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Post-collegiate athlete transitions and the influence of a coach

Molly Harry^a and Erianne Weight^b

^aSchool of Education and Human Development, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, USA;

^bExercise and Sport Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

ABSTRACT

Through examination of semi-structured interviews from former National Collegiate Athletic Association athletes ($n = 150$), this study used Schlossberg's [1981. A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 9(2), 2–18. doi:10.1177/001100008100900202] transition theory and Jowett's [2007. Interdependence analysis and the 3 + 1Cs in the coach–athlete relationship. In S. Jowett, & D. Lavalley (Eds.), *Social psychology in sport* (pp. 15–27). Human Kinetics] 3C's model to explore the influence of the coach, on athlete post-college transitions. Athletes found the transition difficult, experiencing feelings of identity loss and depression, while 39% reported difficulty and ease in their transition out of sport. The remaining 41% of athletes reported a smooth transition because they established identities outside of athletics and prepared for the ending of their athletic careers. Athletes voicing strong interpersonal support systems, mainly family and coaches, more successfully navigated their post-college transition than their peers who lacked interpersonal support. Finally, former athletes who noted positive athlete-coach relationships demonstrating 3Cs of commitment, closeness, and complementarity, found transition out of sport to be smooth.

KEYWORDS

Athlete; transition; Schlossberg; identity; coach; Jowett; 3C's model; intercollegiate athletics

Introduction

Research on athlete transitions from college to career has grown in recent years, with much literature focusing on the value of a college education, identity development, athlete support, and transition programming (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Fuller, 2014; Navarro, 2015; Stokowski et al., 2019). Another critical area of research in understanding athletes' successful post-college transitions has yet to be explored: the influence of the coach. Previous literature has noted the importance of the athlete-coach relationship. These dynamics influence athletes' academic and athletic success, teamwork, locus of control,

and motivation (Adie & Jowett, 2010; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Simons et al., 1999; Weight et al., 2015).

However, the role of coaches in athletes' transitions is largely unexplored (Park et al., 2012). Each year roughly 94,000 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletes transition out of sports (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). A successful transition creates an opportunity for athletes to begin their careers on solid ground, and through resources and support networks overcome the adversity that may arise from such a major life change (Schlossberg, 1981). Alternatively, an athlete's failure to acknowledge and navigate the transition out of college sport may lead to negative lifelong consequences (Stambulova et al., 2009).

The coach plays a powerful role in the athlete experience during college; thus, they also play a crucial role in how athletes transition out of intercollegiate athletics and begin their next stage of life (Navarro, 2014; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). As such, understanding the role of the coach in the transition out of sport is critical in post-college success for this population. The purpose of this research is to extend the literature on post-graduation transitions through an examination of the influence of a coach on athlete post-collegiate transitions.

Theoretical framework

Through Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory and Jowett's (2007) 3Cs model, this paper explores the transition experiences of former athletes as they move out of sport participation. Schlossberg's theory has traditionally been used in the adult psychology literature, but recently, the theory has been applied to the field of college student development and college student affairs (Patton et al., 2016).

Although Schlossberg's theory is not specific to athletic participation, previous studies examining student and athlete transitions have employed Schlossberg's model (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Flowers et al., 2014; Swain, 1991; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Transition theory states that a transition occurs "if an event or non-event results in a change in assumption about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Three factors play a role in the transition process: (a) social and psychological characteristics of the individual, (b) characteristics of the situation, and (c) pre-transition and post-transition environmental factors.

This study focuses on athletes' interpersonal support systems in the transition environment, paying particular attention to the athlete-coach relationship. This area of interest has been absent in the athlete transition literature (Park et al., 2012), and this research addresses this void. To further understand the role of the athlete and coach dynamic as it relates to the interpersonal

support systems during transition, this research also employs the 3Cs model (Jowett, 2007).

Jowett's (2007) 3Cs model is an extension of interdependence theory (IT), a framework commonly used to explain personal and social relationships and how relational partners may impact one another (Jowett & Nezlek, 2012). The athlete-coach relationship has components of IT: The athlete is expected to perform, understand, and receive support, while the coach must discipline, instruct, and provide support (Jowett & Nezlek, 2012). Thus, the 3Cs model helps characterize the coach-athlete relationship, while also providing greater understanding of the transition environment mentioned by Schlossberg (1981).

The 3Cs model includes three constructs: closeness, commitment, and complementarity (Jowett, 2007). The construct of closeness pertains to emotions such as respect, trust, and appreciation, while commitment centers on the "cognitive attachment and long-term orientation toward one another" (Jowett, 2009, p. 35). Both closeness and commitment are reflected in Schlossberg's (1981) theory noting that successful intimate relationships involve the aforementioned qualities and assist in easing transitions. Complementarity involves athletes' and coaches' cooperation and responsiveness toward one another. This willingness to communicate and collaborate between athlete and coach also echoes Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as such interactions have been shown to provide perspective for the person transitioning and aid in the adaptation to the post-transition environment.

The model contends, that an athlete's 3Cs will be interrelated and connected to his or her coach's 3Cs. Previous research has supported the use of this conceptual model in sport (Antonini Philippe & Seiler, 2006; Felton & Jowett, 2013; Fuller, 2014). A study by Felton and Jowett (2013) noted the importance of interpersonal relationships coaches provide through appropriate levels of challenge and support of their athletes. Coaches who challenged their athletes to be autonomous, while also providing support, had athletes that were most satisfied. Similarly, athletes who believed their relationship with their coach was strong reported higher feelings of satisfaction. Thus, these two theories can be applied in tandem to explore athletes' post-college transitions.

