

**“I Was on Top of the World, Then ... Nothing ... And Today I Am Many Things:” Retirement Stories of Former Elite Female Athletes**

By

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## Abstract

This narrative research explores elite women athletes' retirement experiences, to answer the following questions: *How did the athletes experience their athletic lives? How did the athletes experience their retirement? What supported and/or hindered the athletes' transition out of elite sport? How do female athletes create new meanings and re-story their lives?*

Being an elite athlete requires a lot of commitment and sacrifices from a fairly young age. Due to the extended involvement in sports, athletes build their identity around their sport and are often ill prepared for life-after-sport. Consequently, retirement from elite sport has caught the attention of researchers who have studied it from different perspectives. The post-positivist research has examined the causes and consequences of sport retirement, the quality of life and life satisfaction after sport, the factors that influence the quality of transition, the body image, physical self, or global self-esteem (Erpic et al., 2004; Price et al., 2010; Smith & McManus, 2008; Stephan & Bilard, 2003; Stephan et al., 2003a; Wylleman et al., 2004). The interpretive research around retirement from elite sport has included personal experiences and how people make sense of their experiences within their contexts (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Carless & Douglas, 2009, 2012; Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Kerr et al., 2020). More specifically, interpretive narrative researchers have used predetermined narratives (e.g., performance narrative) to understand the retired athletes' experiences. In addition, the post-structuralist research on sport retirement has explored the power relations within the sporting context to explain the retirement experiences (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012; Jones & Denison, 2017). Existing research, however, has revealed that retiring elite athletes could face significant challenges to their physical, psychological, social, and occupational well-being, possibly struggling with a loss of identity, depression, and even self-harm or suicide.

While there are a number of narrative studies that have explored the retirement experiences, I also chose to pursue a narrative study. Congruent with the interpretive approach, I focused on the individual athletes' stories. Expanding from the previous sport narrative research, I examined athletes' stories during their athletic lifespan and after retirement. I drew on a combination of a more traditional narrative approach and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & al., 2007) to explore 10 women athletes' stories. My interviewees were over 18 years of age, English speakers, competed at national/international levels in different sports (both individual and team sports), and were at least two years into their retirement. In addition to the ten stories of retired athletes, I, as a former elite athlete, included my own story.

Through my reflective thematic analysis, I constructed three overarching themes based in the participants' stories: Life as an Elite Athlete, Life After Elite Sport, and Living a Regular Life. My analysis of the first theme revealed that the retired athletes told very similar stories about their athletic lives: they were very dedicated to their sports that they loved unconditionally despite experiencing injuries, eating disorders and 'cut-throat' competition. When I analyzed the second theme, I found that the retirement experiences were all unique. Seven participants perceived their transition to be quite smooth, while three participants experienced a difficult retirement with periods of intense struggles. My analysis of the final theme, Living a Regular Life, revealed that most of the former athletes had found new meanings in their lives, that included family, education, or career. The retired athletes also identified certain skills, such as time management and perfectionism, that were helpful during their athletic lives, but did not transfer well in life-after-sport. They further suggested that hearing other former athletes' stories and having connections with other former athletes would have been beneficial for a positive transition out of elite sport. My lifespan analysis, thus, revealed that the athletes' retirement

stories were complex and unlinear: a positive athletic life did not necessarily convert into a smooth retirement experience or vice versa.

My narrative study expanded the previous research by demonstrating the importance of examining the entire athletic lifespan to reveal the complexities of women athletes' retirement experiences. This allowed me to move beyond focusing on a single aspect of retirement experience, or one narrative framing (e.g., performance narrative), to obtain a more holistic understanding of elite athletes' retirement as a process.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Andreea Ingrid Mohora. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name, “RE-WRITING A LIFE STORY: A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S RETIREMENT EXPERIENCES FROM ELITE SPORT,” No. Pro00035152, November 28, 2013.

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## **Prologue: *I AM ... NOTHING***

I am lying on the couch in my living room thinking about my life: “*How did I get here? Why am I not an athlete anymore?*” This is one of my many moments when I am trying to figure out what I am and what has happened to me. It has been 20 years since my high-performance athletic career ended. However, I have been struggling to make sense of my life since.

What has happened? I thought I would be an athlete for my entire life, yet now I am not. So what am I now? Why am I struggling so much with this athlete thing? Why can't I let it go and have a ‘normal’ life? I am now a mom, a student, an instructor, yet I still feel **empty** inside because **I am not an athlete**. I also realize I will never be one again, not to the extent that I once was!

My story starts in Romania, where I spent the first 23 years of my life. The first 10 years were under the communist regime, while the next years were under a regime that struggled to recover from the years under communism. Yet, I had no clue that things were different in other countries. All I could think about was basketball. Since I was a little girl, I always loved being active; I loved movement and sports. If there was anything I could excel at and was not shy about, it was sport. And I got my chance.

In Romania at that time, sports were practiced mostly for high performance. I do not remember anyone talking about sports as a leisure activity, a concept that was nonexistent at that time. All sports were developed and played in sport clubs that were subsidized by the government during that time. Thus, to get the best kinds of kids for the sport, coaches from different sports clubs would come into schools and select children based on their body type. The teams would start with a large number of children, but only a few of those initially selected

would make it through the years. In my case, we were about 25-30 girls when we started, but only two (me and another girl) remained in high-performance sport until 18 years of age.

And so, my story starts ...

*1991 Bucharest, Romania (grade 7)*

*Knock! Knock! The classroom door opens and two tall and slim ladies walk in. They go to the front of the class to talk to the teacher. After a few interactions, they turn towards us and introduce themselves: "My name is Mrs. M., and this is Mrs. T. We are basketball coaches at CSS 2 [Scholar Sport Club no. 2], and we are here to recruit some girls for our team. Who would like to play basketball?" A few hands go up. I did not know much about basketball at that time, just some basics that we were taught in school until grade seven. Yet, I wanted to be selected so badly.*

*"OK, let's have all the girls line up in front of the class here, from the tallest to the shortest." We knew the drill. That was what we had to do for every physical education class since kindergarten. I was the second tallest girl in class, so I went towards the front. The coaches contemplated us for a short moment and sent most of the girls back to their desks. Six or seven of us were left standing at the front of the room.*

*"Now get some distance between you and put your arms to the side."*

*We did as we were told. There had been selections for other sports, each with their own particularities. I stretched my arms as wide as they could go, wanting to impress the coaches. A couple of girls were sent back to their desks. Four of us were left.*

*"Now jump on the spot, as high as you can, with your arms up. Do that a few times."*

*I imagined a bar above myself that I needed to touch, a bar that only the tallest girl could reach. I told myself that I would touch it too, no matter what. I jumped as high as I could, with my arms so extended that it felt I would lose them if I did not pay attention. I knew I made an impression right away, as I was invited to the gym for the tryouts.*

For the next nine years, **basketball was my life**. I breathed and ate basketball. Everything revolved around practices and games. I **loved** that period! I loved the intensity, the schedule, the training camps, the travel, the bonding, the coaches, everything! There was nothing else better in the whole world. I would get into fights and arguments with anybody who tried to convince me differently. My life was basketball, and basketball was my life. I was living a fairy tale.

*1994 Bucharest, Romania (grade 9)*

*Five more minutes until the bell rings! I keep looking at my watch. My legs are already restless with anticipation. I cannot wait for school to be over, to get to the gym for basketball practice. I love it there! I get to run, and jump, dribble, and shoot the ball. There, I can show what I can do with and without the ball. The bell rings! "Hurry, hurry, let me out," I keep thinking as the teacher slowly finishes her class.*

*Finally, I am in the gym. Today is a scrimmage day. I love scrimmaging; I get to show the skills I have learned. I also love impressing my coach with my sprints and jumps and with the little tricks I have developed on the court. One time I overheard him telling another coach that I was his best player. I was so proud!*

After that I worked very hard to maintain that status. I cherished every positive comment from coach D. and lived to see him pleased with my performances. Besides wanting to please my coach and show my best skills on the court, I was also proud to be "the class athlete." I was the

only athlete among both the boys and the girls in my class. Not only that, but only two other girls in my high school were part of my team at one point in time, but they gave up basketball to pursue their studies. In Romania, most athletes were “helped” (i.e., administrators were bribed) to enter into a much lower-level high school where they could miss classes for games and practices. I was not one of those athletes. I attended a more prestigious high school, where I had to pass an entrance exam to get in. Thus, during physical education classes at school, I, as an athlete, showed much higher skills than the other students. All the physical tests we had to pass or the new physical skills we would learn were a chance for me to show I could do them better than the other students.

*1994 Bucharest, Romania (grade 10)*

*It is physical education class and today we have the 800m run test. I am nervous, but not because I was afraid of the run. No. I am nervous because I want to finish first and hopefully way ahead of everyone else. I know I can do it. All the conditioning I get through basketball training is there in my body. I can feel it, just waiting to be released. Two laps, that's all. Not the five, or ten, or twenty that I am used to during training. It seems so short that I can probably sprint the entire race. I am now entering my second lap. On the turn, I peek behind me to see where everyone else is. Oh ... they seem so far behind. I increase the pace since this is the last lap. I can see my classmates on the other side of the stadium, looking tired, and slowing down. That gives me even more energy to accelerate. My last hundred meters is an all-out sprint. I cross the finish line and still have energy, so I go for an easy jog. I check to see where my colleagues are and I see the closest one is over a half of a lap behind me, and many others are just starting their second lap. I am so proud! I feel as though I have won another medal.*

*Speaking about medals ... we are in for another one this year. Then I can bring it to school to show it to my classmates. I love to see the admiration in their eyes, the way they examine it, and sometimes even try it on. But in the end, it comes back to me. It is my pride. Oh ... **I just love being THE athlete in the class!***

Time passes and training becomes longer and more intense. Throughout my high school years, there were months in the year during which we would train six, sometimes seven hours per day. Because there are only 24 hours in a day, spending that much time in the gym meant that other things had to be sacrificed. For me it was playing with the other kids, hanging out or going out with friends, or going to birthday parties. “Playtime” was in the gym, and every school break and holiday were spent in training camps. The only concession on days like Christmas or New Year's Eve was having only one or two practices instead of our regular three practices per day. Weekends were spent traveling to games and competitions, and during what little “free time” we had ... we slept.

Yet, that did not seem like a loss! If anyone asked me to choose, I would always choose basketball over anything. And I never thought twice about!!

*1996 Eforie Sud, Romania – A regular summer day at the training camp (summer vacation after grade 11)*

*“BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! ... BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! ... ”*

*My brain is starting to wake up at the pounding on the door, but I do not move. I keep my eyes closed. I do not want to wake up, not just yet. It is only 5:45 in the morning, and the coach is waking us up for the first practice of the day. I am sharing a hotel room at the seaside resort Eforie Sud with two other teammates. None of us moves; no one wants to open the door. We all*

*yearn a few more minutes of rest. We all know that the coach will just let herself in, because we were not allowed to lock our door. Suddenly the light is flicked on.*

*“Ohhh ... it’s too bright! Why does she do that all the time? I hate her!! I hate being here!”*

*She pulls my blanket off! “Grrrrr!!” ... I hate when she does that! I wish she would wake me up like my mom does, with a kiss and a hug, and nice soft words ... not so roughly!! Ehh ... what am I thinking? I am not at home; I am at training camp. I have to get out of bed as quickly as possible and be ready in five minutes. Luckily, I went to bed fully dressed for practice. I just have to put my socks and the runners on, both of which are waiting for me at the side of the bed. I quickly comb my hair and put it up in a ponytail. I tighten the elastic so it holds through the entire practice. If my hair falls loose, there will be no time to rearrange it. I grab my training equipment – the heavy medicine ball, plastic bottles filled with sand that we use as free weights, oh ... and I cannot forget the rubber skipping rope. This has been my routine since our very first training camp as I must not be late or forget anything. On my way out of the hotel I hear my mom’s voice in my head asking me the same question before I left the house in the morning: “Did you brush your teeth?” I smile at that thought. Brush my teeth? There is no time to brush teeth before the first practice. Coach made it clear to us that brushing our teeth was not important at that time, since we had not had any food yet. We would have time to brush the teeth after breakfast. Now I must rush to the beach because coach does not like us being late. She wants to start early, before there are too many people on the beach, so we can do our drills without stepping or throwing sand on their towels.*

*Once on the beach, the coach finds the deepest sand where we spend the next two and a half hours working on conditioning, strength, and agility. Around 7:30 – 8:00 a.m. people start arriving at the beach, and we know that practice is almost over. Even though it is hard training,*



*I am hungry and tired, I like being out here. I also love showing off our ripped bodies. People always look at us with admiration, they comment on the physical things we are able to do, and most people cannot even try them. All these make up for the rough waking-up moments in the morning with the coach. Another half hour or so:*

*“Are you girls hungry? Do you want to eat? If you do, then run to the canteen, or they might not wait for you!” the coach says smirking.*

*Are you kidding me? Of course, we are hungry; we haven't had breakfast yet, and we just spent the last two and a half hours running and jumping! So, full of sweat and sand, and carrying our equipment, we rush to the canteen to have some food.*

*Once at the canteen, the first thing we do is to get as much tea as possible. We are not allowed to drink water during practice and after all that sweat, we need our liquids. My mind wonders to my home: “It would be so nice to get some milk!” My mom gives me milk with coco and honey every morning. But here ... we only get this flavourless tea. Ehh ... what am I thinking? I should be thankful we are allowed to have two cups of tea and not just one. Our plates only have two very thin slices of cheese and two of ham on them, along with little hotel-size packages of jam and butter, and a small bun. Other days the cheese and ham are replaced with a couple eggs. Hmm ... they think this is enough for us? I could never make it through the next practice if this were all I ate. So, I learned, as all of us did, to get extra food from the little gymnasts who are also training at the resort. They are always watching their weight and do not eat all their food.*

*Once breakfast is over, we have a break until the next practice starts at 10:30. Most of us go back to the beach to tan and snooze. I laugh, because once we hit the towels, we fall right asleep. The second practice of the day is very similar to the first one. It involves more*

*conditioning on a different surface like water, grass, stairs, hills, or rock chips. We have to be ready for any of those conditions, though in the summer it's easy because bathing suits, socks, and runners are all the equipment we need for a practice. Around 1:00 p.m. we get the same incentive – run back to the canteen or miss your meal. We again keep our eyes open for the gymnasts who do not finish their meals.*

*Finally, it is time to rest. But I don't want to stay in my room, so I go back on the beach to take advantage of the sun. I happily lay on the towel, enjoying the heat. The sound of the waves, the loud music, the constant noise of kids and adults, and the salty breeze all put me to sleep right away. Somehow my internal clock wakes me up just in time for our third practice. This one is usually the most fun, as the coach is very inventive about the place and the drills we do. The practice that I love the most is in the seawater, even though it is the hardest of them all. Running and jumping in the waves, sprinting in the knee-high water, wheelbarrows push-ups with the water to my elbows, and the long distance running at the edge of the sea while your bare feet sink in the sand below ... what can be more pleasant than that? And the pride that comes with showing off to the entire beach makes everything well worth it!*

*When practice is over, we all rush to the hotel to shower and dress up because after supper we ARE FREE! We can go out and do whatever we want. It is only at this time that we can push all thoughts of practice out of our minds until the next morning. I feel just like the times when my mom sent my brother and I outside to play after we'd finished our homework. I also loved the feeling of being clean, with no salt, sweat, or sand on my skin. It is the time when I do not feel tired anymore, I feel accomplished, I feel proud. Not many people can do what I did the entire day!*

*“How long do you girls want to stay out, and where are you going tonight?” the coach asks us before we head out. I’ve always loved that about her. She is not like other coaches who forbid their athletes to go to certain places and give them curfews. She lets us go anywhere and for however long we want, as long as she knows where we are. The only condition she has is that we are ready to perform our best at the morning practice. A few teammates go to discos until the wee hours of the morning, but I head back to the hotel around 11:00. My body does not allow me to stay up late and still be ready for a full day of training. So, I settle for a relaxing walk on the beach shore, looking at the resort attractions, and maybe an ice cream.*

*Back in the hotel room, I start getting ready for the next day. Under my pyjamas I wear the clothes for the morning practice. Then I put my runners and a pair of socks at the edge of the bed, and all the equipment I need to take with me in the morning by the door. That way I won’t forget anything.*

*As I fall asleep, I think how I miss my mom tucking me in. It would be nice to be at home, but ... just 10 more days like this and we will go back. I can make it! I already dread the next morning wake up time. Ohh ... how I want to sleep in in the morning and go straight to breakfast. I know that won’t happen! We only get that treat on Christmas Day and New Year's Eve morning. Now it is summer, so no special treatments. Maybe I can fake some kind of sickness and skip the first practice! NO, what am I thinking? I have to train; I have to be ready. We have a national championship at the end of the summer and the best ten teams in the country that qualified will be there. And I want another medal! Just sleep, you will feel better after the first practice, you always do!*

Through my years of training, and especially towards the end of my athletic career, I had to fight with myself to keep going. I loved basketball, I loved playing the sport, I loved how good I

felt after the practices and conditioning training. I loved being seen as physically more fit than most people, as special. But I was dreading the initial part where I would have to make myself go to practices. I hated waking up early in the morning, I hated not having enough rest, I hated certain rituals that my coaches would do (e.g., pulling the blankets off us or turning the bright lights on in the morning). But I still pulled myself to do what was needed because I loved the feeling after. As I was getting older, I also started to see how the little girls in the team struggled, recognizing that I was in their shoes at one point in time, and I knew how they felt.

### *1998 Winter training camp in St. Gheorghe, Romania*

*I am having my evening shower in the common shower area. I am crying, because I cannot stand my roommates. Ten of us are sharing a room and they do not understand dedication. All they can think about is smoking and running out at night through the window. I do not fit with this group. As I am crying, my coach walks in. I am trying to hide, first because I was naked, and second because I did not want her to see me crying. Too bad, she already found out I was unhappy. I guess another teammate must have told her I was crying. As she was asking me how I felt about the room, I was trying to figure out what to tell her. But then ... she told me I could switch rooms! I could go in the little girls' room and sleep there if I wanted. Ohh ... she knew! She knew I would not fit in with the other 16–17-year-olds. So, I said yes, and moved to the 8–10-year olds' room. Of course there were comments from the 16-17 year olds, but I did not care. I just moved and it was the best decision! The little girls had a different coach and a different schedule, so I always had to know mine ahead of time. But it worked out. I was happy. Not only that, but I could also take care of the little girls. At night, some of them were sad, missing their mommies. So, I would lay down with them, or tuck them in, telling them good night. I also helped*

*them with their equipment or cleaning up the room. The ten of us got along very well. They looked up to me and also got comfort, something that I never got when I was their age.*

The fairy tale ended when I was about 20 years old and my high-performance life ended. My athletic career did not end because of an injury – I was lucky not to have injuries. My eligibility to play in the junior league was over and there were not many chances to play on a senior team at that time. Everything I was and everything I loved was gone. That was the time when my struggles began. I was not myself anymore. I was empty ... I was nothing.

*2000, Bucharest, Romania*

*It is daylight and I lie in bed wondering what I will do today. It is so beautiful outside; I might go out for a walk; or maybe not. I know that if I could get out of bed, I would feel much better. But I do not feel like going. I wish there were more practices. I would be the first one to wake up early and I would practice hard. There is nothing like that feeling!!*

*15 minutes later...*

*I am still in bed. Why can't I get up? I could read, study, do anything ... but I do not feel like doing anything. It has been three weeks since practices stopped. I have become this fat, lazy, out of shape person. I cannot control myself around food anymore. I feel like such a loser! There is nothing for me anymore. Nothing makes me feel good. Everything is a chore. And worse ... I just lie in bed and gain weight!! I am probably too heavy to run or jump. "I hate my body and I hate myself! I hate my life!"*

*Great!! My parents are up. They have no idea what is going on inside me. No one understands. I have no friends. Who would want to be around someone like me anyway? I*

*wonder why I am even alive. I think where I was just one month ago ... playing in the National Championship. What great moments!! We actually won a bronze!! And now what? Just sadness. My career is over! My life is over, and I am just 20 years old.*

*Mom yells something at me. "What does she want now? Why can't she leave me alone? I do not want to eat anything. I just want to lie here and be miserable." Maybe everyone was right when they said: "Where will the sport take you? What will you do with basketball? Sport takes you nowhere, you should focus on your studies!" But basketball is what I loved! No one seems to understand that! Now that basketball is over, my life is over. What will happen with me?*

After my athletic career ended, I had many years when I did not know who I was. If I was not an elite athlete, I was nothing. Nothing compared to being at the top. Nothing was good enough. Training and competing in other sports at a much lower level did not even touch on the feelings I had as a high-performance athlete. I had to rebuild my life somehow, but I did not know how. It felt like I lived an amazing story that had an awful ending. I wanted to change that ending, but all I could think was: **NOTHING**. I was NOTHING, my life meant NOTHING, I had NOTHING.

# CHAPTER I

## Everyone Has a Story

My interest in retirement from elite sport came from my own experience as a retired elite athlete, who has been through a difficult transition period. As a doctoral student, I sought to understand why retirement from elite sport is not necessarily an easy process.

The word ‘sport’ can bring up many taken-for-granted images of health, fitness, wellbeing, and happiness. Physical activity and sport are often viewed as fun, recreational, healthy activities through which different physical, psychological, and social skills are built (e.g., Coakley, 2011). However, a growing body of researchers have argued that participating in elite sport can be detrimental for a person’s health and wellbeing with long lasting consequences (e.g., Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Berg, Migliaccio, & Anzini-Varesio, 2014; Johns, 1998; Pike & Maguire, 2003; Waldron & Krane, 2005). Theberge (2008), for example, found that athletes minimized the threats posed by their injuries to their health and even separated their injury history from their health. This disembodiment seems very deeply entrenched, as the athletes in the study minimized the consequences of injury by highlighting the benefits of sport participation, such as positive mental feelings of being fit or accomplished. Several researchers have used the metaphor of the body as machine to describe this attitude in sport (e.g., Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007; Hargreaves, 1985; Magdalinski, 2009). For example, Dionigi and O’Flynn (2007) explained that the body of an elite athlete is a device to be “worked on, trained, compartmentalized, and continuously monitored and managed” (p. 102). This language is consistent with the Cartesian notion of the body “as object of possession,” “a machine driven by mechanical causality ... extrinsic to the essential self” (Leonard, 1994, p. 52). Leonard’s view of the body explains the disconnection between the body and the mind that athletes frequently

employ to achieve high performances. For example, Theberge (2008) concluded that athletes talk about their physical bodies as separate from their selves. We see examples of these extremes in the stories of gymnasts Brandy Johnson, Karen Tierney, Betty Okino, and figure skaters such as Tara Lipinski and Michelle Kwan, who competed with pain due to bone fractures (Ryan, 2000). Other athletes (e.g., gymnasts Christy Henrich, Cathy Rigby, and Erica Stokes) fell into disordered eating behaviours to maintain a low body weight for competitions (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Johns, 1998; Ryan, 2000). Consequently, high levels of competition (e.g., national or Olympic levels) involve long hours of training, sacrifices at many levels, and often injuries.

It is often assumed that involvement in sport from a young age helps to shape values and beliefs, character, stamina, and increases self-confidence, self-esteem, and positive body image (Coakley, 2011). While these perceptions of sport may be accurate if children are involved at low competitive levels, Miller and Kerr (2002a) added that young athletes at higher levels of competition tend to develop a very narrow identity based entirely on sport and at the cost of a decreased attention to their personal development. McKnight et al. (2009) further noted that during competitive careers, athletes mainly focus on the physical dimension, while the other dimensions of life (e.g., social, occupational, and intellectual) are set aside. Career, job, school, and friends come second to the intense daily training. Simple day-to-day skills that people usually learn and practice (e.g., social skills) may be put off until the athletic goal is achieved. There is no room for thoughts related to life after competition because elite athletes would not perform at their best if they were thinking of what they plan to do a week after the Olympics. Those thoughts and questions have to be put off until after they achieve their goal and a large portion of elite athletes' lives are put on hold for years in favor of their sport performances. After



retirement, these other dimensions play increasingly more important roles. However, due to their narrow focus on performance, many elite athletes are ill-equipped to cope with these shifts in their lives (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Jones, 2013; Lavalloé & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavalloé, 2008). Some experience a decline in their mental and emotional health and employ maladaptive behaviors to cope (e.g., disordered eating, drug/alcohol abuse) (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Jones et al., 2005; Ryan, 2000). In extreme cases, some contemplate or even attempt suicide (Carless & Douglas, 2009).

As a devoted athlete, I wondered if my sole focus on sport made my retirement more difficult. I also questioned how other athletes' careers impacted their retirement processes. I began to further question why some elite athletes experience such difficult transitions into retirement. We all go through transitions throughout life, from high school to university, from university into the work force, from one field of work to another, from work life to retirement; yet the depth of athletes' experience of retirement seemed much more severe to me. Therefore, I wanted to learn more about athletes' experiences of retirement, to hear their stories, to give them voice.

Reading about former elite athletes, I became fascinated by the ways they created new lives and found new meaning in their existence once retired. It was the changes in an elite athlete's story, identity, and self-understanding that piqued my interest. This was something that the previous research on retirement from sport did not explore, at least not in a narrative way, and not by weaving the author's personal story into it. I also realized that in order to understand the impact the transition from elite sport had on female athletes, I needed to explore their entire athletic careers. Thus, in this thesis I asked: *How did the athletes experience their athletic lives? How did the athletes experience their retirement? What supported and/or hindered the athletes'*

*transition out of elite sport? How did female athletes create new meanings and re-story their lives?*

I have structured my dissertation into the following chapters: **Prologue – I Am Nothing**, where I positioned my life story. **Chapter I – Everyone Has a Story**, where I outlined the rationale for the study. **Chapter II – What Do We Know**, I reviewed the present literature regarding retirement from elite sport. In this chapter, I discussed the different approaches that were used to study the transition period from elite sport, as well as the different factors that lead to sport retirement. I also examined the current programs designed to help athletes transition to life after sport. In **Chapter III – Methodology**, I discussed the different paradigmatic approaches employed in studying retirement from elite sport. I also reviewed the narrative approach to studying sport career termination before detailing my narrative approach and my positionality. In **Chapter IV – Method**, I gave details about my participants, the recruitment process, data collection, analysis, and representation, and ethical considerations. In **Chapter V – Life as an Elite Athlete**, I discussed what it meant for my participants to train and compete at elite levels in their sports. In this chapter my participants told stories about their athletic lives and what that meant for them. In **Chapter VI – Life after Elite Sport**, I explored how the participants transitioned out of their sports, what that meant to them, and how their lives changed. In **Chapter VII – Living a Regular Life**, I investigated what my participants did at the time of the interview, and how they adjusted to their lives after elite sport. Participants also offered suggestions for others to smooth the transition from elite sport. **Chapter VIII – Conclusion**, summarized the findings as well as detailed the contributions and significance of my study. I conclude this chapter with suggestions for future research. I then ended my dissertation with my story in the final section: **Epilogue – I AM ... Still an Athlete?**

## CHAPTER II

### What Do We Know?

Retirement from sport has been studied from different theoretical and methodological perspectives to understand, explain, and prevent the difficulties that some athletes go through when their sport careers end. Women and men, both young and old, from different sports, have all shared comparable retirement challenges (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Jones, 2013; Jones et al., 2005; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Park et al., 2013; Torregrosa et al., 2015; Sparkes, 1998; Swain, 1999; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). Thus, sport retirement research has been conducted from a multitude of viewpoints. The lens that a researcher looks through and explores a phenomenon will determine how the study is approached, how it is set up, and what methods are used to collect and disseminate the information of interest. These lenses are referred to as paradigms (Markula & Silk, 2011; Weaver & Olson, 2006). I have divided my discussion of the literature based on these paradigms.

To distinguish among different paradigms, one would have to consider the philosophical underpinnings that guide each paradigm: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology. Ontology refers to the nature of reality; epistemology pertains to how one knows the world; methodology involves the ways of obtaining material or 'data' based on which to build knowledge; and axiology refers to the ethical aspects within the social world (Markula & Silk, 2011). The literature identifies five main paradigms: positivist, post-positivist, interpretive, critical, and postmodernist/ poststructuralist. As the literature on sport retirement draws on social science research located in post-positivist, interpretive, and poststructuralist paradigms, I focus my discussion on these three paradigms. I will first detail the post-positivist lens to sport retirement.

## **Post-Positivist Approaches to Sport Retirement**

The post-positivist researchers of sport retirement adhere to the ontological assumption that research is to obtain universal truth through objective epistemology. Methodologically, they use large samples and employ questionnaires, surveys, or possibly structured interviews. Through these methods, post-positivist researchers have examined the causes and consequences of sport retirement, the quality of life and life satisfaction after sport, the factors that influence the quality of transition, the body image, physical self, or global self-esteem using large samples to gather data and statistical analyses to be able to generalize their findings as objective detached researchers (Erpic et al., 2004; Price et al., 2010; Smith & McManus, 2008; Stephan & Bilard, 2003; Stephan et al., 2003a; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wylleman et al., 2004).

Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, and Côté (2009) identified the 1960s as the time when researchers and sport psychologists became interested in the career development and transitions of athletes. Miller and Kerr (2002b) pointed out that during the 1960s and 1970s, performance excellence in sport overshadowed the importance of personal excellence. During this time, sport psychologists developed a variety of assessment tools to help predict good performance. The glorification of performance excellence continued through the 1980s, as sport psychologists started to develop and implement mental skills techniques (e.g., relaxations, autogenic training, hypnosis) to help athletes achieve higher performances (Miller & Kerr, 2002b). By the early 1990s, there was a growing awareness that the pursuit of performance excellence could have a detrimental effect on the overall wellbeing of individual athletes (Miller & Kerr, 2002b). Around this time, developmental theorists started to associate restricted athletic identity to issues related to identity formation (Grove et al., 1997; Lally, 2007; Lavalleyé et al., 1997; Lavalleyé & Robinson; Murphy et al., 1996; Sparkes, 1998; Warriner & Lavalleyé, 2008). At the same time,

the concerns raised about the difficulties some athletes experienced once they disengage from elite sport, led researchers to studying the phenomenon of retirement from elite sport.

Initial studies associated retirement from sport to other retirement experiences. For example, Rosenberg (1981) used a social gerontological point of view to link retirement from sport to retirement from work life. In his view, chronological age determines the ending of a work career, after which the retiree withdraws from society and may be experiencing some adjustment difficulties. Rosenberg (1981) observed similar adjustment difficulties in both athletes and retirees including losses of status, sense of purpose, and identity, and in some cases, reduced mobility. Others drew from thanatology (the study of death and dying) to describe sport retirement as a social death, which highlighted the isolation and rejection individuals may experience when they leave an important reference group (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985).

