummings, Dean, Newell & McCaffrey, 1960) is a theoretical extension of Erikson's (1950) 8-stage psycho-social model of lifespan

development. This theory posits that during a transition, individuals voluntarily reduce the amount of social contacts, and implies that this alienation is mutually desired by all parties - transitioner, and his/her social contacts. This theory argues that disengagement is an inevitable process where individuals reduce the number of social roles in their later years and implies that the individual and society mutually withdraw from each other (Cummings et al., 1960; Drahota & Eitzen 1998). Because most former athletes do not leave the work force permanently and more often than not accept positions of employment elsewhere, the theory of disengagement does not fully capture the essence of the experience athletes' face when retiring from professional sport. In addition, former professional athletes, due to their chronological age can not afford to withdraw from society. Lerch (1981) highlighted a contradiction to the concept of mutual withdrawal by pointing out that a large proportion of former athletes actually do the opposite and try to hang onto their sport long after their skills have begun to deteriorate. While this theory is valid, relative to retirement from the work force, it fails to take into consideration the unique circumstances of former professional athletes and contributes very little toward understanding retirement from high-level competitive sport (Greendorfer & Blinde; 1985; Swain, 1991). Disengagement theory may prove to be useful in a study of athletes who chose to leave sport voluntarily.

**Activity Theory** (Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953), also referred to as Substitution Theory, operates on the notion that the career transition will be more manageable if the athlete maintains the same level of activity as they used to during their active playing career. Although this theory has received support in the gerontological literature, it has

been suggested that this theory is based on an inadequate, if not invisible, theoretical foundation (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000). In terms of Activity Theory's potential use with professional athletes, it does not appear that it is a suitable theory in that the goal to maintain the same or similar level of activity is unrealistic and difficult to duplicate outside the sport context (Baillie & Danish, 1992).

**Exchange Theory** (Homans, 1961) is firmly grounded in social interaction theory, and was originally developed to distinguish how aging individuals rearrange their activities in order for their remaining energy to generate the greatest return (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000). Rosenberg (1981) suggests that Exchange Theory is highly applicable to sport-career transitions from sport. There are concerns, however, regarding the usefulness of this theory, emphasizing that it does not address circumstances and demands specific to the former elite sport participant.

**Subculture Theory** (Rose, 1962) suggests that prolonged social interactions between individuals can lead to the development of a group consciousness, a subculture if you will. Because it is believed that athletes possess distinct (sub) cultural characteristics, Rosenberg (1981), purports that this theory has relevance for former elite amateur and/or professional athletes. Other researchers (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985), however, question Subculture Theory and its utility in predicting whether an athlete will experience successful sport-career transition. Whether this theory can predict successful sport-career transition is unclear, but it does assist in identifying sources that could potentially lead to adjustment problems during the sport-career transition (Lavallee & Wylleman 2000). Unfortunately, Subculture Theory has been greatly criticized in the

sport psychology literature for having limited utility for helping athletes cope with their sport-career transition.

**Continuity Theory** (Atchley, 1981), also known as Consolidation Theory, posits that energy devoted to the major role occupation is redistributed among the remaining roles. For individuals who have lived a balanced life, this seems like a reasonable theory to apply when confronting the transition from amateur elite or professional sport participation. Unfortunately, elite level athletes are not known for their ability to balance multiple roles, and are more likely to be enmeshed in their athletic role; therefore, simple redistribution of roles may be harder to accomplish for former elite level athletes.

**Social Breakdown Theory** (Kuypers & Bengston, 1973) suggests that the individual becomes more susceptible to external labeling following the loss of the professional role. If the label is undesirable it is believed that social withdrawal takes place. Social Breakdown Theory is similar to Disengagement Theory however, this theory states that withdrawal and undesirable labeling may cause the individual to gradually reduce their involvement in certain activities until the role is completely eliminated from one's life. According to the sport-career transition literature, Social Breakdown Theory has definite implications for athletic retirement. Edwards and Meier (1984) have investigated the relationship between adjustment and other variables associated with Social Breakdown Theory including; socioeconomic status, pre-retirement planning and health (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). A study using former professional hockey players found significant support for Social Breakdown Theory and athletic retirement (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000).

## Thanatological Models

Thanatology, the study of death and dying, has been equated to the end of a sport career (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998), and these thanatology models have been applied when explaining various stages of athletic retirement and transition from elite sport participation. Similar to the social-gerontological theories, these models are too narrow in their approach and fail to adequately address the diverse and complex experiences of former elite-level athletes.

**Social Death.** The sport-career transition has been referred to and described as social death. This concept focuses on how members of a group treat an individual who has recently left the group. Although, physiologically the athlete is still alive, they are no longer a team member working toward a common goal. Upon retirement from competition athletes are separated from many of their social contacts, environmental contexts, and their psychological comfort zone. Here the term death is used as a metaphor for role termination (Drahota & Eitzen 1998). Social death may be a relevant analogy to describe how some athletes feel during the transition period. However, for some, ending a competitive athletic career is viewed as a time of relief and excitement about engaging in other pursuits; that high level sport participation prohibited. At best the concept of social death has received mixed views regarding its applicability to the sport-career transition of professional athletes. This concept has received anecdotal support but empirical data supporting its application with former athletes is lacking.

**Social Awareness.** Theorists have proposed that awareness contexts have relevance for athletes retiring from sport (Lerch, 1984; Rosenberg; 1984). The social

awareness research is largely related to the terminal hospital patients' impending death. The belief is that as terminal patients interact over time with family members, friends and medical staff, predictable patterns of interaction emerge. It is suggested that four levels of awareness contexts develop (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). They are: closed awareness, suspected awareness, mutual pretense and open awareness.

As it pertains to sport, it is suggested that individuals in the closed awareness stage remains in denial about their inevitable retirement or trade and thereby fails to make plans for their future. Individuals in suspected awareness stage suspect that the trade or release is imminent and try to confirm or deny the suspicion. In the sport context, these individuals attempt to obtain information about their future from league and association officials, friends, and agents. In the mutual pretense context, everyone involved with the athlete, including the athlete, is aware of the inevitable retirement event, but everyone behaves as if the event is not going to occur. In the last stage, open awareness everyone involved openly acknowledges the impending retirement event and has the opportunity to discuss their feelings. Specifically related to the athletic retirement, some athletes may have difficulty accepting the fact that they are at the point where they must retire from their successful sport career. This context also allows the athlete to plan their post-athletic career. Derek Swain (1991) reinforces the concept of social awareness when he recommends that athletes engage in this open awareness context from the beginning of their sport career and progressively take appropriate steps in preparation for retirement and the sport-career transition.

**Stages of Death.** Kubler-Ross's (1969) stages of death research grew out of a study of terminal patients. When describing retirement from sport, a stage theory has been suggested, similar to the stages of death proposed by Kubler-Ross. The stages of retirement are: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The application of the stages of death theory in sport psychology literature has become a topic of interest in recent years (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). It has been especially useful in understanding psychological patterns associated with athletes and injury (Wiese-Bjornstal & Smith, 1993). However, only Blinde and Stratta (1992) have successfully applied the stages of death theory to retired athletes. Once again, using the stages of death theory to describe the sport-career transition of professional athletes is not applicable for every athlete and has its limitations.

In summary, thanatological models have limited applicability to the sport-career transition of former professional athletes, and therefore caution should be observed in generalizing to athlete populations. One major criticism of thanatological models is that these models were developed using non-sport populations, and researchers Greendorfer and Blinde, (1985) strongly advise that we develop sport-specific models to explain the sport-career transition from sport process. Thanatological models, however, can be a useful guide in understanding the various stages that retiring athletes may experience (Baillie, 1993).

#### Counseling and Career Counseling Transition Models

For most of the general population retirement from one's primary full-time employment has been categorized as a milestone marking passage into later adulthood

(Kim & Moen, 2001). Separation from ones' primary career can lead to significant changes in roles, relationships, and routines with concomitant shifts in income and health (Kim & Moen, 2001).

Transition Models are distinctly different in their approach to addressing the sport-career transition of amateur elite and professional athletes. Whereas social-gerontological and thanatological models interpret the transition as a singular event, transition models view the sport-career transition as a process that occurs over time. In the non sport-career transition literature, there are various definitions and characterizations of role transitions. Allen and Van de Vliert (1984) in *Role Transitions: Explorations and Explanations*, examine career transition literature and life adaptation literature. Career transition models focus on the individual moving from one stage to another and this movement results in a change in the individuals' psychosocial assumptions and cultural perspective (Allen & Van de Vliert, 1984). Synthesis of these two commonly held beliefs leads to a definition of role transition, as, "an event or non-event resulting in changes in individuals psychosocial assumptions, concerning oneself or one's organizational environment, social environment, or one's relation to one's environment" (Allen & Van de Vliert, 1984).

Although the onset of a transition may be linked to one particular event or non-event, transitions are really processes that evolve over time (Schlossberg, 1995) – sometimes taking six months, a year or even longer before an individual traverses fully through a major transition. In what follows, I will outline some of the more popular non-sport career transition theories. Endings, Neutral Zones and Beginnings (William

Bridges, 1980), Process of Role Exit (Ebaugh, 1988), Entering a Transition (Meryl Louis 1980), Rites of Passage (Van Gennep & Myerhoff, 1960), and the Model of Adaptation to Transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

**Endings, Neutral Zones and Beginnings.** Bridges (1980) proposes that the transition period has three stages, and presents a convincing argument that every beginning and every transition starts with an ending, hence the order for the name - endings, neutral zones and beginnings. Bridges wrote that “endings are the first phase of transition. The second phase is a time of lost ness and emptiness before life resumes an intelligible pattern and direction, while the third phase is that of beginning anew” (1980, p. 17). Endings involve disengagement, dis-identification, disenchantment and disorientation (Bridges, 1980). Not every individual goes through all of these stages, nor does every individual experience these stages in order. But, in one way or another all individuals experiencing a transition do disengage from old roles and routines. Relative to disengagement is the need to dis-identify with the former role and re-identify with new roles. Endings can also include a period of disenchantment and disorientation. Experiencing some or all of these feelings is considered the ending stage.

Neutral zones generally involve a period of unproductive time-out where the individual may appear to be in limbo, somewhere between their former role, and assumptions and a new role and new set of assumptions about oneself (Bridges, 1980). For some people this may be a time of psychological distress and they may have difficulty coping with and getting through this neutral zone. Beginnings come after endings and neutrality are complete, often taking the form of a career change.

**Entering a Transition.** In this theory of career transition the emphasis is on what happens to people when they enter a new employment environment. When an individual enters a new employment environment, they have to learn a completely new set of rules, regulations, norms and expectations (Schlossberg, 1995) associated with the new system. Louis (1980) proposed that in order for individuals to be successful in their new roles they should have clear understanding of the expectations and be socialized into the explicit and implicit norms, roles and culture of the organizations.

**Process of Role Exit.** Concentrates on the process of leaving a role. Ebaugh's (1988) findings suggest that exiting from a role is a unique process that begins with the individual having doubts, taking action that can be either positive or negative, and then seeking alternative roles (Ebaugh, 1988). Role exit theory seems especially appropriate for sport-career transition of athletes for several reasons. First, the focus is on mid-life transitions rather than transitions related to advanced age. Second, the model applies to roles that are centrally important to individuals (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998) for example occupational and religious roles. Although Ebaugh didn't specifically apply this model to ex-athletes as a group, Drahota and Eitzen (1998) argue that this approach may be especially promising for understanding the sport-career transition process of athletes because 1) past affiliation with the role of athlete often becomes a part of the present and future identity, a concept that they identified as "holdover identity" which is similar to the concept of "identity foreclosure" also referred to in studies of sport-career transitions. 2) Because society often refuses to let go of an athletes' previous identity and has a tendency to respond to people based on who they used to be, it is difficult for an athlete

to exit the role because society, on some level, is still maintaining it. 3) Role exit not only impacts the “ex” but also others connected to that person.

Ebaugh employs a stage theory for role exit characterized by four stages that individuals must experience. Stage 1, identified as first doubts, can be initiated by a number of events; for example, injury and deselection could cause an athlete to begin having doubts as to his continued participation in professional sport. However, many athletes recognize the temporal nature of their professional athletic career even before their careers begin. These original doubts (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998) do not fit into Ebaugh’s Role Exit model. In stage 2, the athlete engages in seeking alternatives. In this model, this appears to be the most critical stage for athletes.

**Rites of Passage.** Arnold van Gennep and Barbara Myerhoff (1960) identified a process common in all societies. They believe that the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one stage to another (Schlossberg, 1995) and from one occupation to another. For each one of these passages there are ceremonies whose primary purpose is to grant permission for the individual to progress from stage to stage. The rites of passage include events that:

1. separate the individual from the group such as a wedding, or graduation.
2. incorporate the individual into a new role such as marriage
3. acknowledge an in-between status

Each of these transition theories suggest that individuals making the transition move through a series of stages in hopes of successfully making the transition to another role. Individuals making the transition must learn how to balance their activities with other

parts of their life and how to feel supported and challenged during their new journey. Several transition models have been proposed to explain the sport-career transition of athletes as a process.

### Model of Human Adaptation

Schlossberg's (1981) Model of Human Adaptation and Taylor and Ogilvie's (1998) Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition are two multidimensional models believed to be useful for the explanation and understanding of the sport-career transition of athletes. A transition, as defined by Schlossberg (1981), is an "event or non-event, which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). In Schlossberg's (1981) model, three key factors interact during a sport career transition: individual characteristics, perception of the transition, and characteristics of the pre-transition and post-transition environment. In the sport-career transition literature, several qualitative research studies (Parker, 1994; Swain, 1991) have found evidence to support the efficacy of this model concerning former elite-amateur and professional athletes (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). Schlossberg (1995) has revised her initial framework, which now includes four key factors believed to influence the individuals' ability to cope during a transition.

1. The situation
2. The self
3. The support
4. The strategies

The four S system (Schlossberg, 1995) describes the factors that make a difference in how an individual copes with change and can be viewed as potential assets or liabilities. Coping effectiveness has been explained by using a model that includes both resources and deficits, rather than just considering deficits.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined transition as a transaction between individuals and their environment with the individuals' appraisal of the transition being a key factor. The individual's perception of the event or non-event clearly influences how the individual feels and copes with the transition.

#### Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition

Drawing on previous theoretical frameworks both within sport psychology, career counseling and general and social psychology, and professional experiences with athletes, Taylor and Ogilvie (1998) have created a conceptual model (Appendix B) that aims to address the entire course of the athletes' retirement experience. The model suggests that the sport-career transition of high-level athletes is multidimensional and involves psychosocial (emotional, social, financial and occupational) factors that interact in response to the sport-career transition and account for the disposition of the athlete in transition. The model proposes 5 developmental stages: 1) cause of career retirement, 2) developmental experiences, 3) coping resources, 4) quality of adaptation to retirement and 5) interventions for retirement difficulties. I find this model to be the most relevant theoretical explanation of the sport-career transition of high-level athletes for two reasons. First, it provides a vital sport-specific framework for assessing individual experiences of athletes during the sport-career transition process (Swain, 1991), and

identifying markers regarding the quality of sport-career transition. Second, it serves to advance research and professional practice in the area of sport-career transition so that applied sport psychology consultants and other practitioners working with professional athletes can help athletes better prepare and function effectively after their career in sport has ended.

As I have been unable to locate any studies that have tested the validity or reliability of the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition, I am extremely motivated to use this model as a guide for this proposed research. After speaking with Jim Taylor, one of the authors of the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition, has also concurred that other than the article, *A Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Retirement among Athletes* (1994) and a few book chapters authored by Taylor and Ogilvie (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000) there is no other literature to support the efficacy of this model. While not theory driven, this model, which incorporates prior theoretical and applied considerations within and outside the sport domain (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994), was conceived by the authors who recognized the need and importance of developing a multi-dimensional sport-specific career transition model. This model, developed in 1998, has not been applied to any sport psychology research studies. Following the mandate proposed by Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) to develop sport-specific theory, models and measures to explain the sport-career transition experiences, I have decided to use this model as a framework for this proposed research design to determine whether it is applicable for use with former National Football League players.

## Variables that Mediate the Sport-Career Transition of High-Level Athletes

### Individual and Sport Related Factors

Most of the literature on sport-career transition has adopted a crisis orientation to describe the circumstances surrounding the sport-career transition that athletes experience when they retire. McPherson (1980) suggests that this *problem-oriented* approach to the study of sport-career transition needs to be replaced by a *process-oriented* approach. Withdrawal or retirement from sport should not simply be perceived as an event, but instead, a process that should begin shortly after the athlete becomes engaged in his/her career (Kim & Moen, 2001; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Swain, 1991; Torregrosa et al., 2004). A major shortcoming in this line of research is that too frequently sport-career transition has been defined as an event, which automatically causes an extreme negative reaction. Viewing the sport-career transition as a process can help consultants to help athletes individually prepare for their sport-career transition given their individual perceptions of the situation, personal resources, coping strategies and developmental experiences (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).

The literature has shown that a large majority of athletes have failed to prepare adequately or not at all for their post-athletic career (Person & Petitpas, 1990; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). As a result, ill-prepared (financially, emotionally or both) former athletes experience difficulty adjusting to life after withdrawal from elite sport participation, often taking months and in some cases years to make a successful transition (Torregrosa, et al., 2004). Although a conclusive definition for “successful” sport career transition from elite sport participation does not exist, successful transitions have been associated with:

having achieved one's goals in sport, having options to focus on after retirement, and talking with someone who listens (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Sinclair and Orlick surveyed 199 retired high-performance athletes and found reasons for retirement, individual coping strategies, support networks and other variables affected the quality of adaptation to life after elite sport participation. For high-level athletes, the sport-career transition can be a time of crisis, relief or a combination of both, but the majority of the sample (63%) rated the first few months after retirement as fairly positive (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).

Many individual and situational factors associated with athletic careers can make the transition an especially difficult and disruptive process (Baillie & Danish, 1992). First, a career in sport is much shorter than most other careers, as most athletes retire from elite sport participation in their mid-20 (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). For many professional athletes they go from being competent and skilled in an arena in which they have invested a great deal of physical, emotional and psychological energy to an area in which they have little experience and realize are years behind their counterparts.

Another factor thought to distinguish the sport-career transition from other career transitions is the involvement of athletic identity. Athletic identity is described as the degree to which an athlete defines herself or himself in terms of the athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). For athletes who are overly invested in their status and uniqueness as members of an elite, privileged group of individuals, the end of a sport career may precipitate a range of negative outcomes (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Training and competing at a high level can contribute to an imbalance of other activities in the athletes' life. Unfortunately, this sport-only identity may leave

some athletes with few skills, resulting in limited opportunities at the end of their sport-career, and at -risk for experiencing difficulty making the sport-career transition (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).

Another factor that can significantly affect the sport-career transition experience is the context surrounding withdrawal from active sport participation. Age, deselection, injury and free choice (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000; Murphy, 1995; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998) are the four most common reasons associated with retirement from elite sport participation. Research supports the belief that athletic retirement due to injury is difficult in that it is an event that the individual was unprepared for. When injury is the cause of retirement the athlete has to make a dual adjustment. In addition to the withdrawal from elite sport participation, the athlete must also face the arduous process of rehabilitation from the injury, and the possibility that their career could be over (Murphy, 1995). Findings from Webb et al. (1995) reveal that strength of one's athletic identity and the retirement context were both significant predictors of retirement difficulty for athletes in the study. The study also revealed that injury-related retirees reported greater difficulty during the sport-career transition (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Moreover, retirees with injuries and strong athletic identity experienced higher levels of retirement difficulty. Athletes whose career ended due to an injury have been reported to experience severe psychological distress manifested in depression, substance abuse, suicidal ideation and attempts (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Reactions to athletic injury include: grief reactions, identity loss, separation and loneliness, fear and anxiety, and loss of confidence and performance decrements (Person

& Petitpas, 1990). The anguish that some athletes experience when their career ends because of an injury is summarized best by Little as a bereavement reaction to the loss of part of the self, and the loss of physical prowess.

Another common cause for an athlete to retire is deselection, otherwise known as “being cut”. Sport inherently relies on the Darwinian philosophy of “survival of the fittest”, which places great value on the athlete who survives but pays little attention to the athlete who is cut (Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). When an athlete expects to continue to participate in high-level sport and is unexpectedly cut, the sport-career transition may be an especially difficult experience. The reality is that if you are a good athlete, you must continue to improve, or your risk of being deselected is greatly increased.

Decline in physical skills due to advancing age is another common cause for athletes to withdraw from athletic careers. In many highly competitive sports, as athletes get older, they often experience skill and/or performance decrements, and are often replaced by younger, more skilled, athletes. Depending on the sport this point might occur at a wide variety of ages. In women’s gymnastics, for example, the average age for retirement is 20 years old. In the National Basketball Association, a league that is rapidly shrinking, in terms of age, the average age of its players is 27.03 with only 106 of their 450 players over the age of 30. Injury, deselection and age are all involuntary conditions under which the decision to withdraw from active sport participation is sudden and out of the control of the athlete. Usually a third party (coach, manager, and front office personnel) makes the decision and the athlete has no choice but to retire.

In some cases an athlete makes the decision to withdraw from active sport participation voluntarily. The reasons for withdrawal are varied including financial pressures associated with competition, a desire to spend more time with their family, lack of life satisfaction or a desire to pursue another career (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000, Torregrosa, 2004). Webb et al. (1995) reported that athletes who voluntarily retired from professional sport participation were positively correlated with life satisfaction, but also with retirement difficulty. This finding is interesting and provides us with greater insight into the complexity of the sport-career transition experience of high-level athletes. It demonstrates that while the decision to withdraw from sport is voluntary, it should not be assumed that ending an athletic career voluntarily eases the career transition process (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000).

#### *Developmental Factors*

When faced with the possibility of their sport career coming to an end, athletes can experience a plethora of psychological, social, financial, and vocational changes (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). The presence and quality of factors related to adaptation to retirement will depend on developmental experiences that have occurred since the beginning of the athletic career (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). These developmental experiences influence how the athlete perceives their self, their interpersonal skills, level of academic attainment, athletic achievement. Participation in professional sport can, in many ways, hamper the development of the individual because the single-minded pursuit of athletic excellence, though a worthy goal, may restrict individual development.

### *Athletic Identity*

One of the most studied developmental aspects of the athlete is the construct of athletic identity. Baillie and Danish (1993) attribute the label or role of athlete as a major source of some of the difficulties that occur upon retirement. When the foundation of self-esteem, from a very young age, has been based on athletic excellence, the end of the athlete role can become difficult (Baillie & Danish, 1993). The process of identifying as an athlete, which is also referred to as a *situated identity*, may begin early and has significant influence on social, physical and personal development (Baillie & Danish, 1993). Athletes who are disproportionately invested in their sport participation may be characterized as “unidimensional”, having spent most of their effort in developing their athletic self to the exclusion of other domains, they, at the end of a professional sport career may have few options in which they can invest their ego in other activities that can bring them similar ego-gratification and satisfaction (McPherson, 1980). In addition to the relative early development of the athlete identity another factor which can lead to sport-career transition difficulty is the unique public identity of an athletic identity (Webb, Nasco, Riley & Headrick, 1995). Professional athletes routinely display their athletic prowess to a large public audience, this performance pressure, is rarely encountered in other professional arenas, making it a defining feature of the athlete role. Webb, Nasco, Riley and Headrick (1995) have demonstrated that the strength of the athletic identity is highly correlated to retirement outcomes.

### *Quest for Athletic Excellence*

For athletes who achieve professional status, a combination of natural ability (talent), dedication and hard work has contributed towards a rewarding lifestyle (financial, social). As an athlete progresses through various levels of competition there is a narrowing of one's focus upon sport participation and improving athletic skills. Throughout high school and college normal developmental tasks and exploratory behavior such as: learning life skills, building self-esteem, and developing career maturity are often restricted. Most professional athletes devote primary, if not exclusive effort to the pursuit of athletic excellence. Education and career planning can sometimes be neglected, either intentionally or unintentionally, in favor of and under the pressure to excel (Person & Petitpas, 1990) as an athlete. Due to this single-minded devotion to athletic excellence, many athletes are ill-prepared to handle life without sports. Lack of preparation has been identified as one of the primary reasons that a large percentage of athletes experience extreme personal disruption upon termination of their competitive sport careers (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000; Person & Petitpas, 1990).

### *Perceptions of Control*

Another significant factor that has been associated with quality of adaptation to the sport-career transition of professional athletes is the degree of perceived control that the athletes have with respect to the end of their careers (McPherson, 1980). Although the issue of locus of control has not been researched extensively in the sport psychology literature (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) there is a great deal of support from the areas of clinical, social and physiological psychology that suggests that perceived control is

highly correlated with improvements in human functioning (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Webb, Nasco, Riley & Headrick, 1995). Research examining Olympic athletes from Yugoslavia (Mihovilovic, 1968) and Greece (Koukouris, 1991) revealed that those who felt a lack of control during the retirement and transition reported that they experienced a decrease in the sense of personal control after their retirement from elite level sport participation.

### *Coping*

Coping has been defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to maintain age specific external or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the persons’ resources, cognitive appraisal and reaction to the situation” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cognitive appraisal and reaction to the retirement event are two variables that have been used to explain how certain personality factors may make withdrawal from sport careers smoother. Mihovilovic’s (1968) study of 44 Yugoslavian soccer players and Koukouris’ (1991) study of elite Greek athletes revealed that some former athletes deal with retirement by engaging in negative coping behaviors like alcohol abuse, increased smoking, neglect of personal hygiene and personal fitness. In contrast, Sinclair and Orlick found that keeping busy, training/exercising, a new focus, social support and some form of retirement planning or preparation, were the most beneficial coping strategies employed by former elite Canadian athletes who reported fewer difficulties making the sport-career transition. This finding supports other data indicating that athletes who have social support, pre-retirement planning and something to focus on after retirement exhibit better adjustment to the sport-career transition (Baillie

& Danish, 1992). Planning for another career has also been reported to reduce anxiety regarding the sport-career transition process (Murphy, 1995).

Withdrawal from elite sport participation and the sport-career transition experience is a complex process that is unique for each athlete. Each sport has properties that may influence the sport-career transition of its' athletes. Many variables mediate the sport-career transition. Some of these personal and developmental variables are detailed in the previous section, but many more variables can influence the way an individual athlete experiences the sport career transition (i. e. career-development, self-efficacy, race, level of educational attainment, presence of mental health diagnosis, health status, appraisal of the transition, perceived control, social/organizational support, loss of status, loss of social contacts).

### Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being (SWB) is a construct in the field of psychology related people's evaluation of their lives (Diener, Suh & Oishi, 1997) that has been used to ascertain global feelings of life satisfaction as well as affective self-evaluations. Several hallmarks in the study of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984) can facilitate a better understanding of the connection between transition from professional sport and subjective well-being. First, subjective well-being is defined in terms of the individuals' internal experience, which distinguishes it from traditional clinical psychology, which is dictated externally by researchers and practitioners. The basic assumption behind subjective well-being is that the respondent is in a privileged position to report his or her experience of well-being (Diener, Suh & Oishi, 1997). Second, researchers in the field

are interested in the entire range of well-being from intense dissatisfaction to extreme satisfaction. Not only does it include negative or pathological states of being (ill-being), individual differences in levels of positive well-being are also considered to be important (Diener, Suh & Oishi, 1997). Finally, the topic of subjective well-being involves not only temporal moods, which fluctuate over time, but rather the researcher focuses on long-term states of subjective well-being.