This study is unique in that it combines Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory with Jowett's (2007) 3Cs model, a particular blend of theories that has yet to be utilized in the higher education or intercollegiate athletics literature. This nexus of theories is particularly important as the 3Cs match Schlossberg's (1981) discussion on the transition environment, particularly when it comes to interpersonal support systems, such as that of the coach-athlete dyad. Only exploring the social support available in the pre- and post-transition environmental factors from Schlossberg's (1981) theory is not enough to further understand the shift athletes must make as their collegiate athletic careers end. By adding Jowett's (2007) 3Cs model as another layer to this process, more holistic insight can be attained from qualitative interviews with former athletes on the

role of the coach pertaining to closeness, commitment, and complementarity during the transition out of sport.

Literature review

This literature review provides background pertinent to this study. The first section focuses on college athlete transitions out of sport, while the second section discusses previous literature on the athlete-coach relationship.

Post-collegiate athlete transition

Termination of a student's college career is inevitable, but still difficult for students due to the uncertainty of the future, along with changes in friendships, community, and identity development (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Patton et al., 2016). While retirement from collegiate sport is normal, this transition out of sport is disruptive and challenging for most athletes (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Giannone et al., 2017; Navarro, 2014). In their systematic review of athlete transitions, Park and colleagues (2012) found that of the studies that explored athlete transitions out of elite sport participation ($n = 122$), 70% ($n = 86$) reported athletes experiencing difficulties or negative emotions upon the ending of their sport career. These feelings included distress, identity confusion, and loss.

Through a qualitative meta-synthesis, Fuller (2014) identified themes pertinent to athletes' transitions post-college: athletic identity, preparation, and loss of support. If sport emphasis was too great, some athletes did not prepare for the end of their careers. A lack of preparation was found to make the transition extremely difficult for those athletes (Fuller, 2014). The collegiate athletes in Fuller's (2014) analysis emphasized the importance of support during their transition. While most admitted they needed the support to transition successfully, some voiced concerns about seeking support because others would not understand or could not relate to their situation. Athletes who did not have strong relationships with their coaches or administrators had a more difficult transition than those who experienced more positive and encouraging relations (Fuller, 2014). Thus, Fuller's (2014) study highlights the significance of internal support systems, or the coach-athlete relationship, as proposed by Schlossberg (1981).

Athlete identity development has also been shown to play a role in post-collegiate transitions (Giannone et al., 2017; Stokowski et al., 2019). Using an athletic identity measure and anxiety and depression questionnaires, Giannone et al. (2017) discovered that higher levels of athletic identity resulted in higher levels of anxiety in those athletes upon sport retirement. The relationship between athletic identity and depression while transitioning out of sport was also positive (Giannone et al., 2017). Additionally, while the termination

of an athletics career is abrupt, such as losing or winning a final game or competition, the transition out of athletics is a process that may have a long duration for some, prolonging feelings of depression (Stokowski et al., 2019).

To ease this transition, many athletic departments have implemented life skills programs that include career planning (Navarro, 2014, 2015; Park et al., 2012; Van Raalte et al., 2016). These programs can be helpful as finding a career or interest outside of athletics has been found to be an effective coping strategy as athletes transition out of sport (Park et al., 2012). This exploration has also been shown to change an athlete's identity development by shifting their "athlete-only" mentality and allowing them to examine other roles they can have after sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007; Stokowski et al., 2019). Such programs are associated with positive life-after-sport adjustments for elite athletes (Park et al., 2012; Van Raalte et al., 2016).

Athlete-coach relationships

Perhaps the most important coping strategy for post-collegiate transitions specific to athletes is social or interpersonal support (Park et al., 2012), which is a critical component of Schlossberg's (1981) transition environment. One of the most influential individuals involved in social support is the coach (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Cosh & Tully, 2015). Coaches establish relationships with athletes to share knowledge and experience, while athletes create relationships with coaches to learn skills and compete at high levels (Jowett & Nezelek, 2012). Thus, the two parties are often interdependent with one another, reflecting the importance of the 3Cs – closeness, commitment, and complementarity – in this dyad.

While social support is crucial in transitions, previous studies have not differentiated the types and kinds of support, such as how support from teammates differs from support from coaches. According to Poczwadowski and colleagues (2006) there is limited understanding of the coach-athlete dyad as analysis of this relationship has tended to focus on only a few areas: coach behavior and personality traits and coach and team culture and values. Additionally, prior research has concentrated on coaches and athletes as individual units of analyses, rather than explicitly studying their interactions and influences on one another (Horn, 2008; Poczwadowski et al., 2006). Thus, scholars and practitioners may be lacking a full, holistic understanding of the athlete-coach relationship.

The scant literature on these relationships does underscore the importance of the coach in the athlete experience during college. For example, a host of studies note the influence of the coach in building athletes' self-efficacy belief, which then influences performance (Hampson & Jowett, 2014; Jackson & Beauchamp, 2010; Weight et al., 2020) both athletically and academically. However, much of this research still emphasizes the behaviors of the coaches and their coaching styles, with less consideration given to the interplay

between athletes and coaches as they cultivate relationships (Weight et al., 2020). In Park et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis on athlete transitions, the authors found that a positive and close relationship between coach and athlete was crucial to a successful out-of-sport transition. Athletes who lacked such a relationship struggled with their athletic careers ending and some even blamed their coaches for a poor transition experience (Park et al., 2012). Unfortunately, outside of this work, little is still known about the importance of the athlete-coach relationship as athletes' college careers come to a close, nor do we have a full understanding of how the 3Cs influence this process.

This paper aims to clarify the role of a coach's support during transition as a means to better understand the influence of the athlete-coach relationship at this pivotal point in an athlete's life. Specific research questions addressed within this study are as follows:

RQ1: What was the transition process like for former collegiate athletes?

RQ2: How did environmental factors help or hinder the athlete transition process?

RQ3: To what degree did coach-athlete closeness, commitment, and/or complementarity exist during the transition process?