The social gerontological and thanatological views have been criticized when applied to athletic retirement. Both Blinde and Greendorfer (1985) and Coakley (1983) acknowledged that the social gerontological and thanatological views assume that retirement is an abrupt event after which retired athletes stop all contact with fellow athletes, coaches, and sport organizations. Some athletes remain connected with their sport in other roles and capacities (e.g., as coaches, managers, and referees), and for these individuals, the thanatological model may not apply (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). In addition, Blinde and Greendorfer (1985) noted that many athletes retire at a relatively young age and go on to develop new skills or take up new opportunities related to a different career. In light of these criticisms, retirement from sport began to be seen as a transition from one way of being to another, and as a beginning rather than an ending (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Coakley, 1983).

The shift away from viewing retirement from sport as a one-time terminal event to seeing it as a continuous process, resulted in the adoption of transition models and different theories to explain the experience of retirement from sport. For example, Blinde and Stratta (1992) explored the involuntary retirement experiences of 20 college athletes using Kubler-Ross's stage theory of death, which proposes that dying individuals go through five stages: shock and denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Schlossberg (1981) adopted a psychological approach to examine developmental transitions that affect various aspects of life and social roles. Thus, Schlossberg's Model of Human Adaptation to Transition gained traction. In this model, the people's perceptions of the transitions are more important for understanding how they are affected by changing life events than are the types, contexts, and impacts of the transition. Schlossberg (1981) argued that adaptation to transition is influenced by three major sets of factors: the characteristics of the transition, the characteristics of the environment pre- and post-transition, and the characteristics of the individual going through the transition. Each of these factors can contribute positively or negatively to the transition experience.

Swain (1991) applied Schlossberg's model of transition to the sport realm to explore the interaction between former professional athletes and their environments. He examined the context in which the experience took place, the meaning it had for the individual, and how it changed over time. Swain (1991) found Schlossberg's model of transition to be a helpful framework to understand individual experiences of withdrawing from sport yet concluded that the model would be more useful to understand the experiences of career termination that are of a more traumatic nature.

Using Swain's framework of the interplay between factors related to the transition, the athlete, and the environment, Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) proposed a five-step model of

adaptation to retirement from athletics. The authors explored the quality of adjustment after retirement from sport by looking at the interaction between factors related to the adaptation (e.g., developmental experiences, self and social identity, perceptions of control, and other contributors) and the individual's available resources (e.g., coping skills, social support, and pre-retirement planning). The model predicts that if all the factors are present, athletes are more likely to experience a healthy transition. In contrast, if some factors are missing or not sufficiently developed, the athlete experiences a retirement crisis and may be in need of a multilevel intervention (cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

Transitional models served as the theoretical basis for many subsequent studies about the post-sport life. While initial studies investigated the causes and consequences of sport retirement to understand their impact on the quality of life after sport, later studies explored the factors that influenced the quality of the transition and the strategies that prepare the athletes for life after sport (Smith & McManus, 2008). That being said, up until 2008 there was no agreed classification of the influencing factors, and no established pattern of interaction between them, that was critical to a healthy retirement from elite sport. Smith and McManus (2008) built on Schlossberg's model of transition and created a taxonomy of factors that are important to retirement from elite sport. As previously mentioned, this model included three major sets of factors that influence the transition: the characteristics of the transition, the characteristics of the environment pre- and post-transition, and the characteristics of the individual going through the transition. Building on Schlossberg's model (1981), Smith and McManus (2008) added two additional transition factors – injuries and deselection from teams. They also added athletic identity and the age and stage in life of athletes' retirement to the characteristics of the

individual, and educational and professional-related skills to the characteristics of pre- and post-retirement.

All of these factors (i.e., characteristics of the transition: injuries and deselection from the team; characteristics of the individual: athletic identity, age and life-stage at retirement; characteristics of the environment pre- and post-retirement: educational and professional skills) interact in multiple ways to positively or negatively influence the quality of the transition out of sport in the following domains: *psychological* (identity crisis, loss of self-worth, decrease self-esteem and life satisfaction, emotional problems, alcohol and drug abuse), *physical* (injuries, health and dietary problems, detraining issues), *psychosocial* (social and cultural loneliness, lack of social network outside sport), and *occupational* (lack of professional qualifications and skills outside sport, less suitable career choices, decline in financial income; Erpic et al., 2004). I will now look in more detail at each of these factors identified by Smith and McManus (2008) and how they influence the four domains identified above by Erpic et al. (2004).

### ***Characteristics of the Transition: Injuries and Deselection from the Team***

Besides voluntary cessation, injuries and deselection from teams may also influence the athlete's experience of retirement (Smith & McManus, 2008). Researchers found that injuries are usually related to a premature athletic career termination, which for some can also be quite sudden (Erpic et al., 2004; Lavalleyé et al., 1997; Smith & McManus, 2008; Wylleman et al., 2004). Scholars also discovered that if career termination is involuntary and/or abrupt, athletes are more susceptible to psychological difficulties, such as lower self-control, lower self-respect, anger, anxiety, depression, or even substance abuse (Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Injuries can also affect the achievement of athletic goals and if the injury stops the athletic career suddenly, not being able to pre-plan their retirement can be



associated with a perceived lack of control, which can have a negative effect on the athletes' post-sports transition (Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Deselection from a team may also affect an athlete's perception of their athletic ability and in turn, lead to psychological difficulties such as low self-esteem and self-confidence (Smith & McManus, 2008). In contrast, voluntary and/or gradual retirement appears to correlate with fewer difficulties adapting to post-sport life (Erpic et al., 2004; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

### ***Characteristics of the Individual***

The characteristics related to the individual identified by Smith and McManus (2008) include the athletic identity, and age and the stage in life when the retirement happens.

#### **Athletic Identity**

Athletic identity appears to play a significant role in the retirement process. Athletic identity is defined by Erpic et al. (2004) as "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role" (p. 47). A person's identity is related to the roles with which one associates the most, which in the athlete's case is their sport. Athletes usually think of themselves as the 'gymnast' (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalloé & Robinson, 2007; Warrnier & Lavalloé, 2008), the 'horse rider' (Sparkes, 1998), or the 'swimmer' (Jones et al., 2005). Their involvement, dedication, and commitment to their sport facilitate the development of an athletic identity, which may interfere with their exploration and development of other social roles or skills (Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008). Researchers found that having a strong athletic identity is both beneficial and detrimental for a person. During the active sport life, having a strong athletic identity sustains motivation and goal achievement (Erpic et al., 2004; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). However, the

same athletic identity may have a negative effect on the retirement experience and may affect the duration of emotional and social adjustment to the life post-sports (Grove et al., 1997). Athletes with strong athletic identities tend to struggle more on the psychological and psychosocial levels. These athletes are less likely to explore other careers or educational options. As the athletic identity is also connected to a person's sense of self, they demonstrate more difficulty and take longer to establish a new identity and understand who they are and what they like outside of their sport (Erpic et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2005; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalloé & Robinson, 2007; Smith & McManus, 2008; Sparkes, 1998; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Warrnier & Lavalloé, 2008).

Smith and McManus (2008) noted a lack of research regarding the association between athletic identity and the age and/or stage at which athletes retire from sport. A common belief is that the earlier the involvement in sport, the more likely an athlete is to develop a stronger athletic identity. Athletes in women's gymnastics or figure skating for example, tend to start very early and peak in their teens. These athletes train long hours when they are very young and tend to develop and adhere to a strong athletic identity, which could be associated with psychological difficulties after retirement from their sports (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalloé & Robinson, 2007; Smith & McManus, 2008; Warrnier & Lavalloé, 2008).

### **Age and Life-Stage at Retirement**

Researchers found that the age and life-stage at which the retirement occurs impacted the retirement experience. For example, it appears that if athletes retire at a young age (e.g., late teens, early twenties) such as women gymnasts, they are still within a timely stage of life to develop academic and professional skills (Smith & McManus, 2008; Wylleman & Lavalloé, 2004). In contrast, when athletes retire later in life, they may have more difficulty moving into roles unrelated to their sports (Smith & McManus, 2008). At the same time, Taylor and Ogilvie

(1994) noticed that aging also comes with a decline in the athletes' performance due to a slow deterioration of their physical capabilities. This natural process usually brings with it a decrease in the motivation to train and compete, as well as a change in values and priorities and a loss of social status in the sport environment, associated with a decline in self-confidence (Erpic et al., 2004; Swain, 1991; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Both of these were evident in Swain's (1991) study of professional athletes, whose personal values (e.g., interest in family, health and life quality) started to emerge and were in conflict with the values demanded by the sport environment. Similarly, former professional athletes from Czech Republic interviewed by Kadlick and Flemr (2008) reported a gradual awareness that their athletic career would inevitably end at one point. As a result, they were able to make plans for their retirements, a factor that enabled them to transition out of sport successfully (Kadlick & Flemr, 2008). Other researchers also found that mature athletes acknowledge the end point of their careers and planned their retirements, which was associated with a more positive post-retirement experience (Erpic et al., 2004).

### ***Characteristics of the Environment Pre- and Post-Retirement: Educational and Professional Skills***

Smith and McManus (2008) identified educational and professional-related skills as factors that influenced the retirement experience. During their careers, athletes tend to focus extensively on developing their sport related skills, while educational, occupational, and social decisions come secondary (McKnight et al., 2009; Miller & Kerr, 2002a). Erpic et al. (2004) and Price, Morrison and Arnold (2010) discussed the positive influence of high socio-educational status on the quality of retirement. Developing other interests and making connections outside sport, as well as going to school may influence the occupational opportunities during the post-sport life.

However, close to 50% of athletes do not think about their lives after sport while still practicing their sport, putting themselves at risk for psychological, psychosocial, and/or occupational difficulties during post-sport life (Erpic et al., 2004).

### ***Other Factors Influencing Retirement from Sport***

In addition to the factors mentioned by Smith and McManus (2008), researchers also explored non-athletic transitions, physical changes, and the coach-athlete relationships to further understand the challenges that athletes face once disengaged from sport.

Erpic et al. (2004), for example, investigated the non-athletic transitions as important factors in the quality of retirement from sport. Successfully managing life changes unrelated to sport, could help with the development of personal skills and the athlete's perceptions of transitions to life after sport.

Physical changes may also influence the transition out of elite sport. Researchers from the University of Montpellier I in France (Stephan et al., 2003a), compared 16 athletes in transition after the Sydney Olympics with 16 active elite athletes, to examine the psychological implications of body transitions after retirement from sport. They followed the athletes for a year post retirement and gathered data related to body image, physical self, global self-esteem, and subjective well-being in relation to the transition from elite sport. The authors found a decrease in the athletes' physical self-worth and global self-esteem (Stephan et al., 2003a) that reduced feelings of pride, self-respect, satisfaction, and confidence in the physical self (Stephan et al., 2003b).

During their sport careers, athletes invest a lot of time and effort to improve their physical skills and fitness abilities beyond the regular person, creating an image of 'exceptional' status

which brings an athlete a higher body satisfaction and consequently better body image than non-athletes (Stephan & Bilard, 2003a). After retirement, an athlete's training time is drastically reduced and their eating habits change, which lead to weight gain and loss of muscle mass. Stephan and Bilard (2003a) found that about five months after retirement the athletes reported reduced scores on body image and body satisfaction scales. By one year after retirement, athletes seemed to re-evaluate their status, becoming more satisfied with their new physical selves. Consequently, they scored higher on the above scales, yet still lower than those of active athletes. Similarly, Thompson et al. (2021) investigated how eating patterns evolve once the athletes retire and found that disordered eating patterns persist or even get worse for some athletes after they retired from their sport.

Stephan et al. (2003b) also explored the athletes' life satisfaction using questionnaires and found that during their careers, athletes seem to have a generally high life satisfaction due to their physical capabilities and the public recognition of those skills. These athletes reported a high subjective sense of well-being (a proxy for assessing quality of life). The high scores were also sustained by the fact that the intense physical training acted as both a release and a stimulator for these athletes. After retirement, the researchers found initial feelings of loss during the first couple of months. These feelings gradually improved over time as the retired athletes found different strategies and activities to fill their time, taking on more initiatives and making their own decisions regarding their lives. At the one-year mark, the subjective well-being scores increased considerably compared to the initial months following retirement (Stephan et al., 2003b).

In summary, the post-positivist studies on sport retirement employed different perspectives to discuss the end of the sport career. Initial studies looked at retirement from a social

gerontological point of view, where retirement from sport was associated with retirement from work life. Then a thanatological perspective was used, where sport retirement was associated with a social death. These two perspectives were later criticized as they considered retirement as a one-time abrupt event. Thus, researchers started to look at retirement more as a transition, as a beginning, not an end. As a result, Schlossberg's (1981) transition model was taken up in sport retirement research, whereby the transition could be influenced by the transition in itself, the environment pre- and post-transition, as well as the individual. Post-positivist scholars then started to explore the causes and consequences of sport retirement, followed by studies regarding the quality of the transition. In addition, some researchers found and discussed other factors that influenced the retirement experience, including non-athletic transitions, physical changes, and the coach-athlete relationship.

Developmental theories, identity formation, and self-development perspectives were used to explain and discuss different characteristics of the athletes, their transition from elite sport and the factors that influence the experience of transition. However, the post-positivist perspective was based on the assumptions that individuals follow a certain pattern of development and did not consider the influence of larger contexts on the athletes' development. In addition, the post-positivist perspective did not consider how athletes experienced and gave meaning to their sporting careers. In conclusion, most of the earlier studies were conducted from a post-positivist perspective as they used objective quantitative methods, and as such did not focus on the athletes' subjective retirement experiences. Rather, their aim was to develop universalized models by gathering objective information.

However, some of these studies (e.g., Miller & Kerr, 2002; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008) employed qualitative or mixed methods, where the researchers used interviews to analyze the

athletes' retirement experiences based on psychological theories (e.g., developmental theories). Their research expanded the post-positivist paradigm to challenge the objectivity of the previous research as inadequately capturing, for example, the participants' responses to questionnaires or the researchers' interpretation of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 2005; Markula & Silk, 2011). Although these researchers have added qualitative methods to the quantitative ones, thus conducting what became known as mixed methods studies, epistemologically, these post-positivist researchers continue to value objectivity, controlled conditions, well-defined concepts and values, as well as strict testing methods and instruments. Methodologically, however, they try to be more flexible by incorporating additional qualitative methods (Markula & Silk 2011; Weaver & Olson, 2006). Some of these additional methods include collecting data in more natural settings through observations, informal interviews, or text analysis (Markula & Silk, 2011). In the sport retirement literature, for example, Lavalley et al. (1997) used a couple scales to find out causes for athletic career cessation, as well as how the athletes adjusted to retirement. The authors also employed a content inductive analysis of the responses the participants gave regarding their adjustment to life after sport. Similarly, Kadlick and Flemr (2008) conducted semi-structured interviews to explore a career termination model in the Czech Republic. However, even though they define their interviews as semi-structured, they had a very strict interview guide developed based on a previous framework, and the questions were administered in an identical sequence followed by a priori defined follow-up questions "to ensure that responses from all participants were equal in complexity and depth [... in an ...] attempt to minimize the bias in the interview" (Kadlick & Flemr, 2008, p. 257). Consequently, I classify these researchers following the post-positivist paradigmatic assumptions.

The studies related to retirement from sport conducted from the post-positivist paradigm have gathered important objective information related to the transition out of elite sport. However, it became clear that people in general, and athletes in particular, construct and interpret their own meanings of the events. In addition, some researchers strongly advocated that research cannot be purely objective. That led to a change to a subjective research epistemology: both the researcher and the participants influence the collection and the interpretation of the data (Markula & Silk, 2011). Thus, new paradigms that allowed for such interaction evolved and have also been used to research retirement from elite sport from an interpretive perspective, using a narrative approach to explore the athletes' personal stories.

### **Interpretive Research in Sport Retirement**

In the interpretive paradigm, the researcher interacts and is implicated in collecting and interpreting the data, thus moving away from the strict and more objective ways used by the post-positivists. In interpretive paradigm, researchers are concerned with personal experiences and these studies are, thus, based on subjective epistemology. An interpretive researcher examines personal experiences and how people make sense of these experiences within their contexts (Markula & Silk, 2011). In addition, interpretive researchers use a reflexive approach and include multiple voices to reflect the participants' meanings and experiences. In sport retirement literature, some qualitative researchers draw on the tenets of the interpretive paradigm. I first detail the studies using qualitative data to understand athletes' retirement experiences.

Interpretive researchers connected the retirement experiences with the athletes' performing body and the construction of their identities. They conclude that numerous athletes seem to base



their sense of self and self-esteem on their physical abilities and performance (Jones et al., 2005; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalloé & Robinson, 2007; Sparkes, 1998; Warrnier & Lavalloé, 2008). When their careers end and their bodies cannot perform as they once did, the athletes' identity is threatened, which can have a negative impact on their retirement experience. Interpretive researchers have further found athletes to base their self-worth on their relationship with their coach or their club/sport organization (Johns, 1998; Johns & Johns, 2000; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Researchers recognized this relationship to be yet another factor that could influence the retirement experience from sport. Thus, if the quality of the athletes' relationships with the coaches or club/organization was perceived as negative, the athletes were more likely to experience difficulties during their transition from sports, as was the case with the athletes from Johns (1998), Johns and Johns (2000), Jones et al. (2005), and Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) studies.

Another type of interpretive sport retirement research involves narrative studies. Narrative researchers ask the participants to openly voice their transition to life-after-sport experiences. As such, the narrative studies include much more personal and in-depth retirement experiences compared to what we can learn from the post-positivist studies. The narrative studies are based on stories told by one or more athletes and illustrate common themes around the retirement process. Some of these themes include: the coach-athlete relationship, the sport environment and its emphasis on performance, intense struggles during the retirement period, personal trauma, the role of relationships, and the necessity to recreate life once retired (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring; 2016; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio et al., 2017; Demetriou et al., 2020; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Jones et al., 2005; Kerr, Willson, & Stirling, 2020). As these studies can closely inform my study, I now review them in detail to then return to them in my results chapters.

Jones et al. (2005) used an interpretive biography to explore one swimmer's (Anne) story of retirement from swimming. Central to Anne's story was the relationship she had with her coach; this relationship influenced her swimming career as well as her retirement experiences. Because she wanted to impress her coach and perform well, Anne started using disordered eating behaviours to reduce her weight. Over time she developed bulimia and the relationship with her coach deteriorated. Consequently, she had to retire from swimming, and at the time of the study she was still battling bulimia (Jones et al., 2005). From her story, we learned that the coach-athlete relationship was very important and could have a detrimental effect on the athlete during, as well as after the sport career. While the impact of coach-athlete relationship on retirement experience is not something new (see Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000), this narrative study brings a personal and evocative perspective on the impact of a detrimental coach-athlete relationship on the athlete and their retirement experience.

Barker-Ruchti and Schubring (2016) also took a biographical approach to explore one athlete's (Marie) experiences of retirement from women artistic gymnastics. The authors examined the transformation that happened when Marie left home to train with the national team (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016). The gymnastic environment and the relationship with her new coach evolved in a negative way, which led to her retirement a year later. She viewed her retirement with relief, as she was no longer enjoying gymnastics. In addition, Marie developed disordered eating behaviours which continued, and even got worse, once out of her sport realm. Similar to Anne (Jones et al., 2005), Marie's story speaks to the effect that the sporting environment and the coach-athlete relationship has both during as well as post athletic career.

The findings from these two studies are similar to the Kerr et al. (2020) study with eight former elite female athletes. The authors investigated the period before elite sport, during the

athletic career, and the period post transition. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in an attempt to understand the subjective experiences of each participant. The athletes experienced emotional abuse and abusive relationships with their coaches, which had lasting negative effects after retirement. The authors concluded that the retired athletes exhibited symptoms similar to those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following abusive relationships with their coaches, and acknowledged that each participant's experience, interpretation, and response to abuse was unique.

Several narrative researchers aimed to understand athletes' retirement experiences by exploring the sporting environment in depth. These researchers explored the intersection of psychology and sociology focusing on both the personal as well as the social aspect of sport. Carless and Douglas (2009), Cavallerio et al. (2017), and Douglas and Carless (2009) conducted narrative studies with professional golfers and elite rhythmic gymnasts using the concept of life as a narrative, where one's life is seen as a series of different narratives. The authors discussed the participants' lives as a *performance narrative*, a life that was exclusively focused on sport performance and success. In the life where performance outcomes dominated, the athletes followed common values and norms such as hard work and discipline, winning at all costs, being perfect or having a perfect body (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009).

Douglas and Carless (2009) explored the *performance narratives* within the golf culture to uncover what it meant to be a professional golfer. The authors discussed how the narratives shaped both participants' identity and wellbeing before and after their sport careers. Using the personal stories of two professional women golf players (Bernie and Debbie), Douglas and Carless (2009) uncovered the intense struggles the women athletes endured after disengagement

from sport. The authors explained how Debbie's and Bernie's transitions from professional golf were affected by the socio-cultural factors of their sport environment and how their athlete identities, based in performance values, prioritization of winning above all, and single-minded dedication to sport became incompatible with life after sport. Not having an *alternative narrative* to support their transition out of sport, the two athletes experienced significant personal trauma and needed to find new meanings that worked better in life after sport (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Both athletes found meaning through a *relational narrative*, which meant that they recreated their lives around relationships with significant people close to them. The authors explained *relational narrative* as a narrative that takes place in the interpersonal dimension of wellness, where the focus is on care for and connection with others, away from the personal self. Thus, Bernie found new meaning in her life through connecting and caring for her sick mother, while Debbie started to focus and care for her son.

Carless and Douglas (2012) conducted another narrative study with 21 different former professional and elite athletes (males and females) from different sports (Olympics and Paralympics). The authors used a narrative life story approach to get information related to the biographical, historical, and cultural context for each athlete. The authors conducted a mix of focus groups and individual interviews (for the participants who could not make the focus groups). Carless and Douglas (2012) focused purely on the success stories that were alternative stories to the dominant performance narrative. The authors argued that success could be storied differently, more positively. Moving away from the performance outcomes narratives could enrich the athletes, as well as give them a more balanced life once retired from elite sport. The alternative narratives, in sum did not involve the 'win at all costs' mentality. Based on the athletes' stories, the authors named the main success stories: "*I did the best I could*" (p. 391) in

which the athlete values the “process of being effortful” (p. 391) rather than the dedication, the hard work, and the winning; “*It’s the closest thing you can get to flying*” (p. 392) which referred to enjoying just the movement in itself, rather than being focused on being better than others to win; and “*People I made the journey with*” (p. 393) that valued the relationships with others (e.g., team mates, relatives, friends) more than the competition with others and winning. These stories are based on a different notion of success, regardless of performance outcomes: valuing relationships and connections, as well as self-reference rather than other-reference for assessing success. In other words, success is not about beating the others, or being superior to others, but rather it is about enjoying the effort and making connection with others. This finding supported the conclusion in the earlier study by Douglas and Carless (2009).

Cavallerio et al. (2017) expanded on Douglas and Carless’s (2009) study to explore how the performance narrative reflected life after elite sport among a group of former elite rhythmic gymnasts. They found three types of narratives among their participants: *entangled narrative*, *going forward narrative*, and *making sense narrative*. The authors discussed how each narrative was linked with how the gymnasts embodied the performance narrative during and after their sport career. For example, Diana, the gymnast going through *the entangled narrative* valued the norms and rules of the performance narrative and lived by them even after retirement (Cavallerio et al., 2017). As gymnastics meant everything to her, Diana became unsatisfied with her new life and could not seem to find a new purpose in life. In this *entangled narrative*, Diana felt stuck in the present, did not know what direction to take, and was left to reminisce about the glorious past (Cavallerio et al., 2017).

In opposition with the entangled narrative was the *going forward narrative* exemplified by Giorgia, who, while passionate about gymnastics and following the norms and values of the

performance narrative during her gymnastics career, always knew she would not be a gymnast forever and dreamt about becoming a doctor. Unlike Diana, Giorgia looked forward to her new life even during her gymnastics career, which made it easier to adjust to life after sport, cherish her athletic career, and feel happy with her new goals and accomplishments. Elisabetta's retirement process was characterized by the *making sense narrative*: this represents an uncertain narrative, an in-between place, where the main character is unsure about the future. While Elisabetta, like Diana, enjoyed and embodied the performance narrative during her gymnastics career, she did not struggle as much once retired, because she was open to new ideas after gymnastics, but unlike Giorgia, she did not know her future plans. The making sense narrative was portrayed as connected to both entangled and going forward narratives, where the person still valued the performance narrative, yet could let go of it to create new narratives (Cavallerio et al., 2017).

Similar to Diana in the Cavallerio et al. (2017) study, Bryn, a semi-elite student athlete in Jewett et al.'s (2019) study experienced the *entangled narrative*. Jewett et al. (2019) explored the difficulties that Bryn had once retired from her sport using life history interviews. Through these interviews, the authors were able to examine the structure of sport and its influences on Bryn's retirement, particularly related to her mental health. Jewett et al. (2019) made sense of Bryn's story through the narratives described in Douglas and Carless (2009) and Cavallerio et al. (2017): *performance narrative*, *entangled narrative*, and *making sense narrative*. Thus, Bryn's athletic life was geared towards winning, strict regimes, lots of control left to the coaches, close friendships from this culture; these are all characteristics found in the *performance narrative* (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Jewett et al., 2019). During the immediate period after retirement, Bryn experienced psychological distress, missing being an athlete,

feeling lost and alone, and not knowing what to do outside of the sporting context. This period is similar to what Douglas and Carless (2009) described as an *entangled narrative*. When the interviews finished, Jewett et al. (2019) felt that Bryn was making progress, as she was trying to make sense and understand her new life.

Demetriou et al. (2020) also conducted a narrative case study with one retired athlete: an Australian football player. The authors appeared to employ a mixed methods approach in which, besides the semi-structured interviews, they measured the athlete's life satisfaction after retirement. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted one month apart, and within five years post retirement. The retirement experience of the Australian footballer was similar to other narratives by retired athletes, where the performance narrative left the footballer struggling to find a new and meaningful storyline post retirement (Demetriou et al., 2020).

These qualitative narrative studies bring forward the athletes' stories and voices and have a common thread: elite sport performance culture determines what is seen as normal and thus, shapes the athletes' identities. These mindsets and behaviors negatively impact retirement because the post-sport life is usually based on different values. These interpretive researchers understand research as a narrative through which participants understand their experiences through their stories and storied lives. Several narrative researchers have explained the retirement experiences through athletes' stories that they then connect to dominant narratives within or outside the sport culture (e.g., Carless & Douglass, 2009 & 2012; Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Jewett et al., 2019). Going a little further, some interpretive studies critique the effects of the sporting environment on the retired athlete. However, these studies do not locate the participants' experiences within oppressive ideological contexts of sport

to advocate for social change similar to critical researchers and therefore, I classify them as interpretive studies (e.g., Barker-Ruchti et. al, 2012; Jones et al., 2005; Kerr et al., 2020).

The narrative studies focused on individuals' problematic experiences while acknowledging the cultural context of sport. In other words, even though the stories athletes told uncovered practices and norms from each sport, once retired, the athlete was the one who needed to change and adapt in order to fit with the practices and values of post-retirement life. To address post-retirement problems, the individual's behaviour had to change, not the contextual influences of pre-retirement sport culture. The limitations of the individual narrative approach were taken up by socio-cultural researchers within the context of sport. I will next review some research that critiques the sporting contexts in connection to the retirement process.

### **Poststructuralist Research of Sport Retirement**

Epistemologically subjective like the interpretive research, poststructuralist researchers have a socio-political agenda and want to create change. These researchers understand power as relational, not as dominance and subordination based on ideological means as critical researchers do (Markula & Silk, 2011). Thus, poststructuralist studies are usually “deeply political [...] in which society is considered a site of constant political struggle with continual competition for dominance depending on who dominates the meaning field at a time” (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 49). In addition, the poststructuralist research is strongly rooted in different philosophies carried out by philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze (Markula & Silk, 2011).

Poststructuralist studies around retirement from elite sport have explored different problematic issues in the athletes' careers, which impacted their retirement. For example, using a Foucauldian approach, Chapman (1997) discussed the problematic issue of weight management



in rowing, while Jones (2013) explored the career termination of professional English football players. Further, using the same Foucauldian lens, Jones and Denison (2019) explored retired athlete's relationship with exercise after leaving elite sport.

Unlike the individual focus of the narrative studies, several authors have explored in-depth the socio-cultural context for athletes' retirement. Barker-Ruchti et al. (2012) and Jones and Denison (2017) examined synchronized swimming and professional English football as retirement contexts, respectively. Barker-Ruchti et al. (2012) discussed Amelia's (former Olympic synchronized swimmer) experiences through a cultural perspective of embodied learning that took place in multiple ways. The authors argued that the embodied learning implies "the absorption of skills, knowledge and values" (p. 374) from a certain domain. For athletes, this embodied learning happens during their athletic life, and it influences how athletes view and experience new situations once retired (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012). For example, Amelia, during her synchronized swimming career, had to be mentally strong, submissive, use self-control, and push physical limits (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012). Once retired from synchronized swimming, Amelia had to learn which of these values would help her after her athletic career was over. Even though she still had her sport mentality that would cause conflict at her workplace, Amelia was able to let go of some of the values she learned in her sport (i.e., be less submissive, accept mistakes and weaknesses, and show feelings and emotions) in order to better function in her new non-sporting environment (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012). She also had to learn to accept that while in the synchronized swimming world she had amazing skills and was at the top, in the work setting, she was new, did not yet have the necessary skills, and at that point, was on the periphery in her workplace (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012).

Jones and Denison (2017) explored the experiences of 25 former professional English football players using a Foucauldian perspective. The authors used a post-structural understanding of power to learn how British football players negotiate the challenges of enforced retirement. Through a Foucauldian analysis of their football careers, Jones and Denison (2017) examined how the football players are created into docile bodies that obediently accept the values of their sport. In addition, Jones and Denison (2017) illustrated how these docile football bodies experienced retirement. Through Foucauldian disciplinary techniques and instruments of surveillance (e.g., hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, examination), the football players were constantly monitored, controlled, scrutinized, and disciplined during their athletic careers. Once retired, all the monitoring and control was interrupted, which had a significant and negative impact on the players who were left lost, confused, and not knowing how to conduct themselves (Jones & Denison, 2017).