In addition to the primary hallmarks of subjective well-being, there are three central or core components of subjective well-being; 1) satisfaction, which refers to the cognitive and enduring self-evaluations, 2) pleasant affect and 3) low levels of unpleasant affect, which often refer to both enduring and temporal self-evaluations (Diener, Suh & Oishi, 1997). Each component can be further divided into subdivisions. Global satisfaction can be broken into satisfaction with various domains of life such as recreation, marriage, love, friendship and many others. Positive affect can be further divided into specific emotions such as joy, pleasure, affection and pride. While unpleasant or negative affect can be divided into emotions such as guilt, shame, anger, sadness and anxiety (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997).

Obtaining information about the subjective well-being of professional athletes is an ideal way to assess how they perceive themselves on the well-being continuum, their abilities and the quality of their lives after retirement from professional sport (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, 2002). Because subjective well-being is dependent on expectations, values and previous experiences, and because life transitions often lead to self evaluation and appraisal, subjective well-being has been used as a global measure of

self-perceived adjustment for people making various life transitions (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, 2002), and has the potential to be an indicator of positive sport-career transition in the sport-career transition research.

In a one-year, mixed methods research study conducted at the University of Montpellier, former French Olympic athletes were interviewed, and given the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg & Williams, 1988) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) four times post retirement. Data from former athletes were then compared to General Health Questionnaire's score of active French Olympic athletes. Findings from this study were promising. During the year there was an evolution in subjective well-being; an initial decrease was observed, followed by an increase, stabilization and then a final increase (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, 2002). Qualitative data showed that former athletes' feelings and attitudes during the study period ranged from difficulty at the beginning followed by a reconstruction and adjustment to a new lifestyle, social roles, and professional responsibilities. Implications from this study are vast and suggest the importance of the assessment of subjective well-being in the overall study of the sport-career transition of professional athletes.

Helping athletes make a successful transition to post-athletic careers is an important responsibility for the applied sport psychology practitioner (Murphy, 1995). Increased attention should be directed towards developing pre-transition programs and helping athletes work through some of the negative responses that sometimes accompany retirement from professional sport participation.

The first goal of this dissertation research is to identify variables (behavioral, cognitive) that consistently lead to positive sport-career transitions and feelings of subjective well-being for former National Football League athletes and help to reduce the likelihood of a “crisis” sport career transition. Another goal is to formulate a sport specific definition for **positive sport career transition (retirement)**. Although the European Federation of Sport Psychology (FEPSAC) Position Statement #3 on Sport Career Transitions has defined six sport career transitions, my interest is in establishing a definition of positive sport-career transition (retirement), and helping athletes explore, understand, and plan for the end of their sport careers and learn to cope with retirement and making the transition to life after sport.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

The purpose of this study is to examine the sport-career transition experiences of former professional football players in an effort to develop a better understanding of the multidimensional and complex nature of this developmental stage. Using the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998) as a guide, the goal of this inquiry is to determine what the sport-career transition experience means for former National Football League players. The Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998) is the first and only sport-specific model that examines the entire course of the career transition process of elite amateur and professional athletes. Because no evidence exists in the literature to support the credibility and dependability (Lincoln, 2002) of this model it was the intention of this researcher to examine whether this model is helpful in developing an understanding of the process of sport-career transition for professional football. Using semi-structured interviews, former players were asked to provide information about their sport-career transition experience, a comprehensive description of it, and the subsequent effect on subjective well-being.

A review of the literature reveals that there has been a shift over the past two decades from the once prevailing belief that retirement from a sport career is a traumatic event, to the empirically supported belief that withdrawal from sport is a process, rather

than an event, that begins soon after the athlete becomes engaged in their career (Swain, 1991). Another notable shift in the literature has been a deliberate departure on the part of researchers from using non-sport social-gerontological and thanatological theories to explain the sport-career transition experiences of elite amateur and professional athletes. After an extensive review of the literature, only one sport-specific career transition model was found, and that model was used to guide this research. Researchers have explored the sport-career transition experiences of elite amateur and professional athletes, but none have applied the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition as a framework in their research design.

The Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition, a multidimensional, sport-specific model emphasizes individuality in experience and includes the potential for innumerable influential variables and features related to the sport-career transition of high-level athletes. This study uses the model proposed by Taylor and Ogilvie (1998) and attempts to account for individual experiences related to the sport-career transition of former National Football League players by taking into consideration reasons for the transition, developmental factors, coping resources, quality of adjustment, the importance of social support, and their current level of subjective well-being. Lavalley and Wylleman (2000) suggest that the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition is helpful in understanding the transition process that high-level athletes experience.

While the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition was used in the research design to inform the research questions and develop the interview protocol (Appendix A), it was far less important during data analysis and interpretation, as themes

and categories emerged that were more relevant to the research questions. This research aims to explore and identify individual characteristics, behaviors, and cognitive processes that may moderate subjective well-being during and after the sport career. A secondary, more applied purpose for conducting this study is to inductively develop an explanation and textural description of the phenomenon (Krathwohl, 1997) of sport-career transition to guide applied sport psychology interventions and enhance the sport-career transition experiences of professional football players and elite level collegiate football athletes.

#### Tradition of Inquiry

Qualitative research methods are ideal when attempting to answer experiential questions such as the research questions in this study. These methods are person-centered, rather than method-centered (Moustakas, 1994). That is, qualitative methods humanize problems and give data greater meaning; make people, problems, and situations come alive; portray phenomena in context; describe complex personal and interpersonal phenomena that would be impossible to convey with quantitative research; provide a holistic view of the phenomena; and help to attach emotions and feelings to the phenomena (Krathwohl, 1997). Qualitative research methods allow the researcher to “discover rather than verify, to identify more than a cause – effect, but instead an explanation with understanding that gives us insight into individuals’ behavior” and experiences (Georgi, 1985., p14).

By employing qualitative research methods grounded in phenomenology (Holstein & Gubrium, 1998), the essential task of this research is to gather rich, situated and contextual knowledge and meaning by entering into former athletes’ field of

perception to produce a better understanding of the essential structure (Creswell, 1998) of the sport-career transition experiences of former National Football League players. One of the most outstanding characteristics of data obtained by using the phenomenological lens, is concreteness; that is, the descriptions reflect the details of the lived experiences rather than hypotheses, opinions or generalizations regarding the phenomenon (Wertz, 2005). This research focuses on how former football players' experience the phenomenon of retirement from professional football and their sport-career transition to other social and professional roles.

The objective of this study is to capture the essence of the sport-career transition experiences of a group of former National Football League players who have retired from competitive football participation. By employing an interpretive research design the researcher explores and tries to understand the lived experience of a group of people who have experienced the same phenomena (Creswell, 1998). In the interpretive tradition of phenomenology participants are acknowledged as the primary data source, but the role of researcher is manifested in active, dynamic and reflexive ways (Mason, 2002). In this study, participants are not only the primary source of data - they are an integral part of the process. These seven individuals were invited by this researcher to become engaged in the process of understanding the essence of the sport-career transition experience of National Football League players (Moustakas, 1994). As experts and informants on the phenomenon under exploration, they were encouraged to join with me as truthful seekers of knowledge and understanding (Moustakas, 1994, p. 108) of the sport-career transition experience with the understanding that their experiences, insights, and recommendations

would be the foundation of a program designed to help future collegiate and professional football athletes with their sport-career transition.

Inherent in phenomenology is the concept of reflexivity. Reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the human as instrument, a conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self through engaging in the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). This style of research mandates that the researcher be reflexive at every stage of the investigation forcing a heightened level of self-awareness regarding any biases, judgments, or preconceptions that she may bring to the field. Feelings and opinions about professional athletes, football players, wealthy individuals or male privilege should be continuously evaluated, as well as other feelings that emerge while engaged in this process.

### Participants

Interviews with seven former National Football League players were conducted at the Center for the Study of Retired Athletes (CSRA) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, J. Murrey Atkins Library on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and one interview was conducted at one participants' place of employment. A specifically designed interview protocol was used during interviews to provide reliable, authentic and trustworthy accounts of individual characteristics, behaviors, and cognitive processes that professional football players implemented during and after their professional careers in order to experience feelings of subjective well-being.

Through contacts with the Director of Player Development at the National Football League's Players Association (NFLPA) and collaboration with the staff at the Center for the Study of Retired Athletes, this researcher obtained the names, addresses, telephone numbers, year of retirement and team affiliation of 20 former NFL players. These individuals at the NFLPA and CSRA served as key informants for this study. Thirteen out of 32 teams in the National Football League are represented in this sample. Criteria for inclusion in this study sample are:

- Retired from NFL within the last six years (1999 – 2005).
- Not actively pursuing a career as a professional football player.
- Member of the National Football League Players Association.
- Primary residence in North Carolina.

In light of travel, time, financial constraints and research design (face-to-face interviews) the researcher limited study participants to residents of North Carolina. Initially, the researcher chose to employ only one sampling method; purposive sampling with purposeful selection of participants using the criterion-sampling technique (Creswell, 1998; Mason, 2002; Silverman, 2001). "Many qualitative researchers employ purposive, not random, sampling methods...they seek out groups, settings and individuals where the processes being studied are most likely to occur" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.202). During data collection, a snowball sampling strategy was utilized due to difficulty the researcher experienced securing individuals who were willing to participate in the study. After each interview participants were asked to provide names and contact information for individuals meeting criteria who might be interested in

participating. While this sample is not representative of all former athletes, it does represent male professional football athletes, and is relevant to the investigators' future research agenda.

Seven former National Football League players who have retired from professional football since 1999 and whose primary residence is in the state of North Carolina participated in this research. Participants ranged in age from 28 – 41 years old and represented six positions (wide-receiver, cornerback, linebacker, defensive back, linebacker, full back, tight end). Participants were all currently employed in full-time or part-time non-sport positions. A brief biography for each participant is available in Appendix F. Face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in order to gather rich, meaningful, contextual and situated data regarding their sport-career transition experiences. Findings from these interviews will be used to inform the content and structure of a football-specific sport-career transition program intervention targeting collegiate football players in their junior and senior year.

#### Instruments

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed and used in pilot interviews with three former National Football League players. Two face-to-face interviews and one telephone pilot interview were conducted in the fall of 2004 and spring of 2005. The initial version of the interview protocol and interview transcripts was mailed to the three individuals who participated in the pilot interviews in an effort to obtain feedback and clarification of interview questions and answers. Several changes were made to the interview guide to ensure that questions were stated in clear and concise terms, that they

sought answers that would yield qualitative rather than quantitative information regarding behavior and experience (Moustakas, 1994), and that they were consistent with components of the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998).

Questions in the interview guide were designed to: examine the sport-career transition experiences of former football players beginning with when they had their first doubts about their future in professional football, and standardize all interviews across participants and minimize bias (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, 2003). During interviews, areas such as circumstances leading to the sport-career transition, psychosocial and developmental factors that influenced the sport-career transition period, availability of resources and quality of the sport-career transition experience were discussed.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix E). Questionnaires took roughly 5 minutes to complete and were used to capture basic demographic information (age, level of education, marital status, race/ethnicity, etc.) about the sample of former professional football players participating in this study and to measure each participants self-reported level (current) of subjective well-being. The 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, 1993), was included in the demographic questionnaire (Appendix E), and used to measure subjective well-being.

## Procedures

Each prospective participant received a letter from the researcher, on NFLPA/CSRA letterhead, explaining the purpose of the study. It was hoped that by using official NFLPA/CSRA letterhead potential participants would surmise that this study had the approval of the NFLPA, and thereby be motivated to participate. Recruitment letters (Appendix C) were mailed to 20 former National Football League players respectfully requesting their confidential participation in this project. Each individual received follow-up phone calls, again respectfully asking for their confidential participation in these interviews. A mutually convenient interview time was scheduled with individuals who agreed to participate in this study. Alternative arrangements (change in venue) were made for individuals who expressed an interest in participating but reported that travel to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was prohibitive. The alternate, more convenient location for individuals who lived in Charlotte, NC was the J. Murrey Atkins Library on the campus of The University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

At least four attempts were made to contact potential participants by telephone. After four unsuccessful attempts to make contact with a potential participant, the researcher ceased to attempt contact with that individual for participation in the study. On several occasions, incorrect telephone numbers were listed (National Football League Players' Association directory) resulting in a final potential sample size of 11 eligible individuals. With such a reduced number of eligible participants, the decision was made to employ the snowball sampling technique as a method to recruit participants for this

research study. Five potential participants were contacted from the snowball sampling yielding two interviews.

Data collection began during the summer of 2005 and consisted of seven in-depth interviews (40 – 100 minutes) with former National Football League players about their perceptions, feelings, behaviors, and attitudes regarding their withdrawal from professional football and the sport-career transition process. Each interview was conducted by this researcher who made every effort to provide a comfortable environment (water, Kleenex, temperature control when possible), in which the participant would be more inclined to respond honestly and comprehensively (Moustakas, 1994). Each participant was informed of the nature of the study and encouraged to become fully engaged in this research (Moustakas, 1994). Informed consent (Appendix D) was obtained from six out of seven participants (one participant refused to sign consent but agreed to the interview). After informing participants of their right to withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty; that each interview will be digitally recorded, and assuring that confidentiality will be strictly maintained, interviews were conducted. Each participant was given a signed copy of their consent document. The researcher also retained a copy in compliance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations. After obtaining informed consent participants were asked to complete the demographic questionnaire. All participants complied with this request. Interviews were informal with the goal being to have a “conversation with a purpose” (Dexter, 1970). Interviews were recorded using two Sony Digital Voice Editors (recorders) in the event of human error or technology malfunction. Field notes consisting of non-verbal

behavior, interviewer reactions, and other meaningful information was recorded by the researcher to be used during data analysis.

Strict confidentiality has been maintained on all levels of this research. Any and all information regarding potential participants and participants will remain confidential. Participants are not identified by name, but have been assigned identification numbers (Participant 1, 2...7). Corresponding identification numbers were used on consent forms, and all records are securely held in a file cabinet in the researchers' home office. Participants were contacted after each interview by email to thank them for participating in the study. Hand written thank you letters were mailed to the homes of each participant after the completion of the dissertation.

All taped interviews were transcribed by two transcribers who are experienced in verbatim transcription and who signed Confidentiality Agreements.

#### Data Reduction and Analysis

Phenomenological data analysis proceeds through a systematic process of reduction, analysis of specific statements made by participants, and development of themes in search of all possible meanings (Creswell, 1997, p. 52). Each participant was sent, via email, a copy of their transcribed interview and asked to make any changes they felt necessary, exercising the concept of participant action inquiry where participants become actively engaged in reclaiming their own histories (Lincoln, 2002). None of the seven participants responded to the request to review transcripts for accuracy, make changes (deletions, additions) and/or withdraw from the study, which they were free to

do at any time. The researcher took their failure to reply as confirmation that interview transcripts were accurate and participants were satisfied with their transcript.

After data collection and completion of verbatim transcriptions detailed data reduction and analysis began. Interview transcripts were inspected for accuracy and verified against the original digital recordings as the initial stage of data analysis. Engaging in a literal reading of these data was the next stage in data analysis. A literal reading was instrumental, allowing the researcher to become familiar with these data in order to grasp the sense of the whole, the concreteness (Wertz, 2005) of the descriptions. At this stage of analysis the researcher reflects on the relevance of each part of the “language data” (Poklinghorne, 2005) and what it reveals about the phenomenon, sport-career transition. Observing specific content, use and style of language were the primary objectives at this stage. Following literal readings of these data, the researcher engaged in an interpretive reading. An interpretive reading of all data is the logical next step in analysis and involves the researcher inferring meaning into what the data represent (Mason, 2002) and how they describe the phenomenon being investigated. As this detailed analysis continued independent meaningful units of text which were relevant to the purpose of the study were identified, and labeled by this researcher in a process referred to as coding (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). After initial coding was completed these data were then reviewed, reinterpreted and organized in a data matrix into consisting of core themes, categories and topics (T.P. Daaleman et al; 2001) relevant to the purpose of the study. The motive for this level of data organization is to turn the data into a resource, to be easily accessed during the analysis.

It is of note that although the research design, interview protocol and data collection were informed by the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998) data reduction was predicated on the emergence of core themes, categories and topics relevant to the purpose of this study. However, as core themes, categories and topics emerged during this iterative process (Moustakas, 1994), thematic parallels to the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition were observed.

Meaningful units of text were used to construct evidence-based answers to the research questions about the sport-career transition experiences of professional football athletes, and a definition of a successful sport-career transition of the study participants was developed from these data.

#### Trustworthiness of Findings

Every effort was made to ensure that data reduction and analysis was rigorous, authentic and trustworthy. To ensure that credibility, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln, 2002) were achieved, several verification techniques were employed. The researcher has produced an audit trail including: raw data, data reduction and analysis products, and process notes. Member checks were also solicited and external peer reviewers were employed to review transcripts, checking for accuracy of interview transcripts and consistency concerning core themes and categories (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

To establish trustworthiness and authenticity of these data I assembled a verification team. Meetings were held with two external peer reviewers to verify data reduction and analysis procedures and products. The role of an external reviewer is to

“keep the researcher honest”, by asking difficult questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations (Creswell, 1998) of data. Reviewer one, who reviewed three interview transcripts, had extensive knowledge and understanding of qualitative research methods, specifically phenomenology. Reviewer two did not have experience with qualitative research methods prior to this experience and reviewed two interview transcripts. Reviewer and researcher analysis were compared, and discussed during a two-hour meeting. Consensus regarding core themes was achieved.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter begins with participant profiles and then presents the major findings in three distinct sections. Each section addresses a particular facet of the phenomenon – sport-career transition from the National Football League. The following profiles establish familiarity with each individual who shared their “lived experience” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52), insights and recommendations regarding the phenomenon sport-career transition from the National Football League. Also included in participant profiles are: demographic characteristics, reason for retirement, a self-reported rating of their sport-career transition experience, as well as their Satisfaction with Life Scale score, which is an indicator of current level subjective well-being.

**Participant 1** is a 36 year-old Caucasian male. He had a nine year NFL playing career, played in the position, Tight End, with two NFL teams, and retired from the NFL five years ago. He cites his reasons for retirement as age and diminishing skills. He began his football career at the age of eight years old. He has a Bachelors Degree and is currently employed as a financial advisor. He is married.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 10

Subjective Well-Being Score – 27 **Satisfied**

**Participant 2** is a 28 year-old African-American male. He had a three-year, three-game NFL playing career; playing the positions, Cornerback and Special Teams, with three NFL teams and retired from the NFL three years ago. His release and retirement

was precipitated by a pectoral injury that he sustained during training camp. He began his football career in ninth grade. He has a Bachelors Degree and is currently employed as a Mortgage Loan Officer. He is currently married, but was a bachelor during his NFL career.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 4

Subjective Well-Being Score – 32 **Extremely Satisfied**

**Participant 3** is a 41 year-old African-American male. He was an undrafted player with a fourteen-year NFL playing career, at the position of Wide Receiver. During his tenure he played with three NFL teams and retired from the NFL four years ago. He was the only retired player in this sample who voluntarily chose to leave professional football. He began his football career in ninth grade. He has a Bachelors Degree which he completed during his professional football career and is currently employed as a police officer. He is currently married, but was a bachelor during his NFL career.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 1

Subjective Well-Being Score – 23 **Slightly Satisfied**

**Participant 4** is a 33 year-old Caucasian male. He had a seven-year NFL playing career, playing the position of Linebacker, with four NFL teams and retired from the NFL four years ago. He cites “his services were no longer needed” as the reason for his retirement from the NFL. He began his football career at 12 years old. He has a Bachelors Degree and is currently in dental school. He is married.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 3

Subjective Well-Being Score – 32 **Extremely Satisfied**

**Participant 5** is a 33 year-old African-American male. He had a five-year NFL playing career, played in the positions Defensive Back and Special Teams, with two NFL teams, and retired from the NFL five years ago. His retirement was precipitated by a neck injury. He began his football career in elementary school. He has a Bachelors Degree and is currently employed as an Athletic Director. He is married.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 8

Subjective Well-Being Score – 34 **Extremely Satisfied**

**Participant 6** is a 35 year-old African-American male. He had a five-year NFL playing career, played in the positions Full Back and Special Teams with two NFL teams, and retired from the NFL five years ago. He cites that he was “released” and unable to get a position on another team as the reason for his retirement. He began his football career at the age of eight years old. He has a Bachelors Degree and is currently employed in medical device sales. He is married.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 4

Subjective Well-Being Score – 27 **Satisfied**

**Participant 7** is a 34 year-old African-American male. He had an eight-year NFL playing career, played in the position, Cornerback with four NFL teams, and retired from the NFL three years ago. Chronic injury and inability to pass team physicals were cited as the reasons for his retirement from the NFL. He began his football career in elementary school. He has five classes to take in order to earn his Bachelors Degree and has plans to complete his Bachelors Degree in the near future. He is currently employed as a trader/sales representative. He is married.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 10.5

Subjective Well-Being Score – 19 **Slightly Dissatisfied**

Table 1 summarizes participant profiles. As the table indicates, their sport-career transition ratings covered the full range from very difficult to very easy and all except one participant was at least “slightly satisfied” with their current appraisal of their subjective well-being.

Table 1: Demographics, Sport-Career Transition Rating and Satisfaction with Life Scale Scores.

Participant	Age	Race	Youth Football (# of years)	College Football (# of years)	Pro-Football (# of years)	Position	SWLS	Sport-Career Transition Rating
1	36	Caucasian	9	4	9	Tight End	27	10
2	28	African-American	4	4	3	Corner Back	32	4
3	41	African-American	4	4	14	Wide Receiver	23	1
4	33	Caucasian	9	5	7	Linebacker	32	3
5	33	African-American	9.5	4	5	Defensive Back/ST	34	8
6	35	African-American	7	4	5	Full Back/ST	27	4
7	34	African-American	7	5	8	Corner Back	19	10.5

\* Satisfaction with Life Scale ranges from 5 – 35. Mean = 27.7

\*\* Sport-Career Transition Rating 1 (easy) – 10 (difficult). Mean = 5.7

The following three sections present the main findings on the phenomenon – sport-career transition from the National Football League. Section one includes a detailed analysis of interview data, identifying core themes, supporting categories, and units of meaning generated from participant interviews that poignantly describe the

essence of the sport-career transition experience of seven former National Football League players. Four core themes emerged from these data to complete this section: 1) how former players understand and describe the sport-career transition experience, 2) systems of support to help with the sport-career transition, 3) how to prepare for the sport-career transition, and 4) subjective well-being. Due to the large amounts of data core themes, especially the theme, how former players understand and describe the sport-career transition experience, are extremely detailed and have been further divided into sub-sections for clarity and ease of understanding.

Section two offers specific recommendations for an educational program to assist elite football athletes with the sport-career transition. These recommendations have been advanced by participants and the theme: Content and Structure for a Sport-Career Transition Intervention emerged from participant interviews. A composite textural description of the sport-career transition experiences of former National Football League athletes is presented in section three of this chapter.

### Section 1: Essence of the Sport-Career Transition Experience of Former National Football League Players

Participants involved in this study were extremely forthcoming with regard to personal challenges they faced as they made the transition from a career as a professional football athlete to other personal and professional endeavors. In addition to their challenges, participants also disclosed many positive experiences that they had during their sport-career transition. While discussing the sport career transition from professional football, several participants disclosed that “it’s tough” (participants 1, 4, 7) making the sport-

career transition, however the majority of participants' satisfaction with life scores (rating their current level of life satisfaction) indicated that they were at least "slightly satisfied" with their present level of life satisfaction. This finding is consistent with Webb et al., (1995), who found that retirement difficulty and overall life satisfaction were unrelated. One participant's score indicated that he was "slightly dissatisfied" with his present level of life satisfaction, and this was consistent with his interview data.

#### How Former Players Understand and Describe the Sport-Career Transition Experience

The analysis of data provided countless examples that elucidate how athletes feel about the sport-career transition, perceive the sport-career transition, and respond to the psychological and social demands placed upon them during the sport-career transition. While most participants experienced a period of adjustment during the sport-career transition, the level of adjustment varied based upon a variety of internal and external factors. Demographic questionnaires and player profiles indicate that participants rated their sport-career transition from 1 – 10.5, which is illustrative of the degrees of adjustment that former players experienced during the sport-career transition period. Under the core theme, how former players describe and understand the sport career transition, four distinct categories emerged: *cognitive appraisal*, *affective response*, *behavioral response* and *psychosocial adjustment*. The following 23 pages of this section describe how an individual's cognitive appraisal of his sport-career, retirement and sport-career transition influence the quality of the sport-career transition experience and subjective well-being.

### *Cognitive Appraisal*

Cognitive appraisal refers to how an individual analyzes and interprets a particular situation. During interviews with participants it was evident that the circumstances surrounding the reason for the sport-career transition had significant influence on their interpretation of, and experiences during the sport-career transition. In an overview of the sport-career transition literature, age, deselection, injury and free choice (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998) have been identified and accepted as the four primary causes for sport-career termination. Support for each of these major causes of career termination is evidenced in these data as participants described all sport-career termination causes. Participant 1 cited age and “diminishing skills” as the reason for his sport-career termination. When asked what were the circumstances surrounding [your] sport-career transition? His reply was:

Participant 1: “I was cut after nine years. Salary cap moves and diminishing skills.”

Participants 2, 5 and 7 each cited injury as the primary cause for their sport-career termination. When asked what were the circumstances surrounding [your] sport-career transition? Participants reporting injury as the major cause for their sport-career transition responded:

Participant 2: “I was lifting weights with the strength coach for [name of the team], and I tore a pectoral muscle, which caused me to miss most of training camp. And then by the time they rehabbed me and said okay, you’re ready to get back out there and practice, I was released.”

Participant 5: “My last year with the [name of the team], I broke my L4 and my L5 vertebrae...through that process, I was released from the team.”

Participant 7: “When I was a young kid, I tore both my ACL's. Ripped, you know -- had them torn. I never had them repaired because we didn't have -- couldn't afford it. I was young, and we didn't have any insurance, so -- so I have always been injured per say...and the long term effects I guess...I just wasn't able to pass anymore physicals later in my career.”

According to participants 4 and 6, they were released from their teams (deselected). Deselection or “being cut” from a team can occur for many reasons, however, both indicated that they were released due to a new salary cap structure that became effective during their last active season.

Participant 4: “I think services no longer needed would be accurate.... Basically nobody called me after the union made a deal with the league whereas veteran players would make more money than younger players, rookie players, which effectively would have doubled my salary, but really effectively cost me my job.”

Participant 6: “My circumstances were I got released. Due to salary, salary cap.”

Participant 3 was the only retired player who made a choice to withdraw from the game of football after a 14-year professional career. When asked what were the circumstances surrounding [your] sport-career transition? His response was:

Participant 3: “It was because of, more or less, a change of career. I was ready for a change of career.”

Participants reporting age, deselection and injury as the primary cause for their sport-career transition were more likely to disclose that they had difficulty relinquishing their professional football career and moving on to another career or area of interest. Adjustment issues, ranging from mild to severe, were reported by six out of seven participants. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggest that the individuals’ cognitive appraisal of the transition is a critical indicator of adaptation to sport-career transition. Several cognitive constructs emerged from these data as key elements that influence how the individual feels and copes with the transition from professional football careers.