Method

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews gathered through chain-referral sampling (Miles et al., 2020). Sample chains began from 10 distinct researchers in order to facilitate a rich, representative, and diverse sample. The focus of the semi-structured interviews was to gather narratives of participants' lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Participants

Inclusion criteria detailed that participants competed in intercollegiate athletics across various institutions and athletic levels and were at least five-years post eligibility completion in order to ensure some degree of separation from their collegiate experience. Participants ($n = 124$) included individuals who completed their intercollegiate athletics eligibility between 5–44 years prior to the interview. The sample was skewed toward Caucasian (71%, $n = 88$) men (70%, $n = 87$) who participated in NCAA Division I (75%, $n = 93$). Thirteen different sports were included within the sample with the most respondents coming from football (19%, $n = 24$), baseball (16%, $n = 20$), and basketball (16%, $n = 20$). Table 1 provides basic demographic information about the participants and Table 2 provides a listing of sports the athlete interviewees participated in. The sample may reflect implicit bias uncovered through the sample-chain method wherein researchers and participants were more likely to associate "athlete" with men in more

Table 1. Demographic information of former athlete interviewees.

	%	<i>n</i>
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	73%	91
Female	27%	33
<i>Year of Graduation/Transition</i>		
2005–2014	36%	45
1995–2004	20%	25
1985–1994	26%	32
1973–1984	18%	22
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Caucasian	71%	88
African American	26%	32
Asian	2%	2
Hispanic	2%	2
<i>Competition Classification</i>		
NCAA DI	75%	93
NCAA DII	8%	10
NCAA DIII	13%	16
NAIA	2%	3
Junior College	2%	2

N = 124.

visible sports (Die & Holt, 1989; Harrison & Lynch, 2005; Messner, 1988). Additionally, nine of the ten research chains originated with white researchers demonstrating evidence of social network racial homogeneity. According to the NCAA Demographics Database (n.d.), white athletes currently represent 56.2% of the Division I athlete population. Another explanation for the predominance of white former athletes in the sample is due to historic underrepresentation of Black, Asian, and Latinx athletes.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews varied in length from 30 to 90 min with the mean interview length being 46.5 min (*SD* = 13.9). The interview guide included questions about initial exposure to athletics, lessons learned from participation

Table 2. Collegiate sport of former athlete interviewees.

	%	<i>n</i>
Football	19%	24
Baseball	16%	20
Basketball	16%	20
Soccer	13%	16
Tennis	10%	13
Wrestling	6%	8
Track & Field	6%	7
Volleyball	4%	5
Lacrosse	2%	3
Cross Country	2%	2
Rowing	2%	2
Swimming	2%	2
Golf	2%	2

N = 124.

in athletics, description about the participant's relationship with their college coach, and the process of transitioning out of intercollegiate athletics. Example questions include:

- (1). How would you describe your relationship with your college coach?
- (2). How was the process of transition out of sport for you?
 - (a) Were there any physical, mental, or social hurdles you experienced as you transitioned out of competitive athletics?
 - (b) What social influences helped or hindered this transition (e.g. coaches, parents, teammates, etc.)?
 - (c) Did you struggle to find a fulfilling career after sport?

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and imported into Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis and research software. Qualitative software was utilized to facilitate organization due to the volume of data. Atlas.ti facilitated documentation of analytic decisions in a systematic, rigorous, and transparent way that allowed sharing among researchers and analytic tools very difficult to support through traditional qualitative research methods (Brito et al., 2017).

Data analysis

In addressing the research questions within the study, an inductive approach toward qualitative data analysis was utilized (Creswell, 2009). During the first round of coding, narratives were codified based on three general frameworks: (a) the nature and experience of their transition out of sport, (b) the nature of the environmental factors before and after the transition out of sport (Schlossberg, 1981), and (c) coach-specific relationship factors related to closeness, commitment, and complementarity (Jowett, 2007).

Additionally, during the initial round of coding, researchers utilized memoing as this process facilitates analytic thinking and enables focusing in on any emerging codes from the data to provide direction for the second round of coding (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Themes and patterns were established to guide the second round of coding which allowed for the categorization of deeper themes (Miles et al., 2020). These additional codes are presented within Tables 3–5. A section of coded transcripts was independently audited by a second reviewer in order to demonstrate internal consistency and reliability. Roughly 30% of the narratives were independently reviewed by two coders yielding inter-coder reliability of $\alpha = .936$, indicating a high level of inter-coder agreement. Finally, in addressing research demonstrating important differences in experiences between athlete subgroups (e.g. Gayles et al., 2018; Rubin, 2016), analysis of variance was utilized to test whether there were significant differences in transition experiences utilizing independent

Table 3. Transition- general themes.

	%	<i>n</i>
<i>Smooth Transition</i>	41%	51
Transferred competitive drive/focus to other areas	58%	72
Tremendous social support that eased transition	52%	65
Was ready/had a plan/began transition prior to conclusion of competitive career	19%	23
Being an athlete was just one element of identity	13%	16
Enjoyed the break	5%	6
<i>Difficult, but Smooth Transition</i>	39%	48
Some elements of difficulty and smoothness in transition		
<i>Incredibly Difficult Transition</i>	20%	25
Wasn't ready/didn't want to transition/sudden end of career	32%	40
Loss of purpose/direction	26%	32
Loss of identity	23%	29
Loss of structure/schedule	23%	28
Loss of social support (teammates/coaches)	15%	18
Physical adjustments	12%	15
Loss of accolades/importance	11%	14
Physical pain	4%	5

N = 124.

variables of gender, sport type (revenue vs. non-revenue), competitive division (NCAA DI, DII, DIII/NAIA), and ethnicity.

Results

This section examines the transition process of college athletes and the factors contributing to the three main types of transitions that emerged from the interviews: difficult, smooth, and smooth but difficult transitions. This is followed by the role of the 3Cs – closeness, commitment, and complementarity – in the post-collegiate transition.