In both studies, the authors problematized the environment and the normalizing practices the athletes adopted in order to become proficient elite performers in their sports. In addition, the researchers in both studies acknowledged how power relationships within each sport shape what is perceived as valuable and normal (e.g., winning, being perfect, being submissive), and how the athletes learn them (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012; Jones & Denison, 2017). Consequently, the beliefs and practices that the athletes adopt during their sporting lives will influence how they experience and adapt to new situations such as those once retired. Both Amelia and Jones and Denison's (2017) football players learned that they did not need to be docile any longer or prove to anyone how good they were in the working environment (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012; Jones, 2013), because they now lived in different contexts from sport. In these new contexts, connection with others, showing emotions, and making mistakes are accepted and not condoned.

Further to their earlier study, Jones and Denison (2019) discussed one aspect that is common among retired athletes: their relationship with exercise after leaving elite sport. In this article, the authors used auto-ethnography (i.e., self-reflection of the author's personal experiences) to present a socio-cultural analysis of the challenges faced by the first author (a former elite footballer) when it came to exercise after retiring from football. Even though the article was written as a narrative, the authors used Foucault to critically analyze the new context (i.e., retirement) where former elite athletes exercise. The article presented a new way to look at one of the challenges (i.e., the relationship with exercise after retirement) that former elite athletes face once retired from their sport. In this article, the athlete (i.e., the first author) struggled to create a meaningful relationship with exercise once retired from football. The authors argued that learning to be docile in sport could become disadvantageous once retired, and the relationship with exercise for former athletes was not as easy as many might believe (Jones & Denison, 2019).

Based on the poststructuralist research, power relations within sport influenced the athletes' careers and their retirement. The authors moved away from problematizing individual athletes to problematize the sporting environment and sporting practices the athletes are exposed to during their careers. The poststructuralist researchers were interested in what it means to become elite, Olympic, or professional athletes in the contemporary cultural context of sport. They explained retirement experience from sport as a complex process that does not depend solely on the individual athlete's resources, but is also a result of the relationships and practices to which the athletes have been exposed in the context of sport. The researchers expanded from the interpretive narratives study to challenge the cultural practices within the sport. Consequently,

they suggested that changes needed to be made at the coaching and sporting, not only individual, levels.

### **Research in Sport Retirement: Discussion of the Current Findings**

Retirement from elite sport has been investigated in many different ways. Studies were conducted with different categories of athletes, in different locations around the globe (e.g., Canada, Australia, Europe, Hong Kong), and using different methodologies (e.g., objective, mixed methods, interpretive, or critical). Initial studies investigated the factors that influence the retirement experience, their frequency, or the extent of their implications. Many of these studies used a post-positivist approach to explore a variety of different women and men's sports. Later studies were more focused on a particular sport, or a certain type of elite athlete. For example, several studies were conducted with former female gymnasts (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Cavallerio et al, 2017; Clowes et al., 2015; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Kerr et al, 2020; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Warrnier & Lavallee, 2008), as women gymnasts usually retire at an early age. After peaking during mid- to late teens, their retirement usually happens during the late teens or early twenties. The authors argued that a strong involvement in sport during a time when the athlete is still developing psychologically and socially would have negative consequences and reduce the quality of transition out of sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Warrnier & Lavallee, 2008).

While the researchers investigated several different categories of elite athletes, there does not seem to be an agreement regarding the definition of elite. Thus, some studies focused on athletes competing nationally and internationally (Koukouris, 1994; Lavaleé et al., 1997; Price et al., 2010), others focused only on professional athletes (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Jones, 2013,

Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008; Swain, 1991; Young et al., 2006), Olympic athletes (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2013; Stephan & Bilard, 2003; Stephan et al., 2003-a&b; Torregrosa et al., 2004, Torregrosa et al., 2015), or varsity athletes (Jewett et al., 2019; Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

The studies also differed methodologically. The majority were based on retrospective memories of those who had already been through the transition period (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Jewett et al., 2019; Jones, 2013; Jones et al., 2005; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Swain, 1991; Warrnier & Lavallee, 2008). Other studies looked at the retirement process as it was happening: the researchers followed the athletes during the first year after retirement through a longitudinal study (Stephan & Bilard, 2003; Stephan et al., 2003-a, b; Torregrosa et al, 2004; Torregrosa et al., 2015). Price et al. (2010) looked at still active athletes and their athletic and non-athletic interests in order to better understand the impact of retirement from their sport. In addition, researchers used a variety of methods to collect their data. For example, post-positivist researchers used surveys, scales, and/or questionnaires (e.g., Erpic et al., 2004; Stephan et al., 2003a); others combined questionnaires with semi structured interviews, into a mixed-method approach (e.g., Demetriou et al., 2020; Lavallee et al., 1997); a few researchers used an interpretive approach, either phenomenological or a narrative (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Jewett et al., 2019; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Miller & Kerr, 2002), while others used different poststructuralist theories to analyze qualitative interview data (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012; Jones & Denison, 2017, 2019).

Although researchers have clarified some of the factors that help or hinder the retirement process from elite sport, it appears that the presence or absence of these factors does not necessarily predict a certain type of retirement experience. For example, some post-positivist

researchers reported positive transitions for their athletes (Kadlick & Flemr, 2008; Sincclair & Orlick, 1993; Swain, 1991), while many others revealed the difficulties and turmoil the athletes go through after their disengagement from sport (Grove et al., 1997; Jewett et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2005; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007; Lavallee et al., 1997; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Sparkes, 1998). The Olympic athletes in the Jackson et al. (1998) study experienced some difficulties post retirement, even though they achieved the highest goal in an athlete's career, the Olympic gold medal. These difficulties (physical, psychological, psychosocial, and occupational) varied in intensity and duration for each athlete (e.g., Erpic et al., 2004). For some, the intensity and duration of these adjustment problems were low, while for others they were very traumatic and could even be life threatening. For example, Anne (swimmer) developed an eating disorder (Jones et al., 2005), and Debbie (professional golfer) attempted suicide (Douglas & Carless, 2009).

Nevertheless, a consistent finding was that there are three phases athletes go through after they retire from their sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Smith & McManus, 2008; Stephan & Bilard, 2003; Stephan et al., 2003a, b). Researchers identified an initial phase where there was a huge void and an intense sense of loss right after the sport career ended (Jewett et al., 2019; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Smith & McManus, 2008; Stephan & Bilard, 2003; Stephan et al., 2003a, b). During this phase retired athletes reported losing the meaning and direction in life, their identity, their sense of satisfaction and fulfilment, and feeling disoriented, confused and out of control (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Smith & McManus, 2008; Stephan et al., 2003b). This phase could coincide with what Cavallerio et al. (2017) described as *entangled narrative* (see section 2.2 for an explanation of this narrative).

The second phase was a period of re-orientation, personal growth, and adaptation, where former athletes reflected back, analyzed, and deconstructed their athletic experience (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Smith & McManus, 2008). Having distance from their sport allowed the retired athletes to see their athletic life from a different perspective. Depending on their experiences, some worked through physical and/or psychological problems, learned about themselves, and/or searched for new meanings for life (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres (2003b) found that retired athletes went from using distracting activities – that they used to compensate for the emptiness they felt after retirement from sport – to taking more control over their activities, decision making, and lives within the first year after retirement. This second phase could resemble the experiences Giorgia and Diana (Cavallerio et al, 2017) underwent, described by the authors as *going forward narrative* and *making sense narrative*. Debbie' and Bernie's *relational narratives* (Douglas & Carless, 2009) also resemble this second stage (see section **Interpretive Research in Sport Retirement** for a detailed explanation of these narratives).

Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) identified a third phase after retirement, the New Beginnings, where the former athlete is happy, immersed in new activities, and well-adjusted to the new life without the sport. It appears that when retired athletes experience a negative transition out of sport, they may get stuck in the second phase, either taking a long time to reach, or never reaching the New Beginnings phase. Because there are still many athletes who struggle to reach the third phase, some countries recognize the need to support the athletes once they finish their athletic careers. In the next section I discuss some of the programs that are already available.

## **Programs for Retired Athletes**

Some organizations and countries have developed programs to help athletes adapt to a new career and life and to prevent or reduce consequences associated with negative transitions. These include the Olympic Athlete Career Centre (OACC – Canada), Career Assistance Program for Athletes (CAPA – USA), Athlete and Career Education Program (ACE – Australia, UK), Lifestyle Management Program (UK), and Retired Athlete (Netherlands) (Alfermann et al., 2004; Baillie, 1993; Jackson et al., 1998; Petitpas et al., 1992; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Smith & McManus, 2008; Stambulova et al., 2009; Stambulova et al., 2007). In France, Russia, Lithuania, and Germany, the sport system offers no support to former athletes, which leaves all the responsibility of adjusting to a new life solely to the athletes themselves (Alfermann et al., 2004; Stambulova et al., 2007). In Sweden, athletes receive financial and educational support during their athletic career, yet no special support services exist for retired athletes (Stambulova et al., 2007).

Since there is little research done on these assistance programs, my discussion pertains to the OACC, CAPA, and ACE programs in Canada, USA, and Australia respectively. These programs are the ones most often cited in the literature. OACC, CAPA, and ACE programs have emerged based on studies that suggest that the athletes should prepare for retirement while they are still competing. As a result, these programs target competing athletes with little attention to the already retired athletes (Smith & McManus, 2008). This explains why many retired athletes feel abandoned or disregarded by their sport organizations once they are no longer competing (Jackson et al., 1998; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Warriner & Lavalloé, 2008).

Further, programs for retired athletes are available for a selective group of athletes, as they were targeted toward Olympic and national level competitors. Other athletes cannot access these



services (Peptitpas et al., 1992; Smith & McManus, 2008). Although national and Olympic level athletes should be supported pre- and post-retirement, they represent a small proportion of dedicated athletes, as only a few athletes in each sport are chosen to be part of a national or Olympic team. Yet, many more train at high levels for long periods and do not get selected or develop injuries. These athletes do not have access to the same services as the athletes on national or Olympic teams.

Another characteristic of the programs for retired athletes is that they focus mainly on occupational and educational domains. This is not surprising, since much of the research on retirement from sport has determined that education and other career interests often receive little consideration, due to the narrow focus and high time commitment of elite sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Miller & Kerr, 2002b, 2003; Murphy et al., 1996). Athletes do indeed report that services offering financial assistance/management, job, career, or educational advice helps them find new interests and adjust to a new life (Jackson et al., 1998; Petitpas et al., 1992). However, the athletes acknowledge that these programs lack emotional support or attention to general life skills, self-esteem, or coping strategies during the transition (Jackson et al., 1998; Smith & McManus, 2008). A successful transition is more than just moving on into a new career. Body changes and the loss of their 'exceptional' status, for example, can have an effect on the former athletes' overall self-esteem and well-being, something that can last for a long time after retirement, even though they are successful in their new profession (Jones et al., 2005; Kerr & Dachysyn, 2000; Stephan et al., 2003). Thus, McKnight et al. (2009) also recognized the elevated need for emotional assistance for retired athletes and affirm that part of this support is helping athletes to transfer some of the skills they developed during their athletic careers to other life settings.

The transferability of skills from the athletic life to a day-to-day life appears to be of high interest to athletes. In their evaluation of CAPA which focuses on national and Olympic level performers, athletes reported that the transferable skills session, where they were taught to identify and understand skills they had already developed during the athletic career, was the most useful (Petitpas et al., 1992). Smith and McManus (2008) explained that during their athletic career, athletes receive nutritional (i.e., meal plans), psychological (i.e., mental strategies), and physical (i.e., workout routines) information to help them improve their performance. However, when the athletes retire and this support ceases, they may lack the general life skills which can lead to an inability to cope with the new and unfamiliar lifestyle (Smith & McManus, 2008). McKnight et al. (2009) argued that increasing awareness of life skills will empower the athletes and may lead to a more positive transition. They developed a treatment plan that targets the emotional well-being of retired athletes, by helping them develop a support network, as well as by increasing self-efficacy and individual perceived competency through knowledge and awareness of transferable skills (McKnight et al., 2009).

Beyond programs developed for elite athletes (Olympic and national level), other support programs exist. For example, Miller and Kerr (2002a) referred to CHAMPS/Life Skills Program developed in many US institutions to support varsity athletes. The program has five components (academics, athletics, personal development, service to the community, and career development) that aim to develop other interests and roles outside the athletic realm and performance excellence (Miller and Kerr, 2002a). The program is valuable, and no doubt helps the student-athletes in the long run to develop other roles and skills. However, even when given such opportunities to be involved in other social or academic activities, there is no guarantee that the athletes will develop a multidimensional identity. For example, in Warriner and Lavalée's

(2008) study, although some gymnasts were enrolled in school, saw school as a “nuisance” (p. 307), which illustrated the dominance of the athletic identity and its prevalence over other roles.

In addition, while varsity athletes are very involved in their sport, their sport requirements are different in time commitment and the competition season than those of Olympic or national level athletes. This difference was acknowledged by McKnight et al. (2009), who contended that retirement from sport was more traumatic for professional and elite athletes than for varsity athletes, who were bound to five years of eligibility and who had more time to pursue other interests (Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002a, 2003). Because they were aware of the limited time they have to compete in their sports, these athletes can prepare in advance for life after sports (assuming that there are no career-ending injuries; Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002a, 2003). This is different for an elite or professional athlete who competes until he/she is unable to continue. As a result, programs such as CHAMPS/Life Skills Program would not be as helpful to elite or professional athletes.

In Canada, several initiatives exist to help athletes at all levels experiment with different roles and activities and promote a balanced, yet active life. In the next section I will discuss two models adopted by the Canadian sport system: Long Term Athlete Development model (LTAD) and athlete-centered model. The LTAD approach evolved from research related to identity foreclosure (i.e., commitment to the athlete role without exploration of other alternatives) and career ending injuries. It has been documented that early specialization in a sport is more likely to lead to repetitive injuries and a possible development of a foreclosed identity (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Murphy et al., 1996; Ryan, 2000). Early specialization means that the athlete starts training many hours per day to perfect skills at a very young age. The constant repetition involved in this training can lead to injuries (Ryan, 2000; Stambulova et al., 2009). At the same

time, early commitment dedicated training leaves little time to develop and explore other roles or activities and, may then lead to the development of a narrow and focused athletic role or foreclosed identity (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallée & Robinson, 2007; Murphy et al., 1996; Warriner & Lavallée, 2008). Research has shown that both the career ending injuries as well as the foreclosed identity can negatively affect retirement from sport with consequences such as depression, body image, and eating disorders (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Grove et al., 1997; Lavallée et al., 1997; Lavallée & Robinson, 2007; Sparkes, 1998; Warriner & Lavallée, 2008). As a result, regulations regarding the maximum number of hours and the type of training children should engage in have been instituted in all sports. Each sport has adopted the LTAD model (Canadian Sport for Life, n.d.), which is geared at preventing early specialization in children, in order to avoid injuries and some of the challenges and repercussions of early retirement. The LTAD model incorporates seven stages:

- 1) Active start.
- 2) FUNdamentals.
- 3) Learn to train.
- 4) Train to train.
- 5) Train to compete.
- 6) Compete to win.
- 7) Second career/active for life.

Each stage comes with specific age-related guidelines about the number of hours to train and the skills to be developed. In spite of its potential benefits, the LTAD model has its own limitations. The program cannot protect all athletes from all the factors that could potentially lead to a negative retirement experience.

Another approach mentioned in the literature is the athlete-centered sport model, which promotes the idea of a power shift from coaches to athletes in order to foster individual independence and self-reliance by giving the athletes more responsibility (Miller & Kerr, 2002a). This approach is based on research findings related to the relationship between coaches and athletes (Johns, 1998; Jones et al., 2005; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalleyé & Robinson, 2007). Athletes, reflecting back on their careers, reported that there was an asymmetrical relationship between them and their coaches, with the latter having more power than the athletes, based on their greater knowledge and experience (Jones et al., 2005; Lavalleyé & Robinson, 2007). The coaches were considered to be the experts in helping athletes achieve high performance, while the athletes were the ones with “a need to know and desire to conform” (Jones et al., 2005, p. 387). The athletes felt a lack of control during their careers, with coaches making all the decisions during practices and sometimes outside sports (as some participants lived with the coaches; Jones et al., 2005; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalleyé & Robinson, 2007). During their athletic careers, the athletes were discouraged from questioning the coaches’ expertise even when they felt they were treated like “robots” (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000, p. 124), “dispensable tools,” or “physical machines” (Lavalleyé & Robinson, 2007, p. 129). This unbalanced power relationship between coaches and athletes is detrimental for many athletes even after disengagement from sport. Based on developmental theories, researchers concluded that a person develops an identity partly through independent decision-making (Miller & Kerr, 2002a; Murphy et al., 1996), which is thought to foster self-reliance, self-responsibility, and independent thinking (Miller & Kerr, 2002a). Because such qualities are not typically encouraged in the coach-athlete relationship, athletes often felt lost and did not know their interests, values, or what to do with themselves after retirement (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). In the athlete-centered model,

coaches are encouraged to involve the athletes in decisions regarding their training, competitions, as well as health behaviours such as nutrition, conditioning, or recovery, with the goal of shifting some of the responsibility onto the athletes (Miller & Kerr, 2002a).

Although the athlete-centered sport model for empowering the athletes and encouraging independence has obvious benefits, there may also be some pitfalls. Through this approach, athletes are encouraged to make decisions and take more responsibility for their training. However, this might not be possible in all sports and at all levels, and it does not necessary protect the athletes from experiencing a negative retirement.

Even though there are some unquestionable benefits of each of the programs for athlete retirement, none of them offer a clear solution to help the athletes who struggle after their athletic career is over. Although some of these programs aim to prevent the negative experiences by addressing some issues while the athlete is still active, there is no guarantee that the quality of the transition will improve.

## **Conclusion**

In my literature review, I demonstrated that many factors influence how athletes experience retirement from their sports. Several of these contribute to athletes experiencing a negative transition: first, if their withdrawal from sport was involuntary due to age, deselection, injury, or other non-sport related issues, they might not have pre-planned for life after sport; second, they had not achieved their athletic goals; and third, they had not developed other roles and social networks outside the athletic realm. While some athletes transition relatively smoothly out of their sports, many others experience difficulties physically, psychologically, socially, and occupationally. That happened in my case as well. Whereas some of my teammates did not crash as hard once retired, I experienced months of loss, depression, and even anger at times.

Physically my body was changing fast and what I perceived as drastic. My social group (the fellow athletes and coaches who were like my family) was gone, and I did not have anyone to talk about what I was feeling and experiencing. I felt alone and lost. I did not know what to do with myself and I had no clear plan for post-retirement from sport.

Why some athletes experience a negative transition while others transition more easily is a complex question due to numerous and interacting factors including individual, environmental, and socio-cultural influences. The need to support elite athletes to prepare for retirement has been recognized, and assistive programs and models have been developed to help them during and after their athletic careers. However, these programs do not address all the problematic issues of athletic retirement, and not all athletes have access to such programs. In Romania for example, when I stopped playing basketball there were no such programs available to help me deal with my retirement process. All I could think at that time was that I was the only one going through those experiences, and that there was something wrong with me. Thus, all I could do at the time was to hide, put up a brave face in public, and crash when I was alone.

The transition out of sport seems to come in three phases: an initial sense of loss and being in a void, followed by a period of growth and adaptation, until the former athlete reaches a happy, well-adjusted point in life without sport. Although we know some of the factors that influence the retirement experience, it is not very clear what moves athletes along through these phases, and what contributes to them feeling satisfied and well-adjusted to the new life after sport. Some athletes seem to either take a long time or remain stuck in the second phase, not being able to move forward and reach the well-adjusted, happy phase of retirement. I was one of those athletes. After the initial phase when I was very depressed and lost, I managed to pick myself up enough to prepare for the university entrance exam, which involved passing

gymnastics and track and field physical tests. While training for those, I went back to my club and kept training with the current junior team and trying to play for the club's senior team. The physical training and the routines helped my emotional state. I was also able to get into university where I got exposed to other sports. After a couple years of playing for senior teams, there was nowhere else to go. I refocused my attention on other sports. I really wanted to learn how to dance and swim. Those two became my new sports that I tried to perfect. Physically I started to feel better; I was fit again and proud of what I could do. I was also working on my occupational side, studying physical therapy that I liked and then doing physical therapy internships. I was good at both, and I loved working with people, which helped me feel a little better about myself. However, all the new sports and all the training that I was doing, did not compare to how basketball made me feel. Deep inside I was still missing that life. I could not say I was happy. All that time I involved myself in more and more training, just to get the same feeling that basketball gave me. Yet, nothing did.

Though I was able to move forward on educational and professional levels, emotionally I was trapped. School and jobs never seemed to have the same meaning as the sport had for me. I was moving through the new life more like a robot, instead of a happy, fulfilled person although I, externally, presented all the signs of moving to what previous research described as well-adjusted life after retirement from sport. At one point, it started to become clear that the personal perception and meaning could be the part that differentiates what some athletes see as a positive transition versus a negative one. In several ways, my individual story resembles the findings from the previous research.

Thus, I was interested in an interpretive narrative study of other women athletes' experiences but recognized that several of the previous narrative studies focused on the



experiences of one to three athletes. In addition, several of them examined women athletes' experiences in individual sports, particularly different forms of gymnastics, where athletes retire young. As a team sport player, I was also interested in women's retirement experiences from team sports and did not want to limit my study to experiences of young athletes. Some of the previous studies on women athletes also focused on a single topic. For example, the case studies (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Jones et al., 2005) only discussed one aspect related to the retirement of those athletes (e.g., the coach athlete relationship or the development of an eating disorder).

While I acknowledge the importance of these aspects, I was interested in how the entire life of an athlete shaped their retirement experiences. Some previous researchers also used such terms as biographical approach or interpretive biography (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Carless & Douglas, Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Jones et al., 2005) to examine the athletes' retirement process. I, however, employed what I identified as a lifespan approach. In my study, the lifespan approach denotes to an exploration of the athletic experience of former elite female athletes during their entire athletic career as well as after their retirement considering what they believe is important in their experience, not what I, as a researcher had pre-identified as an issue (e.g., coach-athlete relationship or eating disorder).

Finally, as a retired athlete myself, I was surprised how few researchers included their own experiences in their studies. I wanted to integrate my own experiences in the study as a way to illustrate a retirement story and then compare and contrast it to how other athletes may construct meanings from their stories.

## Research Questions

In my study, I explored the storied lives of former elite athletes. Based on their experiences during their entire athletic lives, I investigated factors that helped or hindered their retirement experiences and how retired athletes created new lives with new meanings. More specifically, I asked:

- How did the athletes experience their athletic life?
- How was their retirement experienced?
- What supported and/or hindered their transition out of elite sport?
- How did elite female athletes create new meanings and re-story their lives?

To find answers to my questions, I chose an interpretive approach to learn about the connections retired women athletes created between their athletic careers, their retirement processes, and their lives after sport.

In the following chapter I will detail my interpretive, narrative research approach that I found was best suited to explore personal experiences and meaning-making processes. It allows the participants to use their own voices and me, as the researcher, to stay closely located and connected to their research stories.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

I consider myself an interpretive researcher. Thus, I draw on the interpretive paradigm to examine women athletes' retirement experiences. In this chapter I will frame my interpretive examination within narrative research. Narrative research, however, now includes several different strands and I first clarify what unites these strands to then detail my narrative approach to studying women athletes' retirement. To explore a deeper understanding of retirement experiences, I use a narrative approach combined with specific aspects from narrative inquiry. This combination has provided me with an innovative way of researching and writing about experiences of retirement from elite sport. To further clarify my interpretive onto-epistemology, I discuss my positionality as a reflexive interpretive researcher.

#### Interpretive Paradigm and Studying Sport Retirement

As I concluded in **Chapter II**, I am interested in the subjective experiences of former elite women athletes. I further discussed in **Chapter II** how sport retirement can be examined from multiple paradigmatic lenses such as post-positivism, interpretive research or post structuralism. However, the post-positivist paradigm is not a suitable frame for my study because it does not take into consideration the individual subjective experiences. Neither is the poststructuralist paradigm applicable, as I do not focus primarily on critiquing the power relations within my participants' sports. Thus, I find that framing my study within the interpretive paradigm allows me to answer my research questions regarding women athletes' retirement experiences. This paradigm also allows me to draw on my own story of retirement from elite sport. In addition, within this paradigm I am inclined to see life through narratives, as an accumulation of stories

that bring meaning to our experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For a more detailed discussion of these paradigms, please refer back to **Chapter II**.

As an interpretive researcher, I believe people interact and create their own (and different) realities. Thus, I work from the interpretive or relativist paradigm, also called a constructivist paradigm (Markula & Silk, 2011; Mertens, 2019). The constructivist/interpretive paradigm is based on the ontological assumption that reality is co-constructed by people, and that there are multiple interpretations of reality (Lincoln et al., 2005; Markula & Silk, 2011; Mertens, 2019). In addition, the epistemological assumptions in this paradigm inform us that the data, the interpretation, and the outcomes are also co-constructed, subjective, interactive and/or transactional (Lincoln et al., 2005; Markula & Silk, 2011; Mertens, 2019). Methodologically, it is implied that the researcher interacts with the participants to co-create the underlying meaning of the events and activities (Lincoln et al., 2005; Markula & Silk, 2011). Thus, the researcher is a key part of qualitative research, having influence over the collection and interpretation of the data (Holmes, 2020). Qualitative research approaches are well suited for studies that aim to “understand the social reality of individuals, groups and cultures, and explore the behaviours, perspectives and experiences of people in their daily lives” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 14). Thus, this paradigmatic approach is suitable for my study that focuses on how people, including myself as a researcher and a former athlete, make sense and interpret their experiences (e.g., retirement experiences from elite sport).

### **Narrative Research – a Methodology and a Theoretical Framework in Itself**

Consistent with my interpretive research approach, I believe that all of us construct and interpret our world and experiences in relation to other people. To do so, we create stories, as we

all live storied lives (e.g., Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Smith, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Consequently, I have chosen to study retirement experiences through a narrative approach. While ‘narrative’ can denote a particular approach to studying individual experiences, it currently has diverse meanings in different disciplines. Although much of narrative research can be located within the interpretive paradigm, it can also be used by researchers with other paradigmatic assumptions (Riessman & Speedy, 2006). My emphasis here is, however, on narrative research as interpretive research. I am using the term narrative approach to first detail the different meanings of the term narrative within interpretive research to then discuss how these relate to ideas of ‘storied’ research. I then clarify my own narrative approach that aligns with my understanding of narrative approaches to storied research.

Similar to other interpretive qualitative approaches (e.g., phenomenology), narrative approaches offer the opportunity to explore personal experiences and to understand individual meaning-making processes. Even though the drive to narrate and to story one’s experience has been documented over 40,000 years ago through cave art (Papathomas, 2016), narrative research, as a methodology, emerged around mid-1980s from Clandinin and Connelly’s work around teacher education and development (Lindsay, 2006). However, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) mentioned that narrative research has deeper roots in medical research from the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as in feminist studies from the 1990s. Chase (2005) added that narrative research as “an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods—all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them” (p. 651) is now a broad lens to understanding individual experiences. With this history, narrative research has taken multiple turns (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), but typically shares the following characteristics.

Narrative research is interested in the meaning of the experience and how the meaning is created through narratives. These two characteristics of narrative research come from the interpretive assumption that human beings interpret their experiences, therefore, giving them meaning (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). These meanings then help people to live significant lives and behave in certain ways towards others. According to Smith (2016), human beings are “meaning-makers who, in order to interpret, direct, and intelligibly communicate life, configure and constitute their experience and sense of who they are” (p. 260) by using narratives shaped by the social and cultural worlds they live in. These narratives not only give meaning, but they also influence one’s emotional life and “what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided” (Frank, 2010, p. 3). Smith and Sparkes (2009) referred to narratives as “a framework within which we attach meaning to our experience, make sense of our experiences, and make experience meaningful” (p. 4). In other words, narratives are ways of knowing, ways our experiences are interpreted and made important, and possible ways for individuals to help recreate meanings to live more relevant lives (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). As such, narrative research reveals how individuals make sense of and interpret the world (Riley & Hawe, 2005). Therefore, in my research I was not only interested in the retirement experiences per se, but how the former elite female athletes interpreted their experiences and what meaning they attached to their experiences.

Another characteristic of narrative research acknowledges that meanings are achieved within relationships and are both personal and social (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Smith and Sparkes (2009) further asserted that experience and meaning go hand in hand, as people ascribe meanings to their everyday experiences and actions. People, thus, make meanings in relation to others as well as to the world (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Smith and Sparkes (2009) also acknowledged

that people are relational beings and their stories, and their meanings, are constructed in relation to other people. In my research, I also assume that women athletes make sense of their lives and experiences through stories. In addition, they understand and make meaning of their retirement experiences in relation to their sport, the other athletes, coaches, and families.

Specific to narrative research is also the assumption that selves and identities are constructed through narratives (Frank, 2010; Riley & Hawe, 2005; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Riley and Hawe (2005) added that personal and social meanings are the basis of people's actions, and the individual is "the primary sense-making agent in the construction of his/her own identity" (p. 228). That means that who we are is developed through our experiences, through the meanings we attribute to these experiences, and through the relationships that we foster. In my research then, the context (e.g., the retired athletes' sport, their team and teammates, their family) in which the retirement happened was very important in order to understand the meaning the former athletes gave to their retirement experiences.

Further, narrative research differs from other forms of research as it assumes a necessary relationship between the researcher and the researched (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). This implicates a move away from the idea of the researchers as an objective observer in the research project. In other words, narrative researchers view knowledge development as an intersubjective process in which the meanings people make of their experience is central. In narrative research, thus, the researcher/interviewer actively invites the participants to tell their stories and encourages them to take responsibility for the meaning held within (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). This relational aspect of narrative research allows for new knowledge creation through the interaction between the participant and the researcher. Sparkes (1999) explained that narrative research "is about the telling of stories. In the telling, listening, and reading of stories the

opportunity arises to share experiences about our own lives and the lives of others” (p. 19).

Hence, both the participant and the researcher learn from each other through sharing their stories, and experience personal growth (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). In my research, I was not an objective, external researcher analyzing the participants’ experiences. Instead, I was able to relate to my participants’ narratives as a former athlete myself. At the same time, I let my participants tell their own stories in an interaction between me, the researcher, and each interviewee. I return to this aspect of my narrative later in this chapter when I detail my positionality.

In addition, narrative researchers assume that particular, individual experiences provide a potentially deeper understanding of lives than research seeking generalizable findings (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Lindsay (2006), for example, noted that narrative researchers “reconstruct experience to learn more about something that is personally and socially relevant” (p. 34). In my research, I too was interested in a deeper analysis of sport retirement experiences than one provided by the post-positivist research. Therefore, it was important to understand each individual story to detect what was personally and socially (i.e., interactions with other athletes, coaches or families) relevant to the retired women athletes.