#### *Locus of Control*

Participants resented the fact that decisions regarding their status as “NFL players” were determined by other individuals – coaches, front office personnel, and owners. In many instances, participants perceived that they had little or no control regarding the eventual outcome of their professional football career. During interviews, it was apparent that these perceptions related to an external locus of control evoked intense negative emotion:

Participant 4: “...even though I was an older player, I was a much more experienced, I was a better player, I was very productive. But, I didn’t cost much more so I was a greater asset. But, when they made that agreement, effectively doubling my salary to where I was making five hundred more plus thousand dollars, or would have, than younger guys,

you know, front office personnel who are in charge of personnel acquisitions crunched numbers and decided guys like me – it wasn't just me, several, ten, fifteen guys like me that found themselves without a chair.”

Participant 2, whose three-year, three-game career was the shortest professional career of any participant in the study, expressed resentment and frustration because after rehabbing his injury he felt that he was never given the opportunity to prove that he was still a valuable player who could make a contribution in the National Football League.

Participant 2: “...because it's an injury that you can't necessarily say you're a hundred percent until you actually get out there and compete and hit somebody or whatever and see how the shoulder feels, there's really nothing I can do...that was frustrating a little bit, but you roll with the punches; things happen...The release, I wasn't necessarily pleased with it, but that's part of -- that's part of it.”

Due to salary cap measures one participants football career ended while he was still a young, healthy, skilled man. The average age of individuals in this study was 34.1 years old which, by traditional career standards, is considered to be young. Frustration and anger were expressed by participant 6 regarding external factors which resulted in his sport-career termination at the age of 30 years old:

Participant 6: “you're still healthy, you still play, but for money reasons, you're not out there. You know, just anger, you know.”

External locus of control is inherent to the structure of professional football. With respect to organizational dynamics: owners, front-office personnel and coaches are usually the individuals responsible for making team decisions. However, under these circumstances – deselection, age and injury, these players resented this degree of complete external control over the outcome of their professional football careers.

### *Athletic Identity*

The construct, athletic identity emerged as an important topic in this category of cognitive appraisal and appears to have considerable bearing on how former players perceive the sport-career transition experience. These data suggest that athletes with high athletic identity are more likely to experience negative adaptation to the sport-career transition. In the sport psychology literature, researchers have ascribed patterns of self-identification to play a critical role in adjustment to sport-career transitions (Webb et al, 1995; Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). Athletic identity is a construct that refers to the extent to which an athlete defines him/herself in the role of athlete (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). Although maintenance of a strong athletic identity may have a positive effect on professional athletes and their sport performance, there may be risks associated with such patterns of self-identification after a sport-career has ended.

There were many notable examples in the data that illustrate how patterns of identification with the role of athlete appeared to cause cognitive dissonance for participants after their retirement. In most instances, the sport-career transition compelled participants to restructure their identity in order to minimize the degree of cognitive dissonance. Participants reported that this restructuring was a defining point

for it allowed them to either: acknowledge that their athletic identity was more important to them than they previously thought, accept that the loss of their athletic identity was emotionally distressing, or understand that their single-minded pursuit of excellence in the football arena was achieved at the expense other areas of the self. Participants 4 and 5 were surprised upon reflection that the role of athlete was so important to them:

Participant 4: “I took a lot of satisfaction in that I was an NFL player. I really identified myself with that. To a dangerous degree honestly. I really think that it’s probably better for me that spiritually, emotionally, relationship-wise that I’m not maybe doing that at this point. I needed kind of to be separated, because I had to do a lot of self-examination on who I was and who I thought I was. And they weren’t necessarily the same person.”

Participant 5: I never thought I had any struggles with identity...but when you don’t have that title...when you had it for so long, you know, and you always have been known for [playing football] whether it been in Pop Warner, whether it be in high school, whether it be in college, whether it be in the pros...I think what happens is when you don’t have a title anymore, I think sometimes you can get you know wrapped up in who you were as a player.”

The development of an athletic identity typically takes place over a period of time and can be influenced by a number of factors. These data show achievement level, and length of time devoted to the pursuit of sport performance,

are to two variables that increase the risk of negative adaptation to the sport-career transition. All participants involved in this exploration played in the National Football League, therefore, they were all a part of an elite group of athletes whose emotional, physical, and psychological investment in their athletic career afforded them participation at the highest professional level of football:

Participant 4: “You’re looking at 1500 guys, you know, and (train), so you’re looking at 1500 guys in the world doing this.”

Participant 4 demonstrated a profound sense of pride in his membership in this group and placed a high premium on his accomplishments as a professional football player. He was the only participant who reported during his interview that he achieved the ultimate goal in professional football – a Super Bowl ring. However, his pattern of identification with the role of athlete was strengthened by his pride in membership and achievements on the field, making the sport-career transition to another career or interest, a formidable task.

The average playing career (elementary, high-school, college, professional) for participants was 21.4 years, which translates into approximately 2/3 of their lives. For 2/3 of their lives these men have played and excelled at football - culminating in the coveted professional career. Several participants, recognizing the influence that lengthy playing careers can have on the sport-career transition, addressed this salient point about how length of playing career facilitates the development of the athletic identity:

Participant 4: “that’s what you’ve spent your whole life doing, and you kind of identify with that to – You know, it’s kind of like that’s what you’ve spent your youth and while you’re playing, you’re still young.”

Although participant 4 is currently in dental school and has committed to moving on to a career as a dentist, his sense of loss related to his athletic identity was palpable. He later goes on to say:

Participant 4: “I’ve been doing this since I was eight years old, and now...It’s always what I’ve been and what I’ve done. So there’s a little bit of identity change.”

This construct of athletic identity is further complicated in that, not only is there the potential for the athlete to possess a strong athletic identity; there is also a tendency for the public to view the individual exclusively as an athlete (public athletic identity), which can be complicated, frustrating and upsetting, after the sport-career has ended. Participants expressed annoyance with people’s expectations during their sport-career transition. Interactions with the public and in some cases family members evoked negative emotion regarding these former athletes’ identity:

Participant 5: “I really didn’t think I had a lot of identity in what I did until I got outside of it... I think a lot of athletes are always or have been stereotyped and either whatever stereotype that a person might put you in, I just think a lot of athletes are stereotyped... I think they put all athletes in a box.”

Public perceptions about athletes can hinder movement through the sport-career transition. For example, one participant expressed frustration because he believed that he wasn't being taken seriously as a businessman:

Participant 7: "...business transition, for example. Just talking to people about business, they automatically say man, you've been playing football, you don't know what you're talking about...as if I don't have a brain. Do you know what I mean? A lot of them only perception was that oh, he can write a check. Do you know what I mean?"

The tendency for some members of the public to place former athletes in the proverbial box can have a negative influence on the individual and the quality of his sport-career transition. He later goes on to express frustration with family members and their failure to treat him as if he were a normal person, continuing to perceive him as the athlete "superstar":

Participant 7: "people's perception's got -- were altered, and it was just very difficult to be around people that I loved because they just saw me -- they treated me differently instead of treating me like [his name]...they treated me like this star."

Orlick and Sinclair (1993) report that athletes with low athletic identity do not report experiencing problems associated with this aspect disengagement. Data from participant 3, who denied having some of the experiences that others reported, indicate that his identification with the role of athlete was low. He

attributed his “smooth” sport–career transition to having clearly differentiated patterns of identification:

Participant 3: “This is just me, you know, the person. This is not me as a football player, you know; let’s just separate both of them... Sometimes people blend the two together...and then if you’re not as grounded or if you don’t have that belief for yourself -- then you see yourself as one - football player.”

Identification with the role of athlete after the sport-career has ended can have negative effects on self-perceptions, interactions with the public and on occasion with relatives. Football athletes should attempt to adopt alternative methods for self-identification (during and after their sport-career) which have been demonstrated to facilitate the process of moving onto new careers or personal interests.

### *Uncertainty*

Another cognitive construct shown to have an impact on the way former professional football players experience the sport-career transition was - *uncertainty*. Uncertainty refers to the sensation of being unsure about the outcome for the next stage of their life. One participant so eloquently stated, “it’s stressful going from a known entity to an unknown”. For this population uncertainty was an uncomfortable feeling and a source of constant distress. According to all except one participant the lack of security (job, position) inherent in the field of professional football can be extremely anxiety provoking:

Participant 7: “I think football...is the most unique, of any profession -- of any profession. Not professional athletes...I don’t think that basketball is the same way because of the guaranteed contract situation there...they have security....baseball, hockey as well, all guaranteed. Hockey, I think, is changing. But our situation is year-to-year...Which is phenomenal in that sense...there’s just no other job, I don’t think, is really like that that gives you such a lump sum of money, puts that amount of pressure on you and can take it away the next year if you do not perform.”

Statements like this and others from these data emphasize the perpetual pressure that professional football players face. There is a choice of performing, or risk the alternative – being released. Under these conditions it is difficult for released players to truly accept that their career is over and take steps to begin their sport-career transition. When players are released, the normal behavior pattern is to persist and persevere. Instead of accepting the retirement event, they continue to train hoping to “get picked up” or for someone to get hurt.

Several participants continued to “workout” after their release, hoping to be “picked up” by another team in the league. Participants exemplified optimism, none willing to accept (initially) the fact that their sport career was over. They all continued to train in hopes of being reinstated:

Participant 4: “it’d taken longer and longer for anybody to sign me, the last, the previous few seasons. And, while I didn’t expect it to completely be out. It was a surprise then, I just figured it was going to be a little later

when somebody would sign me... I worked out, stayed in shape, trained, and actually got a guy to train me so that if I did get a workout, I'd really be in peak position, ready to go."

Participant 2: "I didn't get released until August or somewhere thereabouts...by that time, the 2003 season had started, and I let my agent handle all that [negotiations]. 'You go see whatever it is I need to do'. And in the mean time, I'll stay in shape. I'll do what I got to do...I was not sure until maybe the end of the season came; I was like wow, it's almost a wrap."

Participant 2 continued to train and prepare to be reinstated during the entire 2003 – 2004 season, and even though a whole season lapsed without him playing a single down, he was still uncertain about his future as a professional football player as evidenced by the statement "it's almost a wrap". Even at the end of the season he had not accepted the retirement event.

Participant 6: "Part way through the season, I was cut. And you know, you'll stay in shape and everything through the end of the season. Because I mean, you've got a couple workouts here and there. Guys would talk about signing you, and maybe they didn't; some you didn't just fit into their scheme of things. Nobody really got hurt at your position, so they didn't pick you up. And that goes back to just having a good agent. But I said that after the season, if I'm not picked up by a team, I'm going

to retire. I kind of felt like it was time for me to retire if I didn't get picked up. So, that's what I did at the end of the 1999 season."

Uncertainty, fueled by hope and optimism, produces a cognitive unwillingness or unreadiness to move on, delaying onset of the sport-career transition. This pattern of behavior (continuing to workout, refusing to give up) is demonstrative of the mentality of elite athletes. Persistence and perseverance are traits that have enabled them to be successful, and they continue to rely on these qualities in an effort to extend their professional football careers. Eventually, however, optimism turns into acceptance and players sign the papers and make plans to move on:

Participant 4: "It's a paradox. It's a two-way sword. One reason you've done so well is because you believe in yourself and you do work hard and think things are going to happen."

Uncertainty and external locus of control are two topics that emerged from these data often, and often with negative emotion. It is interesting that both are inherent to the organizational structure of professional football and athletes are aware of their existence, as evidenced by their frequent trades, demotions, and frequent trades, demotions and deselection of teammates. However, professional football players rarely think that retirement is going to happen to them until they are faced with the reality of the situation. One participant described it as "the Superman Syndrome":

Participant 4: “The problem is what they call the ‘Superman Syndrome’.

You know, I’m bulletproof; it’s not going to happen to me.”

Because players focus much of their time and energy on performance issues in an attempt to extend their careers, very few players have career plans established when their professional football careers end. Anxiety caused by the unknown can be a source of stress exacerbating negative adaptation to the sport-career transition:

Participant 1: “You also -- you don’t -- you know, you don’t know how it’s going to be. You know, you hear from people that are retired and some, you know, are doing well and some -- most are not.”

Participant 4: There’s anxiety, you know. Fortunately I did well enough and was able to get into [type of professional school]. So, I didn’t have to spend that time, ‘What do I want to do?’ you know ‘What jobs can I get?’ You know, there’s just dealing with the uncertainty of going from a known entity.”

For individuals who have established a clear career path for after their sport-career, and have had training related to their post-sport career, adjustment to the sport-career transition seems to be minimal. For participant 3, uncertainty was not a factor, he was certain about what he wanted to do after his professional football career was over:

Participant 3: “I always wanted to be a law enforcement officer... The whole time, I knew in the back of my mind I wanted to go in law

enforcement. So while I was playing ball, I always did things with the local law enforcement officers. And I took it to another step further, and I started doing like internships with the FBI...I knew that when I left, I knew exactly what I was going to do. A lot of people leave the game like ah, I don't know what I'm going to do. To me, I knew...my excitement had just begun...I was getting ready.”

When asked to describe a successful sport-career transition from the NFL to “regular life”? Participants consistently opined that having another career or entrepreneurial venture to transfer your passion and energy towards was commensurate to a positive adaptation to the sport-career transition:

Participant 6: “Having an offer on the table from a company. Or having an entrepreneurial venture, I mean a venture just ready to walk right into. As soon as you're ready to call it quits – I mean you might even want to have something like that up and running why you're still playing...it should be seamless.”

### *Perceived Facilitators*

Finally, under the category cognitive appraisal, a topic titled *perceived facilitators* emerged from these data. In contrast with the other cognitive constructs discussed in this section, *perceived facilitators* is the title, however, these statements seem to be more consistent with the psychological construct - defense mechanisms. Psychologists believe that when intrapsychic conflict is acute and anxiety threatens the ego, people resort to using defense mechanisms.

Defense mechanisms are techniques by which the source of anxiety is either excluded from consciousness or distorted into a less anxiety-provoking form (Bootzin, Bower, Zajonc & Hall, 1986). During each interview, participants speculated about circumstances they perceived to positively influence the quality of the sport career transition. Participants candidly advanced assumptions about education, draft position, and financial security, asserting that each had a positive influence on the sport-career transition experience. These assumptions were not based on any evidence, other than speculation and hearsay about other players circumstances, not their own.

The belief that possessing an undergraduate degree facilitated positive adaptation to the sport-career transition reached saturation in these data. It was apparent that at some point in their development, these individuals learned to value obtaining an education but it was unclear whether this value was instilled in the home from parents, on the field from coaches, or from another source. Participants placed a high premium on receiving a Bachelors Degree. Six out of the seven participants earned their degrees; five before their professional football career, one during his professional football career, one began a Master's Degree in Sports Administration during his professional football career, and one is currently in dental school. The consensus was that having a degree was a valuable asset that provided retired players with a greater variety of options for careers after football:

Participant 1: “Gosh, I was so fortunate to have a degree....A lot of guys didn’t have a degree. When you don’t have a degree, you’re done.”

He later reiterates his belief concerning the benefit of obtaining an undergraduate degree along with several other participants.

Participant 1: “if you didn’t have a degree, you were in trouble. And they don’t think about that. Because, obviously, they didn’t think about it -- if they would have thought about it, they would have the degree.”

Participant 2: “coming out of college I had a double degree -- well, it’s a business degree, but with a concentration in marketing and finance. I said I wanted to like market for a company like Sean John or something like that -- a clothing company.”

For this participant, earning an undergraduate degree was his “plan B” in the event that a career in the National Football League failed to materialize.

Participant 3: “I mean it pays for you to go back to college... They got to realize that when they come to the NFL, they got to be very serious about, you know, continuing their studies. The only thing you can keep, like my mom told me, is the diploma....The knowledge I have in my head, you can say everything you want to, this and that; but if I have that behind me, you can’t take that from me. It’s up there because I earned it; not because it was given to me.”

Participant 4: Fortunately I did well enough and was able to get into dental school. So, I didn't have to spend that time, 'What do I want to do?' you know 'What jobs can I get?'"

Participant 6: "I actually started grad school [Sports Administration] when I was in [city] and once I got traded to [name of team], I was part way through that program, but they didn't have the same program anywhere around here."

Participant 7: "Like I am like five classes left for my degree, and I always said I'm going to take them and finish my degree, but I never took any. I took action, but I never completed it...Now I'm going to pursue it this time... and finish, you know? I think it's just now time for me, you know. I'm just feeling like that's what I need to do."

An education was obviously a commodity that participants believed would allow them to have greater opportunities and prevent them from experiencing negative adaptation to the sport-career transition. While they all shared this belief and all except one participant had an undergraduate degree, they all had very different sport-career transition experiences. The more accurate statement is that having an undergraduate degree does provide more opportunities for those who possess one versus those who do not, however, having a Bachelors Degree doesn't translate into an easy sport-career transition. The sport-career transition experience is more complex with psychological, emotional and behavioral factors to consider.

Another assumption frequently discussed during interviews pertained to financial security. Participants believed that financial security had a positive influence on the quality of the sport-career transition. Many believed that individuals with “lots of money” or who had a “nest egg” had an “easier” sport-career transition experience. Although Participants were not asked directly about their salaries during their professional career, National Football League salaries are public record. Participants salaries were not used in this analysis. However, in order to provide perspective regarding this issue the average salary in the National Football League last year was 1.25 million dollars per year (the least of all professional leagues in the United States). With the average NFL career at only three and a half years, earnings from a professional football career are often not enough to provide long-term financial security. Several Participants referred to themselves as “minimum salary” guys implying that their salary was considerably less than 1.25 million a year.

In one instance the assumption that having financial security was confirmed to be a factor in mitigating worries. Participant 2 reported that he had “transition capital” and did not worry about his finances.

Participant 2: “I wasn’t worried about much... I don’t really buy a bunch of ridiculous expensive stuff, so it was no way I was going to blow through the money that I had had -- in that short amount of time. I had just gotten out of football, so it was no big deal... So I had, I guess, transition capital... there’s no way [I could have] spent all of that.”

Participant 2 was 26 years old upon retirement from professional football. He was also gainfully employed two months after the start of the 2003 season (six months after his injury) therefore his financial worries were minimized due to several factors: “transition capital”, modest lifestyle, and new income. His youth and life stage also factor prominently into this sport-career experience. At the time of his retirement he was unmarried, making his frame of reference vastly different from a man who is married with children and has two homes to maintain:

Participant 1: “I never made a lot of money -- so my immediate concern was financially maintaining what I had...I had my first child and I wanted -- more so -- I knew I had my severance...but I wanted to make sure what I did was right. You know, I went through -- I started pretty quickly -- start looking for jobs. I didn't have a whole lot of enthusiasm about it, but I did start quickly.”

Participant 4: “You know, guys that are like me, it's a bigger deal because you don't take home as much even when you invest and live pretty conservative, like my family, if you didn't, you know, you're really like ‘Hey what am I going to do now?’ Whereas some of my buddies, that made millions and millions. It's an easier transition because they're not pressured into “I got to get something going because I still got bills to pay.”... In terms of they got more of a cushion, nest egg, whatever you want to call it, built up. And that's definitely a major impact on your transition, you know, in terms of it being easier...Guys that are like me,

me and some of my buddies, who are in the same situation I was are like ‘God, I gotta get going. I gotta get something. I don’t have two years to sit around and goof off.’”

Financial security is a difficult term to operationalize, which makes it impossible to draw conclusions about either positive or negative effects of financial security on sport-career transition – it’s extremely subjective and many other factors must be considered. A player who has a family and homes to maintain has different financial concerns and obligations and possibly a greater sense of urgency to create income than perhaps a twenty-something, bachelor living in an apartment or condominium. Both participants 1 and 4 quoted above were married with families to support.

Similar to the perceived facilitator concerning an undergraduate degree, financial security did not necessarily prevent former professional football players from experiencing problems during the sport-career transition. For example, one participant in this study reported that he was able to “[get] a big contract” but in spite of earning several million dollars, he still reported having extreme difficulty making the sport-career transition.

Another perceived facilitator cited by participants and believed to affect the quality of the sport-career transition experience is directly linked to the previous perceived facilitator, that is, players who were drafted high (first, second or third round) were more likely to have an “easier” sport-career transition because they secured more lucrative contracts and signing bonuses. This belief

was pervasive among participants who identified themselves as “minimum salary guys”. These participants believed that highly drafted players didn’t have to worry as much about what they were going to do after football because they had financial security. This perception permeated these data. Being drafted in the first three rounds does not guarantee longevity in the National Football League or financial security, just as being drafted in the sixth round does not mean that you will have a brief, financially unrewarding career in the National Football League. Contracts are not guaranteed for anyone and your career is based completely on performance. One example of how other factors account for longevity and financial success in the National Football League is Tom Brady, quarterback for the New England Patriots, who was the 199<sup>th</sup> player chosen, drafted in the sixth round. The sport-career transition period can be smooth or tumultuous due to a myriad of psychological, emotional and behavioral elements involved and it’s not as simple as participants implied.

One final example of how these data reached saturation regarding the perception that financial security automatically translated into an easy sport-career transition:

Participant 7: “I hate to break it down like it’s a difference, but it is a huge difference....A guy who makes \$11 million -- Or twenty-one million or thirty million or fifty million dollars is going to have a big, big transition change versus the guy who is on the back of the roster making, you know, minimum wage.”

Actual experiences of participants were used in this analysis but I believe that it was prudent to include these additional perceived facilitators in the findings because they play a significant role in how former professional football players perceive their sport-career transition experiences and illustrate the point that the sport-career transition is often oversimplified to reinforce or justify behavior. What continues to be clear is that the sport-career transition experience is a multidimensional and complex stage of development that requires understanding of the whole athlete. These beliefs emphasize the notion that some factors (undergraduate degree, financial security) are necessary conditions but not sufficient for positive adaptation to the sport-career transition. A discussion about conditions perceived to be sufficient in order for National Football League players to experience subjective well-being after disengagement from football takes place in another section of this document.

#### *Emotional Response*

Analysis and interpretation of interview data indicates that emotional response is one of the most complicated and challenging dimensions in the sport-career transition experience. Furthermore, a distinct pattern was observed from these data that suggests that participants who experienced intense negative affect about disengagement from professional football were more likely to exhibit negative behavioral patterns in response to these overwhelming feelings, which intensified transition distress. According to Lavalley and Wylleman (2000), in managing the sport-career transition process, those individuals high in coping

resources will tend to experience less stress than their peers. Emotional responses to the sport-career transition include: shock, frustration surrounding the circumstances that precipitated the retirement event, and grief – sense of loss. For this analysis the emotional responses of shock and frustration have been interpreted as emotional challenge. All participants, except for one, suggested that making the sport-career transition was “tough” (Participant’s 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7) emotionally. During interviews these intense emotions became quite evident to the researcher. One participant became noticeably flushed while discussing his difficulties during his sport-career transition. Participants reported varying lengths of time required to finally “come to terms” emotionally with their sport-career termination. Participants 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7 all reported that they missed playing the game. Not being in the locker room preparing for “war” with your teammates left them with mixed emotions; frustration, sadness, anger, shock, and denial.

Participant 5: “You get kind of down that you’re not out there.”

Most players reported that their professional football career was a time filled with joy and satisfaction. Playing football was a source of great pride for participants. Football was financially rewarding, afforded them membership into an elite group, celebrity status and fame, locally and nationally. For one participant, the reality of playing professional football was disappointing because his “love for the game had changed when it became a job”, he reported that, in

some ways, he welcomed his release from his team due to a significant decline in enjoyment and increasing dissatisfaction with the “business” of football:

Participant 5: “for me the love of the game had changed so much, you know, from the time I played Pop Warner football where there it was just a joy, and you know high school football was a love. But I think you know going through college and going through the professional with the professional football, you see that it becomes a business.”

Although his professional career was a disappointment, he reported adjustment difficulties during his sport-career transition, experiencing a sense of identity loss, and financial security.

The majority of those interviewed however, held contrasting views; for them, playing professional football was “great”. Consequently, having to withdraw and no longer being a part of this elite company proved to be a devastating blow:

#### *Emotional Challenge*

Participant 1: “It was just tough...football was great. And as I start talking about it, I kind of didn’t want to talk about it because it just gets -- brings back those good memories.”

Participant 4: “I had a lot to offer, if I could just get in the door. You know, and that’s, don’t get me wrong. I’ve had three years to kind of come to peace with that...but I still dream that I’m playing. I’ll wake up

all depressed, and go oh, I'm not, you know, it was a dream. Well, I think anybody would be like that."

For many players apprehension regarding the end of their sport career and uncertainty about their future can be a major source of distress. Participant 4, reports that before he made the decision to abandon his pursuit of the illusive football job it was "tough"; but after discussing his options with his wife and making a decision to enroll in dental school, he felt better and his anxiety decreased:

Participant 4: "there's nothing I'm going to do outside that I'm going to enjoy as much as football. I can't even think about it, so... It's tough! I mean, you know, figuring out what you're going to do, I think once you know what you're going to do, it's a lot easier"

The shock that athletes feel when their football career is about to end is another element that contributes to the emotional challenge that professional football athletes experience as they make the sport-career transition. Athletes reported that it is a shock when they find that they no longer have an "assignment", even if the "writing was on the wall". Participant 4 states that he started thinking about his sport-career transition after he had back surgery:

Participant 4: "You always know it's coming, but you're always hoping it's later, rather than sooner, and then when it's here, it's, even on some level it's a surprise, a shock, you know like 'God!' you know..."

Participant 1: “There’s nothing you can do to prepare for when it’s over....Now you can -- I mean prepare for the final shock of it being over -- of your career being over. Now there are things you can do to prepare for life after football, definitely. But there’s nothing you can do to prepare for what it *feels* like when it’s over. I don’t care what anybody says. You can try to write about it, you can do anything.”

Participant 1 reported that his sport-career transition was very difficult (Sport-Career Transition Rating = 10), he exhibited emotional and behavioral disturbances which were eventually resolved, however, these challenges affected the quality of his sport-career transition experience and his subjective well-being. He goes on to say that he was surprised at the degree of difficulty he experienced during his sport-career transition:

Participant 1: “I don’t think that anybody knew that I would struggle like I did.”

Participant 7 also had a difficult sport-career transition period (Sport-Career Transition Rating = 10.5). He attributes his difficulties to a variety of internal and external sources, and one of them is feeling as though he had unfinished business on the football field:

Participant 7: “I mean that’s -- that’s hard, you know....I thought I was going to be `okay because in my mind I said, you know, if I played eight years, I’m fine. You know what I mean?... But, as it got toward my eighth year and some of the goals that I set in my mind didn’t get accomplished; well, I wanted to play those extra two years to see if I could accomplish them.”

*Sense of Loss – Grief.*

In addition to feelings of shock, and frustration that retired athletes experience during their sport-career termination and transition, there are a number of substantial losses that accompany the sport-career termination and transition experience. Powerful friendship bonds are lost or changed; there is a loss of privilege and status; loss of high-level income; loss of intense competition; loss of intense physical activity resulting in an inability to use the body as a weapon; loss of crowd adulation and recognition; loss of elite group membership; loss of identity; loss of youth and loss of respect were some of the losses that participants revealed that they missed and had to learn to manage. As a result of these losses numerous personal and professional adjustments must take place in order for players to successfully move on to another developmental life stage. Participant's 4 and 5 both concluded that the sport-career transition was "tough" emotionally. You have to adjust to taking care of your own schedule, paying your own bills – generally taking responsibility for yourself. The end of football is symbolic – representing the culmination of a period of extended youth.

Participant 4: "It's a little more of moving on in life and growing up, and that's something you have to face and deal with...Football's finally over. You know like, okay, I got to grow up now."