One in five athletes interviewed (20%, *n* = 25) expressed transition experiences that were tremendously difficult. These individuals shared feelings of loss, pain, and depression as the primary focus of their life and the element

Table 4. Factors contributing to a “smooth transition.”

	%	<i>n</i>
<i>Transferred competitive drive/focus to other areas</i>	58%	72
Work	48%	60
Staying in shape/other recreation	33%	41
Giving back/coaching/mentoring	25%	31
<i>Had tremendous social support which eased transition</i>	52%	65
Family	30%	37
Coach	20%	25
Significant Other	15%	19
Friends	10%	12
Teammates	9%	11
New colleagues/rec sport friends	6%	8
<i>Was ready/expected/began transition prior to conclusion of competitive career</i>	19%	23
Already shifted focus/social circles	15%	19
Accomplished goals athletically/ready for new challenge	10%	12
Could not play pro, chose to walk away	12%	15
<i>Being an athlete was always just one element of athlete's identity</i>	13%	16
<i>Enjoyed the break</i>	5%	6
Freedom, rest, lack of schedule		

of their being that defined them, athletics, was taken away. Roughly two of five (41%, $n = 51$) athletes expressed their transition as being smooth, and the remaining 39% ($n = 48$) experienced elements that were both easy and difficult during their transition. Testing differences in transition experiences based on athlete subgroup, transition experience was treated as an ordinal variable with athletes experiencing a continuum of transition experiences from 1.0 representing a “smooth” transition, 2.0 representing a “difficult but smooth” transition, and 3.0 representing a “difficult” transition. Analysis of variance revealed there were not significantly different experiences between any of the independent variables tested: men ($M = 1.71$, $SD = .735$) and women ($M = 2.00$, $SD = .791$); $F(1, 123) = 3.517$, $p = .063$; those participating in revenue ($M = 1.74$, $SD = .658$) vs. non-revenue ($M = 1.81$, $SD = .808$) sports $F(1, 123) = .243$, $p = .623$; African American ($M = 1.78$, $SD = .686$) and Caucasian ($M = 1.79$, $SD = .780$) athletes; $F(1, 121) = .001$, $p = .971$; and those who participated in the different competitive divisions of DI ($M = 1.79$, $SD = .773$), DII ($M = 2.10$, $SD = .737$), and DIII/NAIA ($M = 1.56$, $SD = .629$); $F(1, 123) = 1.577$, $p = .211$. The means between athlete genders were the closest to approaching significance with men noting marginally smoother transitions than their female counterparts. Each subgroup had large standard deviations indicating variance at the individual level or variance among groups that were not tested. The subthemes uncovered throughout the qualitative analysis are listed in Table 3.

Difficult transitions

The most common element of transition difficulty stemmed from athletes not being ready to transition or feeling as though the end of their career was sudden and something they did not want (32%, $n = 40$). This theme was followed by loss of purpose/direction (26%, $n = 32$) and loss of identity (23%, $n = 29$). Encapsulating each of these three themes, Swimmer #6 shared

... For about two years after I stopped swimming, I didn't know what I wanted to do. My entire life had been spent focusing on training to make the Olympic team, and suddenly I was forced to focus on another piece of the world outside of swimming. I had no guidance on what I wanted to do ...

Table 5. Presence of 3Cs in coach-athlete relationship before and/or during transition.

	Pre-Transition		Pre + Post-Transition		Lacking	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
Closeness	39%	48	23%	29	38%	47
Commitment	36%	45	19%	24	44%	55
Complementarity	36%	45	24%	30	40%	49

$N = 124$.

Similarly, Tennis player #94 recounted

When you're a student-athlete you have a purpose and you know why you're putting all the work in. But when you leave that environment it kind of leaves you with the hurdle of what do I do now? Who am I without tennis?

The loss of structure (23%, $n = 28$), social support of teammates and coaches (15%, $n = 18$), and loss of accolades/importance (11%, $n = 14$), were also expressed as elements that made the transition troublesome. A sense of structure is often found in support systems in the pre-transition environment, but this structure and support shifts as one attempts to adapt to their post-transition environment (Schlossberg, 1981). One respondent highlighted how the loss of structure created transition adversity

Transitioning from sports was really difficult. It was a care free life full of fun, partying and girls. After sports it was like nobody knew who I was and my life had no structure. When I was an athlete I had a schedule, but without basketball I didn't have a schedule and had to figure life out (Respondent #51, Basketball).

Similarly, two former baseball athletes emphasized the loss of support they once had through athletic participation. Baseball player #82 mentioned,

I miss the competitiveness, and you miss your buddies. You're waking up every day because you have a game, or you're going to the gym or getting ready for the next season, and then you're just not ... but you just have to move on ... Unfortunately I know some guys that ended up killing themselves and you can trace it back to the fact that they just didn't know how to move on.

Baseball player (Respondent #8) agreed, emphasizing a loss of identity and how others did not seem to care about him anymore

My identity was an athlete in high school and college, and moving from that and competing all of the time to sitting at your desk making phone calls was depressing ... I missed it a lot ... People knew you on campus as an athlete, and you go from that to being in the real world where nobody cares.

The loss of structure, support, and accolades resulted in many feeling like others could not relate to their transition struggles: "it's hard in social settings to have conversations with people who don't understand how good you were at what you did" (Respondent #33, Track & Field).

The final element of transition that was difficult for athletes was physical. A swimmer mentioned,

Physically, I got pretty soft. Being a swimmer I was comfortable around other people in not very much clothing. I now am not as confident in my physical appearance even though I wear more clothes than when I was swimming. (Respondent #93)

Track & Field respondent #33 described the physical challenges post transition

It was a challenge learning how not to consume as many calories as you did when you were an athlete ... I remember when I didn't make the Olympic Team I got out of the shower and walked by the mirror and was like 'who is that, and who is following me? Where did all of this stuff come from?'