Finally, narrative researchers assume that individuals can understand the world in multiple ways. As Smith and Sparkes (2009) stated: “Humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 3). Narratives are, thus, seen as social and interpersonal constructions, which develop overtime, and are influenced by the psychological, social, and biological characteristics of the characters, environment, and institutional networks (Bold, 2013; Papathomas, 2016). To emphasize this feature, some narrative researchers distinguish between a narrative and a story. According to Papathomas (2016), narratives represent the “overarching thematic structure of a



story” (p. 40) and different stories create a narrative. For example, different athletic stories (e.g., success in sport, winning stories, being the best) create the same performance narrative. In addition, a narrative is not just a description of the experience, it requires a ‘why’ explanation of the experience, and a ‘what’ consequence of that experience. Therefore, a narrative can only happen if there are personal and social elements that create the story: characters, a plot, a temporal component, an action that happens within a context (Bold, 2013; Papatomas, 2016). In my research, the participants were the main characters of the stories they told. Their stories revolved around their athletic lives followed by the transition out of sport. The stories gathered followed different narratives. For example, all participants talked about their athletic lives (i.e., the plot) which took place over a certain number of years (i.e., temporality). Depending on how their athletic careers went, including the relationships they had with their coaches and teammates, and how they interpreted those relationships, influenced how they felt and interpreted the transition out of elite sport (i.e., action and context).

To create narrative research, narrative researchers place different emphases on the above narrative aspects. The assumptions that underlie narrative work make narrative research both a methodology and a theoretical framework in itself. Through narrative research, the participants’ meanings and interpretations of their experiences are emphasized, different than poststructuralist research for example, where the experiences are analyzed through a theoretical lens (e.g., Foucault) that the researcher adopts.

I acknowledge that there are different ways to conduct narrative research and that there is also a line of existing narrative research on sport retirement (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Jewett et al., 2019) that drew specifically on the work by Frank (1993, 2010), who examined how terminally ill individuals make sense of

their lives. In his work, Frank first identified that these illnesses were not curable and thus, the patients would not be able to employ a ‘restitution narrative,’ a narrative of return to the healthy life before illness. They then have two alternative narratives ‘chaos narrative’ that has no hope of positive outcome and ‘quest narrative’ “which involves the reconstruction of an alternative self in response to a crisis or a change in life circumstances” (Barker-Ruchti & al., 2019, p. 689) like retirement from sport. Modifying Frank’s original narratives, as I detailed in my literature review (see **Chapter II**), the previous narrative research on sport retirement has identified additional narratives characterizing sport (e.g., performance narrative, relational narrative, entangled narrative, and making sense narrative) through which the athletes made sense of their retirement experiences. Although this type of narrative work has influenced my research through its focus on narrative analysis of individual athletes’ experiences, I wanted to expand from previous narrative studies of sport retirement through a unique engagement with narrative research and narrative inquiry. I will further detail the aspects of narrative inquiry that influenced my research.

### ***Narrative Inquiry***

The term *narrative inquiry* was introduced by Connelly and Clandinin who used it in the educational research field in 1990s (Clandinin et al., 2007). Narrative inquiry is a fluid, relational methodology that enables the researchers to focus on participants’ experiences through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Broadly speaking, narrative inquiry is based on Dewey’s (1938) theory of experience. In Dewey’s view, experience is both personal and social, and it occurs on a continuum. Thus, an individual cannot be understood alone, and no experience exists in isolation. Both can only be understood in relation with self and others, and in the social context that the experience happens (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Lindsay,

2006). In addition, Dewey argued that experiences are not a onetime event, but rather what happens in the past affects the present, which will further affect future experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Lindsay, 2006).

Following Dewey's theory of experience, Clandinin and Connelly's narrative inquiry approach assigns the researchers to work within a three-dimensional space, in which meanings are considered in relation to time (past to future), space (the space where the experience is lived), as well as the personal and social aspects of the experience (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2007). Further, the epistemological position of narrative inquiry (Lindsay, 2006; Sparkes, 1999) views life as a continuous narrative with a beginning, middle, and an end (Edwards, 2001). Clandinin and Connelly (2000), thus, define their narrative inquiry as "the study of experience as story" (p. 447).

Considering the above understanding of experience, the retirement experiences of former elite athletes can only be understood if we understand athletes' past sport experiences. Thus, in my study, I used a lifespan approach, where the athletic life of the former women athletes played a very important role in understanding the retirement process and the meanings they created in their life after elite sport. Their particular social context (i.e., their sport and the relationships they developed while in that sport) was then a crucial aspect in understanding the athletes' experiences of retirement.

Another core characteristic of Clandinin's narrative inquiry is that this kind of research begins with experience "as expressed in lived and told stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 40), not theories or social structures. This is in contrast with what Clandinin characterized as a more formalistic research approach, where a theoretical framework that guides the research and the discussion is identified at the beginning of the study. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued

that in this formalistic view “persons can never see themselves as they are because they are always something else; specifically, they are whatever social structure, ideology, theory, or framework is at work in the inquiry” (p. 39). Thus, in keeping with Clandinin and Connelly, my starting point is women athletes’ retirement experience as stories instead of a particular theoretical framing. In addition, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), in formalistic research the theory would be present from the beginning of the literature review section to the end of the discussion section. In my narrative research, even though the literature review chapter is written in a more formal way, it is not structured as a defining theoretical framework. The findings sections of my study where the literature is weaved throughout the participants’ stories, also follow Clandinin’s approach “in an attempt to create a seamless link between the theory and the practice embodied in the inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 41). Thus, as Clandinin puts it, narrative inquiry is the theoretical framework, informed by the findings, in itself. Consequently, narrative inquiry research interweaves its insights from the participants’ stories and the previous literature in its findings section instead of separating them into distinct results and discussion chapters, which is what I followed in my three analysis chapters.

At this point, one might wonder how a study without a theoretical framing as a starting point can contribute to the existing knowledge in the sport retirement research. Narrative inquiry does not contribute to the existing literature the way more formalistic research would, by solely adding new knowledge. Thus, narrative inquiry research contributes by creating “a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42). Therefore, my narrative research with retired former elite athletes was not designed necessarily to only add new knowledge. Rather, it was intended to feature a deeper and more detailed way of exploring retirement experiences and the meanings the former elite athletes

create in their lives post elite sport, through an original way it was researched and written. This approach is again in accordance with Clandinin's narrative inquiry approach.

To add to this innovative way of exploring retirement experiences I used another feature of Clandinin's narrative inquiry approach, which is the autobiographical aspect. Narrative inquirers need to justify their personal link with the research by writing "narrative beginnings" that "speak to the researcher's relationship to, and interest in, the inquiry" (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 25). My thesis begins and ends with my story as an elite athlete, which helps the reader understand my relationship and interest in researching sport retirement. In addition, throughout **Chapters V-VII** that explore the elite athletes' narratives, I inserted autobiographical anecdotes and insights which connect with my participants' stories. This aspect of Clandinin's narrative inquiry allowed me to create a unique way of exploring stories of retirement from elite sport.

While researchers who frame their studies with narrative inquiry include autobiographical writing, the purpose and thus, also the style of writing, differs from autoethnographical ways of research representation. Autoethnography is considered both a methodology and a research representation (Collison & Hockey, 2005; Markula & Silk, 2011), and it has been used previously in sport studies (e.g., Denison, 2002, 2010; Halas & Hanson, 2001; Jones & Denison, 2019; Tsang 2000). Such authors as Dashper (2013), McMahon, McGannon and Zehntner (2019), McParland, (2021), Popovich (2010), Throsby (2018), and Tsang (2000) have highlighted, particularly, women athletes' experiences using different autoethnographic ways of writing. In autoethnographic research the researchers analyze their own experiences within a cultural or social context, using different theoretical perspectives (e.g., phenomenology, feminism, Foucault) (Collison & Hockey, 2005). In my study I have inserted autobiographical moments from my life that connected with my participants' stories. The women's stories jogged

my memory about my own experience as an athlete, and I chose to include those memories that resonated with my participants' experiences. However, these excerpts from my life are autobiographical moments intended to, as Clandinin et al. (2007) noted, speak of my relationship to my research interest in other women's retirement experiences. Therefore, my intention is not to analyze my own experience while being immersed in a sport or after my sport career to illustrate how these are constructed through a cultural and social context.

Above I have explained the aspects that I took from Clandinin's narrative inquiry approach. However, other aspects of my study differed quite significantly from the narrative inquiry research practice, and this is where my study departs from Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) work. As it happened, I was able to obtain a significantly larger sample than is typical for Clandinian narrative inquiry projects, which usually have very small sample sizes (e.g., one to four participants maximum, see for example, Clandinin et al., 2016) and thus, the larger sample influenced my data collection and analysis. Because of the small sample size, a Clandinian narrative approach typically includes an ethnographic component of gathering and writing the participants' stories with the researchers situating themselves in a more or less relational way with the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013). The researcher knows the participants outside the research context and has a relationship with the participants even before the start of the research project. Given the small sample size, the researcher is able to follow and meet the participants on different occasions to collect their stories. However, given the size of my sample and the ethics board requirement that the participants contacted me and not the other way around (see the ethical consideration section in **Chapter IV**), I was not able to follow Clandinin's suggested procedure of collecting and writing the participants' stories. In my research I used narrative interviews instead of an ethnographic approach and my relationship

with each participant differed based on the knowledge I had of their sports. Thus, I departed from Clandinin's approach regarding the collaboration between myself as the researcher and my participants over time, in a series of places and in interaction with their environments.

In summary, to explore the retirement experiences of former women elite athletes I used a unique approach to narrative. Even though I employed some aspects of Clandinin's narrative inquiry in my research, I needed to expand on her approach to include all my participants' experiences. This led me to draw on narrative approach more broadly. As narrative is both a methodology and a theoretical framework, my approach was aimed to expand the previous narrative studies on retirement, through a unique narrative approach that featured multiple stories from diverse cohort of female athletes. I now turn to explaining my position as an interpretive researcher in my narrative study. To do this, I detail my positionality as a researcher.

### **Reflexivity/Positionality**

As I locate my narrative research within the interpretive paradigm, addressing the researcher's positionality is also central to the study. Holmes (2020) defines positionality as "an individual's world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context" (p. 1). Furthermore, according to Holmes, positionality is informed by reflexivity or the researchers' self-assessment regarding their views and positions, and how they may or may not influence the research process. Stated differently, positionality refers to what the researchers know and believe, while reflexivity is about what the researchers do with that knowledge.

By being reflexive regarding my positionality as a researcher, I am trying to understand the part that I played in conducting my research (what I know and believe), and how my own self

influenced my approach and conduct of my study (what I did with the knowledge). Several authors (Holmes, 2020; Walsh, 2003) outlined different aspects of positionality: a researcher needs to reflect on their influence on a study from personal, interpersonal, methodological and contextual positions (Holmes, 2020; Walsh, 2003). I now detail each one of these aspects of my researcher positionality.

From a personal perspective, I am a White, working-class female, who just entered the middle age stage of my life. I am originally from Romania, where I grew up first under a communist government, and then under a system that was trying to move past the trauma created by the communist regime. This is important to bring forward because my thinking was formed in a system that did not encourage people to think independently. The government did not need intellectuals, but followers who could be easily manipulated. Almost two decades ago I moved to Canada by myself, and thus I am a first-generation immigrant. As like many others, my story as an immigrant is not an easy one, and it definitively influences how I see, think about, and interact with the world.

My upbringing has influenced my approach to research because it was dangerous, at times, to know too much, or to transmit the knowledge to others in Romania. In my family, my father's father was imprisoned because he was a doctor (therefore considered an intellectual), and my uncle was not allowed to pursue undergraduate studies, because his mother was also a doctor (i.e., an intellectual again). However, living in this culture enabled me to see the value of knowing and understanding the past. I wanted to hear more stories, I wanted to know about others' experiences. This is how I started to understand that people's stories were valuable, and that there was so much information that we could learn from their stories. This was also amplified once I became a mother, and my children started to be interested in stories from my



past. Reflecting back on my own stories regarding my upbringing made me understand that I am who I am because of those experiences.

Thus, following the constructivist perspective, my upbringing contributed to my current way of seeing, understanding, and interacting with the world. Congruent with this paradigm, I believe that people construct and interpret their realities, and that stories are the vehicles to learn about their experiences. Hence, I adopted a constructivist/interpretive perspective to my narrative research in my interest about retirement from elite sport.

Following Holmes (2020) and Walsh (2003), I now discuss the aspect of my positionality that relates to my interpersonal stance or the relationship between the researcher and the participants. My Romanian upbringing is important to mention again, because, as a young person, I became an elite athlete in that system. Being an elite athlete during that time meant that we trained a lot and spent a great deal of time in training camps, away from our families. We, the athletes, also had some benefits that other children might have not had, such as getting outfits and shoes to wear, and better and more regular food. Consequently, many parents wanted their children in sports for those reasons, but not every child made it to 18 years of age being an athlete.

After moving to Canada, I became an athlete in the Canadian system, which was very different from what I grew up with in Romania, where all sports trained together as teams, in different centers or training camps. In Canada, it seemed that the athletes would train as a team only for one particular sport, and the athlete's individual development was the athlete's responsibility. For example, in Romania, conditioning was done together, while in Canada athletes go to work-out gyms on their own. In addition to this difference, my athletic experience in the Canadian system was at a much lower level than in Romania. In Romania I trained with

the national basketball team, while in Canada I trained and competed in different sports from a recreational (in gymnastics), to community level (for basketball), to amateur level (in dance), to masters level (for speed swimming and track and field), to university nationals (for synchronized swimming). However, my sport participation in Canada enabled me to relate to the athletes I interviewed for this study and understand their experiences. It is also important to emphasize that I competed (even though at much lower levels) in some of the sports in which my participants were involved. This allowed me to engage with my interviewees in a deeper discussion of their experiences.

My experience of retirement from elite sport in Romania also influenced my choice of research topic. My own struggles once I retired from basketball inspired me to research other retired athletes' experiences. My own battles helped me to relate to and understand the participants' stories. Some of my participants knew about my background and appeared more comfortable talking about their experience with someone who has been through something similar.

The third type of reflexivity that Holmes (2020) and Walsh (2003) mention refers to the researcher's methodological stance. As I view the world from a constructivist perspective, it implies that people co-create their experiences, interpret realities differently, and the participants and the researcher are both involved in creating knowledge (Lincoln & Guba., 2005; Markula & Silk, 2011; Mertens, 2019). To follow my paradigmatic assumptions, I chose a qualitative methodology and narrative research approach. Consistent with this methodology, I used semi-structured interviews to gather information about my participants' experiences. During these interviews, I actively participated by asking questions, asking for clarifications, and sometimes sharing some of my experiences. I provide more details of my method in **Chapter IV**. This

created a connection between the participants and myself, though I was mindful that the interview was about their experiences, not about mine. The narrative approach that I used to collect and analyze the information gathered from the interviews allowed the participants to share their experiences in their stories and allowed for the active interaction between the participants and me.

The fourth type of reflexivity mentioned by Holmes (2020) and Walsh (2003) was concerned with situating the study in a cultural and historical context. Thus, I acknowledge that my study was conducted in Canada with former Canadian athletes. Even though my high-performance athletic experience happened in Romania, I was still able to relate to my participants' sporting context, as I was also familiar with the Canadian non-elite level sporting system. I have, nevertheless, included in the results chapters some of my own experiences as a Romanian elite level athlete to complement the cultural context of Canada.

In conclusion, the current study was inspired by my own struggles with retirement from elite sport. That allowed me to relate and understand my participants' experiences, sometimes sharing a bit of my own. While I acknowledge that my background, both personal and athletic, has influenced my research, it has enhanced the data collection and interpretation of the results. My positionality consistently informs my narrative approach in which I combine commonly acknowledged elements of narrative research, such as the focus on experiences and meanings created with relationships with others, with Clandinian narrative inquiry, that instead of formalistic research approach uses stories as the starting point of research. It also enabled me to include my participants' athletic lifespans and add personal biographical detail to further illustrate my interest in researching retirement experiences. My method, semi-structured

interviews, however, differ from the Clandinian approach and in the next chapter I detail how I collected and analyzed my data.

## CHAPTER IV

### Method

In this chapter I will provide details of my sampling, narrative interview method, and the thematic analysis of the interviews. I conclude with how I ensure the quality of my thematic analysis. The method that I chose to conduct my study is in line with the narrative approach described in **CHAPTER III**.

### Recruitment and Participants

My participants were selected following the subsequent criteria:

- females,
- over 18 years of age,
- retired for at least 2 years,
- elite performers,
- national/international competitors,
- both team and individual sports; indoor, outdoor, summer, winter sports.

My decision to recruit only women was based on the sex and gender differences that influence retirement experiences. Stambulova et al. (2009) mentioned that “female athletes typically start to specialize, achieve their peaks, and terminate athletic careers one to two years earlier than male athletes in the same sports” (p. 397). In addition, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000), Lavalleyé and Robinson (2007), and Warriner and Lavalleyé (2008) talked about the physiological changes associated with puberty at the time of retirement. For example, different authors (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalleyé & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavalleyé, 2008) mentioned that female

gymnasts tend to retire earlier than their male counterparts because these changes could be advantageous for men, but disadvantageous for women (though this might not be true for every athlete). Other gender differences were mentioned by Murphy et al. (1996), who, referring to one previous study, stated that women have been found to have lower athletic identity than men. Their study indicated a higher level of career maturity and a more adaptive foreclosure status in women student-athletes than men but acknowledged the fact that there are fewer professional sport opportunities for women. In addition, differences in how males and females perceive and relate to change may also influence the emotional and/or social support men and women require through their retirement process (Lubker & Etzel, 2007). Alfermann et al. (2004) reported slightly lesser negative emotions after career termination and a longer duration of adaptation to post-career life in female athletes compared to men, in a sample of elite athletes from three different European countries. Being aware that the previous results might not apply to all male or female athletes, I limited my sample to female athletes, leaving the option to conducting consecutive similar studies with male athletes at a later time.

The participants had to be over 18 years of age to be able to provide consent to participate in the study. In addition, many athletes do not reach national and international levels until later in their teen years, which means they would not have time to be retired for two years by the time they were 18. The reason for seeking athletes at least two years into retirement is that it takes time to create a new life, make new friends, learn new skills, and find new meanings. One participant in Lally's (2007) study took a year to resolve his identity crisis and establish a new sense of self, while some gymnasts in Kerr and Dacyshyn's (2000) study took up to five years to adjust to life-after-sport.

Because there is no widely accepted definition of an elite athlete, for the purpose of my study, I defined athletes who have trained a minimum of 20 hours per week all year round and competed at national and/or international levels as elite athletes (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalleyé & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavalleyé, 2008). To allow for insights into a range of retirement experiences, I did not restrict my sample to a particular sport or type of sport (e.g., individual versus team sport). The retired elite athletes I recruited participated in both individual and team sports: synchronized swimming, speed swimming, figure skating, biathlon, and cross country running.

Even though varsity athletes are also considered elite athletes, I excluded them from my sample. The reason for this exclusion was that, based on previous studies that looked at varsity athletes (Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002, 2003), it seemed that those athletes might have a different commitment to their sports than national level athletes. They often do not train and compete all year round, they must be university students and maintain a certain GPA level, and they might have more time and opportunities to develop other interests and roles outside the athletic realm, which may be beneficial when they transition out of their sport (Lally, 2007; McKnight et al., 2009). In addition, varsity athletes can only compete for the 4-5 years of their university or college career, which may encourage them to consider other options before their athletic career is over (Lally, 2007).

Some inclusion criteria changed during the recruitment process. One was related to Olympic athletes, and the other one to training all year round. Originally, I had decided to exclude Olympic athletes from my study, based on the assumption that they would have more access to the assistance programs to facilitate their transition into retirement (Petitpas et al., 1992; Smith & McManus, 2008). However, I was contacted by potential participants who

participated in the Olympic Games, either competing themselves or being there as a spare. They both mentioned that they did not have any assistance that other elite athletes who did not compete in the Olympics in their sports could also access (see **Chapter II** for programs designed to assist athletes' retirement). Thus, I decided to include those two participants in my study.

My initial criteria dictated that only former athletes who would not have breaks during their training seasons should be included in the study. However, once I started to interview elite athletes, it was clear that each sport was different. They all had some breaks, some longer than others, but it did not mean that they were not elite athletes, focused and committed to their sport. For that reason, I included former athletes who did not necessary train all year round.

### ***Sampling***

The participants for my study were selected using purposive sampling. This is the primary sampling technique for qualitative research where the researchers' knowledge of the topic area enables them to identify individuals who can contribute meaningfully to the aims of a study (Markula & Silk, 2011). This non-probability approach is common in qualitative research and relies on the researcher's judgement in selecting information-rich sources for in-depth study of the phenomenon of interest. While my qualitative research does not aim for generalization of the findings to all retired elite athletes, it does offer insights into human experiences and meaning-making processes.

The University of Alberta Ethics Board required that I did not have direct contact with the possible participants. Thus, I recruited my participants through either my connections with coaches or by posting my research in public places. I left information letters (**Appendix 1**) explaining the study with the coaches to give to potential participants. The information letters



had my contact information and those who decided to participate were asked to contact me. This kind of recruitment was intended to minimize any pressure that retired athletes might have felt to participate in my research. One other retired athlete had already expressed interest in participating in my research, contacting me following a presentation I gave about my proposed study (Mohora et al., 2011). To recruit additional participants, I created a poster (**Appendix 2**) inviting possible participants to contact me. The posters were placed in locker rooms, hallways, and a few sport-specific stores, where former athletes may see them.

Through the above-mentioned techniques, I was able to recruit 10 retired female athletes, over 18 years of age, who had been retired for at least two years, and who provided informed consent to participate. I have included a table in **Appendix 3** with the ten participants, their sport, and level of competition.

### **Narrative Interviews**

To explore women athletes' retirement experiences from elite sport, I invited 10 retired female athletes to tell their stories. Even though all participants were invited to openly tell their stories, some needed more guidance. Before the interviews, I prepared an interview guide (**Appendix 4**) that I used to encourage the story telling. Some would consider this process as semi-structured interviews, where part of the conversation comes from the participants, while the researcher prompts and keeps the conversation going.

Interviews are a very common way in qualitative research to collect information and gain knowledge about the other person, regarding their personal experiences or meanings. Markula and Silk (2011) refer to interviews as “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 82). The semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to have a plan to follow during the interview, and in

addition they leave room for probing questions. Further, the semi-structured interview allows the interviewer to actively participate in the conversation (Markula & Silk, 2011). Thus, I used my own experiences as an athlete to understand and make meaning of the participants' experiences.

The interviews I conducted were individual and eight were completed face-to-face. There were two participants who lived out of the province or the country. Consequently, I conducted one phone interview and one interview via Skype. These two interviews did not differ from the ones face to face in terms of gathering the participants stories. Previous researchers used interviews via telephone or internet and did not find differences in responses compared to the face-to-face interviews (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

During the interviews, I invited the women to tell their stories about their athletic careers, their retirement process, and their adjustment to their new life-after-sport. This type of data collection is referred to by Markula and Silk (2011) as "an extended story of a significant aspect of one's life" (p. 137). Rather than just focusing on the retirement experience alone, I asked the participants to start with their athletic career. I chose this approach to be consistent with the characteristics of the narrative inquiry, as an event or an action (in this case retirement from elite sport) can be understood in relation to past events, and in the context in which it happened (Bold, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Papathomas, 2016). I believed that it was important to understand the participants' athletic experience holistically to analyze their retirement experience. In addition, and consistent with the narrative inquiry, an extended story approach enabled the participants to talk about the parts of their experiences that they deemed important, relevant, and meaningful. This way, the participants had the opportunity to explain and make sense of their own experiences. In order to get rich data, I allowed the participants to take as

much time as they needed to tell their stories. I asked them questions only when I needed to clarify something they said, or when I needed to move the conversation along. I referred to the interview guide (**Appendix 4**) if I felt an area has not been covered or if I felt the participants finished talking about a particular issue. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours each.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As my study involves research on human participants, I am obligated to consider the ethical implications of conducting my research. These ethical considerations in Canada have been developed to ensure that both the participants and the researcher are treated with respect and dignity (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2018). To reach those goals, research ethics boards in Canadian Universities determine if a study follows the subsequent ethical principles: respect for dignity, free and informed consent, vulnerable persons, privacy and confidentiality, justice and inclusiveness (Markula & Silk, 2011).

Thus, before proceeding to recruit participants, I obtained ethical approval from the University of Alberta Health Research Ethics Board to ensure that my study fulfilled the general criteria of respect for dignity, concern for welfare, and justice. Once the approval was received, the participants who contacted me and met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate in an interview at a time and location convenient for both of us.

To adhere to the ethical principles of free and informed consent, at the time of the interview, I presented the participants with the information letter (**Appendix 1**) and explained the goals and procedures of the study, as well as their rights. The participants were encouraged to raise any questions or concerns related to the study and its procedures. Women who were still interested in

participating were asked to sign a written consent form (**Appendix 5**) indicating that they agreed to participate and were aware of their rights as explained (e.g., freedom to withdraw at any point in time without consequences to them, or the right to ask questions at any point during the interviews). Thus, the participants' rights for dignity (or to be autonomous) and for free and informed consent were fulfilled.

Another component of research ethics pertains to individuals who lack decision making capacity (e.g., children, elderly, individuals with cognitive or intellectual disabilities) or vulnerable individuals (e.g., prisoners, people with different disabilities, ethno-cultural minorities or those who are institutionalized) (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2018). While my study did not include participants from these communities, I still found it important and made sure that my participants understood the research purpose and what was required of them.

The principal of privacy and confidentiality in research ethics refers to the importance of maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity regarding the participants information and potentially identifying markers, such as names, competitions, or coaches. In my study, all participants chose to remain anonymous, and they were given the option of choosing a pseudonym of their choice. All preferred that I chose their pseudonyms. To further ensure anonymity and confidentiality, I reminded the participants to only share the information that they were comfortable sharing. Thus, the participants' stories contain information that is relevant to their particular stories and that the women were comfortable sharing. They were made aware and understood that what they shared would be used to analyze their experiences and the meanings they constructed.

In addition, the participants were made aware of the fact that the interviews were being audio-recorded and the recordings would be kept in a locked, private office that only my

supervisor and I had access. After the completion of the study, the data will be kept in a secured place for five years, after which it will be destroyed.

Another principal of research ethics includes justice and inclusiveness. This principle takes into consideration the potential benefits or harms that come up if participating in a research study (Markula & Silk, 2011). In the case of this study there were no financial benefits for participating in the study. However, the participants were given the space and the opportunity to talk about their retirement experiences. For some participants those experiences were positive, and they wanted to share them with others, to let others learn from their experiences. For a few participants, the retirement experiences were not as positive, and they just needed the space to talk about them, to make sense of them, to share them with others who might experience similar struggles.

My study was not designed to intentionally harm the participants. However, due to the nature of my research interest, I was aware that my topic could potentially affect the participants' emotional wellbeing, as the interview could bring up painful memories about their retirement experiences. Thus, I made sure that the participants felt supported and understood during our discussions and had support during and after the interview. None of the participants in the study were distressed during or after the interview. Two participants had very difficult transitions out of their sports and were still working through some of the related issues. To ensure safety, I offered one participant a list of available mental health resources, in case she required professional support after the interview. She was also the only participant I felt I needed to call within 24 hours after the interview to check on her well-being.

## **Interview Data Analysis**

After the interviews are completed and stories are shared, researchers need to make sense of them. I will further detail the steps I took to analyze the interview data, through a technique used in narrative research, called reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016).

Thematic analysis is a commonly used technique in qualitative interview analysis and can take different forms and often credited to Braun and Clarke's (2006) original work. As their work has evolved to several directions, Braun and Clarke (2019) now acknowledge that there are several approaches to thematic analysis and consequently, a researcher needs to be aware of the type of thematic analysis they propose to use and explicitly state their approach to avoid confusion. As an interpretive, narrative researcher, I follow Braun and Clarke's (2016, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis. It resonates with the importance of the researcher's reflexivity that closely informs the paradigmatic assumption of my interpretive research. Following Braun and Clarke, I have explicitly stated my philosophical assumptions that I intend to "consistently, coherently and transparently" inform "analytic process and reporting of the research" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). My coding process and the following themes were actively created by me as the researcher "at the intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity" (p. 594) that I openly discussed earlier in this chapter. Similar to Braun and Clarke, I have emphasized that my themes "are creative and interpretive stories about the data" (p. 594) that have required my "reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data" as well as the analytic process that then generated the themes I presented in **Chapters V, VI and VII**. Consequently, for this study, I used an inductive approach to the analysis developing the themes from the athletes' stories. In summary, Braun and Clarke's reflective thematic analysis fits well with the narrative

methodology, as well as with the epistemological standpoint of my study. To analyze the interviews, I followed similar steps described in Braun et al. (2016). I detail these steps below.

### Phases 1 – 2: Familiarization and Coding

After I completed the interviews, I sent them to a transcriber. Once I received the written transcriptions, I engaged in a familiarization phase. The familiarization phase refers to the process where the researchers deeply immerse themselves in their data to become “intimately familiar with their content” (Braun et al., 2016, p. 196). This phase involves an analytical reading during which the researcher reads and re-reads the interview transcripts to intimately know the dataset. Consequently, once I received the transcripts, I went through all the interviews to get familiar again with the stories and to make sure that the transcription was accurate and reflected the audio-recorded interviews.

The coding step involved uploading the interviews into the NVivo program, in order to help manage the data. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software that helps qualitative researchers to organize and analyze unstructured data. Even though NVivo program could be quite complex, I used it to organize, classify, sort, and arrange the information gathered in the interviews. After uploading all the transcripts into the program, I sorted the quotations into three major areas that the women talked about, which became obvious during the familiarization phase. The former elite athletes shared experiences related to their athletic life, experiences related to their retirement from elite sport, and also experiences related to their life after sport. Within each of these areas, I identified multiple codes. A code, as defined by Braun et al. (2016), “identifies and labels something of interest in the data – at a semantic and/or a latent level – that is of potential relevance to [the] research question” (p. 196). Through coding, I systematically identified several

aspects or ‘interests’ in my data that were relevant to my research questions. This included reading the data more closely and then “tagging” a code to such parts of the interviews that were pertinent to my research subject (Braun et al., 2016, p. 197). Working within the above three areas, I further coded the interviews. At the end of this step, I had 71 codes (which in NVivo are called nodes), broken down as: 21 codes under the athletic life area, 37 codes under the retirement experience area, and 13 codes under the life after sport section.