Participant 5: "From the time you wake up, you have an agenda on what to do, where you need to be, where you need to go, what time you need to get back. All these things are done for you so it's almost like you're a

baby or a child while you're playing and when you get out of there, it's like you have to grow up. It's time to grow up.”

Participants equate retired football players making the sport-career transition to the baby or young person taking responsibility for their own care. These narratives are extremely poignant. Implicit in these statements is the perception that the sport-career transition period can be difficult for some due to players' inability to take care of themselves; either because of delays in the development of certain skills and/or immaturity.

Participant 7: “It was just very difficult for me to make my own schedule because I always had my life scheduled for me....that was very difficult....So keeping the focus and maintaining the focus throughout the day was very, very tough...”

Not all former professional players experience intense negative emotional response to retiring from professional football. For one, participant 5, mixed emotions accompanied the sport-career transition, while another reported positive emotions associated with the sport-career transition. Participant 3 revealed that he was “excited” when thinking about what he would do after he retired from football because he had always wanted to be in law enforcement:

Participant 3: “When I left football, it was like -- I left the game healthy. I never was a sports fan in the beginning. I don't watch it on television; I'm not one of those guys who have to see it...As far as me being -- losing sleeping over it --I never lost sleep over it when I left the game”

Participant 7 reported that he did not experience positive adaptation to the sport-career transition. For reasons unknown to him initially, he was unwilling or unable to manage his “new” responsibilities for himself and for his family. The way he chose to cope with everything was by avoidance:

Participant 7: “I’d just be away from --- trying to be away from home mentally, trying not to deal with the responsibility of, you know, being a husband and a dad, you know, on regular basis.”

When negative emotional responses to the sport-career transition occur players have reported feeling “depressed”. During his interview participant 7 disclosed that he was depressed after his sport-career ended. This is not uncommon; two participants involved in this study reported that after their sport-career ended they were diagnosed with some form of depressive disorder, and three others spoke of depressed feelings but did not report an actual diagnosis. The culmination of the sport-career and subsequent adjustment to life after football can cause an individual to exhibit a grief reaction or symptoms indicative of depressive disorder. A depressive disorder is an illness that involves the body, mood, and thoughts and can cause impairments in a variety of areas. These disorders should be treated by a trained clinical professional if there is any hope for improvements in mood and functioning.

Depression is a significant problem for some athletes after disengagement from sport participation and in this population it is probably under-reported due to the stigma associated with men and depression.

Guskiewicz and colleagues at the Center for the Study of Retired Athletes have conducted research in the area of the residual effects of injury from contact sports. Results from studies on former professional football players indicate that football athletes with a history of recurrent concussions are at-risk for developing a depressive disorder and other cognitive, emotional and functional disabilities (Guskiewicz, 2005). With that said, retired players with a history of recurrent concussion or other types of injury may be dealing with chronic pain for the rest of their life after football, which is known to influence quality of life outcomes and probably has a negative influence of the quality of the sport-career transition. This issue of how injury influences the quality of the sport-career transition is two pronged: Is it that athletes become depressed because of the end of disengagement from football, or is it that residual effects from injuries sustained and “years of pounding” increase their risk of developing a depressive disorder?

These descriptions speak to the potential impact that residual effects of injury can have on retired players efforts to move on to another career:

Participant 7: “A lot of guys can’t keep track of the time....Let alone do an Excel spreadsheet and keep track of sales....I mean there are a lot of injuries -- had concussions -- Guys can’t stay focused.”

Participant 1: “concussions. I just -- I just knew it was over. It’s hard, it’s hard. You know, I didn’t have a hard time with just saying it was over, because I knew it was. I had a hard time adjusting --.....-- to life after football.”

Participant 4, denied any clinical diagnosis but did report that he does sometimes have dreams about football, and when he awakens he feels “depressed”:

Participant 4: “I still dream that I’m playing. I’ll wake up all depressed, and go oh, I’m not, you know, it was a dream.”

### *Behavioral Response*

Analysis and interpretation of these data show that behavior patterns after sport-career termination were closely associated with each former National Football League players’ emotional response to the sport-career transition. Participants who demonstrated intense emotional reaction to the end of their sport career were most likely to exhibit behaviors perceived to be negative, disruptive and in some instances harmful. Behaviors were interpreted into two categories: behaviors perceived to be negative in response to the sport-career transition or behaviors perceived to be positive in response to the sport-career transition. Most participants involved in this study reported exhibiting some degree of negative behavior. Participant’s 2 and 3 denied exhibiting any negative behaviors, while participant 4 was very reticent. In the ten pages that follow, positive and negative behaviors exhibited by participants in response to the sport-career transition will be analyzed. In this section positive behaviors will be presented first, including supportive textural descriptions. Taking a break, obtaining gainful employment and being productive, developing a clear career path and staying in shape, are examples of positive behaviors that participants

demonstrated in response to the sport-career transition. Irritability, verbal abuse, excessive drinking, gambling (craps, blackjack), and isolation are presented under the heading negative behaviors. In several examples, positive and negative behaviors will be discussed simultaneously, given that a positive behavior was precipitated by negative behavior.

### *Positive Behaviors*

After making the decision to retire from the game of football, all except one participant took time off to “relax”, “recover” or “rest”. The average length of time was 12 months with a range of 2 months to 18 months. Participant 2, wanted to “be productive” again, therefore he didn’t take much time off:

Participant 2: “October came around; I said okay, I ain’t -- I don’t really -  
- I’m not comfortable with the couch, so let me go see what Plan B is. I  
got a degree. What do I want to do? He said alright, I got a guy that’s in  
my close circle that owns a mortgage company. And I went to work for  
him. I got my license and all that stuff organized and, by the middle of  
October, I was working with that gentleman.”

The following narratives illustrate a fairly consistent behavior pattern for participants in this study that involved a period of rest after retirement from professional football:

Participant 7: “I gave myself about three, four, or five months just to kind  
of, you know, make the transition...I’ve been playing football -- I’ve been

doing this for about twenty-five years, you know, so I just wanted to give myself some time.”

Participant 5: “I kind of felt I need to go ahead and give my body rest anyway. And that’s what I did. I took some time off and you know rested my body... I think it got to the point where I said ‘You know I need to take some time off’. I took about a year, year and a half off where I really didn’t do anything other than just letting my body recover from years and years of just pounding.”

Taking time off and allowing the body to “recover” from years of “pounding”, also allowed participants to spend more time with their families, a luxury that they were not afforded during their playing careers because “football – I don’t care. It’s a ten-month deal now”.

Participant 5: “I was able to spend time with family, my wife, my kids. Just kind of you know really enjoy life because I started at the age of eight, and played every year football...I think even at that age, where you have a gift at doing something, you really don’t spend a whole lot of time off. You’re always trying something to do to train your body and to be the best you can be.”

Participant 3 reported that his body is in good shape and credits that to good fortune and taking care of his body when he played:

Participant 3: “It seems like I never played football. I played fourteen years, and it seems like I never played. I don’t have the injuries, I don’t have the aches, I don’t have the pains, I don’t have that. When I get up

and go pick up my little girl in the morning and go do things, and we got -- I have nothing -- because I have friends, you know, telling me man, it takes me like thirty minutes to get out of bed. To me I don't know how they feel, I was just blessed. You take care of your body year round."

Although he had established a clear career path and didn't report any injury-related residual effects from playing football, he also took 12 months of after he voluntarily retired from football.

Several participants were anxious to be productive again shortly after their retirement from football. After years of participation in a sport where intense physical activity and aggression are standard, sitting on the couch and "watching Sports Center" was not an option that participants wanted to exercise. In a previous section, participant 2 expressed that he was "uncomfortable with the couch" and was motivated to obtain gainful employment and be productive as soon as possible, even while training and waiting to receive a call from a team. Participant 4 discussed his options with his wife and then began the process of applying to dental school for the fall of the following year:

Participant 4: "I went ahead and started an application process to dental school. I took the entrance boards, talked with people here, and some other people, and I started that ball rolling during the 2002 season."

Later during the interview he continues to discuss his experiences as he tried to adjust to retirement; coping with feelings of restlessness and boredom while waiting to enter dental school:

Participant 4: “The first month or two when you’re not working is okay. After that, you get bored. Yeah ‘I gotta do something’. You know ‘Find something to do to occupy [your] time’... ‘Man I gotta do something, I’m bored. Sitting around the house watching Sports Center gets old.”

During the active sport-career professional football players are constantly striving to achieve an athletic build uniquely developed to perform and punish on the grid iron. The condition of the body is integral to athletic success. After retirement however, most athletes are unable or unwilling to maintain the same level of intense physical activity since conditioning has always been oriented towards a specific goal. In many cases former athletes “let themselves go” (Messner, 1992). Another positive behavioral response demonstrated by several participants during the sport-career transition was, developing a training regimen. Re-evaluation of their level of physical activity resulted in a change in goal from conditioning the body to preserving health:

Participant 7: “...I mean, I work out every day...I’m just more self conscious, I think, than a lot of guys about their health...I’ve heard stories about guys gaining 50 and 60, 70 pounds, a hundred pounds, a hundred and twenty pounds -- not going to be me.”

### *Negative Behaviors*

Six participants exhibited varying levels of negative behavior in response to the sport-career transition. When asked the question did you engage in any behaviors that you perceived to be negative, all participants except for one

reported irritability and emotional lability which manifested itself in short tempers with self and others, conflict with spouse, or isolation from the family. Everyone reported these behaviors in varying degrees from mild to severe.

A few examples of irritability and other mild negative behavioral response are expressed by participants 6 and 4:

Participant 6: “it’s not very comforting to be around a person who is no longer playing and wants to be playing. So, you gotta hear all the, ‘you’re snapping at everything’. You’re yelling at the kids for something you probably shouldn’t have yelled at them for.”

Participant 4: “I mean you’re depressed, you know. I wasn’t popping pills or curled up in a ball on the floor. But, I mean, you kind of lose some of your identity and you’re having to deal with that. It’s something you’ve spent your whole life doing. There is a change. I don’t -- I wasn’t abusive. I’m not a drinker or a drug abuser. I may have been a little shorter with people... I think if anything I was more angry at myself. I don’t think I displayed it to other people, but you know if I was building something and made a mistake, I’d get madder at myself. You’re just frustrated.”

Participants in this study were extremely candid about the more challenging negative behavioral responses they exhibited during the sport-career transition away from professional football. Players who experienced these negative behaviors took a longer time to move through the sport-career transition

and to eventually experience feelings of subjective well-being. Participant 1 expressed having a “tough” time emotionally which resulted in exhibiting negative behaviors:

Participant 1: “it’s tough... I wasn’t a nice person. I was – I mean could come out here and sit on the -- I mean I could sell anything, I could charm anybody. I just wasn’t good when I got home...verbally I wasn’t nice...which is almost as damaging sometimes as physical [abuse].”

Participant 5 was more reticent about behaviors he may have demonstrated that may be perceived to be negative. When asked the question, did you engage in any behaviors that you perceive to be negative in terms of making the sport-career transition? His response was:

Participant 5: “That may be a question you could ask my wife. But, no I can’t think of any, you know that...I mean, even if I did, I don’t think I would want to share them. No, I’m just kidding. But no, I don’t, I can’t say I have.”

Participant 5 mentioned on more than one occasion during the interview that that he is a Christian and copes with difficult circumstances in his life by summoning guidance from a higher power. For the purposes of this analysis into the sport-career transition experiences of former professional football players, coping styles of religiosity and prayer will be regarded as positive behaviors.

Participant 5: “We all have your mental things you struggle with, personal things you struggle with. I’ve always just dealt with them is just through prayer.”

Spouses, who were identified in a later section as a primary system of support for their husbands during this difficult period often became the victims of abuse. Participants acknowledged that they were verbally abusive to their wives:

Participant 7: “I know a lot of guys who treat their wives like crap at the end of their career -- and I’m one of them....I never hit my wife....But, a lot of the emotion about...leaving the game, it was, you know, you take that out on the person that’s closest to you.”

Participant 7 also reported having extreme difficulty with the sport career transition. On a scale of 1 – 10, with one being very easy and 10 being very difficult, he reported that his sport-career transition was a 10.5. Several participants attribute negative behaviors to an attempt to create or find another interest that would evoke feelings of the same or similar magnitude as those received during their football careers:

Participant 7: “I think it’s a very hard transition period, because you experience such highs and such lows....And there’s really not anything in between. You know, you experience very high highs and very low lows....And that’s, I think, what’s the hardest part to get over for a lot NFL players including myself... I’ve never done drugs, never used any type of drug, but I can’t imagine anything that gets you up more than

going out in front of that crowd every Sunday... I think a lot of guys go through that high. And when it's cut off completely; and you know that you're not going to suit it up for the next year, then I think a lot of guys search for that high, you know...and I did. I searched for that high in gambling.”

His behavior is indicative of an individual who is addicted to competition. Unfortunately gambling and risk-taking behaviors (losing money) caused other problems which ultimately had a negative influence on the sport-career transition.

Another participant co-opted this feeling of looking for something to occupy the void left by football:

Participant 6: “You’re looking for something to fill a void. And um, I may still be searching for that. I’m in a good position now, but is that what I really want to do?”

Participant 4 is doubtful that he will ever find anything that can equal the intense positive feelings that playing football produced:

Participant 4: “...there’s nothing I’m going to do outside that I’m going to enjoy as much as football. I can’t even think about it, so...”

According to the literature (Mihovilovic, 1968; Koukouris, 1991; Orlick & Sinclair, 1993) and these data, attempting to fill this void can cause former athletes to experience a poor sport-career transition and reduced levels of well-being.

Another common trap that some retired athletes fall into when trying to induce pleasant emotions associated with their playing career or mask negative emotions associated with the sport-career transition, is substance abuse. While discussing the difficulties that a friend was experiencing, Participant 1 reported that he too began drinking too much in an effort to cope with his feelings about retiring from professional football:

Participant 1: “I was going through the same thing, you know, and drinking too much... I drank too much...just too much, period. I mean, I didn’t get abusive, I didn’t, you know, stumble down the stairs drunk but, you know, you just drink to make you feel better. I self-medicated with it....You know, um, ease the tension a little bit....Not everyday, I didn’t. But when I did, I drank, you know.”

Several participants had to overcome extremely challenging emotional and behavioral obstacles, as they attempted to cope with the sport-career transition. They each took steps to obtain professional help with their negative behavior patterns. The goal for treatment was to develop appropriate coping behaviors in response to difficult emotional issues. Engaging in these positive behaviors demonstrates strength and a desire to change. Accepting responsibility for their behavior and taking the necessary steps to change these behaviors was instrumental in fostering personal growth and development.

Participant 1: “we had to go to counseling, and we went to counseling...Yeah. And, uh, it was mainly for me, but we had to go as a couple because it was affecting our marriage.”

Participant 7: I talked to a therapist; and after talking to her, I determined yeah, I was depressed, but it was for various reasons, not just the football. Do you know what I mean? I think it was a lot of things... football was one, and it was a big one, about eighty percent of it.”

Participant’s 2 and 6 reported other behaviors that they perceived to be negative for example; making bad decisions with money, wasting money, avoiding family and the day to day household operations. As long as players engaged in negative behaviors they continued to experience problems as a result. When they understood the reason for their behavior and accepted responsibility for changing their behavior they reported fewer problems with negative emotions and behaviors.

### *Psycho-Social Adjustment*

Psychologists use the term psycho-social to indicate that both aspects of psychological and social behavior are involved. In a previous section, quite a few significant losses were delineated and the emotional category regarding these losses was identified as grief – sense of loss. In these data, under the psycho-social adjustment, the following categories were most prevalent during the sport-career transition of these seven participants: camaraderie, providing for family, and personal adjustments.

### *Camaraderie*

When asked the question what do you miss about playing football? Without exception participants agreed that the impact of losing the spirit of camaraderie was the most difficult psycho-social adjustment they had to make after the sport-career ended.

Participant 5: “I think one of the main things I miss was probably friendships. Some of the friendships that you build.”

Many of the responses to this question encompassed several of the losses that participants experienced during their sport-career transition. It was evident to this researcher as participants discussed feelings of loss, that these losses were important. Many participants were nostalgic in their descriptions.

Participant’s 4 and 1 summarize the profound sense of loss that they experienced which is indicative of the sport-career transition from the National Football League for most former players:

Participant 4: “I miss lining up on the opening snap and 65,000 people screaming, and making a big tackle. High-fiving my buddies, getting hive-five and knowing that ‘Man, I played good!’ or I made a good play. I miss that. I miss playing more than anything... I miss men saying ‘Hey there goes \*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*! He plays linebacker for the [name of team]... I miss playing. I miss my buddies. I miss goofing off in the locker room. I miss the Super Bowl, 850 million people watching you and you only. I mean, nobody else is watching anything else. It’s awesome! And to be good at

it and just to hit somebody, I miss the violence. I do, I miss hitting people.

I miss being able to at practices if somebody slights you or does you wrong, then you can take immediate action. And you can settle it right then.”

Participant 1: “anything you’ve done since you were eight years old and all of a sudden you stop it, especially -- especially when it comes to a team sport, an individual, maybe not; but anytime you’re involved with ten other guys on your side of the ball and those guys, I mean, you depend -- your livelihood depends on them and you do everything with them, you live them, you go to work with them, you live with them for six weeks in the beginning, you go to work with them all during the year from 7 a.m. to 8 or 9 p.m., and you fly with them, and you travel with them, and then all of a sudden, it’s gone, that’s tough. That is the toughest part because, unless you’re just a total introvert, then it doesn’t bother you. But if you really get along and you play dominoes and you play cards and video games and go out and drink beer and eat hot dogs, you know, and go for a steak. I mean, gosh, when we were playing, we would be with our teammates more than our wives...I got along with everybody. I couldn’t name one player that I didn’t get along with...I’ve missed that more than playing”

Participants in this study reported feeling “disconnected” and “lost” as a result of their retirement. These feelings were attributed to the discontinuation from professional sport participation which was perceived as a comforting and familiar environment; an activity they invested a great deal of time, energy, and

emotions into and that brought them considerable financial, social and emotional rewards. Strong emotional affect was observed when former players discussed the impact that these losses had on their lives:

Participant 7: “I guess the crowd, adulation, you know, respect. It’s a lot of things.... I miss the game....I miss the competition, I think, the most.... The competition is probably the number one thing because I’ve been doing it since I was a baby.”

Participant 7: “I’ve seen a lot of guys just floating....Not knowing what to do with themselves.”

Participant 6: “The competition, you know? Eighty thousand people yelling for you on Sunday afternoons. The attention you get in the community when you go out and you do these kinds of charity events, or you’re out at dinner or something and somebody recognizes you...A lot of guys like that. They’ve got egos...I mean, there’s a lot of egos up in the NFL now.... things like that. Just, you know, not being an NFL player anymore.... And the celebrity that goes with that.”

### *Providing for the Family*

Retiring from professional football can sometimes be an extremely difficult task, as our participants articulated during their interviews. When asked to recall the most pressing and immediate concerns participants had at the beginning of the sport career transition, the answer was almost unanimous - finances. Initially they reported being worried about “going from making a lot of

money to making zero,” a circumstance that was incredibly anxiety provoking. Participants expressed genuine concern regarding how they were going to provide for their families financially. Several Participants indicated that they were “minimum” salary guys who no matter how conservatively they lived during their career they did not have enough money to sustain them for the rest of their lives.

Participant 1: I never made a lot of money...so my immediate concern was financially maintaining what I had...”

Participant 7: “I did okay with my money but didn’t set myself up for life.”

The National Football League is an all male league and as such these men have all been socialized to be the providers for their families. During their professional football career they provided well for their immediate families and in some cases, their extended families as well. Moving from a career as a professional football player to a less lucrative career can result in a reduction in income, and depending on financial obligations it can result in a change in lifestyle. The follow narrative illustrates this concern:

Participant 7: “Where’s the checks coming from? That’s the main thing, you know, especially for me. I was a kid who started working at thirteen, so -- to not get paid is a huge problem, you know, especially, I have a family, so -- and I’ve always been in support of either the family that I’m with now or my family [of origin]. So putting my family right with my siblings and my mom. So I’ve always been able to provide. So that’s

been a very difficult -- not seeing where the, you know, where the money is going to come from so I can provide for the long-term. That's been very difficult."

Others expressed concern about their vocational future, having asked themselves the big question, "What am I going to do now?" Concern about the future career is directly linked to productivity and providing for the family. When a former athlete begins a new career he is required to learn a new skill set and develop competencies in this new area. The physical skills that athletes have perfected for so long may now seem useless and a new career warrants that they have to learn to be competent at something new. Participant 2 was determined to be as successful as he had been in his former career, in his new career. He was judicious enough however, to understand that success was not going to occur overnight:

Participant 2: "I was worried about how I would be successful at Plan B. Okay, Plan A was football. Football is done. Now what's Plan B? Plan B is this mortgage thing. How am I going to be successful at this? What do I need to do? What resource do I need to tap? All that stuff... I guess that I was my only main concern. With that, you have to like build up clientele and give people time to know what you're doing and all that stuff. So it started off slow, but I was fine. I was working along with somebody, so I didn't necessarily intend to excel right away. So that took time."

Participant 3 denied having any worries specific to the sport-career transition. This can be attributed to several factors: his level of level of preparation, identity differentiation and self-awareness. During his interview he reported that his professional football participation was a career move that he had not expected and was never an all-consuming part of his life:

Participant 3: “To play in the NFL was a bonus; it was something that I wasn’t expecting to happen, and it happened... I was there because I was blessed. I wasn’t there because I was, you know, was expecting that I would make it my life -- it wasn’t my life....it was just a stopping point.”

#### *Personal Adjustments*

In addition to the loss of camaraderie and concerns about providing for their families associated with the end of a professional football career, Participants reported a myriad of other losses affecting either the psychological or social aspect of their sport-career transition experience. The following excerpts summarize the psycho-social adjustments that participants had to manage after their sport careers ended:

Participant 4: “I mean you go from making three or four hundred thousand dollars a year...you go from being an active player, and you’re part of the game, ah, around your teammates, your buddies, coaches. I mean, you’re in the system; everything’s going, you’re in that life, and then you’re not. You know, I think I miss actually playing and being around the guys. Money is money; you can always make money. But I

miss that [playing and camaraderie] more than I miss the other stuff...I still deal with it. I talk to guys, everybody does, everybody misses playing, you know? Yeah, you miss the money because it was good money, but most of the guys that I hang out with or know and am associated with, have jobs and are doing okay. You know what they really miss is playing, you know, being an NFL football player. That status, that prestige, the respect, you know. Everything else just kind of comes with it. But, you know, you still going to run into it. Some guy recognized me down there – ‘Hey \*\*\*\*!’ And that’s cool, it feels good, you know like ...‘God I wish I was still playing!’”

For one participant the grid iron, and his position at Corner Back, was the site for the construction of a significant portion of his masculine identity and the site where he tested his manhood every week. During his interview he revealed that the end of his career meant the end of his opportunity to prove his manhood, at least in this way. Masculine identity is linked to performing sport and for him football was the stage in which he constructed, honed and performed his manhood on “any given Sunday”:

Participant 7: “Every day your manhood is being challenged. [football is] a very masculine-based world.... And you have to live up to that. You have to be a lot more than a coward. If you’re ever seen as a coward, then you’re pretty much not going to fit in....So you got to prove every day or every weekend on Sunday at one o’clock or whenever that you’re a

man....I think that is unique to our profession, outside of maybe, you know, you know, going into the battlefield, you know.”

The perception that your manhood is intertwined with professional football is another example of the multiple layers associated with the essence of the phenomenon sport-career transition. Each of these layers has the potential to influence the quality of the sport-career transition. This is an interesting description of how powerful psycho-social aspects of sport participation as well as sport-non-participation influence self-perceptions.

#### Analysis and Summary

These data suggest that the sport-career transition is a complex and multidimensional process. To gain a complete understanding of the process cognitive, emotional, behavioral and psycho-social determinants from each individual must be examined and addressed. For Participants who reported that they experienced problems adjusting to life after football, not just one or two of these factors were implicated, a combination of these determinants was involved. The presence and quality of these factors related to the sport-career transition has a significant affect on the sport-career adaptation and feelings of subjective well-being. During interviews, however, Participants had a tendency to oversimplify the sport-career transition, failing to recognize the multidimensional nature of the process. These findings partially support Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1998) Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition, however, their model fails to acknowledge the potential for varying levels of cognitive, emotional, behavioral

and psycho-social determinants and their influence on subjective well-being and the sport-career transition.

Based on findings from these data, a Blended Model of Adaptation to Career Transition has been advanced by this researcher (Appendix H). This blended model is a modification of the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition and asserts that the quality of the sport-career transition is determined by a combination of complex and unique cognitive, emotional, behavioral and psycho-social factors. The quality of the sport-career transition is also strongly related to the level of preparation that the athlete engages in prior to the end of the sport career.

The blended model has been advanced based on analysis of these data, and should be used to assist future, current and former National Football League players understand and cope with the sport-career transition experience. It is important to note however, that development and testing of this model is ongoing, and will continue until it most accurately reflects the multidimensional, complex and interconnected nature of the elements related to the sport-career transition from the National Football League.

#### Systems of Support to Help With the Sport-Career Transition

In the previous section the sport-career transition was described as a time of uncertainty, identity crisis, adjustment and loss. In many instances participants reported having difficulty coping with feelings of loss during their sport-career transition and upon reflection disclosed that support and guidance from

individuals in their familial and social network proved to be instrumental in two ways: by helping them to cope with the sport-career transition and helping them to plan and prepare for the sport-career transition. Systems of Support to Help With the Sport-Career Transition emerged as the second core theme during data analysis that was relevant to the purpose of the study.

Resources and social support related to the sport-career transition are common themes in the literature and are believed to mitigate adjustment problems during this developmental stage. Analysis of interview data from the seven Participants suggests that the role of support is a crucial component influencing the quality of the sport-career transition experience of former National Football League players. This core theme has been further dissected into two categories: *informal systems of support* and *institutional systems of support*. Informal systems of support refer to support and guidance originating from: wives, girlfriends or significant others, other family members (parents, siblings), agents, psychologists, and friends with the primary objective being to minimize sport-career transition difficulties. In the case of participant 7, he identified himself as a part of the system of support to improve the sport-career transition experience. Included in the institutional systems of support are: the National Football League and their player development programs, the National Football League Players Association and their player development programs, and health insurance coverage that players are entitled to at the end of their sport-careers.

## *Informal Systems of Support*

### *Wives*

At the time of their sport career-termination five participants were married, and two were unmarried. During the sport-career transition, the role, “wife of a former professional football player” can be quite demanding and distressful. It has been documented in the literature and evident in these data that during the sport-career transition relationships with wives are often strained. Due to an inability of retired players to cope with their intense feelings, and difficulty communicating these feelings, wives have endured irritability, verbal abuse and negative behaviors from their husbands. As they struggle with adjustment issues they often lash out at the people closest to them, which primarily meant spouses and other family members, with the brunt falling on the wife:

Participant 7: “just didn’t know how to deal. I think...I just didn’t know what to do...I just didn’t -- I don’t think she really knew how to deal with me or deal with the situation.”

Participant 1: “I didn’t -- I wasn’t aware of the extent that it was hurting my wife. She’s been tough.”

Conversely, wives have demonstrated tolerance, loyalty and support toward their husbands during this challenging sport-career transition period. When asked the question, who helped you cope with your sport-career transition from professional football?, all reported that their spouse played a vital role in helping them to cope with their emotional, psychological and behavioral

adjustments related to their sport-career transition. Although many Participants reported their behavior at home was erratic, and often wondered how their wives “put up with them” they each appeared to value the commitment (emotional, time, financial) that their wives made to support the family/husband and guide them during the sport-career transition:

Participant 6: “I mean, the one who was there every day was my wife. She had to, she was there every day.”