Smooth transitions & difficult but smooth transitions

Many of the athletes mentioned strategies and environmental factors that helped them transition out of collegiate sport. These overall categories are listed under "smooth transition" in Table 3, and expounded upon individually in Table 4. The sample within this table only included athletes who expressed a "smooth" or "difficult but smooth" transition as determined by the positive or negative affect expressed (Schlossberg, 1981). The most common strategy utilized among those with a positive transition experience (58%, $n = 72$) was the transfer of competitive drive and targeted focus from sport to another passion, hobby, or endeavor. This reflects the importance of perception of the transition discussed by Schlossberg (1981). Many athletes transitioned their focus from sport to work (48%, $n = 60$), sport to recreation and/or staying in shape (33%, $n = 41$), or sport to giving back, coaching, or mentoring (25%, $n = 31$). A former soccer player voiced her thoughts about competitive drive: "Sport is like an addiction, in that you have to replace it with something, and I ended up running and living an ambitious and competitive lifestyle to try and replace it. My career fulfills my competitive drive" (Respondent #39).

Many athletes also mentioned social support being critical to easing the transition from sport (52%, $n = 65$). Family was most often mentioned (30%, $n = 37$) followed by coach (20%, $n = 25$). Significant others, friends, teammates, athletic administrators, and new colleagues/friends were also mentioned. These narratives generally described specific people who provided insights, direction, and support through the transition

My dad was the biggest reason I got through that first year. He reminded me that it was a female coach that helped me fall in love with the sport and helped me build this whole life for myself. He said, 'wouldn't you want to do that for another little girl?' I think the reason I got into coaching was because of that simple sentence. (Respondent #86, Tennis)

Other respondents stressed the role their coach played during their transition period:

"My coach was a father figure. He helped me realize how much I love being on a team—with my brothers and teammates. He is a mentor and helped me transition from being an athlete to working in athletics" (Respondent #59, Football). Another added, "My coach was very helpful in saying that he was there to help, write letters of recommendation, and offer any personal connections he had." (Respondent #40, Basketball)

Two additional factors that helped the transition process were mentioned by only a few, but not a single athlete who mentioned these factors had a “difficult” transition. These athletes mentioned having a plan, being ready for the transition, or beginning the transition long before the conclusion of their sport career (19%, $n = 23$). In addition, those who mentioned being an athlete was always just one element of their identity also experienced an easier transition (13%, $n = 16$). A former football player provided

I always tried to look at the big picture of my life and make sure football did not define me as a person and that helped with my transition ... my college coaches were like father figures for me. They always talked about how important it was to do the right things on and off the field. They pushed me to be more than just a football player but they wanted me to be a good student and contributor to campus life. (Respondent #13)

Another participant outlined their post-athletics plan

I knew I wasn't good enough to be a professional runner, so I planned to prioritize academics over athletics all throughout college. Early on, I was leveraging being a student-athlete to stand out amongst recruiters. I used the opportunities given through athletics to prepare me for my professional life. I was always planning for the next step in my life while I was still an athlete, which helped prepare me for the real world more than other student-athletes. (Respondent #90, Cross Country)

The above narratives underscore the importance of identity development in transitions post-sport and bolster findings from previous work noting that athletes who commit to roles outside of their athlete identity are more successful in navigating the transition out of athletics than those who over-identify as an athlete and experience foreclosure of their identities (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Di Lu et al., 2018).

Coach influence on transition & the 3Cs

Within each of the interviews, athletes were asked about their relationships with their collegiate coach and the presence of closeness (respect, trust, and appreciation); commitment (cognitive attachment and long-term orientation toward one another); and complementarity (cooperation and responsiveness to one another) in their relationships. The prevalence of the 3Cs in the coach-athlete relationship is presented in Table 5. Generally, athletes who spoke about coaches who demonstrated one of the 3Cs in their relationship also mentioned the presence of the other 2Cs, providing evidence of relationships where there was closeness, commitment, *and* complementarity or no evidence of any of the 3Cs. Just over 1/3 of the athletes expressed having coaches who demonstrated closeness, commitment, and complementarity during their time on campus; however, the 3Cs within the athlete-coach relationship were lacking entirely in pre- and post-transition in 38% ($n = 47$) of the respondents.

Commitment

Thirty-six percent ($n = 45$) of athletes expressed having committed relationships with coaches during their time on campus. Commitment was expressed by many of the athletes who recalled that their coaches cared about their lives beyond sport and developing them as human beings, teachers, and citizens. There were many examples shared of coaches helping their athletes secure jobs, inspiring them to push themselves academically, and having a long-term orientation toward their success. For example, football respondent #22 shared, “My coach was all about giving us the opportunity to play a sport we loved as well as getting a college education. The main thing he pushed was for us to graduate and have options.” A baseball player had a similar opinion stating, “My coach was amazing – he really cared about us and wanted to see us graduate and be successful, man. Even after I lost my scholarship, he really cared” (Respondent #28). However, the prevalence of committed athlete-coach relationships decreased upon graduation with only 19% ($n = 24$) noting that both the athlete and the coach remained committed.

Closeness

Over one-third of the athletes in this sample (39%, $n = 48$) expressed having an athlete-coach relationship built on closeness. Closeness was revealed when athletes shared experiences of how their coaches showed respect, trust, and appreciation for them. For example, a football athlete (Respondent # 35) offered

My head coach was like the dad I never had. When I was in college I didn't have a strong family base, so he would bring me in for all the holidays – Thanksgiving, Christmas, everything. I still talk to him once a week. He's told me there's always an opportunity from him if I get stuck. He's always taking care of me. Any big life decisions I have, I always go through him to get his opinion. It's a huge relationship I hold dear.