### Phases 3 – 5: Theme Development, Refinement and Naming

According to Braun et al. (2016, p. 198), the theme development refers to “clustering codes to identify higher-level patterns.” The authors identified three levels of themes:

**Table 1: Levels of themes**

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<i>(1) Overarching themes</i> – which tend to organize and structure an analysis; they capture an idea underpinning a number of themes, but are rarely analyzed themselves in any depth, and are not a necessary feature of a thematic analysis.
<i>(2) Themes</i> – which report in detail on meaning related to a central organizing concept.
<i>(3) Subthemes</i> – which capture and develop an important facet of the central organizing concept of a theme. They are not a necessity, but can highlight an important aspect of a theme, or be used to identify notable distinct patterns <i>within</i> a theme.

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Braun et al., 2016, p. 199

In practice, as mentioned above, the athletes’ stories clustered in three sections: quotations about the athletic life, quotations about the retirement experience, and quotations about the life after elite sport. These then became the three major overarching themes: Life as an Elite Athlete,



Life after Elite Sport, and Living a Regular Life. I further worked with the codes within each of these overarching themes. Thus, during the refinement phase of my analysis, I grouped these codes into themes that I later named based on the information they provided (see **Appendix 6**). I then saved the themes and their corresponding quotations into word documents for further analysis. I went through each theme and revisited what each participant had said, grouping, regrouping, and revising my analysis. Each theme then had subsequent sub-themes (see **Appendix 6**). The themes I chose reflected important parts of the participants' stories related to their athletic life as well as their retirement experience from elite sport, relevant to my research questions, which is what Braun et al. (2016) suggested. After coding and refining the themes, I used a more creative approach to give a final name to the themes, sometimes using quotations from the interviews, followed by explanatory text (Braun et al., 2016). That allowed for a more compelling capture of the story behind the theme.

#### Phase 6: Writing Up

The last phase suggested by Braun et al. (2016) refers to the writing up of the analysis. This phase is a continuous process that starts with the first phases of the thematic analysis. Similarly, I started with writing the codes, then the overarching themes, and consequently the themes and sub-themes. In this phase, I integrated the quotations with the previous literature to interpret the participants' experiences. I further redefined the themes and sub-themes to further compare and contrast the athletes' stories in my results chapters and to reduce the sub-themes to more coherent narratives of sport retirement. Consequently, many sub-heading titles in my results chapters do not match the sub-themes found in **Appendix 6** because I combined them and gave them new subheadings to match the narrative style of writing and to increase the readability.

**Chapters V, VI and VII** that, following my narrative inquiry approach, interweave the participants' stories with my thematic analysis and the previous literature, represent the final product of the above steps.

### **Ways of Representing Research: Research Stories and Realist Research Representation**

Once my interviews were analyzed, I needed to find a way to best represent my participants' experiences of retirement from elite sport. In narrative research, there are different ways to represent stories. One is a more traditional way, and often used, called realist writing. The realist writing is usually an objective, neutral, third person account of the findings, where the researcher's voice is typically not included. This is generally the kind of writing that can be found in quantitative research, where the researcher tries to remain as objective as possible, to provide a truthful account of reality (Markula & Silk, 2011). However, realist writing is also employed in the majority of the qualitative research, although it has been changed to reflect more the paradigmatic assumptions of the qualitative methods. For example, in narrative research, realistic writing is rich in participants' quotations, to convey to the reader the authenticity of the participants' experiences. In addition, rather than being excluded, the researcher's voice and positionality are integrated and reflected upon (Markula & Silk, 2011).

Another way of research representation is through research stories. The research stories are a more evocative way of representing the data intended to be more thought-provoking (Markula & Silk, 2011). Such an approach can reach a larger audience as it may be more engaging than the traditional realist writing. Some researchers use different techniques, called creative analytical practices to create stories that include both the participants' voices as well as the researcher's voice (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). This kind of writing is aimed to "move the reader to think and

act critically and reflexively” (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 183). Smith and Sparkes (2009) provided such literary styles as poetry, ethnodrama, fiction, and autoethnography (see Ellis et al., 2011) as examples for creative analytical practices designed to appeal to all the readers’ senses.

Both realist writing and the research stories have their strengths and weaknesses. A researcher chooses a particular way to represent the findings after considering the audience, what and how they want to address, the impact they want to make, and not lastly, the author’s writing skills (Markula & Silk, 2011). The literature around retirement from elite sport includes mainly realist representations of the athletes’ experiences.

In my study, I also chose to represent the participants’ retirement experiences through realist narrative writing. Consistent with the interpretive paradigm that I work from, I acknowledged that as a subjective, qualitative researcher, my analysis partly constructed the participants’ stories, as well as the representation of their experiences. Thus, I used several techniques to construct my realist narrative writing segments. To present my participants’ retirement experiences in an orderly, intelligible, and coherent fashion, I (as I detailed in my data analysis section), systematically and analytically developed key themes from the interviews. The interviewees’ experiences were then represented through verbatim quotations. Relying heavily on the participants’ words was a conscious strategy to present to the reader a strong sense of their voices “to provide evidence, enhance explanation, make illustrations, and improve readability to foster greater understanding” of the athletes’ experiences (Ayo, 2016, p 88). In addition, I, following my narrative inquiry approach (see **Chapter II**), have also intertwined my own reflection within certain aspects of the text, using a first-person account to distinguish it from the participants’ voices. Using these strategies, I created three chapters that include different aspects of the participants retirement experiences from elite sport. In **Chapter V**, I focus on the themes

that emerged related to *Life as an Elite Athlete*, while in **Chapters VI and VII**, I discuss the themes related to the retirement period.

### **Ensuring Quality in Narrative Research and Thematic Analysis**

The quality in qualitative research has been a dynamic topic. In quantitative research, criteria such validity, reliability, replicability, and objectivity are used to determine the quality of the study. However, these criteria are not appropriate for qualitative work, where researchers do not try to be objective, or to generalize the findings. Burke (2016) identified two positions that could be adopted to judge qualitative studies. One is a criteriological approach, which is comparable to the positivist and post-positivist views. In this approach, a study is judged against established external criteria, assuming that all genres of qualitative research can be evaluated using fixed, universal criteria. These criteria include credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Burke, 2016; Loh, 2013; Markula & Silk, 2011). Loh (2013) captured the techniques used by qualitative researchers following these criteria (see **Table 2**):

**Table 2: Criteriological approach**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Techniques</b>
Credibility (internal validity)	1) Prolonged engagement 2) Persistent observation 3) Triangulation (sources, methods, investigators) 4) Peer debriefing 5) Negative case analysis 6) Referential adequacy (archiving of data) 7) Member checks
Transferability (external validity)	8) Thick description

Dependability (reliability)	9) Overlap methods (Triangulation of methods) 10) Dependability audit - examining the process of the inquiry (how data was collected; how data was kept; accuracy of data)
Confirmability (objectivity)	11) Confirmability audit - examines the product to attest that the findings, interpretations & recommendations are supported by data
All 4 criteria	12) Reflexive journal (about self & method)

Loh, 2013, p. 5

The second judging approach identified by Burke (2016) is the relativist approach, where the criteria used to discern the quality of the research are contextually situated and flexible, as well as study-specific, “tailored to the study’s goals and the researcher’s choice of methods” (Burke, 2016, p. 334). Thus, this approach aligns with the “ontological relativism (i.e., reality is multiple, created and mind-dependent) and epistemological constructionism (i.e., knowledge is constructed and subjective)” (Burke, 2016, p. 334). Following my interpretive, constructionist paradigm, Burke’s second judgement criteria aligns with my study more closely than the criteriological approach. From this perspective, Burke (2016, p. 334) considered the process of judging research a craft skill, where the researcher makes “informed decisions and ongoing judgements about which criteria reflect the inherent properties of a particular study as it develops over time.” Gathering different ideas from other authors, Burke (2016) put together a list of alternative criteria, which researchers could consider as a starting point when judging qualitative work. These criteria include:

- 1) Substantive contribution
- 2) Impact
- 3) Width

- 4) Coherence
- 5) Catalytic and tactical authenticity
- 6) Personal narrative and storytelling as an obligation to critique
- 7) Resonance
- 8) Credibility
- 9) Transparency

Braun et al. (2016) also presented 15 checklist points, specific to judge the thematic analysis. These points take into consideration the transcription, the coding, the analysis and the overall written report. As I employed thematic analysis in my study, I have adapted Burke (2016) and Braun et al.'s (2016) suggested criteria to ensure that my study has been conducted thoroughly. I will now give more details regarding how I conducted my study.

➤ Substantial Contribution and Impact (Burke, 2016)

My study adds to the existing knowledge around retirement from elite sport through my unique narrative approach that combines general features of narrative research with narrative inquiry. The questions that guided my study came from a very personal and traumatic experience, which urged me to try a different approach to understand women's retirement experiences from elite sport. The stories I gathered from the participants were deep and personal, a few of them having experienced a similar traumatic retirement to mine.

➤ Transcription and Coding Accuracy (Braun et al., 2016)

After the interviews, I spent numerous hours first checking to make sure the transcripts were accurate, and then coding the stories. The themes and sub-themes were created and made sense of after a long interaction with the transcripts.

➤ Coherent Analysis (Braun et al., 2016; Burke, 2016)

I then spent additional time analyzing and writing up the findings into three well-organized results chapters. These chapters include many quotes from the participants stories, as well as my interpretation and the linkage to the literature. The entire written report includes many sections, explanations, assumptions, as well as my own reflexivity.

- Inclusion of Personal Narratives and Storytelling, and Transparency (Braun et al., 2016, Burke, 2016)

Throughout the report, I remained active, inserting my own story and reflection. At the same time, I remained conscious about my ethical obligations towards my participants and represented their stories in the context they were intended. It is my hope that by using a combination of narrative approach and narrative inquiry, by incorporating my participants' voices and stories, and by including my own, I created a deep representation of what some athletes experience when they retire from elite sport, which will affect or move some readers.

- Resonance and Credibility (Burke, 2016)

This writing journey has not been on my own. There have been many occasions when I shared my analysis and my writing with my supervisor, who acted as a critical friend, bringing new perspectives and nuances to the writing. I have also had different occasions to present either the proposal stage of my work, or part of my findings. The feedback received guided me and helped me create the final product.

In summary, in this chapter I have detailed my sampling, interview method and analysis, as well as attended to the ethical considerations relevant to my research. I have completed the chapter by discussing my choices to represent my findings and finally, provided the judgement

criteria for my qualitative research. I now present my findings that, based on my thematic interview analysis, I have divided into three chapters.



## CHAPTER V

### Life as an Elite Athlete

Life as an elite athlete is not easy. It requires a lot of passion and commitment, as well as some costs. In this chapter my participants talked about their lives as elite athletes and what it meant to them to reach certain levels in their respective sports. Based on my narrative approach (see **Chapter III**), I viewed the athletes' retirement stories as a continuous narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 447) that can be understood only against their past sport experiences. In this chapter, I make connections to how these athletic life stories began to shape the rest of their lives towards retirement, as I believe the retirement experience needs to be understood against the entire lifespan, and not as an isolated 'end point.' I aim to demonstrate that the athletic life of the former women athletes played a very important role in understanding the retirement process and the meanings they created in their life after elite sport. I structured and discussed this chapter around six themes that I generated from the athletes' narratives: The Passion and Commitment, The Compromises, The Unknown Side of Sport, The Politics of the Sport, The Health Costs, and Why Elite Sport.

#### ***“We Did Five Hours a Day:” The Passion and Commitment***

Although my interviewees participated in a variety of sports – synchronized and speed swimming, cross country running, skating and biathlon – their stories of their sporting lives shared several common characteristics. These included an early start and extreme dedication, commitment to and responsibility for their sport. In addition, they shared some negative experiences that resulted from the need to be successful at the elite level. I first discuss the concept of time that seemed to be a major element of the participants' stories. Time appears in a

number of ways throughout their athletic careers. I first detail when and how the athletes started their sports and the length of their athletic careers.

Most of my interviewees started their sport around the age of seven or eight years old. One of the participants, a figure skater, whose competition career began at 10 years old, nevertheless, reported starting when she was two years old. Previous research also records retirement experiences of certain sports (e.g., gymnastics, synchronized swimming) where an earlier start is common (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalée & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavalée, 2008).

The participants also talked about how they began their sport participation. Some started the sport because “*it looked cool*” (Tania, synchronized swimmer). Alina (synchronized swimmer) also remembered: “*I started swimming when I was ten, and I loved it from the get-go. [...] I started swimming because of sequins and the pretty bathing suits and also because I always felt more comfortable in the water.*” Others started because they had either a sibling or a friend involved in sport. For example, Rochelle (speed swimmer) recalled:

*I started when I was eight, my mom gave us one week to decide what sport we were going to play because she didn't want us sitting at home after school. So I had a week to decide what I wanted to do. My sister's best friend at the time was part of the swim club and I followed my sister.*

All participants initially started to compete at the local and provincial levels, and later on moved on to compete at national or Olympic level in their sport. The lengths of their sport careers were different for each participant. Although some participants retired earlier due to injury, spending about 8 years doing their sport (Tania and Alina, both synchronized swimmers), the majority spent 12-14 years competing in their sport. Samira (speed swimmer) recalled:

*I was a swimmer for about 14 years. I competed for Canada on a national level for three years, starting at the age of, well, four years, starting at the age of 13. I made the Pan-Pacific team to Japan at 13. I went to the Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur at 15 and at 17 I went to the Olympic Games for Canada.*

Ramona spent 20 years competing in synchronized swimming, while Sonia skated for 36 years. Throughout her athletic life, Sonia (skater) distinguishes two athletic careers. After the Olympics as an ice-dancer, she retired and later started to compete in synchronized skating. Sonia stopped skating when she was 40 years old, considering that her second skating career.

Starting their careers early, several of the athletes had spent significant parts of their entire lives in sport. That is a remarkable length of time dedicated to their sport careers, which one would assume it meant that they must have enjoyed that life very much. As sport played such a dominant role in their lives, it is no wonder that many of them may have experienced difficulty leaving it behind. I will return to detail their retirement process in the next chapter, but so far it is clear that sustaining an athletic life more than 10 years required significant commitment and responsibility for their own success in sport.

I now analyze how timing was present in the athletes' stories of training, schooling, and their out-of-sport lives. Elite level sport was time consuming. Similar to athletes in previous research on sport retirement, my participants engaged in training that involved a certain level of discipline, focus, and a change in priorities. However, the intense commitment and dedication amplifies as the athletes reach higher levels in their sports (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalleyé & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavalleyé, 2008). My participants also experienced a similar intensification, which required more time spent training. I also started with a couple practices a week, which later progressed to two – three practices a day.

Timing also came up when my participants talked about having to attend school. They had very busy schedules having to juggle between school and the 25-35 hours of training per week. Some had a very early start, with a 5 a.m. practice that was followed by either a full or a half day at school. The afternoon practices were between three - five hours, after which they would go home for supper and a little homework time. Then it was time to sleep so they could re-start this routine all over again the following morning. For some, this busy routine started in their early teens. For example, Tania (synchronized swimmer) remembered:

*We did five hours a day. Yeah, yeah from 1:30 'til 6:30 and then twice a week we would have morning practices from 5:30 to 7:30 for extra routines, [Laughter] so if you were doing a duet or a solo you would do that in the morning twice a week and then we had eight hours on Saturday and Sundays off. So it was, it was a lot for someone who was 12, I think.*

Sheila (cross country runner), on the other hand, did not have organized morning practices. Instead, she chose to either bike or run to school (a 10 km distance) and used her lunch break at school to run. On the way back home, she would choose to bike the long way, one that would take her 2 hours. At home she would continue with core training and dinner, after which it was time for bed. Sheila's routine speaks to the disciplinary training that these women adopted. This also speaks to devoting more time in sports, in addition to their regular training practices. Some of my participants chose to do complimentary training either to improve personally or to compete in more events (e.g., solos and duets in synchronized swimming). This usually meant early morning practices and all sorts of arrangements to get to and from practices, school, and home. Even though waking up very early was not a pleasant thing to do, the participants felt it

was a necessary part of an athlete's life. Tania (synchronized swimmer) portrayed a vivid picture of one of her early mornings:

*I would get up in the morning, if it was a morning practice day, I'd, my alarm would usually go off at quarter to five [Pause] get up, I'd stay in my pajamas, honestly [Laughter], and just go downstairs. I'd usually have, like oatmeal or granola and a banana and pour myself a big water bottle full of water, and sit in the front window of my house, waiting for my carpool ride to come and get me, half asleep. [Laughter] Then a friend of mine's mother would come pick us up, we'd drive to the pool, usually in silence because we're still sleeping. [Laughter] And get to the pool at Kinsmen, walk up those big stairs, as I'm sure you can imagine, and sometimes we were there before the lifeguards were even there, so you kind of have to wait outside until the lifeguards come open the door, you're the only people [Laughter] in the building, get downstairs, suit on...it was always kind of a funny thing but swimmers would only wear their bathing suit, like just halfway, like not put straps on yet. Weird thing, but we always did that [Laughter] and head outside to the deck, dump our bags and just start stretching, and it was expected that no one needs to tell you to start stretching, you just start stretching, and if you're not stretching when the coach walks by, extra workout would be added, so [Laughter] that was expected for sure, so we'd kind of do a full-body stretch on our own. Sometimes, you know, you'd visit with each other as you were doing that. Then the coach would come over and give you the rundown and the objective for the whole practice, and in the mornings, it was usually just solo or duet, so you'd be just yourself and your coach or your duet partner and your coach.*

Because the athletes spent an enormous amount of time training, they had to maximize the use of every minute of their day. Similar to Tania, Krista (synchronized swimmer) remembered how she:

*[...] would prepare as much as I could, like I'd have my swim stuff ready to go the night before, but it, I, I wore my pyjamas to the pool. I basically got up, my mom handed me my breakfast and I went out to the car.*

Listening to my participants talk about their early mornings and their routines, takes me back to my early morning as an athlete, either at home or in training camps. I also maximized my time, and I can still vividly remember how I was preparing, sleeping in my training outfits, getting everything ready the night before, pulling myself out of bed, even though my body just wanted to sleep in.

The involvement in such a regimented time-tabled life made Sonia (skater) realize that she had no other memory than her sport and school: *“I really honestly have very little memory of my life. I went to school, I went to skating, I went to sleep. I went to school, I went to skating, I went to sleep.”* Therefore it seems like Sonia lost recollections of other aspects of life than sport and school, which speaks to how much the sport defined her entire life. When I think about my own athletic life, I also do not have other memories than sport because I would have had no time to engage in anything besides the time-consuming training. In fact, all the participants recognized that every minute of their day was accounted for. Besides the time they spent in training or in school, many of the participants had examples of ways that they would maximize their time. Tania (synchronized swimmer) mentioned how they would drive to the pool *“usually in silence because we're still sleeping.”* Krista (synchronized swimmer) used the half hour drive between

home and the pool, time which she would use “to do stuff and to talk to my parents and to relax and whatever.” By “stuff” she meant homework or other things that she needed to prepare for:

*I had to be very aware of time and very aware of time management and how I would fit things in. I never got to leave things to the last minute because it just wasn't an option.*

*Things had to be planned far in advance.* (Krista, synchronized swimmer)

Time also surfaced in my athletes' stories when they talked about responsibility as part of elite sport participation. In Tania's (synchronized swimmer) morning story, each swimmer took the responsibility to be fully stretched and ready to go when the coach would walk by, not just waiting for the coach to start their training session. Nina (synchronized swimmer) vividly remembered how she got her driver's license exactly the day she turned 16 to take responsibility for driving to practice:

*I could not wait to have my license. Um, but we carpooled, so before that age, somebody would take turns going around and picking everybody up, and then once we got our licences, we were driving ourselves, for sure.*

By getting her own driver's licence, Nina showed independence as a result of the strict timetable of elite athlete life. Nina continued that it was also everyone's responsibility to wake up on time and be ready in order not to delay the other girls carpooling, disturb their families, and to make it to practices on time.

*There were often times, you know, somebody would sleep in. Hopefully it's not the person who's driving, and then they'd come and ring the doorbell and “C'mon, get up, get up,” and that was before cell phones. None of us had cell phones, so we weren't phoning people personally. We were banging on the door, waking up mom and dad, probably. We'd go and wake up whoever, and probably would have missed more practices if we didn't have each*

*other to do that with, right? [Laughter] So if you were not the one driving, and you were up and you're waiting at home, you're like, "You're 10 minutes late. That's not acceptable," and you're phoning the house and waking up everyone in the house to get to whoever is supposed to come, right?*

In summary, time was an essential element when the athletes talked about their athletic lives. Sport not only dominated the years of the athletes' entire life spans, but also their daily lives. It was clear that their everyday routines were structured around practices. For several athletes, this meant always starting their days with sport with significant responsibility for making sure they attended all their practices. Not remembering much more about their lives outside of sport, like Sheila (cross country runner) indicated, shows how significant sport was in their lives. Since the majority of the former athletes' memories revolved around their sporting lives, it meant that there would have been a major change after their sporting careers, which significantly shaped the athletes' retirement experiences. Many of the athletes also discussed school in connection to the commitment to sport. While some retired when still in school, for others leaving school life to attend, for example, post-secondary education, and retiring from sport at the same time, may have created significant life changes.

In addition to time, my participants' stories often included references to distance. These stories related to other qualities besides time commitment and responsibility that were necessary to keep the athletes at the elite level. Many of my participants talked about how dedication to elite athlete life required moving to a different location for training or competing away from home. The meaning of distance has also been discussed by other researchers, as many athletes have to move away from home at a very young age to take advantage of a more advanced level of training (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016). Elite athletes had to live at a distance from



family and friends, or from familiar environments, as they sought high level training opportunities. However, for some, this meant intense immersion to different training environments or coaching practices. Comănesci (2004) and Olaru (2016) in their autobiographies gave very detailed descriptions of their experiences living in training centers. Even though their experiences were in Romania, their stories speak to the impact it had on them as children and as athletes.

Among my interviewees, Ramona (synchronized swimmer), who moved away from home to train full time when she was 20, acknowledged that it would have not been a good idea to do it earlier, because she was not ready to live on her own. Misha's sport, biathlon, required competing and training in the mountains, so she spent a lot of her time "*in hotel mostly,*" away from home, during the competition season. At about 14 years of age, she would spend two months of the summer away at a training center, and when she was 17, she moved there full time. Tania (synchronized swimmer) only went away for a few weeks for the junior national team trials. Even though she found the camp "*insane,*" she perceived the experience as "*amazing.*" Yet, she noted: "*interestingly enough, [it] didn't make me want to go back and try again.*"

Even though some of my participants moved away from home to benefit from higher level training, most of them perceived their experiences as positive. Alina (synchronized swimmer) was the only interviewee who had a negative experience while training away at the national center. At 17 years old, she was invited to train at the center. Because she "*decided that that's something I really wanted to do*" she went to try it out despite many coaches at her club telling her not to go. Those coaches knew more about the training methodology and approach at the national center and considered that it would be very difficult for Alina to adapt there. Alina's

experience at the national center turned out to be a very negative one and, in the end, terminated her athletic career.

Negative experiences while away from home and familiar training environments have been noted in previous studies. Barker-Ruchti et al. (2012) discussed how different the environment was for Amelia, their synchronized swimmer participant, when she moved away to train with the national team. Similar to the gymnast in Barker-Ruchti and Schubring's (2016) study as well as Anne, the swimmer in Jones et al.'s (2005) study, Marie had negative experiences training away from home with the national team, experiences that led to the termination of their athletic careers. Just like in Alina's case, the athletes in these studies perceived the training environment to be a lot more demanding and hostile than what they were used to at their local clubs. In addition, at higher competition levels, the relationship with the coaches changed for the worse. As a result, the athletes moved from enjoying the sport and learning new skills, to hating the sport (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016) or hating themselves for not being able to achieve a certain appearance that was 'the norm' for their sport (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Jones et al., 2005). This indicates that Alina's (synchronized swimmer) story is not unheard-of and it happens probably more than is commonly known.

I also experienced the effects of distance when I frequently trained away in camps. Just like Alina, I too faced hostility from other girls in my basketball team. It came at different times, once when I was younger and the older teammates did not trust me. I had to gain their trust by becoming good at some parts of the game. Unlike Alina, I was able to adjust to those training conditions. Since I was one of the shortest, I worked hard to develop abilities that would help me in a game where taller girls reigned. Luckily, I was able to really jump, sprint, and shoot 3-points. The other time when hostility showed up was in my last year of playing. I was a senior

then, playing for a brand new team (that only lasted that year). What was different about that team was that they got some sponsors (it was something very new in Romania at that time) and we would get paid. But the payment was based on each player's performance: the minutes played, how you did in the game, or the number of passes or points made. That changed the players' attitude and instead of playing the game we had previously played, they would not pass as much, trying to score the most points and thus, trying to be the best in the team. When basketball became a tool to chase after the money, I hated the sport: it was not about the game anymore, or about playing as a team. It is interesting, however, that this realization did not impact my retirement experience during which I still longed to play. It was obvious, however, that I could not successfully integrate in this more commercially oriented form of basketball as I, perhaps, was not willing to compromise my view of team play for the sake of playing the game for money. This was, however, towards the end of my athletic career when I had obviously already absorbed an 'ideal' way of playing my sport. There were, nevertheless, other sacrifices I was willing to make earlier in my career to succeed.

Unlike Ramona, Misha, Tania, Alina, and myself, the rest of my participants did not want to or did not have to move away to train more intensely. For example, Rochelle (speed swimmer) recognized that she might have missed the opportunity to make it to the Olympics because at 16, she was not ready to leave her mom and move away from home. This is different than other studies (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012; Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016), where the participants made the choice to move away at a young age to train at higher levels in their sports.

My research revealed that time and distance were significant elements of the athletes' stories of their sporting lives. When my participants talked about their long-time passion and significant commitment to their sports, time, and distance featured strongly in their stories. It seems like

these are an overlooked and taken for granted part of elite sport in retirement research. When they appear in retirement research, they are usually discussed in terms of length of athletic career or training hours per week (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). The research does not usually address the meaning of time to the athletes' lived experiences of their sporting lives, their passion and commitment to sport. My narrative research now demonstrates that time and distance deeply shape elite women athletes' lives and consequently have an impact on their retirement experiences. In addition, my participants shared several nuances of their "athletic life", which means it would be difficult to compartmentalize their experiences into neat categories.

### ***"Missing Out?" The Compromises***

While elite sport requires a lot of commitment, responsibility, and dedication, the athletes make compromises and choices daily. As a narrative researcher, I was also interested in the athletes' lived experiences holistically in other contexts besides sport, as most participants in the study expressed interest in other things outside of their sport, such as performing arts, travelling, shopping, or hanging out with friends. However, some gave those up to maintain their strict training and competing regimes. Most participants said they missed school dances or other social events with their school friends, did not get involved in deeper relationships, or they did not have the time to watch certain TV shows or school sporting events at that time. Thus, they were unable to participate in discussions regarding those subjects with their school peers. Because she did not have time to have a job, Nina (synchronized swimmer) felt that she *"missed out on learning some of those skills that kids who did have jobs did."*

Sonia (skater) could not go on vacation with her family due to her tight schedule, but also because of the financial burden that her athletic life was costing her family, while Ramona

(synchronized swimmer) had to miss a family funeral because it was before an important competition. Other fun activities, such as skiing or playing ball games, were avoided due to the risk of injury. Both Ramona (synchronized swimmer) and Sonia (skater) mentioned they would not participate in these kinds of activities, while Nina (synchronized swimmer) would still go skiing with her family, even though that was not positively regarded by her coaches or team mates. In fact, because Nina liked to travel, after high school she *“took four months off and went traveling, and then came back and continued competing. And it’s kind of unique ‘cause people don’t usually do that. My brothers had both done that after grade 12 and I really wanted that experience.”*

My participants’ stories were similar to mine. In high school, I was initially invited to birthday parties. However, after a few refusals because I had training or games, everyone stopped inviting me. I was very focused on my performance at that time, and I did not care, because a game or a practice meant a lot more to me than attending a party. Other times, when my parents had to travel for work, I stayed behind, because my training routine was much more important to me than traveling with my family. Previous narrative research on retirement from sport briefly mention compromises as part of being a committed athlete, but this aspect is not developed further. It is a unique feature of my study, as my participants talked at length about this aspect of their athletic life.

Nevertheless, some participants were able to schedule other activities around their training schedule, yet they prioritized the training. Nina (synchronized swimmer) saved her Friday and Saturday evenings for social events with her friends outside her sport. On the other hand, Sheila (cross country runner) would only hang out with friends after she was done all the training. Krista was taking piano and voice training once or twice a week after her synchro practices, and

she went to performing arts auditions at her high school, even though she knew she was not going to continue as it conflicted with her training schedule. She explained:

*I went to a performing arts school for high school and was really interested in the performing arts and every year I'd do the auditions. I figured, why not? It'd be a chance to, to see and to try and audition, to find out what this stuff's like, and a couple of times I had the, the opportunity or the choice of, do I want to swim or do I want to go do dance this year? Do I want to go do something else totally unrelated this year? And it would have been a conflicting time priority and it came down to making a choice, and so I chose synchro.*

Other times, the decision to prioritize their sport was not an easy one, causing a lot of internal anguish. For example, Krista (synchronized swimmer) also loved speed swimming that she pursued during the summer months when she got time off from synchro, “*to keep in shape for synchro.*” When she advanced in speed swimming, she had to make a difficult decision:

*I think maybe [Pause] there was once where it was a very, very difficult decision and [Laughter] I actually got really, really stressed out about it and really upset by it, by having to make that decision, where I was on the provincial team for Alberta, [...] And [Pause] it came down to a choice, because I love speed swimming and I was being very, very successful that year and had a lot of goals for speed swimming as well as for synchro, but I was on this provincial team, and I had a choice between going to the final tryouts to see if I would stay on the team for the Alberta provincial team for the next year, or doing the trials for the Alberta Summer Games for speed swimming, and I couldn't do both. They were in two different cities and it was [Pause] unbelievably stressful to make that choice*

*because they were two things that I wanted, and one of them, I was...I love speed swimming. It was so much fun, but I ended up picking synchro.*

Interestingly, although all participants talked about how they had to give up “tons” (Ramona, synchronized swimmer), had to negotiate their priorities, or had to skip social and family events, this was not perceived necessarily as a negative aspect of their sport participation. For example, Alina (synchronized swimmer) “*didn’t want to go to school dances and I didn’t want to be part of extracurricular activities because I hated it.*” Sheila (cross country runner) found there was too much drama at high school. Misha (biathlete) only stayed at home for three weeks between November and March, and preferred to be around her biathlete friends rather than her school mates: “*I had more in common and got along better with all the people I skied with than I did with anybody that I grew up with.*” For myself, I much rather spent my summer holidays as well as Christmas and New Year’s Eve in training camps than at home with my family.