Participants admit that the period during the sport-career transition can irreparably damage some relationships resulting in divorce. Participant 6 expresses his relief that his marriage did not have this outcome.

Participant 6: “It didn’t tear my family apart.”

Despite the strain that the sport-career transition can have on a marriage no divorces were reported on the demographic questionnaire. This detail is important in this analysis. Experiencing a divorce probably has significant influence on the quality of the sport-career transition and the time that it takes to achieve feelings of subjective well-being. These data do not yield any concrete information about the influence of divorce on the sport-career transition however.

### *Familial Support*

Several participants were unmarried during their professional football career and sport-career transition. Consequently, there was no spouse to rely on for support and guidance. These individuals did not mention girlfriends as a system of support. For these individuals, family members (parents, siblings)

proved to be valuable resources providing a system of support the sport-career transition. These individuals disclosed that familial support and guidance from parents and siblings was present before, during and after the sport-career.

An example of familial support facilitating a smooth sport-career transition came from a father in the form of encouraging his son to prepare for life after the sport-career ends. This support and guidance occurred before the sport-career termination. Participant 2 was strongly advised to complete his undergraduate degree before leaving college. According to him, his father was extremely vocal about preparing for life after football, and urged him to think about this even while choosing an agent:

Participant 2: “Before I got drafted it was more me and my parents than anything. Well, my dad telling [me] this thing doesn’t last forever...I guess he saw the big picture or whatever...he’s like when the agents come and meet with you and they try to sweet talk you, tell you all that they can do, they say well, after football, we can -- if you have a marketing degree, we can do this for you, we can do that for you, we can get you on television and all that stuff...so I see that after football, you have to be ready to do something as well. So, pretty much it started from there...”

Financial security is perceived to be a crucial factor influencing the quality of the sport-career transition of professional football players. The familial system of support was shown to help mitigate anxiety associated with financial security

during the sport-career transition by reminding the player to be fiscally responsible:

Participant 2: “he’ll [my dad] say little things just to keep you in mind that it’s your money; you can do with it what you want, but just be smart about it a little bit.”

### *Agents*

Support and guidance can also be derived from non-family sources. The agent is one of the most important non-family individuals in the life of a professional athlete and can often have a tremendous amount of influence. These data illustrate that attitudes about agents are mixed. Some participants have favorable impressions about agents while others do not. Agents can sometimes play a significant role in helping the athlete plan and prepare for their life after sport, as well as support them through the sport-career transition. Several participants alluded to their agents providing this type of support and guidance, by either being facilitators of the sport-career transition preparation or assisting players after disengagement from professional football:

Participant 2: “I just talk to my agent and, fortunately, he was -- he had the resources to get me -- at least get my foot in the door; get me headed in the right direction, which I guess -- from what I heard, a lot of agents don’t have that, and they don’t -- either they don’t have it or they choose not to do it...Like the guys that have other agents, and they can talk the big talk and all this stuff, and then when it’s time for after football, they

say well, I got this client I got to go to Vegas and do something with him.

I don't really have time for you right now.”

Negative attitudes about agents support the belief that after the sport-career ends agents are more interested in helping current players and players with potential to play again, not former players who have different kinds of needs now.

Hiring an agent who is interested in performance excellence as well as personal excellence was important to participant 2. He deliberately selected an agent who would be a powerful negotiator, ally and advocate during his sport-career, as well as an ally, advocate and resource when his sport-career ended and he had to make the sport-career transition.

### *Psychologists*

Participant 7: “I think sometimes when people are going through stuff, they think nobody has ever done this...And just -- if you can just talk to somebody about -- it, it makes it --It makes a big difference...It starts to make it easier.”

While familial systems of support can help retired athletes address many of the emotional and behavioral challenges that they experience as a result of the sport-career transition athletes sometimes require the services of a professional counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist. Admittedly, several participants attempted to deal with problems they were experiencing on their own before eventually seeking support and guidance from a trained professional.

Demonstrating characteristics common in most elite and professional athletes,

these players showed strength, persistence and determination in their efforts to deal with the sport-career transition struggles:

Participant 1: “I was pretty resilient ...I didn’t give in to throwing in the towel.”

Upon reflection, participants who participated in counseling reported a positive experience, were glad they entered treatment, and were pleased with the outcome. At the time of these interviews, they were no longer participating in counseling sessions. With respect to participant 1, the need for counseling services was precipitated by a series of negative behaviors that he exhibited as a way to cope with his sense of grief and loss after his sport career ended. He went to counseling because his of negative behaviors: “drinking too much” and verbal abuse. He recounts the reasons that he struggled during the sport-career transition and the need to attend counseling sessions with his wife in order to improve his quality of life:

Participant 1: “the first year and a half, two years was tough -- marital problems like everybody has; withdrawal from the camaraderie of the teammates, the competition, nowhere to channel that energy...verbally I wasn’t a nice person...I mean I was drinking too much... I didn’t get in any trouble with the law or anything, but I had a hard time, you know... We just, you know, I don’t know if it was more me, but it was just -- it was a strain on our marriage, so we had to go to counseling, and we went

to counseling...It's fabulous... it was mainly for me, but we had to go as a couple because it was affecting our marriage.”

Participant 1 reported that he was diagnosed with mild depression after his sport-career ended. This diagnosis may be secondary to recurrent concussions sustained during his football career. Guskiewicz (2001) identified a positive correlation between and increased incidence of depression in players with a history of two or more concussion in studies conducted on former National Football League players at the Center for the Study of Retired Athletes.

Participant 7 reported that he talked to a therapist about his negative behaviors: gambling, verbal abuse, and isolating from his family and was also diagnosed with depression. Although he recognized that he was depressed for reasons other than football he admitted that football contributed to 80% of his depressive symptoms:

Participant 7: “I felt like I was depressed....I talked to a therapist; and after talking to her, I determined yeah, I was depressed, but it was for various reasons, not just the football. I think it was a lot of things that... football was one, and it was a big one, about eighty percent of it.”

During and after therapy participant 7 engaged in a great deal of self-analysis which included reading self-help literature:

Participant 7: “I have talked to some therapists...and just done some analysis for myself...just to see what I am going through.... a lot of the destructive tendencies, a lot of the self-help people say -- it's some things

within you that just make you want to destroy yourself in a way because you don't think you deserve a lot of things.”

In addition to his theory about former football players “searching for that high”, in something else other than football participation as a motivator for destructive behaviors, he articulated some interesting socio-cultural beliefs regarding the reasons for some of his destructive behaviors:

Participant 7: “To me, I think it's kind of a destructive pattern that guys have or, you know, some guys have. I think that the lows are searched for just as much as the highs. You know, because it's a roller coaster... You know, like, in some ways, I think a lot of African-Americans, blacks, you know, hip-hop generation, you know, football, basketball -- so why do so many of them get arrested? I mean, they got all the money in world -- get arrested, you know, go through these crazy things: smack their wives, you know what I mean? Out to -- it's like a self-destructive -- self-sabotage. Self-destructive tendencies because I don't think that they really feel deep down inside that they deserve what they have.”

He also posits that the “lows” are just as sought after as the “highs” which often lead to self-destructive behaviors. Due to the intense emotional pain and in many cases, physical pain retired football athletes experience a tremendous amount of difficulty adjusting to life after football. As a result subjective well-being is severely compromised. For participants in this study, becoming involved with psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors and other mental health professionals

has been shown to be an important component in the systems of support that players can utilize to help them successfully move through the sport-career transition and towards feelings of subjective well-being.

### *Friends*

Former teammates, and childhood or college friends, can be a major source of support for former National Football League athletes during the sport-career transition period. Relationships with long-time friends can be sustaining during the sport-career transition which is marked by significant losses and feeling displaced. Participant 3 reported that he nurtured his long-time friendships during his professional football career, and when his career ended it was important to him that he had these friendships to rely on during a time when players often feel abandoned and rejected:

Participant 3: “I kept my same friends I had in college; hung out with them. I always spent time with them; never lost in touch with them, you know...that’s important.”

Participant 2 also spoke about the importance of maintaining and nurturing his friendships from college and recognized that they along with his parents, and agent, provided support to him after his sport career ended:

Participant 2: “I made close friends in college. A few were in the league; most of them aren’t. They all still live in the area...Raleigh... when I bought the house down here...I thought I got family down here. And it’s still accessible for me to fly to New York, drive to New York, whatever...

we [friends] see each other all the time...we're still on each other's decks and barbequing and all that good stuff.”

Football is a team sport where powerful bonds are developed. After the sport-career ends feelings of loss and displacement are common and these losses can increase players' risk for negative sport-career transition experiences. Maintaining and nurturing these relationships is vital for two reasons, they can become a valuable system of support that can help to ease the level of grief players feel during the sport-career transition period. These relationships can help players to maintain a sense of connectedness with a primary group of individuals after the sport-career termination.

For participants, friendships made during their professional football careers have been reported as a system of support as well. Maintaining these relationships can be beneficial for two reasons. Support and guidance can be expressed through interaction with others who may be experiencing or have already experienced the sport-career transition. These individuals can offer advice and understanding because of their personal experiences. Support from former teammates can be advantageous in that it allows individuals to remain “connected” with their sport on a very basic level, which minimizes issues concerning “loss of camaraderie” which is one of the aspects of the sport-career termination that former players found most difficult.

#### *Institutional Systems of Support*

Participant 5: “all those things are in place, but it's up to the players to take

advantage of all those resources. And most of them don't... Ultimately it's your responsibility. They have people in place to help, but you know, it's up to you to take advantage of it. I mean, it's there for you to do."

The National Football League (Headquarters) has a full-service player development program. A large part of their responsibility is to help current players plan for the sport-career transition from "football" to "life after football". The stated mission of this department is "***To challenge National Football League players to be lifelong learners while pursuing continuous improvement in family relations, social interactions, personal growth and career development during and beyond their careers as NFL players***"(NFL.com). Four primary programs are available to current National Football League players in the Career Transition Program. They are: continuing education, financial education, career internships, and Player Assistance Services (PAS). PAS services include life skills seminars, coping skills workshops and education workshops. Four free counseling sessions are also available for current professional football players as a part of the Career Transition Program. Each of the 32 teams in the National Football League has a player development staff person whose responsibility it is to implement these programs to players on their individual teams.

The National Football League Players' Association also has a Player Development Department with a similar mission "to provide a variety of programs designed to improve the quality of life for players and their families with a focus on continuing education, career internships and counseling" and

coordinates programs to help current, past, and future professional football athletes prepare for and manage the sport-career transition. Player development programs available at the Players Association are: NFL Coaching Internship, NFL Europe Officiating Clinic, Career Transition, Continuing Education and Business Management and Entrepreneurial Program. During interviews these two player development departments were frequently identified as systems in place to provide assistance to players before and during the sport-career transition. Mixed reviews remain however, regarding access, effectiveness, and value of these player development programs.

Most players' initial introduction to player development programs occurs at the beginning of their rookie year during the Rookie Symposium (since 1996). The Rookie Symposium is a four-day orientation program that takes place in June of each year before rookies report to training camps. During these interactive seminars players are informed about player programs and some of the challenges that they may face as players in the National Football League. During the Rookie Symposium athletes are told about the brevity of a National Football League career (3.5 years) and encouraged to plan accordingly:

Participant 2: "they tell you...they tell you realistically most of you will not make it to the NFL... If you're listening, you're like okay, when it's over, what am I going to do? But you don't concentrate on it because you still have this dream in front of you right now that you have to take care of. So you're like okay, let me concentrate on this but keep that in the

back of my head... But they tell you about it, so there's no -- there's really no excuse.”

Speakers from the National Football League (Headquarters), National Football Leagues Players Association, professionals in specialized fields and current and former National Football League players address the draft class on a number of relevant issues, including – sport-career transition. Because the Rookie Symposium is a fairly new program (ninth year), players who have been in the league for over nine years did not have the benefit of this type of educational orientation. Several participants did not have the benefit of this orientation program.

Participants generally spoke about facilitators and barriers to participation in National Football League player development programs during their professional football career. Participants seemed to know more about League sponsored player development programs and less about player development programs available through the Players Association and at times it wasn't clear which player development program they were referring to.

A noticeable pattern was observed during interviews with participants concerning various player development programs. Those who chose not to participate in National Football League player development programs, for whatever reason, were more likely to have a negative opinion of these programs. Data collected from these individuals were interpreted as skeptical. Participant 1, admitted that during his professional career that is his focus was “all football”, he

had this to say about his impression of the programs and his perception about how little emphasis was placed on career transition services:

Participant 1: “I didn’t think they had a lot of substance... it’s a one-time deal. I mean, you know, when they come by and they [say] -- here we got all these things, take advantage of them, blah, blah, blah. Oh, by the way, you know, we got practice tomorrow, you know, volunteer workouts at nine-thirty and lifting afterwards...”

The implication is that programs are not emphasized strongly enough, often enough, or toward the right people. The perception is that these player development programs are not emphasized because coaches, management and owners – the bosses, do not value career transition programs. This group, places emphasis on preparing for the season, preparing for the game, or practicing:

Participant 4: “they weren’t aggressive, you know. And a lot of that I think comes down to the individual player programs director. For some teams that was a former player, and it was really just a nepotism type atmosphere. Other teams they had a guy that took it seriously, but if the team coaches or front office do not reinforce that guy, it’s wasted time you know?”

Participant 7 echoed this sentiment.

Participant 7: “The player development people. They’re not forceful enough...not dynamic enough... there needs to be a dynamic person in that position who maintains that players focus for that amount

that he's going to spend with him, all right, to pound it home that it's so important, you know?"

One participant talked about his perception that programs only are available for athletes when they are active; when time and maturity are often barriers to any form of preparation for the future, and felt like there were fewer options available for retired players. These attitudes were interpreted as a lack of knowledge regarding player development programs at the Players' Association. He also spoke about difficulty he encountered after his retirement trying to contact player development personnel at the National Headquarters and at the Players Association:

Participant 2: "they have all these programs and all this stuff; but once you're on the outside looking in, it's very difficult to get access to those programs and all these -- all this other stuff. But when you're on the inside, you're not thinking about being on the outside...I tried [to contact the NFLPA] for like three weeks straight."

While some players did not perceive that player development programs were accessible, effective or valued by management, coaches or the players in the National Football League, for a variety of reasons, three out of the seven retired athletes in this study had positive experiences with player development programs coordinated by the National Football League. Players took advantage of career transition programs at varying stages of their careers. Participant 3, who had a sport-career transition plan established, commended the National Football

League, and individual teams for broadening the focus on the athlete not only as a player but as a former player. He is pleased that the League has increased and strengthened their efforts to help football players obtain training and job skills necessary to facilitate a smooth sport-career transition:

Participant 3: “The league is getting in touch with that... I think more guys are...they’re more in tuned to do it now more and more because they actually have someone hired on the -- each team to force them into doing that, you know, to go back into school, to get the internships out there...when I started they really didn’t have that...they were more focused on winning.”

He credits this increased attention toward player development, specifically career transition, to unflattering media coverage highlighting former professional players who were bankrupt, incarcerated, substance abusers and who essentially failed to adjust to life after football. He too believes that it is important to take advantage of player development programs during the professional sport career because access to programs is limited after disengagement from football:

Participant 3: “I mean it pays for you to go back to college, they pay for your college, they give you the internship. I mean, any intern[ship] -- any place that you want to intern in the US of A, you can go there. Where, normally, if you go down as the average Joe to go in there -- who are you? you know. But if you use that label of the NFL -- oh, come on in, come

on in. That door is open for you then; but if you don't use it while that door is open, you know, that door will close.”

Participants 5 and 6 both took advantage of the internship program and had positive experiences and benefits from exposure to other fields of interest and job skills. Participant 5 credits his internship as a high school coach in helping to prepare him for both his post-career job as a high-school football coach and his current job as a high-school athletic director. Participant 6 also had a positive experience with player development programs and expressed that the individual has to be accountable for taking advantage of these programs. He attributes his internship experience in sales at Reebok, his academic training (began his masters), and networking to preparing him, in many ways, for his current career in medical device sales.

Participant 6: “I was just real active with that [player development programs]. I did internships with Reebok. When I was in [name of city], I did an internship with the Big 10 Conference.”

Participating in player development programs is clearly beneficial for players' who take advantage of what is available to them. Participants in the study who participated in internships had positive experiences and were able to use skills they developed during their internships in future professional endeavors. Overall, participants who took advantage of these programs appeared to be more vocationally prepared for life after football careers and only reported minor

adjustments during the sport-career transition than their peers who did not participate in these programs.

These data also illustrate that players' who actively prepare for life after football, while their sport-career transition may not be completely stress-free, their time to adjustment was shorter and less disruptive than that of their peers who did not participate in player development programs.

Under the systems of support rubric, health Insurance Coverage was interpreted as an essential means of support for former National Football League players. According to terms in the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the National Football League and the National Football League Players' Association all retired players and their families are entitled to receive insurance benefits for a limited amount of time after disengagement. This time period is contingent upon several factors, for example, number of total games played in the National Football League.

Participant 1: "the average career is three years. You know, you're not vested until after your third game of your fourth year."

On numerous occasions this topic was raised, and the general consensus is that having health insurance coverage paid for by the League, is considered to be a positive benefit for players during the sport-career transition. Health insurance is a benefit that most employers provide for their employees during employment, and it is uncommon for employees to provide this benefit for individuals who are no longer under their employ. For former professional football players this

benefit helps to mitigate financial concerns about finding employment right away in order to have access to health care benefits. In addition to reducing the burden of finding employment, injury-related health conditions they may have acquired over the course of their playing careers can continue to be treated, as well as health conditions that may develop during the sport-career transition. If health insurance coverage was not available, former players would be financially responsible for their medical bills which, depending on the level of care, can be cost prohibitive. Were it not for this benefit, players would either risk financial ruin to pay for their medical care, decide not to receive treatment or would be forced to find full-time employment with benefits very quickly after their retirement. For these reasons, former players have reported that they are grateful for this level of support within the system of professional football. Finally, if health insurance coverage were not available, mental health needs would most likely be neglected, resulting in increased emotional and behavioral disruption, and impacting the quality of the sport-career transition. Players recognize that this benefit benefits them tremendously helping to alleviate some of the pressures associated with this difficult transition period.

Insurance coverage is not unlimited and varies depending on the length of the professional career, but it does provide former athletes with support concerning these very important issues of physical and mental health. Physical health and mental health issues can have a deleterious effect on the level of life satisfaction that a person experiences.

When participant 1 went to counseling his health benefit covered the cost for four years of individual and marital counseling:

Participant 1: “fortunately, you know, there’s not very many good things to say about the NFL pension or the NFL benefits, but our insurance paid for a big amount of that [counseling]. But it only last for four years, so people that don’t have it after that are in trouble because a lot of -- a lot of pensions won’t -- a lot of health care plans won’t pay for that kind of stuff -- that was one good thing.”

Participant 4 who is currently in dental school and has relied on the health insurance coverage benefit for the past three years discusses how health-care coverage affects him and his family:

Participant 4: “I would go back today if somebody called and said ‘Hey man you’re gonna be on the bench come training camp. You’re gonna be on the team.’...For nothing else just to get one game to get six years of health benefits. My insurance runs out this month. So, if I’d played one more year, I would’ve had six years of post-career health insurance versus three. I mean there’s all kind of stuff.”

It is interesting that during data analysis that coaches were not identified as systems of support. This finding is consistent with previous literature addressing social support during the sport-career transition (Orlick & Sinclair, 1993). Sometimes, systems of support (wives, parents/siblings, agents, friends) can actually hinder movement through the sport-career transition process. There

were also few examples from these data which illustrate that systems of support can serve as barriers to successful matriculation through the sport-career transition.

Many family members experienced a transition of their own which made it difficult to provide support to the former player. When this occurred players perceived individuals in their support network to be unhelpful and “annoying”. Systems of support which fail to provide support and guidance and only evoke negative emotion from the retired player, can increase risk of emotional and behavioral disruption:

Participant 7: “I think, because they just felt like money that I was providing for them wasn’t going to be there anymore....That their lifestyle had to change”

It is important that professional athletes learn how to identify systems of support that are facilitators of the sport-career transition and which systems of support are barriers to a successful sport-career transition.

An interpretive read of these data reflect that systems of support are important facilitators to positive adaptation to the sport-career transition. Participants acknowledge and express gratitude for familial and non-familial sources of support. However, systems of support (Appendix I) are also necessary but not sufficient conditions needed in order for retired players to experience feelings of subjective well-being. The core theme Systems of Support to Help with the Sport-Career Transition is not well understood and needs to be examined

in greater detail to provide a clearer understanding of the significance of its role in subjective well-being. However, for the purposes of this study it appears that they do help to mitigate some of the challenges that former National Football League players experience before and during the sport-career transition.

### How to Prepare for the Sport-Career Transition

How to prepare for the sport-career transition was the third core theme generated from interpretive readings of interview data. The sport-career transition has been defined as a process, and as such, preparation for the sport-career transition can begin at any time before the end of the sport-career. According to these data, athletes who take steps and become involved with player development programs or initiate their own career development activities are at an extreme advantage for positive vocational adaptation to the sport career transition. There are some athletes, however, who do not, for various reasons participate in any preparation activities, these individuals are at-risk for experiencing negative vocational adaptation to the sport-career. The core theme how to prepare for the sport-career transition is therefore divided into three categories: facilitators and barriers to participation in player development programs; and strategies used to prepare for the sport-career transition: before, during and after the sport career and transferable life skills.

In the previous section we learned that many player development programs are available to assist professional football players develop personal, interpersonal and vocational skills to facilitate adjustment to the sport-career

transition. Unfortunately, there are no published studies regarding participation in these player development programs. If this is any indication of program effectiveness, then player development administrators are encouraged to conduct careful analysis of these programs and make necessary changes.

Participants in this study elaborated on perceived barriers to participating in these programs, as well as, on areas that they perceive would facilitate greater involvement in these programs.

### *Barriers to Sport-Career Transition Preparation*

#### *Temporal Factors*

Lack of time to invest in player development programs was heralded as the primary reason for not participating by participants who did not take advantage of these programs. “Football is ten months now” according to one participant and the implication is that two months is not sufficient time to “take a break” *and* plan for life after football:

Participant 1: “When I would get that six or eight weeks off between the last game and when off-season workouts started, I would just go hunting.... You know, I wouldn’t do -- I wouldn’t -- you don’t have time. Plus, I had -- I maintain a home here, and I was on the West Coast my whole career, so -- maybe if I lived here and played for the [name of team], and it was my permanent home maybe, but I was traveling too much back and forth.”

A lack of time to invest in sport-career transition activities was

considered to be the primary barrier to sport-career transition efforts.

Failure to emphasize the importance of planning for life after football during the college years, is also believed to be a significant barrier in preparation efforts for life after football. Furthermore, perceived time constraints combined with a lack of awareness regarding the need to prepare for sport-career transition, before the onset of the sport-career transition may increase a players' risk for experiencing a negative adaptation to the sport-career transition. Participants disclosed that, football players are not naturally inclined to think about and prepare for the end of their career. Participants who reported participating in player development programs, reported that their actions were initiated by others (player development personnel), and not the individual player. Implicit in these experiences is that players need guidance to develop awareness that planning for life after football is necessary.

The ideal is that preparation for the sport-career transition should be emphasized and begin during the college career, especially for players who have a legitimate chance at making it to the National Football League:

Participant 4: "Well, honestly people, you've got to have some kind of lecture, counseling or whatever for guys in college"

Participant 1: "They need to prepare in college more than they do in the pros....In the pros, you don't have time. Period. You don't have time to do it. If you're going to be a good player, you -- I mean, you know, you could -- there's some things that you can go to, you know, night classes or

whatever, but -- or maybe even -- maybe even a morning class and going to workout, but most people come in and workout, you know, four days a week, eight-thirty to twelve and that's it. You know, you can do something afterwards, but if these kids don't start preparing in college, you know -- and a lot of them in college don't know if they're going to make the pros...I think that that's when there's, you know, more time. There's not enough time to prepare for life after football if you're playing in the NFL.”

The perception is that a positive sport-career transition will occur if collegiate players are educated concerning the potential cognitive, psychosocial, emotional, behavioral and vocational challenges associated with making the sport-career transition.

Participant 7: “If you're an NFL player, I think that you should start before -- if your aspirations are to play in the NFL, you should start in college.... And I think that you should have these things told to you. Everything that I'm saying should be told to college students...I think earlier than the beginning of their career because once you get in the situation where you can get fired the next year, your mind is just focused on playing football.”

Presentations about player development programs were generally introduced annually at training camp, and depending on the player development staff there was very little follow-up throughout the year. Because, these programs

are executed by individual teams, there are varying levels of effectiveness. The fact that information is presented at the beginning of the year, is perceived to be another time-related barrier concerning participation in player development programs. The perception is that if these programs were frequently addressed (more than once a year) then program participation would be greatly improved, therefore impacting greater numbers of players. Participants held strong beliefs that in order for increases in program participation to be observed, opportunities to participate in player development programs need to be reinforced towards the end of the season when decisions regarding how to spend the “off-season” were being made:

Participant 2: “The people they need to focus those programs on or direct them towards and give the information to are the guys that get released or the guys that are free agents and don’t get picked up around that September, October, maybe even November when they say okay, this season is almost over. That -- those are the ones they need to be getting that literature to because they could use it the most.”

Finally, complaints about player development personnel being ineffective were launched. The perception is that player development staff are covert operatives, working and reporting to management about player activities, making trust a barrier for participation in player development programs. In order for player development staff to be more effective participants believe that they should

have specialized training in counseling psychology, and should possess qualities of trust and rapport-building:

Participant 7: “because if you have a guy that just does what the coach wants him to do, which a lot them, that’s what they do, they just really talk to you, and then they go right back, tell the coach this is what he said... to develop a rapport, to be trusting -- trustworthy, to be able to talk one-on-one on an individual basis. And that person, I think, needs to have some type of educational background as far as, you know, psychology -- therapy. It don’t just need to be, you know, a guy that played the past. You know, that guy probably needs help, too.”

Participants also recommended that each year player development personnel implement aggressive program initiatives designed to motivate players to enroll in classes (degree completion and graduate), internships or player assistance services.

### *Procrastination*

Personality characteristics typically exhibited by many professional athletes are; focused, hard-working, driven to succeed, persistent and dedicated. Participants 1, 4, and 7 all admit to having a single-minded focus towards football during their active career; in many cases football took precedence over anything else:

Participant 7: “she understood. It was really football before her you know, until we got married...My focus was to get a big contract to make a lot of money. And I was able to do it...I was able to do it.”

This focus on extending the football career another year often leaves players unprepared for when the retirement event occurs, which can cause regret and other negative outcomes regarding the quality of the sport-career transition.

Participant 2: “but while you’re still in the NFL, while you’re doing it, nobody really concentrates or moves -- makes any moves towards life after football. And then after football, you’re like man, I wish would have done that. I wish I would have talked to him a little bit. I wish -- I wonder if I could still get in touch with that guy -- stuff like that.