A former basketball athlete added

My coach is 87 years old and we talk at least once a month. If I call him right now, his voice would just light up. I have a greater appreciation for him now than I did when I was in school because I know that had he not given me a chance, I may not be where I am today. I've always called him for advice because he's always had my best interest in mind. (Respondent #85)

Similarly to the element of commitment, athletes expressing feelings of closeness decreased post-transition to 23% ($n = 29$).

Complementarity

Complementarity was evidenced through discussion of responsiveness and cooperation between athlete and coach and expressed by 36% ($n = 45$) of the athletes. “So, my D-Line coach, our relationship and communication was really good when I was a player, and it's still really good. I could call right

now and he'd pick up the phone" (Respondent # 29, Football). The complexity of relationships and necessity for cooperation was mentioned by several athletes

After I began playing, and was elected captain, our relationship changed. As I developed a stronger relationship with the coach, I realized that he had to balance many things that were not obvious to me or to the rest of the players. He really valued his captains a lot, and would talk to us about who would be playing, what offenses to run, and more to engage with his players. We became a lot closer after that. (Respondent #41, Basketball)

As with the other 2Cs, complementarity decreased post-transition and remained in only 24% ($n = 30$) of the athlete-coach dyads.

Athletes lacking the 3Cs

Among athletes who noted no evidence of 3Cs within their athlete-coach relationship, there were many examples of coaches who seemed ambivalent to their athletes, abusive, unethical, negligent, and viewed their athletes as pawns in their pursuit of on-field success. Baseball respondent #26 shared

My coach was in your face and screaming at you and spitting tobacco flying out of his mouth ... and you sit there and don't say a word. You take it. You let them speak and don't offer any interjection. You let them speak and you take your lumps.

Football respondent #27 offered his perspective

I didn't really have a relationship with them ... but I understood that it's a business and they don't really care about you. They only care about what you can do for them. It's cutthroat. That's why we're all here. At the end of the day, the only thing that would matter was if you win.

A similar experience was offered by a former wrestler

I learned a lot from my coach – what not to do, how not to treat people, you know ... a lot! He was a very bad person who would belittle and make fun of everyone. He didn't discipline or give feedback. He gave scholarships to people who were highly ranked in high school and then count on them to carry the team. He treated us all like garbage. (Respondent #31)

Others shared a desire to have a relationship with their coach, but the coach didn't seem interested

I tried to have a connection with him, but it felt like he just viewed us as his products. He wanted us to get out there and perform, but he never inspired me. I couldn't make a relationship with him. (Respondent #32, Soccer)

Table 6 provides additional insight into coaches' influence on the transition.

Discussion

There is a growing body of literature addressing athlete transitions in the field of sport psychology, but this is an under-examined area with much potential in

Table 6. Coach influence on transition.

	Smooth		Difficult/ Smooth		Difficult	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Coach pre-transition commitment	33%	15	38%	17	29%	13
Coach post-transition commitment	58%	14	38%	9	4%	1
Other social support	43%	23	43%	23	15%	8
Transferred competitive drive	44%	40	46%	42	11%	10
Ready / expected transition	80%	12	20%	3	0%	0
Balanced identity	83%	5	17%	1	0%	0

N = 124.

higher education (Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004). This study extends the literature on the athlete transition process by examining how athletes experienced transition out of college sport, what environmental factors pertaining to interpersonal support were most influential, and how closeness, commitment, and complementarity (3Cs) with a coach impacted the transition experience.

The transition process

Any transition process tends to be individualistic and context-dependent (Patton et al., 2016), however, particular themes about athlete transitions out of sport emerged in this study. Forty-one percent of participants found their transition to be smooth. These athletes made a conscious effort to transfer their competitive drive to other areas and experienced interpersonal support from family, coaches, and others. A unique subgroup of those who experienced the smoothest transition included those who had prepared and were ready for the ending of their athletic career ($n = 23$, 19%). These participants created a plan to prepare for the transition and shifted their attention to that plan. Additionally, these former athletes said they viewed the transition through a competitive lens: it was a new challenge. This perspective supports previous literature stating that planning for sport retirement and having goals outside of sport eases the transition (Coakley, 2006; Navarro, 2015). Similarly, these findings support Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory and the significance of affect when it comes to adapting to the post-transition environment. Those with more positive affects who were able to reconceptualize the transition as a positive endeavor, were more successful in moving on after sport. Others in this subgroup said they ended their participation on their own terms, offering them a sense of control in a situation where others expressed a lack of control (Park et al., 2012).

The transition out of competitive sport was incredibly difficult for other athletes ($n = 25$, 20%). These athletes voiced feelings of unease when their career ended and also lacked purpose and direction pre- and post-transition. This lack of purpose or direction stemmed from their over-identification as an athlete and a subsequent loss of this athletic identity (Murphy et al., 1996)

The transition was hard emotionally – it was devastating – like losing a major part of my identity. I couldn't walk through the building where I used to practice ... All of the sudden I was an outsider and I felt alone and lost. (Respondent #123, Basketball)

This documented struggle supports prior research on the importance of developing multiple identities in athletes and allowing them to explore areas outside of college athletics (Di Lu et al., 2018; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) and Navarro (2014) contend this is an area where coaches can play a vital role, particularly pre- and post-transition. With the commercialization of intercollegiate athletics and common win-at-all-costs mentality, many coaches are overly focused on their athlete's success on the courts or fields, and less keen on enhancing their academic and career preparation. Coaches who can find a more appropriate balance for their coaching and mentoring when it comes to emphasizing sport and education, are more likely to have athletes with successful transitions. Additionally, this may encourage both the athlete and the coach to remain committed to fostering and maintaining the relationship after graduation.