That is maybe because my participants found in their athletic experiences something that “*contributed significantly, to who I am, and what I think and how I think*” (Krista, synchronized swimmer). Sonia (skater) exclaimed: “*Would I do it again? In a second. I wouldn’t change anything about [...] my experience.*” And that is how I also felt. My meaningful athletic life story (and I believe my participants’ meanings of their athletic lives) at that time were aligned with what the sport meant to us, how it made us feel, what the sport represented for us. The meaning we attributed to the sport was what was important to us. Like elite golfer, Christina, in Carless and Douglas’s (2009) study, our stories contributed to our single-minded dedication to sport. This is also similar to the gymnasts in Kerr and Dacyshyn, (2000) and Lally (2007) studies, whose entire selves were defined by their sports. Our sense of self, in other words, “came to be

almost exclusively constituted in and through” sport (Carless & Douglas, 2009, p. 55). This is discussed in the retirement literature as performance narrative through which athletes understand themselves (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2019; Carless & Douglas, 2009, 2012; Douglas & Carless, 2009) and is also considered to make the retirement process difficult due to the singular identity as an athlete.

In addition to compromising their time with their families, friends, or leisure, my participants also discussed compromises related to different aspects of schooling. School is usually a very important part in a young person’s life. However, only a few studies focused on this aspect. In their studies of sport retirement, Miller and Kerr (2002b) and Lally (2007) discussed some of these experiences, but only at the university level. In my study, however, many athletes discussed how various aspects related to school had to be adjusted in order to fit their packed schedules. For example, most of my interviewees chose to attend schools that were either close to the location where they had practices, or close to home. Sonia (skater) “*went to a special school so that I could leave and come and go as I wanted and I didn’t have to lose my classes.*” Furthermore, some athletes’ school schedules were modified. Tania (synchronized swimmer) was only going to school in the morning, while others would take only a few classes and miss the rest. Misha (biathlete) recalled: “*it was insane how many classes I missed. [...] I was away more than I was at school.*” Sonia (skater) also did “*a lot of our schoolwork at the rink, and then handed it in to the teachers at the school.*” Ramona (synchronized swimmer) would only take a few classes at school, the majority of the courses being completed through distance education. “*I had to basically give up most of my schooling,*” only taking “*maybe two courses of university, that was it,*” while she was training full time with the national team. Alina



(synchronized swimmer) also did some distance education while she was away training with at the national center.

My experience regarding school, was in some ways similar to some of my participants. Like Krista, my parents wanted me to get a good education and, from the moment I started basketball, they imposed I only get good marks, or I would not be allowed to play basketball. Not only that, but they wanted me to go to better high schools instead of the lower-level ones which most athletes attended. Because I loved basketball so much, I satisfied my parents' conditions. I got relatively good grades, not because I loved school, but because it was the only way to keep playing. I saw school more like an annoyance that interfered with my athletic life. Not for once did I see that I compromised my schooling. Rather, attending school was a small price to pay continue playing basketball. Similar, my participants did not see that sport compromised their schooling. On the contrary, they adjusted their schooling to maximize their sports.

When it came to deciding what university programs to attend, some of my interviewees made those decisions to suit their athletic goals. For example, Samira (speed swimmer) went to a specific school that offered her an athletic scholarship, and Nina (synchronized swimmer) did a full degree around her practices:

*Swimming ruled everything and my scheduled was based on, okay when are our practices, and I worked things around it. That's how I picked my university courses, was, okay, I got to be at the pool at this time. Because I went to a small school, there wasn't many choices. I got the course schedule, I highlighted the things that were available during the times that I could go to class, and then selected from those. [Laughter] I didn't select from everything, and only in my second last year, 'cause I took six years to do a three-year degree [Laughter], after four years, I, I literally said, okay I've finished these courses.*

*What degree can I graduate with that will take the least courses left to finish? It wasn't, what am I interested in. [Laughter] It was, what's going to work and how can I get it done as soon as I can?*

Similarly, when I needed to decide which university I was going to attend, I chose to continue with sports. I was fit and I knew I could easily train to pass the physical entrance exams (i.e., two gymnastics tests, and three events in track and field), so I decided to go to the National Academy of Sport to pursue physiotherapy. I was happy, but my mom was initially devastated. She wanted me to pursue a 'better' program than sports. Nevertheless, it was a good fit for me, and I thrived. Like me, most of my participants chose a university program that was either related to sport, or like Samira and Nina, enabled them to continue having a sporting career. Unlike the athletes in Miller and Kerr (2002b) who took into account the quality of their education when choosing their university programs, my participants, as well as myself, focused more of the kind of program that would allow us to continue training at that elite level or had connection to sport-related studies.

It is interesting to notice that the issue of schooling has not been discussed in previous narrative studies related to retirement from sport. The fact that my participants talked about changing school schedules or choosing a particular university program to match their athletic goals speaks again to the commitment they had towards their sport and athletic life. This emphasizes once more that these experiences shaped their lives, which were also likely to impact their retirement experiences.

Thus, instead of perceiving their commitment to sport as sacrifice, all participants "*had this bigger goal,*" "*bigger thing to be doing*" (Samira, speed swimmer). Ramona (synchronized swimmer) explained: "*I wanted to go to the Olympics and I wanted to win nationals and be the*

best” and Misha (biathlete) commented: “*People were always telling me I was doing something amazing.*” Samira (speed swimmer) elaborated:

*You didn't really feel like you were [...] losing out in any way because you had this thing that was... I was going to Japan and I was going to Malaysia and I was going to Australia, and I had a training camp in Hawaii for the next two weeks, you know? So even though, yeah, I'm not joining [...] the high school drama club. Where's that going to take me?*

It is obvious that my participants' stories exhibit similar characteristics to other elite athletes. The kinds of attitudes, thoughts, and behaviours that they displayed above appear very common among elite athletes. To be a good athlete, as also recalled by the athletes in previous studies of sport retirement, means discipline, commitment, working hard, pushing to be better, and making sacrifices (even though at the time they might not be perceived as such) (Carless & Douglass, 2009; Cavallerio et al., 2016, 2017; Chapman, 1997; Douglass & Carless, 2009; Johns, 1998; Johns & Johns, 2000). At this point of their athletic lifespan, the athletes in my study did not question the requirements of being an elite sportswoman. They continued to adhere to their cultural norms of their respective sports and thus, they did not question the performance narrative that they were living.

A few of my participants, however, started to become aware of the actual impact such a life had on them. Misha (biathlete), for example, considered that her perception of costs versus benefits changed towards the end of her athletic career: “*I was having lots of really cool experiences but I was missing out on being young and being carefree because I was always having to care.*” Ever since she was young, Misha had to:

*think about random drug testing [...] so I didn't take antihistamines, I didn't take drugs, I didn't do anything because otherwise everything I was working for would be gone, [...] I*

*was seriously considering, at the age of 14 or 15 about herbal supplements and how it was too risky to take something like that because you could ruin everything.*

At 19 she “*couldn’t decide that I wanted to go out for a beer with my friends in the evening. I went to bed at ten o’clock every day, except for one month a year.*” In addition, during her very last competition, Misha also realized that even travelling to the amazing competition locations was not necessary how other people travel for pleasure:

*I was in an athlete’s village, eating crappy food, skiing in circles every day. All that I saw was as far as I would run in the morning on my morning run and the trails and like in two and a half weeks in Italy, we had one afternoon in Turin and one afternoon where we went for dinner in France [...] There’s so much more that I’d like to do than go ski in circles and it’s a great way to see the world for a while but then you realize that you’re not seeing as much of the world as you want to see.*

Similar to Misha, but perhaps not to the same extent, Rochelle (speed swimmer) realized that her athletic life was limiting her participation in activities her friends outside sport were taking part in:

*My closest friends are not from swimming. My closest girlfriends were, you know, actually lazy and overweight and partied and [had] boy[friend]s [...] I always would see that they’d be doing other things and doing all this fun stuff and I had to go train, so sometimes it took away my interest in the sport because it was just...I couldn’t do this, I couldn’t go to that.*

Samira (speed swimmer) also noticed the “*massive impact*” the amount of training that she was doing had on her marks. She only became aware of that impact once she stopped training: “*So the difference of just dropping the 40 hours of week of training was huge for my studies.*”

For myself, it became obvious during my first year of university that I could no longer prioritize my sporting life. The first signs appeared when I tried to play for a senior team, because I could not choose courses similar to Canadian universities. I had a very strict schedule and I could only switch a couple of different labs. Even then, because I was in the physiotherapy program, not the physical education program, I was less able to skip, switch, or move classes as I wanted. So, I struggled to make the practices as well as my courses. I needed to give one up. I knew I could not give up my university, but I loved basketball, yet could not keep up with it anymore. At that point I struggled to realize that I had to compromise my sporting career for my education. This was something new to me and not something that I liked. An internal struggle between my desire as an athlete and my growing responsibility as a university student started to build inside.

The impact that the athletic lives had on my participants and myself is another unique feature that my narrative research brings forward. While previous research (e.g., Ruchti et al., 2012; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) recorded that their participants questioned some of the assumptions or the conduct that their sports and coaches were promoting, none of the authors mentioned the athletes being critical of their sport during their athletic lives. Rather, the athletes adopted the “sport thinking” as Ruchti’s participant (Amelia) referred to (Ruchti et al, 2012, p. 378). In addition, my narrative research revealed contradictions that appear in my participants’ stories as well as mine. On one hand, there were many things we all had to give up, or limited our day-to-day life, and on the other hand, the passion and commitment that we all had for our sports and teams seemed to carry stronger meanings that allowed us to continue training and competing. A few of my participants became aware of these contradictions sooner than others during their athletic lifespan. Did that have an implication on their retirement experience? Is this

kind of realization that an athlete might need in order to transition easier out of elite sport?

Nonetheless, the contradictory experiences my participants and myself encountered showed that none of our athletic life stories were uniform, despite a common adherence to the performance narrative.

### **The Unknown Side of Sport**

In addition to the disciplined, but also rewarding athletic life, almost all my interviewees reflected further on another side that is often unknown to outsiders of sport. As they recalled their experiences in sport, the athletes' stories also turned to address some negatives of high performance sport. One element of these stories was the emotional pressure. Training at elite levels was one of the issues that created a very high level of pressure for the athletes. As they advanced in their sports, the participants acknowledged that the expectations became higher, and there was more pressure from teammates and coaches who expected the athletes to do well. I will now give examples of stories that revealed the emotional pressure experienced by some of my participants.

When moving to a higher level of sport, training became more focused and the importance of their performance increased dramatically. Misha (biathlete) commented: "*there's such high stakes in sport*" that "*you feel like everything in your life that you're working for was at stake and you make a one second mistake and it's all gone.*" Misha was feeling self-imposed pressure to do well. Similar to Christiana in Carless and Douglas' (2009) study, for Misha failure was not an option, because it did not align with the characteristics of the performance narrative of striving for success and high work ethics (see also Cavallerio et al, 2017).

However, other stories referred to external performance pressure in their sports. A dominant theme was the extreme rivalry between the athletes. For example, at the national level, the athletes were competing for the same spot on the team. The performance narrative (i.e., winning at all costs, and doing everything for success) (Barker-Ruchti et al, 2019; Carless & Douglas, 2009, 2012; Douglas & Carless, 2009) surfaced strongly in some of my participants stories. This was evident when some of the participants mentioned how some would sabotage their team mates in order to maintain or gain a spot on the team. Tania (synchronized swimmer) mentioned that some of the other athletes at the national team tryouts were “*vicious*.”

*This didn't happen to me, but I would see other girls taking swimsuits from girls so they would show up to the pool and have to say to the coach, like “I don't have my suit,” [...] I was, [...] like on purpose kicked underwater, like trying to swim in pattern and they would, on purpose, like boot you and to make you look lower. Yeah, they would like hold [Laughter] it was crazy, like, you know, because you're an experienced swimmer, you know you have to be up on the surface by a certain count, and people would, like hold you down so you didn't make your count ... it was insane.*

On the same note, Ramona (synchronized swimmer) reflected on the national team: “*I couldn't deal with those girls on a daily basis. They were awful*” when playing “*horrible mental games*” even outside of the actual training time:

*The mental games they played the entire time were unbelievable. It was just like, it was awful, yeah, and like, they would exclude us from ANYTHING. If people decided that they were going to go to the movies after camp, they would just, like the entire team would go, except for us.*

These relationships on the national team involved a lot of “*pushiness*” and were very “*cliquey*,” “*it was cut-throat and that’s part of what made it difficult, but it’s also what made them the best, is they were completely out for themselves, they would do exactly what they needed to*” (Ramona, synchronized swimmer).

This idea of being “*completely out for themselves*” was also mentioned by other participants. It did not matter if they were competing in a team or an individual sport, the athletes could not make too close friends, because at one point they would have to compete against them. Misha (biathlete) “*had teammates but in the end I had to beat my teammates to stay on the team,*” while Nina (synchronized swimmer) remembered the “*huge rivalry*” between the girls, but “*you don’t show it as much*” because “*if you’re doing solo, you’re competing against that person. And then in two hours you’re doing a duet together and tomorrow morning you’re doing team together, [Laughter] or whatever. So, you’re competing against, plus together, right?*” I also had to prove that I was better than my team mates, so I can get more minutes of playtime in the games.

Ramona (synchronized swimmer) had the chance to compete with her sister at the national level, and she brought in a different perspective on the same theme of rivalry between the athletes:

*We were always a team, yeah, no matter what, which I’m sure was also intimidating for most other people, because we always had our backs, whereas with other people, it’s like, you know, your duet partner is your best friend right now, but you never know, she might get switched with somebody else next year and [Pause] whereas nobody would break us up, ever.*

According to Ramona, one needs to take the same attitude or “*they’ll eat you up*” in order to be successful in such an environment:



*You learn very quickly if you don't insist on what you need, you're not going to get it and so, you adapt or you don't. [...] and if you don't adapt, you're going to have an absolutely MISERABLE, miserable time.*

Tania and Alina (synchronized swimmers) echoed Ramona's story: if an athlete cannot excel in the extremely competitive environment, they will necessarily fail. Not all of my participants thrived in this environment. While training at the national center for synchronized swimming, Alina was unable to adjust to such an atmosphere and developed an aversion to the sport: *"I just mentally couldn't do it. I hated swimming, I hated everything, I hated life. [...] every day was awful there."* At the national center, Alina had a strong emotional reaction to the behavior of the other athletes. Her experience is an example of internal struggle created by the external expectations deriving from the performance narrative that drives the elite sport (Barker-Ruchti et al, 2019; Carless & Douglas, 2009, 2012; Douglas & Carless, 2009). Tania (synchronized swimmer) also went to a tryout camp for the national team, and even though she was cut a little before the cut-off for the national team, was *"also happy to get the HECK out of there"* because she would not have enjoyed to be in a team with *"some of those girls."* Other athletes at the same camp felt the same: *"Because it was so competitive for these ten spots, and there was people being cut every week [...], there were girls that were, like, asking to be cut on purpose, like they were saying, 'I'm done.'"* Alina's experience is similar to Marie's story in artistic gymnastics in Barker-Ruchti and Schubring's (2016) study. Marie experienced a major transformation due to leaving home to train with the national gymnastics team. While hers were not necessarily the extreme competitions encountered by Alina, the change was so negative that it led to Marie's retirement from sport a year later.

While my participants all appeared to generally buy into the winning at all cost ethics of their elite sports, there were also differences in their acceptance of it. The competition between athletes and the “*out for themselves*” attitude made Misha (biathlete) “*really selfish,*” “*everything was about me.*” While that helped to reach high performance levels, she realized how destructive it could have been in a relationship. Thinking of how being an athlete would affect her marriage, Misha commented:

*He [her husband] would never get to come first, that it'd be like one month a year where he would have got to come first, and even if it was only for three years, the damage that that could do to a relationship where one person has to be exclusively above the other in all aspects, food, everything, like it would have been really horrible, I think.*

Both Krista (synchronized swimmer) and Sonia (skater) had the opportunity to continue to train and compete at a lower level in their sports after they had reached their highest competitive levels in their sports. At that point of their athletic lives, they found that the atmosphere was “*so much happier and healthier and easier*” (Krista), “*It's totally different than [...] the other stuff*” (Sonia). Even though they still trained hard and were competing nationally and internationally, there was not as much internal competition between the athletes:

*The girls were there because they loved it, they wanted to be there, they were positive, they were excited that people wanted to join their team. They were excited that, you know, that anybody did well, not just, you know, themselves, was such a different culture. (Krista, synchronized swimmer)*

My participants' stories included experiences of intense external pressure to reach elite levels. That translated into destructive behaviors towards other team mates due to the intense competitions and striving for perfection in their sports. While several researchers referred to the

pressures of performance narrative (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014, 2019; Carless & Douglas, 2009, 2012; Cavallerio et al, 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009), they did not explore the tough competition between team mates. However, when recalling their athletic careers, some athletes questioned the performance narrative and therefore, not all the stories were uniformly filled with successfully living through this narrative. Nevertheless, these kinds of external pressures that created high emotional stress for my participants, had a significant impact on their retirement process.

Looking at my participants' experiences at elite level with all the negative parts that come with that level of competition, one might wonder why not give up? Wouldn't it be a relief to get out of such strenuous environment? Why would one tolerate such experiences? Given the stories above, it would seem easy to retire from the sport and be content with that decision. However, my participants' experiences of retirement were not as straightforward as that, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

### **The Politics of the Sport**

Narrative researchers found that individual stories are also necessarily social as people make meanings in relations to others in the world they live in (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). My research also demonstrates that women athletes make sense of their lives and experiences through stories about the world of sport. It was clear that along with the internal competition that developed between the athletes, my interviewees also talked about the politics of their sport, where certain issues were out of their control. Each sport has its own culture, where certain rules are interpreted by coaches, judges, or higher organizations. My participants talked about some of these power relations, which I name the politics of sport.

The athletes' stories often featured individuals such as coaches, judges and higher level officials, who have power over the athletes and can have positive or negative influences on the athlete's experience in sport. For example, Misha (biathlete) talked about the fact that for the Salt Lake City Olympics "*the Canadian Olympic Association had set the standards to be able to go to the Olympics so high that only the top 15 people in the world could go, if they had been Canadian.*" However, the same Association "*went from sending no one to saying in the build up to Vancouver that anybody could go, as long as they were in the top four in Canada, whether they were particularly competitive internationally or not.*" Misha implied that the rules were changed by the Canadian Olympic Association without consulting the athletes, changes that were out of Misha's control. During the Torino World University Games, Misha was already contemplating retirement, thinking that she would not make the next Olympic team in Vancouver, due to the first rule. However, had the rule been changed earlier, she may have reconsidered her retirement.

Samira talked about a similar experience at the Olympic Games where coaches decided who competed in the swimming relay:

*She [a fellow swimmer] made the Games in her own individual event and she didn't make the final. She was meant to actually be a medal contender in this event. She didn't even make the final, so she just bombed it. She just was not swimming fast and they put her on the final, the 4 x 200 freestyle relay, to help bring her confidence back up. So, I was at the top of my game and she was pretty much as low as you can be in your game, and psychologically broken from having done so poorly and they put her on the relay in my place. So politically, I was just pissed because they took my Olympic experience away to make somebody else feel better who had, this was her second Olympics. So, she had done it*

*before and you know, this was supposed to be the one where she was supposed to, you know, be strong enough to medal contend, etc. and she wasn't doing well, and their rationale for this was "Basically even on her bad days, she's about on par with you," and I said, "No, that's just not true." Like that is just not true. If that were true, you know, they're basing it on experience, you know? She is the more experienced athlete. There was a chance I could have broken under the pressure, so you know, so I wasn't even given the chance because I was more of an unknown than she was, even though she was having a bad day. So, it was just a decision that was made based, kind of, just off the gut feel of the coaches, and it doesn't really matter what the athlete argues, you know? You can make your case but it is what it is. You don't get that choice.*

Misha's story shows how athletes are in put in un-equal positions based on preconceived notions related to their previous performances. This could put more experienced athletes in privileged positions where even when they do not perform well, they are still given the chance to compete, while less experienced athletes might be ignored. Samira believed that in her case, the decision to let the senior swimmer compete in the relay was unfair, and not based on her performance in that competition. Samira also knew that it was her last chance to perform at the Olympic level, so she was very disappointed with the coaches' unfair decision that she could not influence.

Besides the coaches and the Olympic officials, judges also have an extraordinary impact in the judged sports. In the synchronized swimming world, for example, the judges hold an immense power over the swimmers. The synchronized swimmers I interviewed talked about the subjective judging that is based on coaches' previous success or the judges' personal impression, not on the performance during the competition day. Ramona mentioned that a coach from a different team could influence the judges to score a duet lower, because "*they* [the swimmers]

*are new.*” Other times, judges would score the athletes from their geographical region higher. This kind of judging was also mentioned by Johns (2000) in his study with retired rhythmic gymnasts. The gymnasts explained that the judges would monitor them even outside the competition floor and the impression they formed from that environment would influence their scoring.

Besides judges and officials, coaches also have an important role in the athletes’ experience during their athletic careers. Marie, the gymnast in Barker-Ruchti and Schubring (2016) study, during her early gymnastics career had five coaches who supported her, motivated her, and helped her improve. However, when she reached a higher level, her new coach at the training facility was different and treated her differently than the previous coaches. The positive relationships she had with the previous coaches changed to a much more negative relationship with the last coach, which influenced how she enjoyed gymnastics. If before gymnastics meant learning new skills, it became all about heavy weight and poor performance. Similarly, when Anne’s (swimmer in Jones et al. (2005) study) coach changed, being good in swimming meant more to the coach than just having the skills. Thus, Anne’s performance was linked to her weight, which deteriorated the relationship she had with the coach, which lead to a negative experience in her sport. My participants recalled similar experiences. Like these two athletes, two of my participants talked about their relationship with their coaches which influenced their experience in their sport. In these two cases, Nina and Krista (synchronized swimmers) were made to feel less important by the coaches, because they did not conform with the norm of the sport. Nina took some time to travel after her high school and restarted her training two months later than her team mates. Even though she got back in shape and did very well at the competitions and during the season, her coach told her that she “*didn’t deserve it.*” That was “*a*

*very defining moment*” in Nina’s athletic career: “*That just kind of shattered everything for me right at that moment.*” Nina continued to swim for another few years at high level doing well, yet “*I don’t think I ever did as well as I could have.*” The coach also made other decisions regarding her duet partner without consulting Nina: “*It just felt like she was always arranging to make it better for the other person, not for me, that I was a consolation prize.*”

Likewise, Krista (synchronized swimmer) was at a point in her career where she was transitioning out of swimming with the club. To do that, she “*chose not to swim team*” and only did solo routines. Because of her decision, “*I don’t think I was regarded in the same way as girls who were swimming team with the club*”, and “*I was made to feel less important and like we didn’t matter, I didn’t matter as much as a swimmer.*” Krista continued:

*We were at a swim competition [...] and we were having a team meeting, like a pow-wow, before competing the next day, and there was one other girl who was swimming a solo for the club, and the coach said, “We really hope our SOLOIST does well tomorrow.” And I said, “Soloists, you have two of us.” And she looked at me for a second and went, “Oh, right, SOLOISTS.” And I was like [...] so, what am I? Chopped liver? Like it was, [Pause] made to feel excluded, I guess?*

It was obvious that the interviewed athletes, although feeling that they were treated unfairly, had to accept the politics of their sports. Most of the athletes accepted such politics as a part of elite sport culture. Athletes at that level expect these kinds of issues and hope that they become the ‘favorite’ athlete. The need to conform with the specific behaviours, values and norms of each sport no matter what, is an issue that has been brought up by other authors from different perspectives. For example, Chapman (1997) observed that lightweight rowers were expected to conform with the responsibility to get to the required weight. Jones et al. (2005) discussed how a

swimmer had to please the coach and lose weight in order to be seen as a good athlete. Similar, Cavallerio et al. (2017) and Johns (1998) detailed that to be a good rhythmic gymnast, the athletes had to follow norms such as: being slim, being the best and winning all the time, work hard, and be disciplined. In light of these experiences, one would wonder if retirement from sport would not seem like a relief. However, as I will discuss in the following chapter, the answer is not that easy, as retirement is a complicated process.

It is clear that these elite athletes had to adopt the values and norms of their sports in order to integrate in their teams. I also remember when I was training for gymnastics, the gymnasts from the national team at that time were not allowed to style their hair how they wanted, they all had to have long hair tied up in a ponytail with bangs (these descriptions can also be found in Comăneci (2004) and Olaru's (2016) autobiographies). Similarly, when I was a part of the synchronized swimming culture, I can attest to the fact that synchronized swimmers had to maintain a low body weight, had to wear make-up and gelatine in their hair for competitions, and the hair and make-up had to be done identically for every competitor in the team. When my participants tried to be different and do what felt good for them, they were made to feel excluded, not part of the team, as if they did something wrong. That type of discipline affected Nina (synchronized swimmer), for example, for the rest of her career. Similar to my participants' stories, Tsang (2000) adopted a feminist perspective to explore the idea of being part or being different from what is seen as normal in her sport (rowing) as well as the society. Using personal narratives, Tsang (2000) discussed how athletes in rowing teams have to portray a certain image and when that image is disrupted, they are singled out, commented on, or made fun of. In one of her narratives, Tsang (2000) used the example of 'make-up' to illustrate how the person wearing



it at work looks good, while on the boat during training, the same person appears different and out of place.

Their stories illustrated that the athletes were aware of the politics in their own sports, which were not always fair. As a result, some of them seem to construct their own meanings of what ethical sport should be. From the athletes' stories, however, it was clear that the requirement to conform with the values and norms of a sport applied to both team and individual sports, because in individual sports, even though the athletes compete on their own, there is still a team of skiers, biathletes, swimmers, gymnasts, or cross-country runners that the athletes are expected to fit in with. While many of the athletes in my study reported unfair politics within their sport, these experiences had different impacts on the length of their sporting careers.

## **Health Costs**

The former athletes' stories revealed that some of my participants' careers were affected by the politics of their sports over the long term. Another story related to health emerged in relations to the politics of sport. The athletes talked about some of the health costs that they experienced personally or witnessed in other athletes. One of these health costs was having to train with injuries.

### ***“Everybody’s Injured:” Training with Injuries***

As compliant athletes, elite sport performers also must get over their injuries and continue to train. It is a well-known fact that elite sport comes with injuries and the athletes go to extremes to continue training (Cavallerio et al., 2016; Theberge, 2008). Cavallerio et al. (2016) vividly illustrated Sally's (a rhythmic gymnast) training through her intense back pain, and the

disconnection between her sacrifice and the coach's perception of Sally's poor performance. I discussed earlier the extreme commitment and passion my participants had for their sports, yet, and they also talked about training with injuries. Training with injuries was also a common theme in the athletes' stories. Ramona (synchronized swimmer), for example, acknowledged that at elite levels "*overtraining is rampant.*" She continued that "*everybody's injured*" to some extent. Alina (synchronized swimmer) also mentioned that the more focused training at the higher level led to the development of torn meniscus.

Because Sonia (skater) loved the sport so much, she "*would have done anything to be on the ice. [...] Snow storms, illness, I skated sometimes, oh my god, so many times I remember I was delirious with a fever at one time, with strep throat, and I'm still on the ice.*" Sheila (cross country runner) who developed shin splints would keep running until they would turn into stress fractures, despite different therapists urging her to "*calm down.*" When running was too painful, she did alternative modes of exercise (e.g., biking) to keep her fitness level. Her motivation to "*be the best*" and to "*get to nationals and worlds*" was the engine that kept her training through all that pain.

Both Tania (synchronized swimmer) and Rochelle (speed swimmer) developed shoulder injuries which later ended their athletic careers. They talked about the intense pain they endured during training, pain that not only affected their performance, but also their free time. Rochelle (speed swimmer) remembered that before deciding to retire, she tried physical therapy for six months, yet "*I just couldn't train any longer. The pain was too much. I wasn't able to drive anymore 'cause I couldn't hold my arm [...] perpendicular from my body. I wasn't able to hold that position. So I wasn't driving and writing notes in classes was becoming difficult, so I'd have to stop and take a break.*" Tania (synchronized swimmer) trained with an injured shoulder for a

year before deciding she could no longer continue. The decision came one morning when she dropped a four-litre jug of milk while trying to pour it on her cereals. Tania's experience in sport also changed after the injury because *“there were times where I couldn't make it through the whole practice, and I'd have to sit on the edge and watch with ice on my shoulder. [...] that was the worst, for sure having to watch when you physically can't do it anymore.”*

Because of our overall training approach, injuries were not as prevalent in my team. However, I too dealt with a couple recurrent injuries which affected both my training and my personal life. Just like my participants I had the same mentality: train at all costs. I kept training, hoping the injuries would heal on their own, without taking time off to properly heal. For us athletes, therefore, the story of pain and training at all costs was what we embodied as 'real' sport and what we considered well worth doing (Frank, 2010). As the pain and training at all costs were essential meanings of the athletic life stories, they also influenced our emotional life.

In addition to the physical injuries, all the injured participants talked about the emotional toll that came with it. Tania (synchronized swimmer) got angry and frustrated with the injury because she felt separated from the team:

*I didn't go to weight training, I didn't go to ballet, I was kind of separated from my team, because during the non-water time, I was at the physio clinic [...] And so I would go up there before practice to ice, and they would inject me with, like, freezing shots and attach these, like, electromagnetic things to my muscle to stimulate it so that it would be ready for the three-hour practice time, so it'd be an hour of that while my team was at weight training, and then three hours of practice, and then while my team went to, whatever after-practice thing we were doing, I went back to the physio clinic to get stretched out and*

*cooled down. So that was hard. That was really hard, actually [Laughter] because I felt like I wasn't with my team.*

Sheila (cross country runner) remembered being “*tired of always training and always pushing my body and always being injured.*” Rochelle (speed swimmer) analyzed the mentality of an elite athlete, who would keep pushing on and on through the pain:

*It's really difficult to keep trying to push yourself through pain. And one of the main things about sport is that, you know, it feels like it's all in your head. You're just, you're making this into a bigger deal than it is, so you're trying to actually minimize it, which, you know, so you're in a lot of pain and you're saying, “No, I could probably do another set,” you know? [...] ... and you can. You actually physically can. It's quite surprising what the body can do.*

Both the physical injuries as well as the emotional toll that the injuries took on the participants are issues that have been discussed in previous studies (Cavallerio et al, 2016; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalloé & Robinson, 2007; Theberge, 2008). Sally, a rhythmic gymnast in Cavallerio et al. (2016) study was battling a back injury during practice. Through a creative writing process, the authors evocatively showed the mental anguish Sally was going through trying to perform her routines, while having excruciating back pain. Mentally she was trying to adhere to the elitest values and norms of the sport (e.g., being a good gymnast), yet her aching body did not allow her to perform as she wanted to (Cavallerio et al., 2016).