The general consensus was that the preparation for the sport-career transition should begin during the college years and at the latest by year one or two in the National Football League. However, the average length of a professional football players’ career is quite brief, 3.5 years. For some professional football players this doesn’t provide them with enough time to prepare before the retirement. While sport-career transition preparation during college or at the beginning of a professional career is the ideal, most participants involved this study disclosed that they believe that for most - preparation begins after the sport career ends:

Participant 7: “When you’re done.... for everybody, it happens when you’re done...or they start to think about it when they are on the bubble of getting cut”

Participant 1: “For most guys, it [preparation] begins the day they realize it’s over.”

Participant 5: “I think the majority of them start to deal with it once it’s done. You know, I think you have a handful where they look to the future, and as much as I thought I did, I really didn’t.”

Failure to prepare for the sport-career transition has direct bearing on the quality of the sport-career transition. These data reveal that individuals with a clearly established career path for after football, as evidenced by participant 3, report fewer adjustment difficulties, a shorter time to adjustment and greater career satisfaction after disengagement. A sport-career transition with characteristics like the ones above has been described as – seamless, which is the ideal. But these data also reveal that even for individuals who engage minimally in sport-career transition preparation the sport-career transition is experienced with fewer behavioral disruptions.

#### *Facilitators to Sport-Career Transition Preparation*

Depending on level of ease or difficulty reported, several factors were identified as facilitators of a higher quality sport-career transition. According to participants, obtaining a *Bachelors Degree*, *vicarious experiences* and *employing*

*preparation strategies* were believed to influence the quality of the sport-career transition.

### *Bachelors Degree*

Receiving a Bachelors Degree was perceived to be the foundation of preparation for the sport-career transition. This factor was discussed earlier under the heading cognitive appraisal of preparation for the sport-career transition. Participants expressed strong opinions regarding the importance of obtaining a Bachelors Degree before entering the National Football League or by the time of career termination. Implicit in these statements is the notion that without a Bachelors' Degree former players were at-risk for experiencing significant adjustment and vocational problems during the sport-career transition.

### *Vicarious Experiences*

Witnessing teammates get "cut" or injured and subsequently released was a facilitator of sport-career transition preparation behaviors or activities. A common theme during some interviews was that professional players were cognizant that the sport-career transition was imminent:

Participant 4: "most guys at least once you get to the NFL after the first year or two, maybe three, you start thinking about it because you see so many guys come in and get cut. You see guys get hurt, and they're gone. You realize that it's kill or be killed. You know, and at some point you're like 'It's gonna end' because you see guys retiring or guys leaving for whatever reason...you know what's coming."

As the sport career continues to advance professional football players become even more aware of the threat of retirement. Depending on the individual player, these experiences motivate him to either: begin to prepare for life after football, or increase training and conditioning efforts in an attempt to prolong their sport-career:

Participant 1: “And a guy that gets four, five, six years and sees so many people come and go, so many people cut, so many people come in every year, so many people underachieve, so many people overachieve, you just never know. They are the ones that probably start thinking about it a little bit but just don’t have time to do anything about it.”

Unfortunately, vicarious learning experiences did not translate into active sport-career transition preparation for many. A well-known euphemism amongst National Football League players is that NFL stands for “Not For Long”, but this known fact doesn’t automatically translate into players making efforts to prepare for life after football. This can probably be attributed toward the “Superman Syndrome”, mentioned earlier, everyone believes that they are immune to the kryptonite of a brief career. It appears that vicarious learning experiences may inspire thoughts about the sport-career transition but not necessarily action. Participants who spoke about watching teammates “come and go” in many instances did begin actively engaging in the preparing for the sport-career transition. Participants who did actively engage in preparation activities like internships or graduate school reported a sport-career transition period with fewer

vocational adjustments or disruptive behaviors.

### *Preparation Strategies for NFL Players*

These data clearly indicate that individuals who make the commitment during their sport-careers to prepare for life after football have given themselves an advantage over their peers who did not. Developing skills such as networking, goal-setting and decision-making, emerged as informal strategies that participants used during their sport-careers to prepare for life after football. While it has been suggested by participants that player development programs and family guiding and advising players has influenced preparation for some, the consensus was that players were ultimately responsible for initiating behaviors to prepare for their sport-career transition:

Participant 4: "It's on you to make the play or not make the play. It's on you to be prepared and stuff...For NFL guys, especially guys who have been in the league for two or more years, you know, you see how short, you know NFL really stands for 'Not For Long'...let's take some self-accountability in that. I don't say I like it, you know but -- Yeah, I mean because you know what? You're still the one who has to pay the bills. You're still the one that has to take care of your family. So, you ought to be the one to be on the ball and addressing these issues...it's on you to make sure you do what you can to transition."

The belief that preparation for the sport-career transition requires a significant amount of effort and time was pervasive among participants who reported a lack of time as the primary barrier for participation in sport-career transition preparation. Participant 2 did not participate in any formal player development programs but honed his

networking and relationship building skills during his time in the National Football League which enabled him to get a job after he was injured and then released:

Participant 0002: “it’s not necessarily something that you have to devote your complete attention to. You can workout from seven in the morning to ten or eleven in the morning. And then from twelve to one, you eat lunch...football was in the morning. What am I going to do? What if this doesn’t happen? What if that doesn’t happen? What if I don’t get this work out with this team? What am I going to do? Am I going to sit on the couch for a year? Am I going to wait until next preseason and try to get on again? Which you do, but there’s a whole lot of time in between that you could be doing something, that you don’t need -- necessarily need to be just sitting on the couch saying yeah, I played in the NFL. No. You got to get up and move and be productive...”

As was discussed earlier, various player development programs are available, however, the decision to take advantage of degree completion, internships or coaching clinics was dependent on a variety of individual factors:

Participant 6: “Ultimately it’s your responsibility. They have people in place to help, but you know, it’s up to you to take advantage of it. I mean, it’s there for you to do.”

Three out of seven participants believed that it was possible for players to obtain the skills needed to move onto another career, interest or entrepreneurial venture and that

there was a correlation between preparation efforts and the quality of the sport-career transition.

Networking and goal-setting were two specific behaviors that emerged from the data as informal preparation techniques. Participants who excelled in these areas during their professional football career reported that developing and cultivating these skills facilitated a successful move towards a job, business or academic opportunities after the sport-career ended. Participant 2 developed a relationship with an individual that he was introduced to by his agent and at the end of his career this contact resulted in a job as a mortgage loan officer:

Participant 2: “a gentleman that worked closely with my agent was -- he was transitioning out of the agent business, and he was going to work for a mortgage company called Home Bank in Atlanta....And he told me -- he was just telling me how successful you could be and how you could -- not necessarily earn NFL-type money, but you could make a very good living once you built up clientele and once you have gotten rolling with it....I said OK, when I leave that’s plan B...That was like in ’02 he was telling me about that stuff....so I just kept it in the back of my head.”

Participant 5: “I was always the guy out there, I’ve always been a good networker, so, I mean, dropping off business cards, letting people know who you are. You throw that around a little bit and get to know people, and you never know when they can do something.”

Understanding that opportunities are more readily available to National Football League players rather than former National Football League indicates that players must make every effort to utilize their status and affiliation during the sport-career to advance careers and business interests when the sport-career is over.

### *Transferable Life Skills*

Participants were asked the question what did you learn as a professional athlete that has helped you in your life after withdrawal from the National Football Association? Answers to this question were interpreted as *transferable life skills*. Time management, coping with adversity, self-discipline, networking and goal-setting were cited repeatedly in answer to this question. Participant 4 speaks to the value of learning to cope with adversity:

Participant 4: “You can’t, just because you face adversity, it’s not over. The game’s not over. You’ve got to keep plugging. The prize usually goes to the people who don’t quit. That’s been my experience. Not just in professional, but people that want it the most, generally get it. If you’re self-disciplined and work hard enough, it generally works out your way.”

Attitudes and beliefs developed during the football career and used to promote success on the field were perceived by participants to be equally as valuable in other life domains.

## Subjective Well-being

Acquiring information about the subjective well-being of professional athletes is an ideal way to assess how they perceive themselves on the well-being continuum, their abilities and the quality of their lives after retirement from professional sport (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, 2002). One of the primary goals for conducting this phenomenal exploration of the sport-career transition experiences of seven former National Football League players was to determine what impact the sport-career transition experience had on subjective well-being. Subjective well-being, a cognitive structure is defined as an individual's evaluation of their satisfaction with their life (current). Participants in this study were all asked to complete the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale before each interview (see Table 2). Satisfaction with Life Scale scores range from 5 – 35 and a score of 35 reflects complete satisfaction with life.

Self-reported quality of life indicators of the sport-career transition experience was determined by each participant's ranking on a scale of 1 – 10 (1 = very easy 10 = very difficult) the level of ease or difficulty they experienced during their sport-career transition. As reported and shown in Table 1, the mean sport-career transition rating for participants in this study was 5.71 (SD = 3.59) which is indicative of 'moderate' adjustment difficulty after football participation ends.

Total scores on the Satisfaction with Life Scale reflect that 85.7% of participants (six out of seven) were "slightly satisfied", "satisfied" or "extremely satisfied" with their current life stage. This finding is encouraging given that several participants reported

experiencing behavioral and/or emotional difficulties during the sport-career transition period. These results demonstrate the ability of participants to overcome their difficulties and ultimately express feelings of satisfaction with life after football.

During the interviews players did not respond directly to questions whose purpose it was to gather information regarding the construct subjective well-being during the sport career transition period. Possible reasons for this are: that questions were not constructed adequately or using the words “subjective well-being” was a barrier. Although the term was explained to participants, a lack of familiarity and/or understanding with the term proved to inhibit gathering rich, descriptions about subjective well-being. In the future, questions regarding subjective well-being will avoid using the term and utilize language more familiar to professional football players. This area will be scrutinized more in future pilot tests of interview protocols.

Despite these shortcomings, interpretive readings of these data revealed common themes which were believed to engender feelings of subjective well-being in former professional football players during the sport-career transition. Under the core-theme subjective well-being the categories; financial security and the ability to provide for the family; maintaining relationships with wives, other family members and friends; feelings of self-determination and having choices; physical and emotional health; productivity and having an outlet to redirect their energy, competitiveness and passion; current job satisfaction and having a strong belief system, emerged. Actualization in these areas is believed to positively influence feelings of subjective well-being and satisfaction with life.

Male sport, particularly the game of football, has been cited in the sociology literature as the foundation for the development of masculine identity; and after the sport-career has ended not only is athletic identity compromised so is masculine identity. Messner refers to this as a crisis of masculine identity (Messner, 1992). During the sport-career transition period professional athletes report feeling lost, empty, displaced, disconnected and unsure of their role and value in society:

Participant 4: “you miss the money because it was good money, but most of the guys that I hang out with or know and am associated with, have jobs and are doing okay. You know what they really miss is playing, you know, being an NFL football player. That status, that prestige, the respect, you know. Everything else just kind of comes with it. But, you know, you still going to run into it. Some guy recognized me down there – ‘Hey \*\*\*\*!’ And that’s cool, it feels good, you know like ‘God I wish I was still playing!’”

The sense of grief and loss are palpable in this description from participant 4, which culminates in him wishing that he was still playing. He longs for the limelight so that he can re-capture the amenities and characteristics of his former profession that he values and that make him feel like valued – like “somebody”.

The topic interpreted as the ability to provide for the family is closely related to the breadwinner ethic, espoused by Messner (1992) in Power at Play. For these athletes football is not only their life it is also their livelihood:

Participant 7: “I think as an adult, you know, when it’s your livelihood and it’s how you put food on the table, I think it’s a very hard transition period”

According to Messner (1992) it is not unusual for men during early adulthood to define themselves in terms of their work (Messner, 1992).

Participant 5: “it’s a job, it’s how you feed your family, you know it’s work”

However, when the sport career ends, their work ends as well; at least for a period of time. During this time there is considerable pressure to maintain the standard of living for the family and concerns regarding the existence of income can be a threat to subjective well-being. If unemployed or inadequately compensated then subjective well-being is sure to be impacted:

Participant 7: “...I’ve always been able to provide. So that’s been a very difficult -- not seeing where the, you know, where the money is going to come from so I can provide for the long-term. That’s been very difficult. You know, seeing that -- as far as where that money is going to come from to create that revenue.”

The loss of friendships features prominently in accounts of life after retirement as an indicator of subjective well-being. Powerful bonds develop between men who share the adversity of athletic competition (Messner, 1992). “On a very basic level the team often comes to be experienced as a family” (Messner, p. 125). When the relationship with teammates is severed, the retired player often feels disconnected, cut off from his family” (Messner, p. 125). An example of the powerful “familial” bonds selected from interview data is recorded below:

Participant 1: “when it comes to a team sport, an individual, maybe not; but anytime you’re involved with ten other guys on your side of the ball and those guys, I mean, you depend -- your livelihood depends on them

and you do everything with them, you live them, you go to work with them, you live with them for six weeks in the beginning [training camp], you go to work with them all during the year from 7 a.m. to 8 or 9 p.m., and you fly with them, and you travel with them, and then all of a sudden, it's gone, that's tough...But if you really get along and you play dominoes and you play cards and video games and go out and drink beer and eat hot dogs, you know, and go for a steak. I mean, gosh, when we were playing, we would be with our teammates more than our wives.”

Separation from teammates and the loss of a sense of camaraderie, belonging to an elite group all working toward the same goal can be a difficult adjustment to make socially for many retired football players. Nurturing and maintaining relationships with other people can mitigate some of the discomfort and distress that many professional players feel during the sport-career transition.

The loss of other relationships can also be a threat to feelings of subjective well-being, therefore maintaining these relationships is critical. Participants reported experiencing difficulty in relationships with their wives due to the adjustments that often accompany the sport-career transition period. Because these relationships were important and they had a tendency to rely on their spouse for emotional support during this period, participants did what was necessary in order to maintain these relationships. Earlier in this analysis we discussed how maintaining long-time friendships positively influenced the quality of the sport-career transition thus affecting subjective well-being.

Maintaining connections with others is an important factor affecting subjective well-being during the sport-career transition from professional football.

Uncertainty and a lack of personal control over certain personal areas is inherent in the framework of the National Football League. For participants released from football due to injury, deselection, or declining age; discussing this particular aspect of their former career evoked considerable negative emotion/affect and feelings ranging from shock and disbelief, to anger and dissatisfaction. Individuals like participant 3 who voluntarily retired did not experience any feelings of dissatisfaction regarding the reason his retirement from the game of football – it was his choice. It is believed that athletes who retire voluntarily face an easier sport-career transition than those who try to hang on and are eventually forced out; left with feelings of resentment regarding the reason for their sport-career termination. Self-determination and having choices regarding the next stage in life was yet another significant factor linked to feelings of subjective well-being. For Participant 4, dissatisfaction regarding the lack of control he felt at the time of his release motivated him to return to school to train for a career as a dentist. His choice of post-sport career was deliberate in that he wanted a career where he would have a certain level of control over his future career.

It is obvious that self-determination and the ability to make choices about the professional career are important conditions for subjective well-being during the sport-career transition:

Participant 4: “So, not having that self-determination did have a big impact on me, and was one reason, you know, that we decided ‘Yeah,

we're gonna pay a lot of money to go to dental school. We're gonna have to budget and live, you know, reasonably. Or at a lower level of what we have been. But, for me it's worth it to pay that price to come out and be able to say 'I'm always going to have a job as a dentist.' I'll have my license. Whether I do a private practice or public health setting or partnership or hospital. There's always employment there. So, I like the job security there. And, it's me and it also gives me a lot of freedom to do a lot of other things I'm interested in."

Stressors like disease and disability have been associated with reduced quality of life and other negative outcomes such as psychopathology and physical distress (Fabricatore & Handal, 2000). At the other end of the well-being continuum is health and wellness which are positively associated with positive cognitive structures like subjective well-being. Participant 3 reported an easy sport-career transition experience and a subjective well-being score that indicated that he was satisfied with his life. During his interview he denied experiencing pain, injury or health problems after his sport career:

Participant 3: "It seems like I never played football. I played fourteen years, and it seems like I never played. I don't have the injuries, I don't have the aches, I don't have the pains, I don't have that."

At the opposite end of the spectrum is participant 1 reported experiencing recurrent concussions during his football career, a history of depression and chronic pain during the sport-career transition. He makes the following statement

which speaks to the connection between the physical and the emotional aspects of health and their influence on subjective well-being:

Participant 1: “I still get headaches from the concussions....Yeah. I got to have my ankle redone...you deal with pain, and that makes it hard, too....Pain makes it hard to be -- pain brings depression on, too. When you're in pain it can change your mood...If you feel good, you know, you normally -- physically, normally, mentally you feel good...uh -- yeah, I mean, my body hurts but, you know, that's just something you got to get used to.”

Participant 4: “I deal with it every day....that's part of the price you pay, you know? I mean, what can I say?...you just have to deal with it”

“Dealing with pain makes it hard.” The reality of these statements and the descriptions above confirm that physical injury sustained during professional football careers can result in significant cognitive, emotional and functional disability which can have a significant affect on the quality of the sport-career transition and subjective well-being. National Football League players with a history of recurrent concussion may be at risk for depression, progressive decline in mental health functioning, higher rate of memory problems and cognitive decline (Guskiewitz, 2005). Participant 7 hypothesized, based on his own experience, reasons for some of the problems retired players often have; following through with tasks, making their own schedule or staying focused throughout a

traditional work day. He reports these problems are attributed to a history of recurrent physical injuries, some of which were unreported or undiagnosed:

Participant 7: “A lot of guys can’t keep track of the time....Let alone do an Excel spreadsheet and keep track of sales....I mean there are a lot of injuries -- had concussions -- Guys can’t stay focused.

His own experiences working for his company after retirement support the perception that retired players experience difficulties maintaining focus during the course of a traditional work day for various reasons, the effects of injury sustained during football careers, being one of them:

Participant 7: “Then I went into this business thing, all right? When I say thing, it’s really a thing. I mean business is doing okay right now, but it was very difficult for me to make that transition for various reasons. The main of which I think is just -- it was hard to keep my focus.... It was just hard to stay focused on one single -- well, to keep my focus....and it was just hard to maintain that focus throughout the day.”

During the athletic career dissociation from the body can occur. This phenomenon is prevalent in the sport culture. Athletes’ develop an instrumental relationship with their bodies’, regarding it as a “tool” or “weapon” to be utilized in athletic competition (Messner, 1992). During these interviews participants who reported that they had residual effects from years of “pounding” were more likely to express feelings of dissatisfaction regarding damage to their body, but also

likely to dismiss this issue, accepting it as just another part of what they had to do in order to compete and be successful.

When asked the question, given your experiences and the experiences of other professional players, how would you describe a successful sport-career transition from the NFL to “regular life?” The majority of participants stated that having something, another endeavor to move right into was an important part of a successful sport-career transition. Orlick and Sinclair (1993) reported similar findings in their study using retired Canadian Olympic, World Championship and World Cup athletes. Disengaging from one passion and seamless entry into another area was associated with positive sport-career transition and feelings of subjective well-being. Finding another area in which to channel or redirect energy, passion and competitiveness helped to elicit feelings of subjective well-being:

Participant 7: “I think the only way that you’re going to be able to find another passion is to get off the other one....In some type of way....you got to completely give it up. Don’t be trying out. Don’t be trying to workout to get -- go back. Do you know what I mean? You have to just put in your papers and be done and say you know what? It’s over, and you just with the -- you just grieve and get that over, get that out.”

Participant 6: “Having an offer on the table from a company. Or having an entrepreneurial venture, I mean a venture just ready to walk right into. As soon as you’re ready to call it quits – I mean you might even want to

have something like that up and running why you're still playing. But if you're going to go into working for somebody, then you need to have an offer on the table, you know, as you're leaving or soon after. That's a successful transition."

Having something firmly established can mitigate some of the concerns mentioned earlier for example providing for the family, having health insurance benefits, being productive that have an impact on subjective well-being.

Finally, personal spirituality (Fabricatore & Handal, 2000) is the last category believed to have a positive effect on subjective well-being. Three Participants made frequent references to their belief in God as an important part of their lives. Two out of these three participants admitted to experiencing adjustment problems making the sport-career transition but denied having any serious behavioral or emotional difficulty and acknowledged that their strong faith-based belief system helped them to understand the sport-career transition experience from a different perspective. Personal spirituality has been found to moderate the relationship between stressful circumstances and subjective well-being (Fabricatore & Handal, 2000) in helping individuals deal with life's difficulties. All three Participants credit a strong belief system for reducing some of the burdens associated with making the sport-career transition. When asked the question what would you say you needed after your professional career ended to give your life meaning and satisfaction?

Participant 4: “I’m a Christian guy, so you know, I am assured of my eternal salvation.”

Participant 5: “being a Christian...I already knew that it had meaning”

In an investigation regarding positive aspects of mental health, researchers have identified several aspects of spiritual or religious life to be positive predictors of subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999). Having a strong belief system helped participant 4 and 5 experience feelings of subjective well-being during the sport-career transition.

## Section 2: Content and Structure for a Sport Career Transition Intervention

In the words of participant 6, “even if the end is not near, you know that it’s coming.” These former professional athletes were adamant about younger players preparing for the sport-career transition during their college years. We have already established that ultimately individual athletes are responsible for initiating action and preparing for the sport-career transition. When asked when professional athletes should begin to prepare for the sport-career transition, participants echoed a similar response, “the earlier they start the better.”

Participant 4: “Well, honestly, you’ve got to have some kind of lecture, counseling or whatever for guys in college.”

These players are in the unique position of understanding the complex combination of psychological, social, behavioral, and emotional demands associated with the sport-career transition and how to mitigate them. One participant who overcame

several obstacles during his sport-career transition believes that it is impossible to fully prepare for the sport-career transition:

Participant 1: “there’s nothing you can do, there nothing you can do... a fabulous deal that you’re trying to do it, but there’s nothing -- I don’t care if it’s football, I don’t care if it’s a doctor, I don’t care if it’s anything -- anything you’ve done since you were eight years old and all of a sudden you stop it, especially -- especially when it comes to a team sport, an individual, maybe not; but anytime you’re involved with ten other guys on your side of the ball and those guys, I mean, you depend -- your livelihood depends on them and you do everything with them, you live them, you go to work with them, you live with them for six weeks in the beginning, you go to work with them all during the year from 7 a.m. to 8 or 9 p.m., and you fly with them, and you travel with them, and then all of a sudden, it’s gone, that’s tough.”

Later during his interview he goes on to say that there are some tangible things that you can do to prepare professional athletes for life after football; develop job skills, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills through networking, and develop time management skills but he believes that is it virtually impossible to prepare professional football players emotionally for what it is going to *feel* like after the sport-career has ended:

Participant 1: “[you] can’t prepare for what it’s going to feel like when it’s over but [you] can prepare for when the shock wears off”

This statement is a perfect example for why athletes should make every effort to prepare for life after football. Participant 3 is an example of an individual who experienced a smooth sport-career transition (Sport-Career Transition Rating = 1). He prepared for life after football by completing his Bachelors' Degree during his professional football career, participating in internships, volunteering with law enforcement and as a result, he was able to move "seamlessly" into a satisfying and fulfilling career in law enforcement after football.

Participants advised that the first detail that should be addressed is identifying a target audience. Football student-athletes have been identified as the group that has the greatest amount of time and opportunity to benefit from this type of programming:

Participant 2: "It [SCT program] might not even be for the freshmen and sophomores because they don't need it. They got two more years to sit around and have to concentrate on playing college football....It's got to absolutely be juniors and seniors."

Education, an important theme permeating these interviews, emerges again as an important component of sport-career transition programs. Each participant stressed that the primary goal for any sport-career transition program is to encourage student-athletes to earn their Bachelors Degree before leaving college because when the concern becomes "keeping your job" it is easy to postpone finishing your degree for a later date, which sometimes never comes:

Participant 3: "get them to understand that nothing is forever. The only you can keep, like my mom told me, is...The knowledge I have in my head."

Participant 4: “you’ve got to have a degree. You know, you’ve got to finish your school. A lot of guys haven’t even finished school yet. That’s priority number one, you know is finishing school.”

Participant 7: “you should start in college.... And I think that you should have these things told to you. Everything that I’m saying should be told to college students...I think earlier [college] because once you get in the situation where you can get fired the next year, your mind is just focused on playing football... Some of them is not going to take it to heart, but at least expose them to it.... If you reach one or two, that’s enough.”

In the event that student-athletes do not have the opportunity to participate in a sport-career transition program before being drafted into the National Football League, participants strongly recommended that players begin taking steps at the beginning of their professional football career to prepare for life after football.

Participant 2 and 4 recommended using vocational counseling and assessments to help student-athletes identify careers that they might be interested to help them plan for their future after football:

Participant 2: “Say hey, [name] what are you going to do with you communications degree. If you don’t ask them, they’re just going to sit in the class like man, I’m good.... If you don’t actually challenge him and make him say something in front of his peers, he’s going to be like well, I want to work for UNCTV. Okay, who runs UNCTV? How are you -- who are going to call? At least make him attempt to think about it.”

Participant 4: “some kind of career counseling. Not that you need to get a job, but some kind of aptitude test, evaluations...[you] can help you get a job here. Or, man you seem like you really like education, teaching. We have these kind of programs. We can direct you there.’ Or you want help going back to school or stuff like that. I just think it would have to be something that’s set up to where it’s not just a shotgun approach, just throw out a bunch of stuff and hope it sticks.”

Participant 4 advised against a prepackaged “canned” approach to sport-career transition programming, reporting that players would be more interested in a program that was unique and tailored specifically for them. This goes back to Participant 5’s comment about “putting all athletes’ in a box”. The implication is that individual athletes have specific needs that need to be addressed. Providing an individualized component to the sport-career transition program is perceived to be pivotal force motivating athletes to participate.

Participant 4: “when it’s more individualized for a player, guys will take more interest in it”

Another content area that many participants advocated including in the sport-career transition intervention is financial education. For guys who go onto the professional league they are going be inundated with continuing education on this area from the National Football League, National Football League Players Association, and other sources but the implication is that you can never get too much information in this area:

Participant 3: “finance....make sure this is some kind of -- something referenced finance....in a language where they could understand. You know, you put the stock market -- they send you sheets -- if you don’t understand the stock market, you don’t have a clue what you’re investing in.”

Participant 5 agrees that financial education is important as well as developing interpersonal skills and identifying how to address the issue of athletic identity:

Participant 5: “how they use their finances, you know, just how to deal with people now...Where’s identity?”

Participant 1 had a simple yet brilliant recommendation to be included in the content of the sport-career transition program. He suggested that football student-athletes needed to be encouraged to read - outside of course work:

Participant 1: “If I could tell them to do one thing that’s easy to do, is -- it’s very easy to do. While you’re playing, while you’re working out, while -- is pick up -- read either New York Times, Washington Post -- read about what’s going on in the world, have some knowledge of something, you know. Even the Wall Street Journal, if you want to -- if you like financial markets...Read a Newsweek once a week, and read it cover to cover. Gosh!...Just be, you know, just know when you’re getting ready to go on these interviews -- what the hell is going on in the world

besides, you know, who, you know, what your record was last year!...if you don't have time to read, turn it on, you know, put it on PBS or watch, you know, a pretty centralized newscast every night...PBS probably...Listen to NPR on the way to practice...That's not hard."

Encouraging football student-athletes to develop knowledge of global events, and develop interests in addition to football, that do not require a great deal of time, may lead to careers after retirement.

Networking and goal-setting were commonly cited as skills that players need to cultivate and use extensively during their careers citing that the relationships established with members of the community during professional or collegiate careers can impact future career success and community involvement.