Participants who found the transition difficult also felt huge voids with the loss of the structure and interpersonal supports athletics once provided. Research by Beamon (2012) found similar results in which athletes in her study felt as though their loss of sport was like experiencing a death. Feelings of loss resulted in feelings of lack of control during the transition process. One athlete voiced

It's really, really hard, to be forced to give up on a dream. Sometimes you still think "maybe I can play," but you know that may be stupid, and because we don't prepare for the transition it is hard and opportunities are limited, you feel like you don't have anything to do, you have nowhere to go, so you just sit around and some people get really depressed. (Respondent #119, Tennis)

Previous literature has also noted the importance of perceived locus of control in influencing the positive or negative perspective an athlete has when encountering transition adversity (Brown et al., 2000; Schlossberg, 1981).

Finally, one group of athletes interviewed found the transition to be a hybrid of smooth and difficult components ($n = 48$, 39%). Overall, they found the transition process to be manageable, with one participant stating

I had no physical hurdles, and I knew the end of my athletic career was coming, and that was hard, but I knew it was time. The challenge I had was assimilating back to the non-athletic world. I had to temper my energy and my aggression because on the football field you have to be aggressive and you have to be aggressive first, and in the work world you can't do that because you look like a bully. (Respondent # 124, Football)

The variety of transition experiences among participants demonstrates an urgency to address a myriad of athletes' needs. There is cause for concern with so few athletes creating a plan and having discussions about life after sport prior to the termination of their collegiate athletic careers. More athletic

departments should provide education and training regarding career exploration for athletes, coaches, and staff, and also establish career support programs or curriculums for athletes. These practices stimulate a preparedness for life after college, which is linked to a positive transition (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Stokowski et al., 2019).

Prior research also notes the reliance of athletes on coaches to prepare for life after sport, however, there is limited research that suggests coaches provide adequate support for their athletes in this domain (Navarro, 2014). With this in mind, coaches and administrators are recommended to talk with athletes about retirement while they are still competing (Stambulova et al., 2009). While some athletics personnel may find this challenging as teams experience turnover based on new recruits and/or transfers, not preparing athletes for sport retirement or cultivating strong, lasting relationships, has been shown, through this research, to have lasting negative influences on the athletes these coaches were supposed to support.

Because faculty play a crucial role in student and athlete development (Astin, 1984; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Patton et al., 2016), they too, should encourage the athletes they teach and mentor to explore their academic interests and non-athletic identities further. As higher education expands training for faculty in working with diverse populations, administrators should also consider providing further education and training for faculty on how to best support athletes during college and as they consider transitioning. This will not only assist in developing identities outside of athletics but will also engage athletes in thinking sooner about their transition out of sport and future careers. As Baillie and Danish (1992) mention in their seminal study: “when the foundation of one’s identity rests in athletic excellence, the ending or loss of this role becomes increasingly difficult” (p. 77).

Addressing an athlete’s athletic identity prior to termination, may have the potential to prevent feelings of loss, distress, confusion, anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues that participants in this study expressed as they transitioned from athlete to young professional (Giannone et al., 2017). The participants who maintained a balanced identity found the transition to be smooth.

Environmental factors

Given foundational literature discussing variance in athlete experience based on sport, race, competition division and gender (Gayles et al., 2018; Rubin, 2016), we expected there to be trends among transition experiences within one or more of the tested subgroups. Results, however, reveal college athletes, no matter their status, sport type, gender, or race have similar transition experiences. What is more important in the transition process are the interpersonal and institutional supports, and personal emotional competence.

Environmental factors, particularly interpersonal support, played crucial roles in the participants' transition stories. Previous research has noted the importance of support in the athlete experience (Park et al., 2012; Navarro, 2014). Scanlan (1988) argued that athletes have a "family of support" made up of themselves, guardians, and coaches. These findings support this concept. Family members were the number one source of interpersonal support mentioned by participants ($n = 37$, 30%), and research by other scholars notes similar findings (Donohue et al., 2007; Hellstedt, 1995). Research by Donohue and colleagues (2007) found that the strongest and most positive relationship for athletes is the connection they have with their family. Because family members are generally present at each stage of an athlete's athletic career, it makes sense that participants would find their support most important during transitions. As athletes discontinue their participation in elite sports, family members are able to offer coping strategies, such as informational and emotional support during this challenging time (Wylleman et al., 2007). While prior research has noted that some family members become overly focused on their athlete's athletic success (Beamon, 2012), this study found that participants were supported by their family members in areas outside of athletics.

Coaches were the next most common interpersonal support element mentioned by former athletes ($n = 25$, 20%). This is consistent with research by Parker (1994) and Werthner and Orlick (1986) wherein participants voiced the significance of the athlete-coach relationship in assisting them through the post-athletics transition. As with guardians, coaches were able to provide informational and emotional support for their athletes. Informational support included providing information about available resources, opportunities, and networks while emotional support involved encouragement and mentoring. The aforementioned coping strategies are found throughout the transition literature, supporting the notion that these are viable ways to support athletes as they move out of sport (Park et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1981). Other influential interpersonal supports voiced by participants included significant others, friends, teammates, athletics administrators, and new colleagues or friends. Due to the importance of family members and coaches, it is suggested that these parties work together to increase support for athletes as they prepare for and move through transition.

The majority of former athletes ($n = 72$, 58%) also found that shifting their focus to new areas, such as work, recreation, and coaching/mentoring made the transition more manageable. With athletics having qualities related to the activities mentioned, it is logical to see why these participants were able to successfully navigate the transition. Research by Lally (2007) and Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) found similar results: Those who find new interests similar to old interests successfully transitioned. This links with Schlossberg's (1981) transition model as these athletes capitalized on the resources that were available to them in adapting to their new post-athletics environment.