My participants' stories confirm that the injuries are more than physical incapacity. They are a result of many factors (individual as well as the sporting environment) and they impact more than just the physical performance and thus, acquire meaning beyond it. There is a point after the injury when the athletes cannot comply with the norms of the sport and become outsiders. For

some athletes, those injuries are career ending, which was the case for some of my participants (discussed in the next chapter). However, knowing that athletes retire due to injuries is not sufficient to understand their transition period out of sport. Understanding the story behind the injury, the impact that the injury had on the athlete, the meaning they attribute to that injury, can offer some light into the retirement experience. Thus, my chosen lifespan approach to retirement, can provide a more complete picture of the athletes' experiences and the stories they construct. At this point of the athletic life span, it seems that we all shared an extreme dedication to the sports and seemed to be willing to sacrifice our health to achieve success without too much questioning. In addition to the physical injuries, the problems around body image were also quite prevalent among many athletes.

### ***“Just Another Ten Pounds and You’ll Be Good:” Body Image and Body Type***

The prevalence of body image problems among the women athletes appears very high. Previous research demonstrates that these issues develop from a combination of athletes' personal thoughts and beliefs and the requirements of the sporting environment, which include the athletes' desires to conform and the pressure the athletes feel from their teammates or the coaches (Jones et al., 2005; Johns, 1998; Johns & Johns, 2000; Lavalée & Robison, 2007; Theberge, 2008). Many of my participants' stories touched body image concerns. Rochelle (speed swimmer) reflected on the extent of these body issues: *“It was tough at that age and every girl...honestly there wasn't a single swimming colleague that I had who did not have negative issues with their body.”*

Krista (synchronized swimmer) mentioned that she used to put a lot of pressure on herself to look like the other girls on her team: she needed to have slimmer thighs like some of the other

girls. Other swimmers (e.g., Alina, Nina, Tania, and Rochelle) got frequent fat tests as well as comments from the coaches about the weight they needed to lose. Alina (synchronized swimmer) remembered how, when she was ten years old, one of her coaches came to her and pushed her belly saying: *“You’ll get rid of that!”* When Rochelle (speed swimmer) developed *“hips and breasts and all that kind of stuff”* around 14-15 years of age, her coach would pinch her and say *“Oh, yeah, you know, just about another ten pounds and you’ll be good.”* She found it difficult to be *“more of a full-figured girl going as an elite athlete”* and yet her *“puberty was still super delayed. [...] I didn’t get a regular period until my mid-twenties. [...]at 16 I got my period but even yet I’d get it maybe three, four times a year and then I only, yeah, got a regular...and even pubic hair. Like I didn’t get armpit hair until I was 24.”*

The body stories and the meanings the athletes constructed to be a ‘good’ performance body were also made within relationships to others (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Sonia (skater) also remembers a time around 12-13 years of age, when she was *“chubbier than everyone and my coach constantly said [...] ‘You need to get skinnier, you need to stop eating, you need to do all this’”* despite her winning a competition. As a result of those comments, she started dieting and continued it until she quit her sport at 40 years of age. Rochelle (speed swimmer) also experienced situations when coaches or even other swimmers would comment on each other’s body features to intimidate *“the competition.”*

*Like you’re up on the swim blocks you know, before...you’ve got coaches from all over the country looking at you in your bathing suit and commenting, you know? [...] You hear it about other athletes, of course they’re talking about... ‘Oh look at Rochelle, you know, she’s sure put on some weight this year, she’s got...’ you know, I’m at the competition so*

*you've got to break me apart, you know? And we did it to the other girls and they did it to me and it's just...it became catty and yeah, so it wasn't good.*

Such experiences of losing weight as a normal practice are also described in previous studies (Chapman, 1997; Johns, 1998; Jones et al., 2005; Theberge, 2008; Warrnier & Lavalée, 2008). Theberge (2008) discussed the many ways different athletes lost weight to conform with the norms of their sport (e.g., wrestling, light weight rowing). Anne, swimmer in Jones et al. (2005) study, following her perfectionist tendencies and the desire to please her parents and her coach, started to drastically diet until she developed bulimia. That happened after her coach commented on her weight and making it clear that was what was expected of her if she wanted to improve her performance. Just like the women athletes in these studies, many of my interviewees were exposed to comments related to their weight or appearance from their coaches or other athletes. Those comments, as well as their own beliefs, influenced the athletes to adopt practices to reduce their weight to conform to the unwritten norms of their sports. My narrative research then illustrated, following Smith and Sparkes (2009), that the athletes ascribed meanings to their everyday body experiences and actions in reflections to others in their social sporting world. It was clear that their perceived need for constant weight loss was constructed in relation to other influential people such as coaches and the fellow athletes around them.

Consistent with previous research findings (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012; Johns, 1998), most of my participants started to receive comments about their bodies when they were very young. However, their body stories also revealed that as they advanced in their sports, the stakes, including those related to their appearance increased at every level. Alina (synchronized swimmer) talked about her experience becoming worse when she moved away to train at higher levels:

*One of the problems was that I was never thin, I was never thin and I was never going to be thin, but I was good, and so [...] here [talking about her home club] you just wanted to be thinner. There, there [talking about national team training center] it was so negative and so poisonous, there were mirrors around the pool and [...] we had our own pool, and we had our own gym room, downstairs, so you went to that pool and you only saw those people every day. You didn't see lifeguards, you didn't see anyone else, and so you were kind of in this isolated milieu and there were mirrors around the pool and there were mirrors in the weight room, and, you know, just, I had a solo and my coach telling me, like "She has to have black panels on the side of her swimsuit because we need to make her look thinner." Or, "You need to lose weight."*

Similar to Alina and Nina, Sonia (skater) observed that in her team, all the girls had to look the same and have the same weight. She also felt that one of the selection criteria during tryouts for a national team was the girl's body type.

It may be that the expectations of a certain look of the body is greater in the aesthetics sports like synchronized swimming. However, in my study there were stories of an 'ideal' athlete's body in all of the worlds of sport. For example, in biathlon, Misha (biathlete) encountered the idea of "*the right body type for that sort of snow condition.*" She was shorter than other girls in her team, and had a more muscular build that in her coaches' mind was "*almost too muscular for a skier,*" though Misha did not know what her coaches wanted her to be like. She was frustrated because, although her coaches acknowledged her different body type and physiology, no adjustments were made regarding her workout regime. She was given the same workout that was given to the taller, leaner teammates with the expectations that it would work the same for her as it did for her teammates.



My participants' stories around body type and image further confirm that elite sport means not just being skilful, but also being able to adopt and cope with the values and norms specific to each sport (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012; Cavallerio et al. 2017; Jones et al., 2005). In women's sport this means also an emphasis on certain 'looks' that, in some cases, becomes more important than skill training. However, just like Johns (1998) discovered, some of my interviewees questioned the applicability of all the weight and appearance demands put on them. For example, Nina (synchronized swimmer) was puzzled by the utility of the fat tests and the importance of being thin and looking a certain way, as the judges did not need these results to rank their performances:

*What difference does it make? That's what I don't get. What the number or the total was or my body fat percentage, whether it was 22 or 26, who cares? But getting it to be a 21 was really important. I'm just picking a number, I don't even remember what the numbers are or were, but that was drilled into us, how important it was. [...] It was just to look good in a swimsuit and present yourself, right? [...] ... you'd need to make sure your thighs don't touch, or your stomach is flat.*

Nina's comment is unique because she is the only one of my participants who questioned the meaning of the normative thinness of the synchronized swimming world. Nina's reflection parallels Johns (1998) finding among the rhythmic gymnastics environment. In his study, Sarah, a rhythmic gymnast was unsure why she needed to be very thin for improved performance. She noted that excessive weight loss is "crazy thing" and added that she knew it was wrong (p. 56). Nina also questioned the weight loss because she did not think the low weight improved their performance. Sarah and Nina however are exceptions. The other athletes in my study

acknowledged the dominant narrative of the acceptable body norms, but did not explicitly offer other meanings for a high-performance body.

In my athletic story, the body type also came up on numerous occasions in different sporting worlds that, nevertheless, appeared to assign different meanings to a high-performance woman athlete body, yet all focused on the size of my body. Even though basketball is not an aesthetic sport, we had to ‘look like athletes’ and mostly, like ‘basketball players.’ Body type was important to our coaches from the selection stage. Just before grade one, my mom took me to a prestigious ballet school run by a famous Russian dancer. I was rejected because I was too thin, and my ankles were not strong enough in their views. Consequently, I was sent to swimming to increase the strength of my ankles. Later, during my basketball career, we needed to look tall and thin, not heavy, like the handball players. It was also very common to receive comments from coaches such as “*look how her fat jiggles on her thighs*” (Mrs. M, basketball coach), or Mrs. L (basketball coach) advised one of my team mates to lose the abdominal fat by “*doing lots of abs and hunger.*” When I changed to dance after retiring from basketball, my ‘basketball calves’ were too big for a dancer. The coaches preferred that I trained for the Standard Dances to cover them with the long gown. When I trained for gymnastics to pass the university entrance exam, we would get weighted in before each practice. We did not even compete in a real gymnastics competition, but whoever was ‘heavier’ was made to feel bad for the extra weight. For synchronized swimming, I needed to be thin and fit, but not too muscular. I was told that would make me sink, rather than float. As I crossed different sports, I discovered that every sport had their own body type and weight standards, and it seemed that my body was not good enough for any of them. In fact, the importance of body image that started with the communist government was a national problem in Romania. Ceaușescu (the dictator at the time) had very strict ideas of

how much people should eat, hence he created food rations based on a low number of calories that people, optimally, needed. During this time, no one was on the large side, and after his dictatorship different body sizes started to emerge. It was then when women started to be judged based on how they looked and thus, women started to monitor how they look and take care of themselves (i.e., don't get fat). On top of these societal pressures to look a certain way, there was the pressure to look even better, because we were athletes.

While some athletes were seriously affected by these body issues, others seem to be able to cope better with comments regarding their bodies. Tania (synchronized swimmer), for example, mentioned that the fat tests did not affect her negatively, yet she acknowledged that many of her teammates had a much more difficult time, to the extent that some even dropped out of the sport. A positive attitude towards body weight helped her maintain her focus and perform well similar to such athletes as the US gymnast Mary Lou Retton (Retton et al., 1986). On the other hand, other participants did not handle these pressures well and developed eating disorders.

### ***“I Cut Out All the Fat or I Would Throw up after Supper:” Eating Disorders***

Considering the prevalence of body image problems, it is not surprising that all my participants talked about the amount of eating disorders in their sports. Among my participants, Alina (synchronized swimmer), Rochelle (speed swimmer) and Sheila (cross country runner) also disclosed having developed eating disorders. The others knew a lot of teammates who struggled with eating disorders. They recalled: “*Just bulimia, rampant*” (Alina, synchronized swimmer); “*TONS of eating disorders*” (Ramona, synchronized swimmer); or “*lots of bulimia, tons and tons. I would say probably 90% of the females in skating are bulimic if not...more*” (Sonia, skater). Ramona (synchronized swimmer) also talked about a club that was “*very bad*

*because they had a ridiculous coach and yeah, some of...they basically just, like turned them all basically anorexic. It was brutal.*” Nina also acknowledged that there were:

*a lot of eating problems because that was important, and we were taught about diet. [...] you'd need to make sure your thighs don't touch, or your stomach is flat. You need to, whatever you're going to do, you're going to do to get it there. And when you're in a swimsuit all the time, you can't really hide that.*

The stories of losing weight, maintaining a very low weight, or achieving an ideal body for the sport was something that my participants normalized as part of being in the sport; that was what it meant to be an athlete, especially at high-performance level. This is consistent with previous studies that discussed this type of normalization in women's sports such as gymnastics, light weight rowing, and swimming (Barker-Rutchti & Schubring, 2016; Chapman, 1997; Johns, 1998; Johns & Johns, 2000; Jones et al., 2005). Some of the means used to lose weight that my participants witnessed were extreme. They told stories of one swimmer peeling the grapes, other one only eating honey, while others used very low carbohydrate diets or even cocaine during their free time. Rochelle (speed swimmer) remembered not knowing much about nutrition at that time: *“so I cut out all the fat or I would, you know, throw up after supper or I wouldn't eat at all during the summer when I wasn't training.”* After dinner, while her family would have desert, Nina (synchronized swimmer) chose to do the dishes: *“I'd put them in the dishwasher, I'd clear the counter, I'd clear all the stuff, cause I didn't want to have dessert. [...] because if I sat at the table, of course I wanted to eat it.”* The details tell an alarming story of meanings regarding the demands of the athletic body, that women in high performance contexts continue to construct.

My participants' stories brought back my own memories around disordered eating and the practices I used in order to lose weight. Back in Romania, exercising while wrapped in plastic

was commonly encouraged in order to sweat more and then lose some weight. I engaged in this practice on a regular basis throughout my last couple years of high school. Around grade 12 (when I was around 17-18 years old) my body started to change as I started to develop a more feminine form. It was then when I started to become very conscious about my body shape. In my mind the body changes equated to being fat and I would have done anything to keep my weight down. Starving myself and exercising a lot came easy to me, as being hungry was something I was familiar with: since childhood, we did not have enough food. I remember some of the practices I employed to control my weight: I used to tie a belt around my abdomen before I went to eat with my family, so that I was uncomfortable and could not eat too much. Other times, I would lock myself in a room when my family had dinner, then opened the window so that I did not smell the food. That way it was easier to skip the meal. Only during training camps, I allowed myself to eat more, because I could justify the amount of food ingested by the amount of exercise I would do. At that time, I did not have any specific education in nutrition, and I adopted those practices based on common knowledge engrained into us of how to lose weight.

The athletes in my study appeared to resort to sources that they had learned somewhere in their everyday lives to guide their endless quest for slimmer bodies. These stories, including my own, did not include any scientific knowledge on proper nutrition, but were rather based on their experiences or advice from other athletes. Previous researchers also found that the athletes were not given a prescription or nutritional training on weight loss. Rather, the athletes used methods that they saw among other teammates, that were transmitted from older athletes to the younger ones, or whatever they thought would help (Chapman, 1997; Johns, 1998; Theberge, 2008).

Some athletes' stories indicated that even if weight loss was not explicitly discussed, the training methods were designed to keep the body weight down. While some athletes had to use

restrictive methods to lose or maintain a low weight, others were not given the chance to get to any bigger weight sizes, as the coaches would use a very demanding work out regime designed to shape the athletes' bodies. For example, Ramona (synchronized swimmer) remembered that while with the national team, she was never encouraged not to eat, but her coaches would say: *"you need to tone up, so you're going to run a triathlon, and that was our training for the next hour. [Laughter] It was, like, do laps, go bike, go run, you're done. [Laughter] I was like, great, the end of the day, perfect, run a triathlon."* Ramona's argument for this kind of training regime was that: *"we had very specific training that was designed to sculpt us into real athletes."* It should be noted that success in Ramona's sport did not require this type of endurance training per se. Ramona's experience is similar to synchronized swimmer Amelia's experience in Barker-Ruchti et al.'s (2012) study. Amelia also mentioned that while training with the Olympic team she could not keep the weight on because of the intense training that they were doing. In both cases, the coaches used over-exercising as a method to control their athletes' weight.

While injuries and overtraining can be common among all the athletes, the previous research on body image problems and eating disorders often reports women athletes, particularly, struggling with these problems. All my participants' stories indicated that they experienced this impact on their appearance very tangibly. This may have been partly due to the judged sports (synchronized swimming, figure skating) they participated in. These sports, nevertheless, have large amounts of women participants who are likely to face similar body related issues to my participants. My narrative research also revealed that the body image related disorders were not limited to judged sports, but were experienced by all my participants and thus, had significant impact on their athletic lives. I was curious then if women athletes' retirement experiences, particularly, were further influenced by body image problems. To understand their full impact, it

is necessarily to trace the athletes' entire lifespan to examine how such problems may have evolved. In spite of all of the above (the compromised eating, the missing out, the health and emotional costs) something kept the athletes going for years. I now discuss the inner drive that allowed my participants to continue with their sports when others would give up.

### **Why Elite Sport? – The Meaning of Sport in My Athletes' Stories**

So far, my athletes have interpreted their sporting experiences to give them multiple meanings (e.g., Smith & Sparkes, 2009). As my participants' stories demonstrated, being an elite athlete requires dedication, commitment, and compromises sometimes to the detriment of the athlete's own health. In their stories, elite athletes have to compete against their own friends for a medal or a spot on a team. As the life of an elite athlete and everything that it entails is not necessary an easy life, I was curious what kept my participants going all those years. There must have been further meanings that helped them to live significant athletic lives "to configure and constitute" (Smith & Sparkes, 2016, p. 260) their sporting experiences as worth living despite the difficulties of being an elite athlete. My narrative research indicated that there is no singular answer to why they continued, my athletes' resilience appears to be a combination of the two meanings they attached to sport: the love they had for their respective sports and their individual characteristics that made them successful.

### ***"Loved it From the Get-Go:" The Love of Sport***

All my participants talked about how much they loved their sport. Alina (synchronized swimmer) "*loved it from the get-go,*" while Nina (synchronized swimmer) "*clearly loved the sport*" and she is currently still swimming. Sonia loved skating so much that "*my dad could have*

*told me, 'You're not skating', and I would have found a way to go. That's how much I loved it."*

Ramona loved to do synchronized swimming "*eight hours a day, five – six days a week,*" because it was fun to travel and meet amazing people. Similarly, all I could think of all day was basketball. I loved dribbling, shooting, scoring, dodging and tricking others. I loved travelling with the team, camping and living with them. I felt I belonged in the gym, in the team, next to my coaches.

In addition, all the interviewees continued with their sports because they dreamed of high level of success. They set high goals for themselves such as wanting to make national or Olympic teams. Ramona (synchronized swimmer) "*wanted to go to the Olympics and I wanted to win nationals and be the best*" while Sheila (cross country runner) wanted to get "*higher and higher*" and "*really wanted to go to the Olympics.*" Alina (synchronized swimmer) felt she was good at her sport and was dreaming to go to the Olympics as well. In her mid-teens she was not interested in what most teenagers appreciated, but rather "*would latch on to the last synchro Olympian from Canada,*" because she "*wanted to be like those women.*" Having these high dreams, my participants continued to train in their sports.

The athletes' team mates were also central to their meaningful and continued sport participation. Several participants mentioned that they got inspired by their team mates. Tania (synchronized swimmer) for example, was motivated by her team mates, as "*we wanted to be successful.*" Both Samira (speed swimmer) and Misha (biathlete) liked to be with their friends from their respective sports. Samira enjoyed the social network that she had created within the swimming community, "*a lot of like-minded people*" because "*all sports tend to have a very certain personality type that gravitates to the sport.*" Misha, in addition to liking the attention that she was getting as an athlete, also preferred to be around her biathlete friends. She:



*had to keep succeeding because they all did and I wanted to be able to go to the next camp or the next race series and spend two weeks with everybody skiing instead of being in school [...] we went biking together or skiing together, we did anything together and I had to be able to keep up, and to keep up I had to train because they were good.*

Ramona (synchronized swimmer) had an even more special situation, as she swam:

*duet with my sister, so that was AWESOME because we were really close, and then we swam team a lot as well, obviously, because everybody does, and the team was just phenomenal because we were working with the best swimmers in Canada and what you could actually do was incredible. Nobody was weak, so everybody was really pushing each other and [Pause] it was a fun...it was a tough, competitive environment, but it was fun because you could do anything, yeah.*

It is interesting to note that my participants felt stimulated by their team mates, although they also had to compete against them – a fact that they earlier indicated as a negative of their sporting lives.

## **The Internal Engine**

Besides the clear love for their sport and the friendships they created, the interviewees also talked about an internal engine that would keep them to continue training despite the hardship, the challenges, and the costs of such a life. All participants identified that they were competitive personalities and had a drive to succeed which would push them to set goals and continuously improve their performance. They all liked to compete, to push themselves at many levels, to become better and to win. Krista (synchronized swimmer) “*LOVE[D] competitions*” and to push herself, while Sheila (cross country runner) “*wanted some competitive edge*” and to be the best.

She loved to compete with others, “*making sure I could, like, beat the next person that was faster than me. [...] I knew I was never going to be, like, the best unless I went to the Olympics and won, then you’re the best.*” Rochelle (speed swimmer) needed “*to train hard every day. It was just a second nature for me to just, like go, I go really, really, really hard, like it was not just 100% effort, it was a 150%.*” Misha (biathlete) found school to be boring, not challenging enough for her because she had some “*sort of loose screws [...] of needing to be totally immersed in something.*” For Ramona (synchronized swimmer)

*Synchro was a mental challenge, it’s a creative challenge and it was a physical challenge. [...] You get to basically push your body as hard as you possibly want, [...] basically there’s no limit to what you can possibly do in the water, and so there’s always things to be improved, you can always sort of push the envelope a little bit faster, little bit farther.*

My participants’ stories bring back many dear memories from my life as a basketball player. It seemed like basketball was a good match for my personality. I liked joking and tricking people, and I got to do that on the court. I loved winning and being the best, and I did that during games and practices.

In addition to this internal determination to succeed, to be the best, participants also mentioned other personal characteristics that helped them be successful elite athletes. For example, Rochelle (speed swimmer) talked about her perfectionist tendencies during her regular life as well as related to swimming. She always wanted to be “*top at everything, so, and I was like on the Dean’s list in university, I was [...] an A student in school, elite athlete [...] perfectionism helps me get to the Olympics [...] absolutely, you have to be [one].*”

Misha mentioned her “*obsessive personality*” that helped her during her athletic career and continues to help her during her current life. This obsession with sport allowed her to be very focused and perform at the level she wanted:

*I was obsessed with sport ... and I lived and breathed everything sport and ... at that level, that's what you do. Everything you eat, everything you do, you're thinking about how it affects your next competition or your workout that next day, and now I think about science 24 hours a day, right? [...] So you had to always constantly think of, you know, if I want to make it to this level or if I want to make it to the Olympics or whatever games or whatever, then food, sleep, rest, everything, right? School, all had to be [...] only [...] what people told me it should be.*

While Misha called her personality obsessive, Sheila (cross country runner) described it as “*a passion.*” In addition to her “*passion,*” Sheila also showed perseverance and the desire “*to be the best.*” Once in a while when training really hard, Sheila would break down “*'cause I was just tired of always training and always pushing my body and always being injured*”, and rather than going home to rest “*I would call my mom and I'd break down and start crying to her, and then she'd, like, calm me down and then I'd go back and I'd finish my workout. [...] 'Cause I wanted to be the best.*” Quitting or taking a break was not an option for Sheila:

*If you, like, you're supposed to take breaks for a week or something and that's, like, the worst week of your life because you just feel like after that week finishes, you feel like you're so unfit 'cause you weren't doing anything for that duration.*

These characteristics required from a successful elite athlete are not uncommon. In fact, the literature talks about certain personalities that draw certain people to certain sports. Moreover, certain personality characteristics appear to be more common in elite athletes than in other

people. Sheard and Golby (2010) explored this type of hardiness among different groups of athletes. They defined hardiness as having three components: commitment, control and challenge, which are similar to the characteristics my interviewees invoked. Sheard and Golby (2010) found higher levels of hardiness among elite-level athletes, distinguishing them from sub-elite performers. According to these characteristics, my participants were no different than other elite athletes. However, my narrative study goes much beyond determining personality traits through objective measures. Through their stories, the athletes in my study are able to bring to life their own meanings behind these characteristics, which help us understand how their experiences in sport became meaningful. This could have not been possible without a narrative lens.

In addition to all the above reasons that kept them continuing in their respective sports (i.e., love for their sport and the friendships they created, and the competitive personalities that lead them to set very high goals for themselves), two of the participants mentioned more practical reasons for why they continued their athletic careers for a little while longer. Both Samira (speed swimmer) and Nina (synchronized swimmer) had thought about quitting their sport at one point in their career. However, Nina continued swimming in order to pay for university, while Samira used her sport to get a scholarship into an architecture program in a US university and continued swimming for two more years as a varsity athlete at that university.

### **Concluding Thoughts – Being a ‘Real Athlete’ Narrative**

Through my participants’ stories I have shown what it means to be a ‘real athlete’ who loves to push limits even when in pain, who will sacrifice anything in order to excel in their sport (e.g., move away from home, giving up friendships, family, and leisure activities), and who is even

willing to accept humiliating comments related to their weight or bodies. My participants, like many other athletes, took these to be the goods and bads of sporting lives. It became clear that not everyone can be successful in elite sport, and exceptional physical abilities are not enough at that level. Dedication, commitment, responsibility, compromises, and certain personal characteristics make a successful elite athlete. This kind of life, for some, becomes an isolated life and sometimes leads to problems in relation to team mates, coaches, judges, or friends. In addition, such a life often comes with health costs, such as chronic or acute injuries, body image issues and even eating disorders. From an outsider's perspective, this would be seen as a difficult life with heavy costs that not everyone would be ready to accept. However, for elite athletes it becomes their second nature, a meaningful identity constructed through a story, something that they become very passionate about, something that they prefer to do for as long as possible.

In some ways, my participants' stories were very similar to what has been discussed in the previous literature on sport retirement related to women athletes' lives. It also appears that being an elite athlete is very similar across sports and my interviewees were no exception: they loved their sports so much that they sought success by any means, sometimes disregarding the damage they did to their bodies. This kind of life focused exclusively on sport performance, success, following the common values and norms of the sport (e.g., hard work and discipline, winning at all costs, being perfect, or having a perfect body) resembles the performance narrative described in previous narrative studies (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio et. al 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009).

However, through my narrative research I was also able to bring forward that even though all my participants lived a performance narrative during their athletic lives, they all experienced it differently, depending on the meanings they each attributed to their experiences. While sport

provided the social and interpersonal context, each participant storied their athletic life individually, which created those distinctive experiences. Thus, the athletic stories that were told were both similar and unique. Consequently, I have named the narrative that emerged from my participants' stories of their athletic lives as the 'real athlete' narrative to better acknowledge the diversity of experiences that were given different meanings in these stories. If the athletes in my study interpreted their athletic lives in several ways, their retirement experiences, interpretations, and meanings are likely to be even more diverse when considered as constructed by the 'real athlete' narrative. In the next chapter I discuss how each participant had a unique retirement experience, which for some was more positive than for others, and how these were expressed in stories with multiple meanings of their retired lives

*As I was listening to my participants' stories, I could see so many similarities to my life as an elite athlete. I could see myself in each of their stories. It was so easy to understand their lives. My life resembled theirs as I also kept going like they did. I was also competitive, and it seemed to suit my personality. Like these athletes, I loved my sport and became more obsessed with it as I got better. As I was writing this chapter, I remembered my own life as an athlete, a life that I am still missing. It was a life that, at that time, I thought would never end! As I now reflect on my athletic life and those of my participants', it has become more important to discuss these experiences before focusing on the actual retirement from sport. The athletic life, as a whole, impacts the retirement process.*

## CHAPTER VI

### Life after Elite Sport

Based on my narrative inquiry approach (see **Chapter III**), I continue to view the athletes' retirement stories as a continuous narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that has a beginning, middle, and an end (Ewards, 2001). In this chapter, following this lifespan approach, I now present findings from the 'middle' part of the retirement process where the athletes have just left their sporting careers. This has also been the focus of the previous narrative studies of sport retirement. As I detailed in **Chapter II**, these studies have revealed how a series of major narratives structured the athletes' retirement stories and how the retired athletes move through different stages of retired lives. For example, Douglas and Carless (2009) demonstrated that *performance narrative* first dominated the athletes' lives, but it was possible to move to a stage characterized by its alternative, *relational narrative*, after retirement. Cavallerio et al. (2017) expanded on this research to find three types of narratives that shaped different stages their retired gymnasts experienced: *entangled narrative*, *going forward narrative*, and *making sense narrative*. Jewett et al. (2019) offered a slight variation of these categories to discuss *performance narrative*, *entangled narrative*, and *making sense narrative* as a process for their athlete's retirement. While I acknowledge the importance of providing a clear, linear structure for the athletes' retirement experiences illustrated through the above narratives, I used a narrative approach that begins with experience "as expressed in lived and told stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 40), not with predetermined concepts, categories, or stages for a retirement process. Consequently, my findings here arise from the stories the athletes told about their experiences and the multiple meanings they made about their experiences. This narrative inquiry approach, thus, enabled me to carefully listen to the athletes' voices and then record the many

meanings that emerged from their stories without a need to match these with concepts from other studies. As a result, I found that although my interviewees shared some similarities during their athletic lives, their retirement experiences differed quite significantly. While some athletes' careers ended abruptly, others had a slow and long transition out of sport. Some participants perceived retirement as positive, others struggled to leave their sporting lives. Consequently, I draw connections to a variety of retirement literature in addition to the narrative research on athletes' retirement. The athletes also gave different meanings to 'retirement' that for some resembled the process identified by the previous research, but for others created a very different story without clear stages of its progress. Following my narrative premise, I have also included my own stories. Thus, in this chapter I first discuss the events that led to the athletes' retirement to then detail how they adjusted to the life after sport. I structured this chapter around six themes that were generated from the athletes' stories: Abrupt Ending of the Athletic Life, Deliberate Retirement, Adjustment to Life after Sport, Not Adjusting to Life after Sport, Education in Athletic Lifespan, and Sport after Retirement.

### ***“I Can't Do This Anymore. I Need to Say Goodbye!” Abrupt Ending of the Athletic Life***

In this section I focus on the athletes' stories regarding the reasons for their retirement. Previous post-positivist studies of retirement explored the relationship between the type of retirement (e.g., voluntary versus involuntary) and the life after sport. It was found that involuntary or abrupt termination of the athletic career might lead to psychological difficulties such as anger, anxiety, low self-respect, depression or substance abuse (Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). A similar division emerged from my participants' stories. However, based on my analysis it appeared that retirement was either a choice or forced



due to different reasons. Some of these reasons evolved during the athletes' sporting careers and thus, it is important also to highlight their entire athletic lifespan. I first explore the abrupt retirement stories and the reasons for them. I compare and contrast my participants' experiences to my own emotions and personal meaning of retirement.