Participant 6: "networking, which is key knowing people. That's really key. There's not a player out there who shouldn't be networking with folks"

Thinking about plan A, B, and C is a useful strategy to teach players in a sport-career transition program. Goal-setting is a psychological skill used frequently in physical activity and sport settings. We have established that there is a disproportionate amount of uncertainty built into the institutional structure of elite and professional football. Therefore having a plan for what you want to do after football can increase feelings of internal locus of control, reduce some of the anxiety associated with ending the sport career and help to avoid "walking around lost" during the sport-career transition period.

It was also recommended that student-athletes should be encouraged to participate in internship opportunities with the goal being: to expose them to an employment atmosphere. For many of these young people they have not had the time to work or believed that they have not had the time to do internships in the past. Developing relationships with corporate partners and providing opportunities for student-athletes to obtain experience in an area of interest has the potential to lead to future careers - after football.

Finally, Participants suggested that it would be relevant and meaningful to invite former players to share their sport-career transition experiences with collegiate football athletes.

Participant 4: “The problem is, is what they call the ‘Superman Syndrome’. You know, I’m bulletproof; it’s not going to happen to me. And, there’s no way to overcome that other than just to really reinforce it... but you’ve got to have former players. And you don’t just need to bring in the guy that played 15 years. You need to bring in the guy that played, you know, ‘Hey, I was a high school All-American who didn’t work out in college’. And plays four or five years of college and had to move on. And, you’ve just got to make it real.”

According to these interviews, approaching the issue of sport-career transition with football athletes can be difficult undertaking. Programs are often met with disinterest, reluctance and resistance. The perception is that clinical and counseling professionals may know how to organize and facilitate sport-career transition programs, but testimonials from people who have experienced the phenomenon are more likely to

make an impression and induce behavior change with collegiate football athletes. The recommendation of inviting former players to attend sessions advising football student-athletes to prepare for life after football now, and during their pro career, rather than waiting until the end, was perceived to be critical feature for a sport-career transition program.

### Analysis and Summary

Participants presented excellent recommendations for consideration in the content and structure of a sport-career transition intervention. A summary of these content recommendations include: encourage student athletes to obtain their degree, vocational assessment and counseling, offer lectures on vocational and transferable skill development (networking, goal-setting, interviewing, time-management), provide internship opportunities and testimonials and advice from former collegiate and National Football League players.

These previous recommendations speak to content areas that are fairly easy to implement, but as participant 1 so eloquently and succinctly states, there is an emotional element to the sport-career transition, that he believes, is impossible to prepare for because it is unknown and intangible. While the specifics of the emotional element may be unknown, there are characteristics within the emotional element that have been discussed throughout this exploration of the sport-career transition. These elements may have to be addressed in a group setting initially and reinforced in individual counseling sessions. Using measurements like the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) could be helpful in assessing risk factors associated with negative adaptation to the sport-

career transition. Finally, individual sessions can be a forum to teach athletes to reframe the sport-career transition experience as not only a time of loss but also a time of growth and development in other domains, encouraging them to take opportunities to develop skills in these other areas so that they can begin to develop confidence and self-efficacy in new skills.

Another area perceived to be a challenge to implement in a sport-career transition program but believed to be an important factor to address, is the issue of violence and aggression. This concern of how to channel aggression in a positive and constructive manner after the sport-career ends may be more relevant for players in certain positions. However, violence and aggression are socially accepted components in the game of football. “Hitting”, “pounding”, “battling” “killing fields” and “kill or be killed” are just some of the language used to describe their role as football players. Participants expressed concern regarding how to channel and redirect aggression without becoming violent or destructive:

Participant 1: “And then, if you go six months and you hadn’t hit anybody, then, you know, you’re a different person... If you’re a good player and you like to play and you like to hit, it’s hard. It’s harder than maybe a quarterback, or a receiver, or a punter, or a kicker.... But if you’re in the trenches and you want to hit and you’ve hitting forever and you like the -- that’s tough.”

Participant 4: “I miss the violence. I do, I miss hitting people. I miss being able to at practices somebody slights you or does you wrong, then

you can take immediate action. And you can settle it right then and there, you know. You can't do that out in the real world.”

It is obvious that these feelings may catch a retired player off guard and can be difficult to manage. Athletes need to at least be aware that there is the potential for these feelings to occur and have someone to talk to if they should need help finding a positive outlet for aggression.

Recommendations regarding the structure of a sport-career transition intervention include: target junior and senior football student-athletes, make programs mandatory, enlist support from student-athlete academic advisors, offer group and individual intervention. The element of timing is the one area that this researcher has not yet finalized. How long should sessions be? How long should the intervention last? Participants made several recommendations regarding the issue of timing. Participant 3 recommended that practitioners exercise flexibility, “make it flexible” suggesting that players sign up for the intervention rather than be expected to attend a group session. Participant 5, suggested that players should be offered financial compensation, or in the case of student-athletes, academic credit for attending sport-career transition programs. These are all reasonable suggestions but the issue of timing can only be determined after formal meetings with athletic department administrators (athletic director, football coach) and after an assessment of the athletic department where the intervention is to take place.

The overwhelming consensus was that sport-career transition interventions would be extremely beneficial to future professional football players and participants were

enthusiastic about making recommendations and suggestions about who should be the recipient of sport-career transition program, what the content and structure of a sport-career transition intervention should include, and when this information should be made available.

### Section 3: Composite Textural Description of the Sport-Career Transition

#### Experience of Former National Football League Players

The composite textural description was developed and will be used as a method to unite interpretations of meanings, themes and experiences of every participant involved in this study. The description is a composite of the experiences of the group as a whole.

For the majority of professional football athletes the onset of sport-career transition is shock. Even if they had an idea that it [retirement] was eminent, the irrevocability of the situation is initially a shock and requires a period of adjustment. The usual suspects that lead to the end of a career are: injury, deselection, age, and free choice. It is believed that athletes who voluntarily retire from sport are not shocked when it ends and experience fewer problems adjusting to life after football. For those who remain, the period of adjustment can be mild, moderate, severe or extremely severe.

Professional football athletes are known for their skill, intensity, work ethic, confidence, conditioned bodies, and strength. At the onset of the sport-career transition players do not know what to expect. Fear and uncertainty can influence choices and behaviors. A myriad of changes stemming from the retirement event are perceived differently by different players depending on the value that each places on these

attributes. Some report that the transition is tough, others minimize their experiences or feelings regarding this period, while others deny the need for adjustment.

A variety of factors individually and in combination with each other, influence the sport-career transition period in either a positive or negative direction. During the period of adjustment participants reported feeling displaced, and disconnected. Feelings of confidence and competence are compromised. Some players realize that they have delays in skill development due to a history of having people to take care of their responsibilities. For some their sense of identity is diminished, they are no longer affiliated with that sport that they used to define themselves, the sometimes feel like, without that title they are “nobody”. They grieve for the loss of teammates and friendships, the camaraderie that occurs as a result of competing together, depending on each other, in order to accomplish one goal. They miss the attention that was always present, where ever they were, especially in the cities where they played. Some players feel abandoned and alone because they believe that no one understands what they are going through.

Because there is no gradual end to the sport-career, or even a brief period that you can get use to get used to the idea, the result is shock accompanied by intense negative emotion experienced as anger, frustration, shock, disappointment and even - fear. Some players had time to get accustomed to the possibility of their career ending and this time was used to make decisions and take action regarding their life after football.

For most retirement from football meant that they could finally take a break. They used this time (average 12 months) to rest, relax, spent time with their families, and

make decisions about the future. Depending on individual circumstances a sense of urgency regarding obtaining a job may be the case for some retired players, which is often perceived as a stressful event. Making decisions and developing plans are behaviors allotted to the “break”. For some who were diligent with their sport-career transition preparation taking a break was just that. For others this time can also be occupied with negative behaviors as well. Drinking, gambling and other negative behaviors were considered methods of coping, but retired players with these issues soon realized the negative impact of these coping mechanisms on their subjective well-being and quality of life and eventually engaged in counseling to help them with difficult issues related to the end of the sport-career.

Moving all the way through the sport-career transition and achieving feelings of subjective well-being can take up to four years to accomplish, but no one gave up. The attribute that they employed most, along with several others is fierce determination to make it through the sport-career transition. All participants had drive and ambition and wanted to succeed, and were doing what it takes in order to succeed. At the time of interviews everyone except one reported feelings of satisfaction in their life currently.

The sport career transition can be tough, but the goal of subjective well-being is not an impossible outcome. The more time and energy that individuals put into sport-career transition preparation such as internships, graduate school, establishing a career or business venture, the greater chance for positive vocational adaptation to sport-career transition and feelings of subjective well-being.

## Definition of Positive Adaptation to Sport Career Transition and Subjective Well-Being

The sport-career transition is a dynamic process that should ideally begin during the collegiate years, and continue throughout the professional football career. It is a multidimensional process involving the interaction of: emotional, psycho-social, behavioral and cognitive factors affecting the individual and his environment. To experience a successful sport-career transition the athlete must engage in preparation activities designed to develop awareness, understanding and coping strategies associated with the sport-career transition prior to the end of his professional football career.

Concrete strategies used to mitigate negative effects of the sport-career transition include:

- Receiving a bachelors degree
- Receive post-graduate training
- Participating in vocational assessment and counseling
- Identify and establish at least one non-sport area of focus
- Try to obtain experience in the field of interest via internships or other training programs
- Develop a relationship with player development personnel
- Develop and strengthen networking, goal setting and time management skills.

Engaging in all of these activities increases the chances for a successful sport-career transition.

Due to the multidimensional nature of the sport-career transition and integrated approach is recommended for sport-career transition interventions. Athletes should be

advised and counseled regarding the social, psychological, behavioral and cognitive challenges that they may experience during the sport-career transition from the National Football League. Issues that need to be addressed are:

- Athletic identity
- Masculine identity
- Physical pain
- Emotional pain
- Loss of friendships, celebrity status, camaraderie,
- Feelings of failure
- Self-determination and issues of control
- Risk for negative behaviors, i.e. excessive drinking, substance abuse
- Managing aggression

A player who commits to tackling his issues; addressing behavioral and psychological difficulties gives himself an advantage for achieving a successful sport-career transition from the National Football League.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Participant 4: “You always know it’s coming, but you’re always hoping it’s later, rather than sooner, and then when it’s here, it’s, even on some level it’s a surprise”

Participant 6: “I mean, the writing’s on the wall. I mean you know, you can’t play forever”

Participants 4 and 6 describe the central theme that emerged from these findings; athletes need to prepare for the sport-career transition in order to mitigate the feelings of shock, surprise and disorientation. According to these interviews and previous research regarding the sport-career transition, athletes’ attitudes and actions regarding their sport-career transition before the retirement event ultimately influence the quality their sport-career transition and subjective well-being. The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the sport-career transition experiences of former National Football League players by conducting in-depth, meaningful interviews in order to gain a more complete understanding of the sport-career transition process and to use this information to develop a football-specific sport-career transition program intervention designed to enhance the quality of the sport-career transition for elite-amateur, and professional football athletes.

Retirement from the sport-career is a pivotal juncture in the developmental stage – sport-career transition (Lavalley, Gordon & Grove, 1997). Retired athletes can experience the sport-career transition as a period of adjustment ranging from mild to severe, depending on a number of individual factors. One of these individual factors is *level of preparedness*. The quality of the sport-career transition can be influenced by the amount of time an athlete devotes to sport-career transition preparation. In this chapter I return to the six research questions from the original research design: *i)* how do former National Football League athletes describe and understand the sport-career transition? *ii)* What factors do National Football League athletes perceive to influence the quality of the sport career transition? *iii)* How do former National Football League athletes prepare to make the sport-career transition and how does preparation affect subjective well-being? *iv)* who plays a role in preparing the athlete to make the sport-career transition? *v)* How do athletes’ learn to cope with the sport-career transition? and *vi)* What programs do elite level and professional football athletes need to make the sport-career transition successful? I will also address the rationale behind the Blended Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Appendix H) that emerged from these findings.

This chapter is composed of five sections: section 1 summarizes the findings presented in Chapter Four that provide answers to the research questions, section 2 speaks to the importance of implementing *effective* and aggressive sport-career transition interventions to help Division I football student-athletes and

professional athletes plan for the sport-career transition, before and during the sport-career. Finally, the last three sections limitations of this study, implications for future research and practice, and conclusions will be advanced.

### Summary of Research Findings

While retirement marks a defining point in the sport-career transition, this period (sport-career transition) is considered to be a process, rather than an event (Coakley, 1983; Kim & Moen, 2001; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Swain, 1991; Torregrosa et al., 2004). To this end, these findings confirm that in order for professional athletes to experience successful career adaptation and subjective well-being after professional football careers they must take the time to prepare for the sport-career transition before the retirement occurs. That is, it is imperative that preparation for the sport-career transition begin during their college years, or very early in their professional career.

Using interview data and the Satisfaction with Life Scale, this study examined the experiences of seven former National Football League players who reside in North Carolina and began retirement at some point between the 1999 professional football season and June 2005. These findings reveal that former National Football League players experience a time of mild to severe adjustment during the sport-career transition (85.3%). However, the level of adjustment and subjective well-being is mediated by several distinct situational factors, individual characteristics and behaviors which can occur before or after disengagement from professional sport. These factors, which have been extracted from Chapter Four

and used to answer research questions, are integrated and infused into this chapter to provide meaningful insights into how professional athletes can decrease their risk of a crisis transition, and increase the likelihood of successful career adaptation and subjective well-being once their professional sport-careers have ended.

Research question one asks how former professional football players describe and understand the sport-career transition. Findings show that individual cognitive, psycho-social, emotional and behavioral determinants *all* contribute towards players' understanding of and movement through this developmental stage. Moreover, these individual cognitive, psycho-social, emotional and behavioral factors are not only relevant during the sport-career transition period but also during the sport-career itself.

When considering how cognitive factors influence adjustment to the sport-career transition, findings from these data suggest that four primary cognitive processes exist. Perceptions about the retirement context, athletic identity, locus of control, and defense mechanisms all play a significant role in how players understand and experience the sport-career transition. For example, an individual who had a career-ending injury, who possesses high athletic identity, has an external locus of control and whose use of defense mechanisms is excessive, is at greater risk for experiencing higher levels of negative adjustment at the end of the sport career than an individual like Participant 3 who chose to leave the game of football, has differentiated identities, internal locus of control and uses defense mechanisms sparingly. Use of defense mechanisms alone does not appear to be a powerful cognitive agent in determining the level of adjustment to the sport-career

transition, but reasons for retirement, athletic identity and locus of control appear to have powerful effect on successful career adaptation. Participants in this study were all guilty of using defense mechanisms and making assumptions about what they believed based on anecdotal accounts and hearsay from discussing this issue with others.

These findings are consistent with Webb et al. (1995), who examined athletes' reactions to retirement from sport and found that lack of control negatively correlated with life satisfaction and positively with retirement difficulty and feelings of uncertainty with the future. It was also found that the quality of the sport-career transition was influenced by cognitive factors such as locus of control and retirement context in a phenomenological study by Parker (1994) examining the sport-career transition experiences of 7 former collegiate football athletes, and Stephan et al. (2003) examining the repercussions of transitions out of elite sport on subjective well-being.

In addition to cognitive factors, these findings suggest that psycho-social factors influence players' understanding and experiences of the sport-career transition including: profound sense of loss – grief, and interpersonal relationships (Mihovilovic, 1968). Former National Football League athletes expressed that during the sport-career transition period many of their interpersonal relationships with teammates, coaches, front office personnel, league officials, and fans were altered. Previous studies show that the number one difficulty associated with the sport-career transition of Canadian Olympic, World Championship and World Games athletes, and retired female tennis players was missing the social aspect of sport and feelings of isolation (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).

Participants indicated that they experienced many losses as a result of their retirement from football; however, the most salient loss experienced by this group of individuals was the loss of friendship, brotherhood - camaraderie. Therefore, it seems logical that the existence of meaningful interpersonal relationships after disengagement would affect the sport-career transition experience by providing a “connection” or “sense of belonging” for the former athlete. As psychological and social references are reevaluated and adjusted, participants begin to construct new identities, a positive step that can positively affect subjective well-being. Participants acknowledge an awareness that links this sense of loss to negative behaviors, which is likely to have a negative effect on life satisfaction and subjective well-being.

At this juncture it is important that we acknowledge that these cognitive, psycho-social, emotional and behavioral determinants are not mutually exclusive; they are all intricately connected in some way and detailed information about each of these determinants should be used to assess level of adaptation. This feature is especially prevalent as it pertains to the emotional and behavioral determinants regarding former players’ understanding and experience of the sport-career transition.

One of the most compelling findings from this body of research is that the emotional response to the sport-career transition is the most complicated and challenging dimension influencing the overall quality of the sport-career transition. Not only is the emotional response to the sport-career transition the

most difficult facet for retired professional football players to address before and after the retirement event, but it may also be the most challenging component to convey in sport-career transition program interventions. This may be one reason why it has largely been neglected in player development programs at the National Football League and the National Football Leagues' Players Association. Another reason for this neglect in programs designed to help athletes as they struggle through the sport-career transition is that, because the athlete doesn't know what he is going to feel when his career ends, it may be more difficult to prepare for this unknown.

Some of the more typical emotional responses to the sport-career transition include: anger, shock, denial, frustration, resentment and grief. Understanding this and recognizing changes in the emotional state of a retired professional football player is essential for all sport-career transition programs. Changes can be used as a barometer to assess individuals who may be at-risk for clinical disturbances. Practitioners can introduce generic emotional control and cognitive behavioral strategies to players in a group setting to address potential emotional issues while more specific emotional concerns can be addressed in individual sessions. Also of note, negative emotional responses can be precipitated by physical injury. Physical pain can be a cause of or exacerbate emotional pain; therefore obtaining information about physical health can be useful in the assessment and treatment of former National Football League players experiencing negative adaptation to the sport-career transition.

Findings also indicate that the level of emotional response can also have an impact on time to adjustment to the sport-career transition. Many Participants expressed that the emotional aspect made the sport-career transition “tough” and was the most difficult part. The primary reason that participants expressed difficulty handling their emotions is that they did not know how they were going to feel until their sport-career ended; therefore, they felt that there was nothing that they could do to prepare. The narrative that best describes this phenomenon is “there’s nothing you can do to prepare for what it *feels* like when it’s over... , but [you] can prepare for when the shock wears off.”

The emotional difficulty that some retired athletes experienced after their sport-careers ended was manifested in a behavioral reaction. For several participants emotional difficulty was masked by engaging in negative behaviors resulting in a negative adaptation to the sport-career transition, and longer time to adaptation. Well-developed coping skills and internal resources are valuable assets to have available to help manage emotionally challenging situations and reduce the risk of former athletes engaging in inappropriate, negative and sometimes dangerous behaviors.

Behavioral responses were reported to have significant impact on the quality of the sport-career transition. These findings indicate that behavioral responses to this developmental stage could be found on a continuum ranging from positive to negative behaviors. Behaviors exhibited by participants during this stage and deemed to be positive included: taking a break, obtaining gainful

employment, establishing a clear career path and staying in shape. Positive behaviors exhibited before the onset of the sport-career transition included: obtaining academic training, participating in vocational counseling and participating in internships. Behaviors such as irritability – mood lability, verbal abuse, excessive drinking, gambling, and isolating from friends and family could be found at the opposite end of the continuum in response to the onset of the sport-career transition. Individuals who reported that they used negative behaviors as a strategy to cope with disengagement from sport reported a more difficult sport-transition period (Mihovilovic,1968; Koukouris,1991). They were eventually able to overcome these hardships, by utilizing external resources, which led to positive behavior change, improvements in subjective well-being influencing overall personal growth and development.

Developing insight and understanding of the phenomenon sport-career transition was one of the main purposes for conducting this study. While questions one and two ask similar questions; answers to question one yield important global elements concerning the sport sport-career transition experience. Question two seeks to identify specific factors perceived to influence the sport-career transition experiences (positive/negative) of former professional football athletes. The goal of this question was to amass concrete information from participants based on their individual experiences, and the experiences of their teammates regarding specific attributes believed to help or hurt players as they move through the sport-career transition period. Because we are seeking answers

about positive/negative influences believed to influence the sport-career transition, information reported is dichotomous in nature.

Attributes believed to have a positive influence on the quality of the sport-career transition and subsequently subjective well-being are: possessing an undergraduate degree, vocational competencies in another area or specialty, an established career path, and supportive family and friends. This finding is consistent with a one-year mixed-methods study conducted in France investigating the repercussions of transition out of elite sport on subjective well-being. They too determined that feelings of confidence and competence are linked to subjective well-being (Yannick, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, 2003). Attributes believed to have a negative influence on the sport-career transition are: failing to obtain an undergraduate degree, no non-sport vocational competencies, confusion about what to do next and unsupportive family and friends. Participant 7 who failed to obtain his undergraduate degree stated “like I have like five classes left for my degree”; was extremely focused on football during his career “my focus was to get a big contract, to make a lot of money”; was competitive “I hate to lose, I am the worst at losing”, was isolated from his family “I would just sit in my office all day – just ignore – the phone, kids, everything...trying to be away from home mentally”, and had an extremely difficulty sport-career transition.

Research question three asks how do athletes prepare to make the sport-career transition and how does this preparation affect subjective well-being? Responses to this question could be found on a continuum ranging from no

preparation to extremely well-prepared, and varied among participants. Lack of preparation for the future clearly affected the quality of the sport-career transition and subjective well-being. Participants were asked to complete the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale after each interview, however, this research design failed to consider the fact that past levels of subjective well-being would have been meaningful information to obtain. Due to this flaw, we do not know how feelings of subjective well-being scores change, when they change, or why they change. It is highly likely the current scores are different from what they were at the beginning of their sport-career transition period. An indication of the fluidity of this construct is exemplified by Participant 7. He reported that he has recently (two to three months) begun to finally accept that the sport-career has ended. Because he is still actively adjusting to life after sport, his satisfaction with life score indicated that was “slightly unsatisfied”. His interview data is consistent with his Satisfaction with Life Scale score. This individual also reported that he neglected to do anything in preparation for the sport-career transition - he thought about it but failed to take any action “I always used to tell myself that I thought about it...but I never did anything about it”.

Findings suggest that failure to prepare on any level, formal preparation or informal preparation, will at some point during the sport-career transition result in feelings of dissatisfaction with life. Participant 3 chose to leave the game of football and took steps during his career (completed Bachelors Degree, internships) to prepare himself for a career in law enforcement. Perhaps football

athletes should be encouraged to try and leave the game of on “their own terms”, instead of being forced out or having someone else make the decision.

Individuals who leave on “their own terms” are more likely to have a plan in place for what they are going to do after their football career is over. Having a plan for life after football can eliminate some of the uncertainty and financial pressure usually associated with the end of a professional football career. This is consistent with results from Sinclair and Orlick’s (1993) study of Canadian Olympic and World Games athletes. When asked, former athletes recommended that current athletes make plans for their retirement. Other suggestions from retired athletes include: finding another focus, continuing to train and exercise, maintaining contact with other retired athletes and learning to transfer skills used in sport to other interests.

Responses to research question four, who plays a role in preparing the athlete for the sport-career transition, were consistent across participants who engaged in informal or formal preparation. Participants who didn’t take steps to prepare for the sport-career transition were not able to contribute to these findings. Player development staff was consistently identified as the primary source for planning and preparation for the sport-career transition, while one Participant identified his father as the most instrumental figure responsible for preparing him to make the sport-career transition. This finding reflects how valuable National Football League Player Development Programs are in facilitating positive adaptation to the sport-career transition and subsequent

subjective well-being of retired football players. It was also evident that player development programs, both with the League and Players Association, can improve on their current level of access to and quality of programs for current and former professional football players.

How do athletes learn to cope with the sport-career transition was the fifth research question in this inquiry. While these interviews provided a variety of answers to this research question, the overwhelming consensus was that they learn to cope and eventually they are able to experience subjective well-being. Results from Webb et al. (1995) reveal that overall life satisfaction and retirement difficulty are unrelated. This is a testimony to the determination and perseverance of this caliber of athlete who learns how to deal with adversity on the field and is able to transfer that skill to life off the field. Participant 2 says “Things are going to happen during the game. You say okay, we thought we were going to pound on this team, but now look at it. It’s 14-14 at the end of the fourth quarter. What are we going to do? We know we’re better than them...We just got to find a way. You got to -- sometimes you just got to find a way even if it ain’t pretty, just get it done somehow”. These athletes found a way to overcome the barriers before them whether it was by obtaining gainful employment so that they could support their family and feel productive, getting support from family and friends, or engaging in counseling or psychotherapy to help them eliminate destructive behaviors and manage difficult emotions in an appropriate manner.

The final research question aims to identify cognitive, psycho-social, emotional and behavioral issues that should be addressed in a sport-career transition program intervention for division I football student-athletes in order for them to experience a successful sport-career transition, whether at the end of college or after a professional football career. Findings indicate that participants value educating young football athletes regarding the potential for adjustment difficulties at the end of a sport-career and during the sport-career transition. Issues that should be included in a sport-career transition program intervention are: to value their education by obtaining an undergraduate degree, establish contingency plans in the event that a professional football career is short-lived, engage in vocational counseling, develop vocational competencies, develop transferable life skills and develop intelligent financial behaviors. Participants believed that preparing for the emotional response to the sport-career transition was a difficult proposition, but encouraged the researcher to make every attempt. The perception was that addressing these issues would be a mitigating factor in the emotional response to the sport-career transition for many football athletes.

The Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998) is the first and only sport-specific model that examines the entire course of the career transition process of elite amateur and professional athletes. Because no evidence exists in the literature to support the credibility and dependability (Lincoln, 2002) of this model, it was the intention of this researcher to examine whether this model is helpful in developing an understanding of the

process of sport-career transition for professional football. Findings from this research partially support the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition, however participants' sport-career transition experiences were not entirely accounted for by the model. Three modifications to the model have been advanced. First, all professional football athletes should be expected to participate in sport-career transition programs, interventions or plans – this stage has been added to the model. Second, cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and psycho-social factors related to adaptation are interrelated, and each individual, depending on their circumstances, exhibits varying levels of each factor. This research also suggests that Taylor and Ogilvie's (1998) Model should include factors associated with a healthy sport-career transition, instead of not including this.

These modifications have been integrated into the Taylor and Ogilvie's (1998) model and it has been renamed the Blended Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Appendix H). Because qualitative research is conducted neither to confirm or disconfirm earlier findings, but instead to contribute to the process of continuous enrichment and advancement (Lincoln, 2002) regarding a particular area of study, I introduce this "model" with caution, trusting that it would be further tested for dependability, in hopes that we can one day develop a credible and dependable model to explain the sport-career transition period.

## Limitations

This research study had several limitations that may have undue influence on data analysis and findings, and ultimately the conclusions. These limitations have been reflected upon and strategies have been outlined in the section titled implications for future research and practice.

The first limitation is that these findings are only representative of the seven participants who are retired National Football League players residing in North Carolina. They do not represent the cognitive, psychological, and behavioral ethos of all former National Football League athletes. In addition, many Participants in this study last played for the Carolina Panthers organization. The Carolina Panthers is just one out of 32 teams in the National Football League each with its own team culture. Characteristics specific to the Carolina Panthers and not representative of other teams across the League may have influenced these particular findings. For example, Donnie Shell is the individual responsible for player development with the Carolina Panthers. Participants repeatedly referred to him during interviews, and spoke of him with respect, acknowledging how well he performs in the position, Director of Player Development. Perhaps a high premium is placed on preparation for sport-career transition within the Carolina Panthers organization. Because, participation in this study was limited to former National Football League players living in North Carolina, these findings cannot be assumed to reflect the sport-career transition experiences of

professional athletes from other football teams, sports or professional female athletes.