The 3Cs in the athlete-coach relationship

As the results of this study demonstrate, fostering a strong coach-athlete dyad, based on the 3Cs may lead athletes to feel less loss, particularly of interpersonal coach support, which could ease the transition. These findings extend the current and limited literature using this model and provide support for its implementation in future studies. Relationships are one of the most important aspects of transitions, and they are influenced by both individual and interpersonal components in the process (Schlossberg, 1981). Few people can influence an athlete during their transition out of sport the way that a coach can (Navarro, 2014; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The 3Cs, closeness, commitment, and complementarity, were expressed in the athlete interviews. Higher levels of the 3Cs were demonstrated prior to transition, but some participants did find that closeness (23%, $n = 29$), commitment (19%, $n = 24$), and complementarity (24%, $n = 30$) remained post-transition. However, some athletes did not experience formulation of closeness, commitment, and/or complementarity with their coaches (38%, $n = 47$).

Athletes who experienced at least one of the 3Cs pre- and post-transition experienced an easier transition than their counterparts who did not have at least one of the 3Cs present in their coach relationship. For example, one respondent said,

My coach is amazing. As alums, we find ourselves going back to the quotes and the things she taught us along the way. She is more of a teacher than a coach giving us a lot of invaluable life lessons. (Respondent #20, Basketball)

The presence of the 3Cs fostered a strong relationship, allowed for athlete growth and development, and enabled a more successful transition (Jowett, 2007). Additionally, Jowett (2009) found that relationships demonstrating the 3Cs were more supportive and significant in the athletes' lives. On the other hand, a participant who did not have this strong of a relationship mentioned

I had a rocky relationship with my coach. He viewed it as a business and did what he had to do but no more than that. He wasn't a father figure and I feel like some of us needed that. He came to practice five minutes late and left 10 min early. (Respondent #51, Basketball)

However, it should be noted that despite having a strong relationship that demonstrated the 3Cs or having strong interpersonal support, some athletes still experienced a difficult transition, as evidenced in this quote from a football player who lovingly described his coach as "the dad he never had"

When I was finished I was lost, and kind of in denial. I didn't want to get a job and didn't know what was going to be my next thing. I became a normal person because I no longer had the tag of being a football player. (Respondent #35, Football)

According to Archer, overly strong relationships with coaches or others in sports may reinforce athletic identity, making the transition out of sport even more difficult. This holds true for athletes who also express an over-reliance on their coaches for direction and knowledge (Navarro, 2014). Thus, it is important for coaches to find the appropriate balance of challenging the athlete to individualize and engage with and form outside relationships, while also supporting them in being the best they can be and mentoring through transition.

Many of those who expressed a lack of the 3Cs, also provided examples of poor coach relationships, such as those who were abusive, negligent, ambivalent, and overly harsh. One participant provided, “He would have derogatory comments he would say to us. Eight or nine guys were his favorites, and the rest of us were called names no human being ever should be called ... and he didn’t care” (Respondent #23, Baseball). Negative relationships can also increase incidence of anxiety, burnout, and decrease self-efficacy beliefs of athletes which further hinders transition (Weight et al., 2020; Wylleman & Laval-lee, 2004).

This lack of relationship foundation could result from coaches focusing on the next wave of athletes coming in or already thinking about the next season, without consideration given to athletes who feel a loss at the end of their career and need transition support. The businesslike environment of college sports may make relationships with coaches challenging for athletes (Lumpkin, 2017). Additionally, conflict between athletes and coaches serves as a precursor for negative transition experiences, and the higher the levels of conflict, the lower levels of support between the athlete and the coach (Jowett, 2009). Consistent with prior research (Donohue et al., 2007), this study demonstrates a need for athletic departments and institutions to work to improve the relationships athletes and coaches establish.

Given the significance of these findings, it is recommended that departments add development programming that enhances the coach-athlete relationship based on the 3Cs. Such practices would likely complement current athlete development work. This programming could focus on forming *closeness* between coach and athlete at the start of the athlete’s career as a means to establish a basis of trust and respect, then it could move into *complementarity* to foster cooperation during the middle of the athlete’s career. Finally, the programming could enhance *commitment* as the athlete ages to ensure the relationship is maintained with the purpose of supporting the athlete as they transition to life after sport. Additionally, further programming for third, fourth, and fifth-year athletes to contemplate life after sport and how they can continue to build upon the interpersonal supports they have cultivated while in college could also be beneficial in working through their transition. Strong and healthy athlete-coach relationships, built on the foundation of the Jowett’s

(2007) 3Cs, allow for athletes to experience less difficulty in their transition out of sport.

Limitations and future directions

There are a few limitations associated with this study. The participants displayed a wide range of time since transitioning out of college athletics, anywhere from 5 to 44 years. Not interviewing former athletes more recently post-athletics participation may impact their ability to remember and accurately convey their transition experiences. However, this did allow ample time for reflection. Similarly, self-response bias may be present in the participants' reflections. Additionally, the demographics were skewed to higher participant numbers from those who identified as males and white from Division I institutions. Future research should aim to gather a more representative sample in order to further examine the differences in participation experiences between demographic subgroups as recent studies have noted the differences between white athletes and those from minoritized populations, and those participating in revenue-producing sports.

A complementary study could focus on the perspectives of coaches and their thoughts on how they participate as their athletes transition. Future research could also explore specific methods coaches use to facilitate successful transitions, along with the effects of career and transition programs established by athletic departments. The decrease in prominence of the closeness, commitment, and complementarity has not been addressed in the available literature on the 3Cs model, thus, future researchers could examine this shift (Jowett, 2007; Jowett & Nezlek, 2012). Finally, those who found the transition out of sport "smoothest" were those with a plan. Further research could focus on why some athletes create a plan before the transition, while others do not.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Molly Harry is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Virginia studying higher education with a focus on intercollegiate athletics and teaches the course Athletics in the University. Her research interests include education through athletics participation, academic reform for college athletics, and the college athlete experience.

Erianne Weight is an Associate Professor of Sport Administration at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She focuses on data-driven decision making and increasing quantity and quality of sport educational experiences.

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