Another limitation of this research study emanates from the source of the data. Recall or reporting bias is potentially a limitation in all research studies utilizing an interview format. Because retrospective data was the primary source of data used for this analysis, there is a risk of recall or reporting bias inherent in this study design. One criterion for inclusion in this study was a sport-career transition period that began as early as 1999, therefore, participants were asked to recall past experiences with a maximum range of six years. If the phenomenon of recall bias is present in this study then interpretation of these findings should be conducted with caution.

Another limitation of this study is the methods used for recruiting participants. Participants in this study were recruited by mailing letters to eligible former players in North Carolina. A list was provided by National Football League Players Association, and most participants were members of the Players' Association. Follow-up telephone calls were then made to invite potential participants to participate. Selection bias may be applicable in this study. Former players may have self-selected out of participation if they were experiencing emotional and/or behavior difficulties adjusting to the onset of sport-career transition. Players who experienced more positive sport-career transition experiences or who were past the emotional and/or behavioral difficulties may have self-selected into the study.

The final limitation was alluded to earlier in the summary of research findings. Subjective well-being fluctuates and is dependent upon an individual's evaluation of his/her current circumstances. Because subjective well-being was only collected at one time point after disengagement, important information about this construct and the influence of time is absent. It is uncertain how subjective well-being changes over time as a former player moves through the sport-career transition period. Given this limitation, findings should be interpreted with caution.

#### Implications for Future Research and Practice

This phenomenological exploration of the sport-career transition experiences of former National Football League players has yielded greater awareness and appreciation for some of the specific challenges that retired football players face during this developmental stage, and how these experiences affect subjective well-being. It has also highlighted the need to continue research efforts in this particular area of inquiry. There is the potential to extend this line of research in several meaningful directions: seeking answers to additional questions concerning the sport-career transition experiences of former National Football League players, or to gain deeper insight into issues mentioned in these interviews and believed to be important but beyond the scope of this study.

A practical direction would be to develop and implement a sport-career transition intervention program, follow the players from their junior year in college through their professional careers, and evaluate the program effectiveness

in terms of the sport-career transition experience and subjective well-being. Because the sport-career transition is a process, and not an event, longitudinal studies are more likely to provide researchers with more complete information about the sport-career transition experience, rather than quick snapshots of athletes after their disengagement from sport. Using longitudinal research designs would permit us to collect subjective well-being measures at multiple time-points, glean information about the fluidity of this construct, as well as data regarding other characteristics that may influence sport-career transition outcomes.

Conducting interviews with significant others is another compelling approach for gaining another perspective concerning the sport-career transition experiences of former National Football League players. One of the most, if not the most important individuals in the professional football athlete's life is his spouse. This of course does not apply to single professional athletes. According to these data, during the sport-career and sport-career transition spouses occupy space in at least two positions: support system and victim. It was quite evident from these interviews that the sport-career transition period influences and affects subjective well-being of spouses as well as players. Because these interviews focused solely on the retired player, insight and understanding from the spouses' point of view is absent. Examination of spouses' experiences would possibly shed some light in several other directions and yield additional, meaningful findings.

With the understanding that there are sport specific challenges that all athletes' will face as they disengage from sport-participation, there is a great need for researchers to conduct studies similar to this one with athletes from sports other than football. These studies will help us to distinguish general sport-career transition characteristics and sport-specific sport-career transition characteristics. Another relevant area that we should examine is related to the sport-career transition and the effect, if any, of gender and the sport-career transition experiences and subjective well-being.

### Conclusions

Participant 1: "if you get five or ten people a year that it helps, it's worth it"

Conducting this research was an extremely enlightening experience. It seems that for most professional football athletes the sport-career transition experience is a time of at least moderate adjustment to changes that occur, with the period of adjustment usually resolved in less than 24 months. For former athletes who experience behavioral or clinical disturbances time to adjustment can take longer than 24 months. However, what is evident is that regardless of the type of sport-career transition, subjective well-being can still be realized. It is our responsibility as practitioners to develop programs and seminars to assist athletes in preparation for the sport-career transition. Participants, who have the benefit of wisdom and experience, advocate that future (college) and current National Football League players begin the process as soon as possible.

While it is the responsibility of the individual athlete to take action, all professional football athletes should be advised each year by their respective player development personnel. The role of individual Player Development Directors is to ensure that programs are meeting the needs of players and reinforce the departments' commitment to support a culture that delivers a continuum of services to help active and practice squad players succeed in all aspects of their lives (NFL.com). Follow up and evaluation should be integral parts of player development programs. In addition, player development programs should have an independent audit of transition services to determine their efficacy and to create strategies to increase participation in these valuable programs. The area of player development programs that appears to be deficient is in counseling players before, during and after the sport-career transition. Player development programs need to make it a priority to create a blueprint addressing emotional issues of former professional football players. It is evident from these data that they are not adequately addressing this crucial sport-career transition issue.

These data reveal that actively engaging in some form of sport-career transition preparation has a positive impact on sport-career transition outcomes and subjective well-being of former National Football League athletes. While we may not be able to help *all* athletes realize the long-term benefits of preparing for life after professional sport careers it is important that we continue to try by conducting methodologically sound research, developing theoretical models, publishing articles, and creating programs that address the issue of sport-career

transition. Research in the area of sport-career transition is critical if professional and elite level athletes are to experience positive sport-career transitions.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### **Circumstances Surrounding the Sport-Career Transition**

1. What were the circumstances surrounding your withdrawal from professional football?
2. How long did it take for you to come to terms with your decision to withdraw from professional football?
3. What were some of your immediate concerns/worries when your decision to withdraw from professional football was imminent?
4. What would you say are the unique challenges elite/professional athletes experience before and during their withdrawal from sport and their subsequent career transition?

#### **Psychosocial Factors Related to the Sport-Career Transition**

1. During your career, how did your views, attitudes and beliefs influence your career transition from professional athletics to your current role?
2. How much thought did you give to your withdrawal from professional football and career transition during your professional career?
3. What other activities or roles were you involved in during your professional career?
4. What were the most difficult experiences/adjustments that you had to face after your withdrawal from professional football?

#### **Developmental Factors Related to Adaptation to the Sport-Career Transition**

1. When does the preparation for life after a professional football usually begin for most football players? For you?
2. When should the preparation for life after a professional football career begin?
3. What would you say you needed after your professional career ended to give your life meaning and satisfaction? What did you miss?

4. Given your experience and the experiences of other professional football players, how would you describe a successful sport-career transition from the NFL to “regular life”?

### **Availability of Resources for Making a Career Transition**

1. Who contributed towards your preparation for your career transition from professional football?
2. In your opinion, who should be responsible for preparing elite athletes for their career transition from sport?
3. What transition services and supports did you know about, and utilize when you played professional football?
4. If you could create a transition program for athletes withdrawing from athletic careers (college, pros) what areas would you include in this your curriculum, based on your experience?

### **Quality of Career Transition**

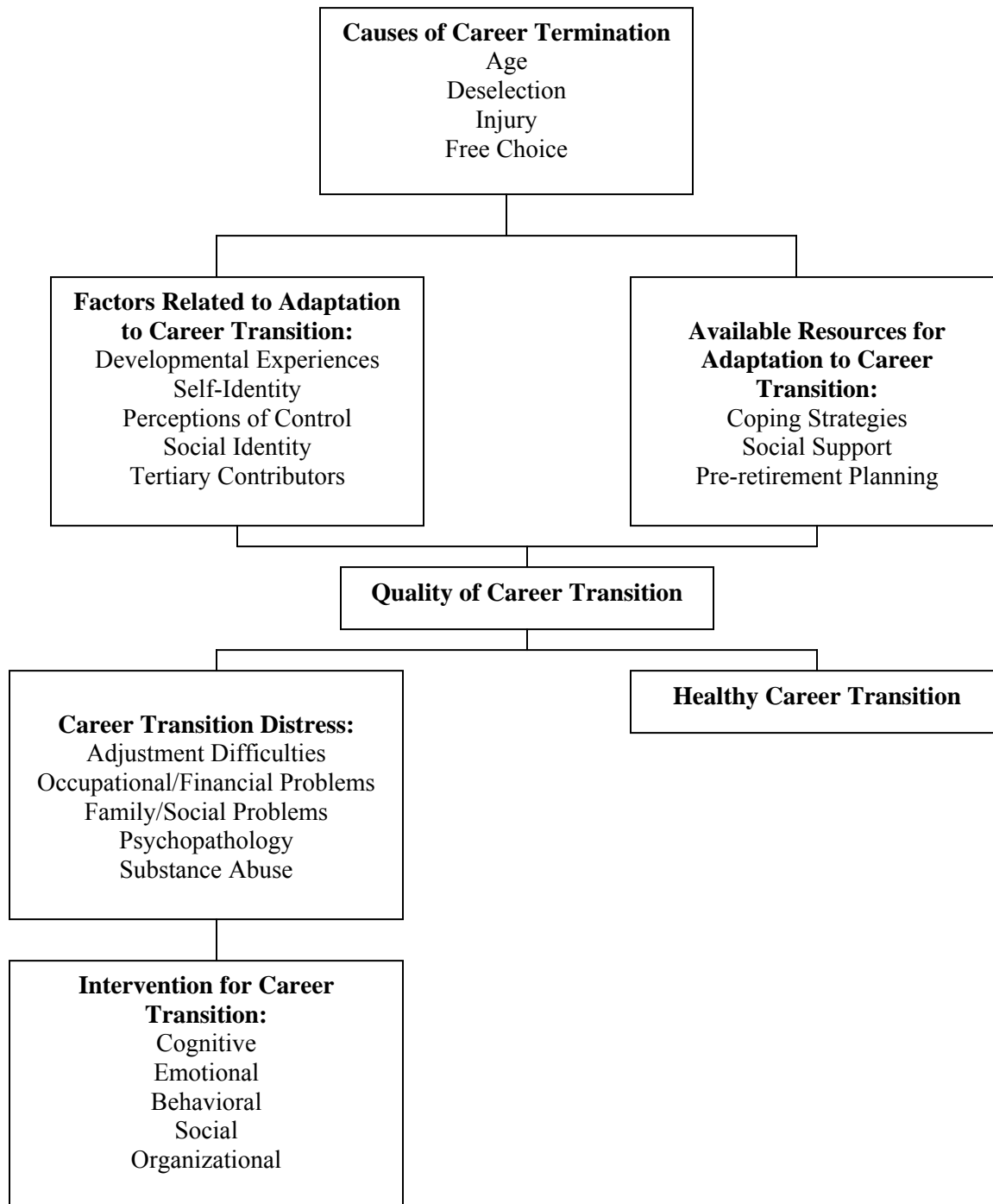
1. Did you engage in any behaviors that you perceived to be negative in terms of making the sport-career transition?
2. What behaviors do you believe positively influenced your sport-career transition?
3. Did you experience any mental health related or physical problems? Did you seek help from a counselor or other professional?
4. Who was most supportive or helpful during your sport-career transition?

### **Reflections**

1. What did you learn as a professional athlete that has helped you in your life after withdrawal from the National Football Association?
2. If you had a chance to do it all over again, would you do anything differently with regard to your professional career, withdrawal from sport, or career transition? If so, what?

APPENDIX B

CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF ADAPTATION TO CAREER TRANSITION



APPENDIX C  
RECRUITING LETTER

November 1, 2004

Dear

The transition from professional athlete to individual in the “game of life” can be traumatic for many athletes. The traumatic effects, however, can be reduced by creating specialized programs, designed to help athletes learn how to plan for and cope with the end of a sport career. We want to create a Sport-Career Transition Program (SCTP) and we need your help.

Because you have retired from professional football for a period of five years or less, you have been invited to participate in a small research project in collaboration with The Center for the Study of Retired Athletes at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which will be conducted by Stephany C. Coakley, M.Ed, LPC, doctoral student in sport psychology at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

We invite you to participate in **one** 60-90 minute interview in person (at The Center for the Study of Retired Athletes) or via telephone and answer questions about your sport-career transition from The National Football League. Your identity will remain anonymous and strict confidentiality will be maintained. We just want you to share your experiences, opinions, thoughts and feelings about your sport-career transition.

Our goal is to improve the quality of sport-career transition experiences for all athletes, but we have chosen to begin by developing programs for professional and collegiate football players. You are the best person to help us develop a program such as the proposed Sport Career Transition Program (SPCT) to help the younger generation of athletes.

The Principal Investigator or someone from the Center for the Study of Retired Athletes will be in contact with you soon in the hopes that we can schedule an interview with you. We, at the Center for the Study of Retired Athletes are dedicated to improving the lives of active and retired NFL players. We appreciate any effort on your part to help us in this endeavor. In the meantime, if you have any questions please contact Stephany Coakley at 336-760-0506 or via email at [stephccoakley@hotmail.com](mailto:stephccoakley@hotmail.com) or the Center Coordinator, Amy Matthews, at 888-830-4885.

Sincerely,

Kevin Guskiewicz, PhD  
Center Research Director

Amy Matthews, MSW  
Center Coordinator/Research Associate

Stephany C. Coakley, M.Ed, LPC  
Doctoral Student

*\*The NFLPA does not have any equitable or legal interest in CSRA and does not in any way warrant, validate or guaranty the services provided by CSRA. The NFLPA is neither a medical or health entity and is not responsible for any study, investigation, health screening, health diagnosis or treatment program which may relate to or arise from your participation in any CSRA program.\**

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: SHORT FORM WITH  
ORAL PRESENTATION**

Project Title: An Interpretive Exploration of Former Professional Football Players (NFL) Regarding Their Transition Experiences From Professional Athlete to - Individual in the "Game of Life".

Project Director: Stephany C. Coakley, M.Ed, L.P.C.

Participant's Name:

Date of Consent:

Stephany Coakley has explained in the preceding oral presentation the procedures involved in this research project including the purpose and what will be required of you. Any benefits and risks were also described. Stephany Coakley has answered all of your current questions regarding your participation in this project. You are free to refuse to participate or to withdraw your consent to participate in this research at any time without penalty; your participation is entirely voluntary. Your privacy will be protected because you will not be identified by name as a participant in this project.

The research and this consent form have been approved by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board, which insures that research involving people follows federal regulations. Questions regarding your rights as a participant in this project can be answered by calling Dr. Beverly Maddox-Britt at (336) 334-5878. Questions regarding the research itself will be answered by Stephany Coakley by calling (336) 760-0605. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided to you if the information might affect your willingness to continue participation in the project.

By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in the project described to you by Stephany Coakley.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness to Oral Presentation and Participant's  
Signature

ORAL PRESENTATION

(Must accompany Short Consent Form)

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceived transition experiences of retired National Football League (NFL) players, and to develop an intervention to assist Division I football players, plan for and cope with the finality of making their sport-career transition. To accomplish this, retired NFL players will be interviewed by the researcher and asked a series of questions that address their personal experiences making the transition from “pro athlete” to individual in the “game of life”. All interviews will be audio taped and later transcribed. Participants will receive a copy of interview transcriptions and provided the opportunity to make any clarifications they feel appropriate so that interviews truly reflect the perceptions of the participants. It is expected that each interview will be approximately one hour to one hour and a half in duration. The participants will remain anonymous to all except the researcher. The audio tapes and interview transcriptions will be kept and stored by the researcher for a minimum of three years. It is hoped that this research will provide a better understanding of the concerns and issues that professional athletes experience making the transition adjusting to life after their sport career has end.

Participants are free to withdraw from the investigation at any time and should feel free to ask any questions at any time. Questions can be directed to the researcher, Stephany Coakley, personally at the time of the interview, or at a later date using the telephone or email contacts listed below.

Contact info: Stephany Coakley  
Telephone: (336) 760-0605  
Email: stephcocoakley@hotmail.com

---

Signature of person obtaining consent on behalf of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro

---

Date

APPENDIX E

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

**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 professional football players.**

Identification Number \_\_\_\_\_

**Demographic Information**

Age \_\_\_\_\_

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

Race/Ethnicity

Caucasian       African-American       Native-American

Hispanic/Latino       Mixed Race       Other \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status     Married       Single       Divorced

(optional)

Widowed       Other

Level of Education (check all completed)

High School

Junior College (Associate's Degree)

College/ University no degree

Bachelor's Degree

Master's Degree

Doctoral/MD/JD

**Sport Background**

How many years did you compete in your sport, please break down (i.e., elementary school 4 years, etc.)

Youth (elementary/middle) \_\_\_\_\_ High school \_\_\_\_\_ College \_\_\_\_\_

Professional \_\_\_\_\_ Other (post college) \_\_\_\_\_

Last Team You Played On (please indicate # of years that you played with this team)

\_\_\_\_\_

Which other teams did you play for during your professional career (please indicate # of years with each team)?

1) \_\_\_\_\_ 2) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

Did you attend school during your professional sport career?  Yes  No

What type/level of school? \_\_\_\_\_

**Satisfaction with Life Scale**

Below are five statements that you may agree with or disagree with. Using the 1 -7 scale below indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responding.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
•	•	•	•	•	•	•
strongly disagree	disagree	slightly disagree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly agree	agree	strongly agree

1. \_\_\_\_\_ In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The conditions of my life are excellent
3. \_\_\_\_\_ I am satisfied with my life.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

**Sport-Career Transition**

On a scale of 1 – 10 with 1 being very easy, and 10 being very difficult, how would you rate your sport-career transition experience? \_\_\_\_\_

What is you primary occupation or career role?

---

Full time employment (list) \_\_\_\_\_  
Part-time employment (list) \_\_\_\_\_  
Retired  
Self-employment (consulting, etc) (list)  
Other (list)

Did you seek full-time employment when you retired?  Yes  No  
How long did it take for you to obtain full-time employment after retirement? \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank You For Your Participation In This Research Study**

APPENDIX F  
PARTICIPANT PROFILES

**Co- Researcher 1** is a 36 year-old Caucasian male. He had a nine year NFL playing career, played in the position, Tight End, with two NFL teams, and retired from the NFL five years ago. He cites his reasons for retirement as age and diminishing skills. He began his football career at the age of eight years old. He has a Bachelors degree and is currently employed as a financial advisor. He is married.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 10

Subjective Well-Being Score – 27 **Satisfied**

**Co- Researcher 2** is a 28 year-old African-American male. He had a three-year, three-game NFL playing career; playing the positions, Cornerback and Special Teams, with three NFL teams and retired from the NFL three years ago. His release and retirement was precipitated by a pectoral injury that he sustained during training camp. He began his football career in ninth grade. He has a Bachelors Degree and is currently employed as a Mortgage Loan Officer. He is currently married, but was a bachelor during his NFL career.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 4

Subjective Well-Being Score – 32 **Extremely Satisfied**

**Co- Researcher 3** is a 41 year-old African-American male. He was an undrafted player with a fourteen-year NFL playing career, at the position of Wide Receiver. During his tenure he played with three NFL teams and retired from the NFL four years ago. He was the only retired player in this sample who voluntarily chose to leave professional football.

He began his football career in ninth grade. He has a Bachelors Degree which he completed during his professional football career and is currently employed as a Police Officer. He is currently married, but was a bachelor during his NFL career.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 1

Subjective Well-Being Score – 23 **Slightly Satisfied**

**Co- Researcher 4** is a 33 year-old Caucasian male. He had a seven-year NFL playing career, playing the position of Linebacker, with four NFL teams and retired from the NFL four years ago. He cites “his services were no longer needed” as the reason for his retirement from the NFL. He began his football career at 12 years old. He has a Bachelors Degree and is currently in dental school. He is married.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 3

Subjective Well-Being Score – 32 **Extremely Satisfied**

**Co- Researcher 5** is a 33 year-old African-American male. He had a five-year NFL playing career, played in the positions Defensive Back and Special Teams, with two NFL teams, and retired from the NFL five years ago. His retirement was precipitated by a neck injury. He began his football career in elementary school. He has a Bachelors degree and is currently employed as an Athletic Director. He is married.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 8

Subjective Well-Being Score – 34 **Extremely Satisfied**

**Co- Researcher 6** is a 35 year-old African-American male. He had a five-year NFL playing career, played in the positions Full Back and Special Teams with two NFL teams, and retired from the NFL five years ago. He cites that he was “released” and unable to

get a position on another team as the reason for his retirement. He began his football career at the age of eight years old. He has a Bachelors degree and is currently employed in medical device sales. He is married.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 4

Subjective Well-Being Score – 27 **Satisfied**

**Co- Researcher 7** is a 34 year-old African-American male. He had an eight-year NFL playing career, played in the position, Cornerback with four NFL teams, and retired from the NFL three years ago. Chronic injury and inability to pass team physicals were cited as the reasons for his retirement from the NFL. He began his football career in elementary school. He has five classes to take in order to earn his Bachelors degree and has plans to complete his Bachelors degree in the near future. He is currently employed as a trader/sales representative. He is married.

Sport-Career Transition Rating – 10.5

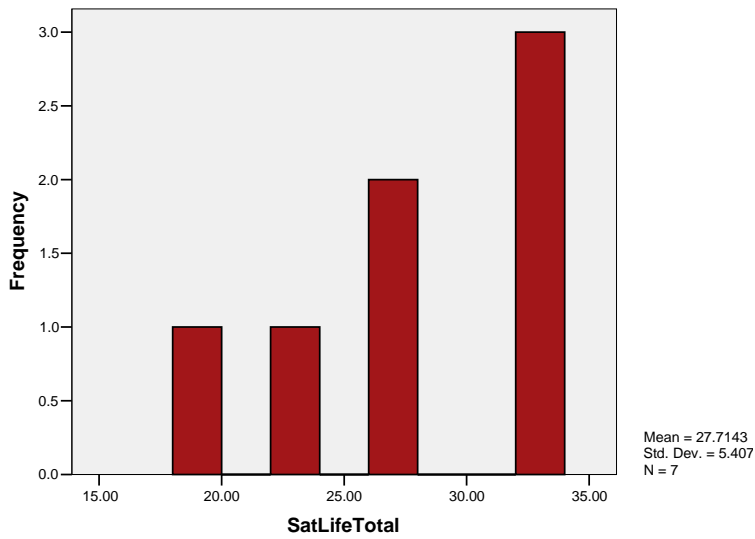
Subjective Well-Being Score – 19 **Slightly Dissatisfied**

APPENDIX G

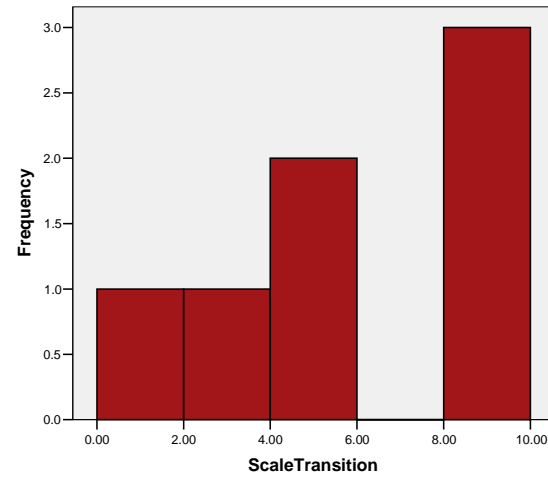
Descriptive Statistics – Satisfaction with Life Scale  
Sport-Career Transition Rating

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
ScaleTransition	7	1.00	10.00	5.7143	3.59232
SatLifeTotal	7	19.00	34.00	27.7143	5.40723
Valid N (listwise)	7				

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

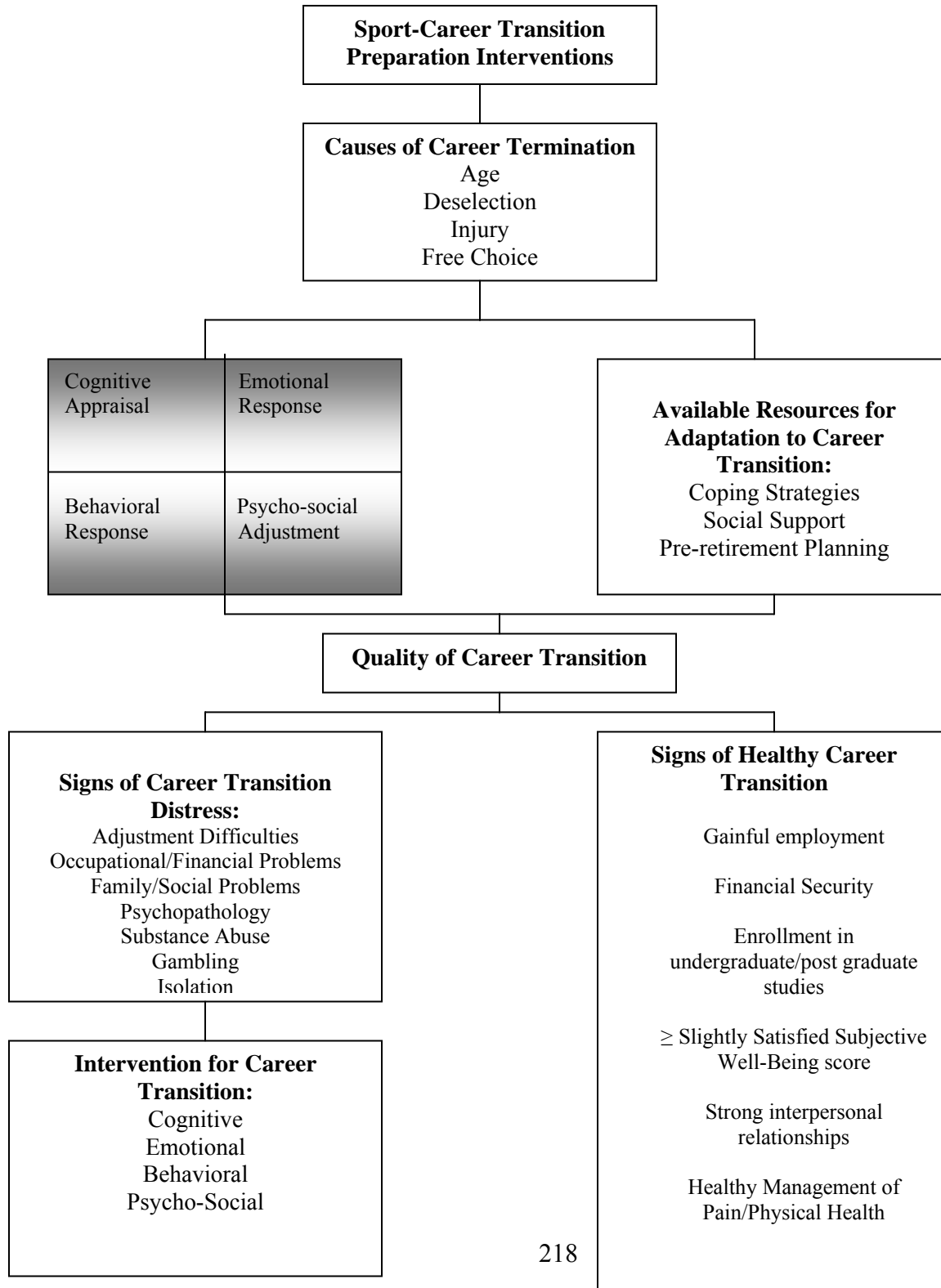


Sport-Career Transition Rating



APPENDIX H

BLENDED CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF ADAPTATION TO CAREER TRANSITION



APPENDIX I

SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT TO HELP WITH THE SPORT-CAREER TRANSITION