### **Stories of Injuries**

As mentioned in **Chapter II**, injuries are a major cause for sport retirement (Erpic et al., 2004; Lavalloé et al., 1997; Smith & McManus, 2008; Wylleman et al., 2004). Injuries happen suddenly and can leave the athlete with unfulfilled athletic goals and unprepared for life after sport, potentially leading to a negative experience post retirement (Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Injuries were a major cause for retirement among my participants as well. Six of them developed injuries and five retired due to being injured. While some of these injuries were related to their training, others happened outside of their sport.

The story that most of my participants told was about getting injured as a result of their training. For example, Ramona (synchronized swimmer) went to the Olympic trials and qualified to go to the next stage but she developed a muscle tear injury that ended her career. Ramona could not train anymore and realized that the injury would not heal fast enough for her to participate in the upcoming Olympics. At that point she decided to retire, as she did not want to train another four years trying to make the next Olympics. She added, however, that *“to keep our funding, we went back for one more competition where we swam one length of our duet to keep funding for the extra four months stint [...]. I went two more times, but yeah, it was a very bad*

*last swim.*” Once Ramona decided to retire, her sister was also forced to retire, because “*we don’t swim unless we’re together.*” Ramona was 25 and never did synchronized swimming after that.

Sheila (cross country runner) also told a story of getting injured during training. She developed shin splints every year, but she would continue running despite the pain. Consequently, she would end up with stress fractures every year. At that point, she would do alternative modes of training (e.g., biking) in order to let the fractures heal, but the following year the injury reappeared. Tired of always hurting and pushing through pain, Sheila quit running at the end of high school. She was around 17 years old. After a little rest, Sheila felt better and for the next half a year she tried to get back into running. She would say to herself:

*“No, I’m not done actually,” and I would go for like a two hour run or something, and then my shins would hurt and like, so it was just like, these bouts of, like, I’m getting back into it, but not really. But and then I just, I think maybe in, like, winter semester or something, just completely stopped everything.*

A somewhat similar story was told by Samira (speed swimmer), who developed a chronic shoulder injury from repetitive movement and the intense strain on her shoulders from years of swimming. She went to the Olympics knowing that her shoulders would not hold up to the amount of training required to make it to the next Olympics. As she was not going to be able to swim for much longer, Samira decided to swim with a varsity team at a University in US and benefit from their scholarship to do the architecture program that she wanted to do. She was able to swim for two years there before her shoulder completely gave up. At that point, the medical staff gave her two options:

*... surgery and they could tighten up my ligaments, sort of manually, [Laughter] and there was maybe a 50% shot that that would actually help in any way, and that I would recover*

*well enough to be able to continue swimming, or I could take cortisone shots before every practice or every race so that I just didn't feel the damage that I was doing.*

Samira did not choose any of the two options. Instead, she tried to rehabilitate her shoulder for six months before she decided to stop swimming. She was 22:

*I just couldn't train any longer. The pain was too much. I wasn't able to drive anymore 'cause I couldn't hold my arm at a... perpendicular from my body. I wasn't able to hold that position. So I wasn't driving and writing notes in classes was becoming difficult, so I'd have to stop and take a break.*

In Tania's (synchronized swimmer) story, her athletic career was also cut short due to an injury. However, Tania's injury happened outside of her sport. Tania hurt her shoulder in a physical education class at school. She tried to rehabilitate it for about one year while trying to continue swimming, until one morning, when trying to pour milk over her cereal, "*I couldn't lift it and tilt it to dump into my bowl and it went all over the table.*" It was then when Tania realized that she could no longer continue swimming. She was 15 years old. Tania considers that her retirement, even though eight years later she swam again competitively for two years with a University club. Although her shoulder injury was still bothering her, the competition level and the intensity of training were much lower. Tania also tried a Masters club, but found it not to be challenging enough for her. Even though she cannot swim anymore, she loves the sport and is currently coaching at different clubs.

In these stories, the athletes experienced an injury, but tried to keep going longer in their sport as it was still meaningful for them. That also showed in their choice of words. Most of them did not talk about retiring from sport. Rather, they mentioned quitting. I feel that by using the word quitting, even though they were forced to retire from their sports due to different

reasons out of their control, they seemed to reclaim some control over that choice by saying: I quit.

Although an athlete in an individual sport, Ramona's decision to retire also forced her sister to retire. The other interviewees appeared to make the decision to retire without a concern for the other athletes in their larger teams. They did not consult with coaches regarding their injuries. Neither did they question the training routines given to them. They just tried to continue with training in a relatively similar fashion, as up until then they were still living the 'real athlete' narrative, being committed and dedicated to their sports and the performance narrative. Rochelle and Sheila, however, withdrew from their sports entirely, leaving the 'real athlete' narrative behind, while the others tried to continue competing several more years. While injuries were definite reasons for either stopping training in their sports, or continuing at a lower level, some participants retired due to other motives.

### **Other Stories of Abrupt Retirement**

Injuries were not the only reason that forced my participants to retire. In Alina's story, she developed an injury (torn meniscus) during the time she trained at the national center for synchronized swimming, but her story revealed further reasons that ended her athletic career. When Alina was 17 years old, she had the opportunity to go and train in a different city with the national team. Before she left her home city, Alina was very much in love with her sport, and was dreaming of making it to the Olympics at some point. However, at the national center she encountered a very negative atmosphere, which led to the development of a full-blown bulimia and a mental decline. By the end of the eight months training season: *"I just mentally couldn't do it. I hated swimming, I hated everything, I hated life [Laughter] I hated everything. And I*

*bombed national team tryouts. I just had the worst swim. I had the WORST swim.*” After that experience, Alina returned home and retired from the sport. A few years later she tried to swim a couple times, but her self-confidence and self-esteem were so low, that she could not return to the sport. Alina’s story was very similar to Anne’s, the swimmer in Jones’ et al. (2005) study. In their stories, both athletes tried to adhere to the ‘real athlete’ narrative and abide to the unwritten norms of slenderness in their sport. However, both athletes’ performances decreased and resulted in retirement.

Misha’s (biathlete) athletic career was also cut short abruptly and her story had several twists and turns that led to her retirement. In order to be able to train and compete in her sport, Misha enrolled in the army that sponsored her expenses. However, when she was 18 years old, the army cut the funding. At that point, Misha retired, realizing that

*I was going to have to work and train at the same time to be able to keep doing biathlon and at that point I just...I didn’t see the point. I knew I was never going to win the Olympics. I knew that I could train for ten more years and maybe I would be able to move up in the ranks and to do well eventually, but the amount of sacrifice I was going to have to do and the amount...I felt like I was already putting so much into my sport to then have to work on top of that, just to be able to continue doing it, that it was just going to be too much for me. I didn’t want to do that.*

After announcing her retirement from sport, Misha (biathlete) competed in a few more important races, where *“I went and I won every race and I just killed it. I had some of the best races of my entire career [Laughter] because I had no pressure anymore because I was leaving.”* Because Misha was leaving the sport due to the army’s financial cutback of her funding and not because of any negative feelings towards the sport, she *“knew that for me it was really important*

*to put some serious distance between it and myself.”* Misha needed to “*totally remove myself from the whole biathlon scene.*” At that time, Misha had an Australian boyfriend, so she followed him and went to live in Australia for a year. Once she returned to Canada, she pursued undergraduate studies. Upon her return to Canada, she was initially asked to coach. After that, she was enticed to compete again in the University World Games. She started training and racing while at the university and qualified again to be on the national team. However, at that time her attitude towards sport and life had changed and she competed with a completely different perspective at the World University Games. Misha now realized how limiting her athletic life was:

*I went to World University Games and my husband came to watch me and it was really exciting and really awesome for him to see me as an athlete and that sort of thing. But we, the University Games was in Torino, exactly a year after the Olympic Games and I watched my husband have this awesome trip to Italy and one of his friends came and they had so much fun and I was there doing the exact same thing that I'd always done in Europe. I was in an athlete's village, eating crappy food, skiing in circles every day. All that I saw was as far as I would run in the morning on my morning run and the trails and like in two and a half weeks in Italy, we had one afternoon in Turin and one afternoon where we went for dinner in France. [...] There's so much more that I'd like to do than go ski in circles and it's a great way to see the world for a while but then you realize that you're not seeing as much of the world as you want to see.*

The World University Games were the last competition Misha ever attended. She was done with elite sport and two weeks after the games, Misha returned to Canada and got married. She decided that she needed a different lifestyle from that point on.

My retirement story also has an abrupt quality to it. I was forced to retire because at that time there were no other feasible options for me to continue playing at the senior level. However, I did try for the first two years to join a senior team. The club I trained with in my last few junior years had a senior team which I joined. I was able to play with them for one year, after which the team dissolved because the club had no more money to finance the senior team. The following year I joined a newly formed private team that gathered a lot of former same generation players. I was happy to be on that team, as I had known the girls for years. However, that team was financed commercially and this changed many of the players. They started playing differently to maximize their earnings as individual players and the game became something different. At the same time, I was in my first year of university and had a difficult time keeping up with the demands of the sport as well as of my studies. I did not finish that season and the following year the team stopped existing. At that point I had no more options to play on other teams that would work with where I was in life (i.e., being a university student).

Thus, my abrupt retirement story from a team sport is similar to Misha's retirement story from an individual sport. I did not have a team to play with, she did not have the financial backing to continue in her sport. However, because our sports still held a meaningful place in our lives, we both found a way to continue in our respective sports during our undergraduate programs, thus trying to continue living the 'real athlete' narrative. While Misha's meaning of elite sport changed, realizing how much she was missing if she continued training at that level, the importance basketball played in my life remained the same. I wanted to keep playing longer; I was a 'real athlete' who wanted to keep living the performance narrative which was giving huge meaning to my life. Even though I was a good student, I was a much better basketball player. I did not miss anything from outside the basketball world. Basketball gave me meaning in

life and at that time, I did not know what retirement meant, or that life could exist without basketball.

In summary, injuries were the main factors that forced my participants to retire. Smith and McManus (2008) concluded that injuries and deselection from teams are the main reasons for a forced retirement. Although none of my participants experienced deselection, they told many stories about injuries that were one of the main reasons for abrupt retirement. Ramona (synchronized swimmer), Sheila (cross country runner) and Samira (speed swimmer) developed injuries due to their training. Tania's (synchronized swimmer) injury happened at school and was not related to her training, yet it was so serious that it ended her swimming career. Alina (synchronized swimmer) also developed an injury. However, her retirement was more related to negative experiences while training at the national center. Misha (biathlete) was the only one who experienced a forced retirement due to the army's financial cutback. Out of these six participants, only Tania (synchronized swimmer) is still involved in her sport. The others tried either to return unsuccessfully to their sport (e.g., Alina – synchronized swimmer, and Sheila – cross country runner), or decided to completely cut all the contact with the sport. For example, for Ramona (synchronized swimmer) it was 'all or nothing:' she either competed at the highest level or not at all. Misha (biathlete) sat somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. She still liked her sport, but she wanted more from life than training and voluntarily decided to cut the connections with her sport. Krista and Tania chose to compete at lower levels to continue their athletic careers. Their stories also pointed at different meanings for retirement, as they began to adhere less closely to the 'real athlete' narrative. It is important to notice that once the 'real athlete' narrative was interrupted, by injury or other reasons, my participants took different directions in their lives, based on the meanings they attributed to their experiences. Some tried to



prolong that life, by remaining in the sport, and others rejected it entirely if they could not live it as before. My narrative approach allowed my participants to tell their stories and the reasons for retirement from elite sport. Within those stories they were able to express their own meanings of those experiences, which went much beyond the post-positivist studies of forced retirement due to injury.

### ***“It’s Time to Just Pack It in:” A Deliberate Decision to Retire***

Four of my ten participants expressed their retirement experiences in stories that indicated a deliberate desire to retire from their sports. In three of these stories, the athletes, similar to Misha, started to lose interest in their sporting lifestyle gradually, at different times of in their careers. At this point, other meanings began to replace the ‘real athlete’ narrative as the meaningful narrative in their lives. Rochelle (speed swimmer), for example, became more interested in boys and parties toward the end of her high school: *“I was more interested in being a teenager and I started, you know, I actually started drinking and partying.”* Rochelle felt that swimming was limiting her life because she could not participate in other activities that she would have enjoyed:

*I started not wanting to go to practice as much and not wanting to go to competitions as much and it just...I think by the time I actually decided that, you know, I’m not going to do it this year, that’s the way I phrased it. I’m like, I’m going to take a year off, is how I, you know, I phrased it. So in my mind I wasn’t necessarily retiring, I was just going to take a break because that idea of fully quitting wasn’t a reality at that time.*

Rochelle seemed to have given herself the option of returning to swimming, in case she did not like the life without sport. However, she never went back to the competitive swimming again and she retired around 18 years of age.

Two of the participants had the opportunity to decide when and how to retire. Krista's (synchronized swimmer) story exemplified a gradual and carefully thought-out retirement process within which she was able to live a meaningful life both as a student and a swimmer. Krista was able to reduce her training and competition gradually on her own terms. At 18 years of age, Krista reduced her involvement at the club level and started to compete in the University league. After that year, she only swam with the University, reducing her training hours in half. After finishing her undergraduate degree, Krista moved to a different province to pursue a Master's program. She wanted to continue swimming at the university level, but her university did not have a synchronized swimming team. Krista found out, however, that she was able to enrol in one course at a different university in that city and then swam with their team for one more year. At that point, she only swam the team event, reducing her training time even more. As she was finishing up her Master's degree, Krista could not commit to competing anymore with the University team. However, she could come to practice whenever she chose. That was Krista's last year of doing synchronized swimming. She was around 24 years old. Krista cut down on her training gradually and on her own terms: *"It felt like I was starting to take control of my schedule and be like, I'm going to set what works for me."* With reduced number of training hours, Krista's schedule filled up with other meaningful things, such as a relationship with her current husband. Even though Krista missed competing nationally, *"it was what was right with my schedule and right with my life then. [...]I felt like I had reached a point where it was like, okay, I've got a lot of other things that are starting to take up time."* At that point, Krista

appeared to take control of her life instead of letting the sport and its 'real athlete' narrative dictate it.

It is interesting to notice how both Rochelle (speed swimmer) and Krista (synchronized swimmer) started to realize that they wanted something more from life at around the same age (e.g., 18 years old). However, the meaning of retirement from their respective sports was different for each of them. For Rochelle it was more of an abrupt disconnection from sport, which I understand as not training at all and moving into experiencing other things of interest. For Krista retirement was more gradual and on her own terms, progressively letting-go of the athletic life.

Sonia's (figure skater) athletic life story was the longest of all the interviewees. She trained and competed until she decided, voluntarily, to retire. Her story is particularly interesting as she considered having two skating careers with two different endings. The first one ended at 18 years old, after she attended the Olympics as an ice dancer. Because her dance partner retired, she decided to retire as well. Soon after, however, she started another skating career as a synchronized skater. In her thirties, Sonia had a serious car accident after which she did not compete at the same level. Sonia considers this her retirement point. Yet Sonia continued to compete at a lower level until she was 40 years old and gave birth to her son. At this point, she had to consider letting go of the 'real athlete' narrative due to the time constraints of her life. In addition, she did not find the last couple years of skating satisfying:

*It was really just about lifestyle. I have far too many commitments to be spending time on the ice and it's not competitive, and that's really important to me. I'm not going to just waste my time on the ice with these people who don't care.*

In her current story, Sonia prefers to divide her time between her son, husband, school, and job and no longer has a rationale for the high cost of training and competing. *“It’s time to just pack it in,”* she concluded. It is interesting to notice how Sonia divided her athletic life span in two different athletic careers. She did transition from skating with one partner to skating with a team of 15 other skaters. In addition, for Sonia the level of competition also mattered in defining when her retirement point was. Following the ‘real athlete’ narrative, once she started competing at a lower competition level, she considered herself retired from the sport, even though she skated a few more years at a lower level. This is different than Krista (synchronized swimmer), who changed her athletic narrative to include her lower level presence in her sport as part of her athletic life span, even though both interviewees stated that they liked to compete and competition was important to them.

Unlike Rochelle (speed swimmer), Krista (synchronized swimmer) or Sonia (figure skater), Nina (synchronized swimmer) did not grow tired of her life as an athlete. According to her story, her retirement stemmed from a very distinct incident with her coach. At 18 years of age, right after high school, Nina took time off to travel for four months. She let her coach know about her plans, because she was going to be late for the training after the summer break. Upon her return, Nina resumed her training routine and did well in her first competition: *“I was quite proud of how well I had done and gotten back into things,”* but *“my coach told me I didn’t deserve that”* because Nina was not present right from the time the training restarted. Nina reflected: *“that just kind of shattered everything for me right at that moment. [...] part of me gave up at that point. [...] I kind of remember sitting there going, okay I have two choices now. I can quit or I can keep going.”* Nina swam for another four, five years not knowing what else she could do. She knew she was good at the sport, but felt she was not good at anything else. However, it was never the

same: “*I don’t think I ever did as well as I could have, [...] ’cause then the next competition I didn’t do as well.*” When her duet partner started to outdo her, Nina felt that: “*in the back of my mind, it was like, oh, I don’t deserve this, and she [the duet partner] stuck with it and she does deserve it.*” Nina decided to retire when she finished her undergraduate degree. “*I wanted to finish school [Laughter] and make that all [Pause] together.*”

It is interesting to notice the resemblance between Nina’s story and Anne’s story, the swimmer in Jones et al. (2005) study. The meaning both athletes attributed to comments received from coaches changed how their athletic career followed. Both mentioned that such comments negatively impacted them, which shows how impactful the coach – athlete relationship is and how influential coaches can be on an athlete’s career, with consequences even on the athlete’s retirement from sport. It is also clear that the women athletes in my study were meaning-makers who interpreted their experiences and their sense of selves based on the social worlds they lived in at the moment (Smith, 2016). These clearly shaped their stories, but one would wonder then where is the line between the deliberate versus abrupt retirement in the context of sport where a singular event can have a cumulative effect that eventually leads to retirement? From my participants’ stories, it seems the line is more fluid and based on the meanings they attributed to their athletic experience.

In summary, the four participants who deliberately chose to retire from their sports (i.e., Rochelle – speed swimmer, Krista and Nina – synchronized swimmers, and Sonia – figure skater), decided how and when to end their athletic careers and were obviously able to see and challenge the limitations of their ‘real athlete’ narratives. Creating new narratives for themselves, Krista (synchronized swimmer) found a way to train and compete for as long as and as intense as she needed to. Sonia (figure skater) was also able to continue training and competing until

finding a different meaning and thus, a new direction for her life. Rochelle (speed swimmer) realized early on that the athletic life and its narrative were not what she wanted to pursue after 18 years of age. Nina (synchronized swimmer) chose to retire from her athletic life, when she realized she needed to move on with her life and create new meanings and a different narrative than the one provided by her sport. All four athletes indicated, nevertheless, that they missed their sports, and if life had been different, they would still compete to this day. In the next section I explore the athletes' transition experiences more closely.

### ***“A Big Social Shift:” Adjusting to Life after Sport***

It seems that the meanings the athletes created from their experiences played a role in how each participant retired from elite sport. Although the athletes told many stories to explain the reasons for their retirement, those reasons were not a determining factor for how they experienced the transition out of sport. Rather, the meaning my participants attributed to their retirement experience, dictated the success of their retirement. For example, Krista (synchronized swimmer, deliberate retirement) had the most positive progression out of sport, all on her own terms. Misha (biathlete), Sonia (skater), and Rochelle (speed swimmer) who as well deliberately chose to retire at different ages because life priorities changed, also felt they experienced a positive retirement. Interestingly, Tania, Ramona (synchronized swimmers), and Samira (speed swimmer) who retired due to injuries also felt they had a positive transition out of elite sport.

In contrast, Nina (synchronized swimmer) who had a voluntary retirement experienced a rough period of time until she found her way in life. Similarly, Alina (synchronized swimmer) and Sheila (cross country runner) expressed that they had some difficult moments as they were forced to exit their sports. In their stories, these three participants all experienced episodes of

depression and had a difficult time adjusting to life after sport. I now detail their transition stories more closely to examine how their personal experiences impacted the meanings for transitioning from their athletic lives to life after sport.

There are a number of previous post-positivist studies (Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) that have examined athletes' transition from retirement. My narrative study, however, offers more details regarding the multiple experiences of this transition and consequently, multiple meanings that cannot be classified causally leading to either positive or negative experiences. In contrast with some of the previous studies that found forced retirement to possibly leading to a negative transition out of sport (Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), most of my participants' stories illustrated that they experienced a positive retirement. Out of the six participants who experienced a longer transition to retirement, only two had a difficult time post-sport. Sheila (cross country runner) and Alina (synchronized swimmer) both experienced a period of depression and had a difficult time adjusting to their new lives. Both of them mentioned the fact that they did not achieve their athletic goals: to become Olympians. Their experiences aligned with the previous post-positivist studies: not achieving athletic goals is linked with a negative retirement experience (Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). However, the other four participants who experienced an abrupt end to their athletic career were satisfied with the athletic goals they achieved, even though it was not the highest goal on their list. Unlike previous studies, they also adjusted well into life after sport. I return to discuss these stories in the next chapter.

While the previous post-positivist researchers found that with a voluntary decision to retire athletes are better prepared for life after sport (Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008;

Werthner & Orlick, 1986), only three of my participants talked about a positive transition out of sport despite deliberately choosing to retire. In her story, Nina (synchronized swimmer), for example, talked about the difficulty she had to adjust to her new life, going through a very serious depression. In my study, abrupt retirement, however, did not necessarily lead to a negative transition and deliberate retirement to a positive transition out of sport. Tania and Ramona (synchronized swimmers), Samira (speed swimmer) and Misha (biathlete) were forced to stop their athletic careers abruptly, yet they storied their transitions out of their sports as positive. Further, Nina (synchronized swimmer) who voluntarily retired experienced a negative period after her retirement.

In addition, the previous studies linked late retirement with a more difficult time to adjust to a regular life (Smith & McManus, 2008). Other studies examined the relationship between the age of retirement and the loss of motivation to train and compete due to deterioration in the athletes' physical abilities and changes in life values and priorities (Erpic et al., 2004; Swain, 1991; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). These studies focused on mature athletes, who competed beyond late teens or early twenties. The age and life-stage at retirement did not necessarily dictate my participants' retirement experience. For example, Rochelle (speed swimmer) was only 18 years of age when she retired due to a loss of interest, but she talked about a positive transition out of swimming. Sonia (figure skater), who retired when she was 40 years old, never lost interest in her sport and would probably still compete had she found a competitive enough team.

The seven participants who had positive transitions out of sport, also talked about a challenging period of time right after retirement, when they had to learn to adjust to their new lives. Though my participants indicated they perceived their transition to life after sport as



positive, they also indicated that they needed to adjust on some levels. This could challenge the straight-forward views about retirement from sport, where the transition is either positive or negative. Rather, my participants' stories brought up multiple meanings of adjusting to life after sport, where one could find the experience positive, yet still having to adjust on some levels. Therefore, my narrative study revealed a much more complex picture of how different athletes story their retirement experiences, and how they create meanings from them, which then influences their emotional state. The stories also revealed that narratives, like the 'real athlete' narrative, not only gave meaning, but also influenced the athletes' emotional lives and what they saw as "worth doing" when leaving sport (Frank, 2010). My narrative approach allowed my participants to express these different nuances through their stories and showed how they could not fit into narrow pre-defined categories.

### **Stories of Time Whilst Adjusting to Life After Sport**

The concept of time came up in most of my participants' stories shortly after retirement. Almost all of them talked about the large amount of time they had to fill with other things. This new experience was again interpreted differently by the participants. For some, this process was easy as they had many things they could draw from, while for others it was more of a struggle. Out of all participants, Krista (synchronized swimmer) was probably the one who did not have any problems with the amount of time suddenly available to her. Krista filled her busy schedule with activities that she never had time for as an athlete:

*So, I joined debate, I joined jazz choir at the U of A, I joined [Pause] I did a lot.*

*[Laughter] I did a lot of stuff that I was like, you know what? I've never had a chance to do*

*this and I've always wanted to. I'm going to do it. I'm going to do! I'm in university! I'm going to try this stuff! This is going to be fun, and I still got to swim.*

As she reduced her involvement with the sport even more, Krista:

*... felt like I was starting to take control of my schedule and be like, I'm going to set what works for me. [That] allowed me to continue to try new things and really experience university and I had a relationship that I was, like, I really want to have time to have a relationship and to experience this and, and do different things.*

The concepts of time and freedom were also prevalent in Tania's (synchronized swimmer) story. For her, having all the time and freedom also led to not knowing what to do with it. She explained: *"I think [Pause] I went a little crazy because I didn't really know how to deal with it."* Shortly after she retired from synchronized swimming, she found herself making *"paper airplanes out of the newspaper, and I specifically remember my brother coming in and saying, like, 'What are you doing?' And I remember thinking, like, I don't know, like what do you do now? Like what do I do with myself? I didn't know what to do."* After her parents advised her to get involved in other things at her school, she *"went and signed myself up for whatever I could."* Because Tania was very athletic, she joined the high school swim team, the soccer team, volleyball team as well as the cross-country team. Tania finally had time to socialize with her friends at school and to create deeper friendships with her school mates. Interestingly, all these activities were not as time consuming and intense as her synchronized swimming, because Tania gave them a different meaning: she was doing them for fun without any long-term goals.

Tania, however, struggled being a regular, full-time student, after being a part time student during her athletic career: *"I don't think I really knew how to be a student in school all day."* Initially Tania was *"excited to be able to pick electives, because I'd never taken an elective*

*before. I had always only taken my core subjects, because it's all I had time for. So I do remember thinking, wow, this is great! I can take cool courses.”* However, Tania soon realized that being “really studious” and “invested in academic learning” was ‘not her thing.’ She “found the whole school day to be exhausting” and was more interested in “having a new boyfriend every month.”

*I think just sitting, sitting in a desk [...] it wasn't what I was used to. So that was what was the most challenging for me. [...] I was never an excelling student. I was always kind of an average student, and now that I was going to school all day, I became an even worse student because [Laughter] yeah, I would skip class often and didn't want to be at school all day. [...] And boys. I was WAY too boy-focused, again because I think I hadn't ever had that opportunity. The thought hadn't even ever crossed my mind. And now I was like, wow, like, boys like me and I could have a boyfriend, and that was appealing to me.[...] But that became my priority, which was silly, but it was. Was having friends, spending as much time with my friends as I could, having a boyfriend and kind of being a rebel.*

Tania's story illustrated that she was searching for meaning for her life after sport. It was interesting that she was also looking to be ‘a rebel’ as a contrast to her disciplined sporting life where she had to adhere to strict training regimes and conform with the culture of the synchronized swimming team. Ramona (synchronized swimmer) too mentions the first four months after retirement being a huge change, yet not devastating:

*It was hard to go from, you know, getting up at five o'clock every single morning, going and training for six to eight hours straight, you know, seeing my teammates, some of who had actually moved on to the next phase of the trials as well, so they moved to Toronto at that time. So they just, like, disappeared suddenly. That was hard to basically...I stayed in*

*Montreal for another four months until March. Just did...basically nothing for four months and so the, like going from very structured to completely unstructured...I think I lost a lot of time and I spent a lot of money, shopping.*

Similar to Tania, Ramona had to find meaning to her life outside of the close team and training culture that now ‘disappeared suddenly.’ In reflection, Ramona now found herself being somewhat lost and irrationally ‘doing nothing,’ ‘losing of a lot of time’ and ‘money.’ After the four months, Ramona and her sister went back home to live with their parents for another few months until it was time to go back to university. Ramona recalled that moving back with her parents was the most difficult part of her transition, as she was used to living away on her own and having a strict schedule. However, once university started, things got better. In spite of these few months, Ramona considered she had a good transition.

Similarly, Rochelle (speed swimmer) transitioned smoothly out of swimming. Even though her retirement out of sport was quite abrupt, she did not find the transition negative: “*I was actually really enjoying myself for that first year.*” In her case, retirement coincided with the end of high school, during which she “*unleashed a little bit.*” Rochelle also had a lot of time on hands, but she:

*... wanted to be a teenager and [...] started drinking and partying [...] Going out on the weekends and going to the bar, meeting boys. [...] I didn't do anything. I never worked out, I didn't do anything I just...like I was a waitress for about a year and partied and that was it.*

Similar to Tania, Rochelle found a new meaning living what she considered a typical teenager, non-athlete life. She specified that she did not feel lost after retiring from her sport because:

*I was so into student drinking and boys. It was so fun, it was like, no time to feel lost. I was like, yeah, let's go out and meet boys and have fun and you know, I just immersed myself in having a great time. Like I had...I felt great. I had such a good year when I was 18 to 19. I had so much fun and I was serving and I made a bunch of new friends when I was waitressing and it was great.*

Rochelle seemed to be really in tune with her new ways of spending her time and discovering what felt good for her. Similar to Anne in Jones et al.'s (2005) study, Rochelle admitted, however, that the eating disorder she acquired during her sport followed her and took her years to overcome.

In her story of retirement, Samira (speed swimmer) also talked about having a relatively smooth transition from her sport. Similar to Krista (synchronized swimmer), Samira used her extra time to involve herself more in her studies. When she finished her sport career, Samira was enrolled in an architecture program, which was very demanding of her time. Samira used her personality type that drove her through her athletic years to re-focus on school, spending the time she now had to improve her marks and do very well in her courses. Her scholarship agreement also allowed her to continue to benefit partially from it during the rest of her degree. Although there was *“this immediate uptake in other areas of my life when I was able to stop training,”* Samira did not feel *“a big social shift,”* because she continued to act like a swimmer and was surrounded by swimmer friends. She described at length:

*It was still my entire identity. It was still, you know, I was a swimmer. I used to show up to classes with ice packs wrapped to my shoulders because I was an athlete. I had all the athlete gear, you know, they kit you out in all the apparel for your sport. So, you know, it was still a huge part of my identity. It was still around me. All my friends were swimmers,*

*all my social network was pretty much swimming, because I really didn't have time to do anything with any of the normal students. So, you know, there was a big social shift as well, as soon as I stopped swimming, where I started hanging out a bit more with people who were never involved in sport and had other interests and hobbies, and I was trying to figure out how they lived. What do you do with your time, you know?*

Like Tania and Rochelle, Samira did have to learn how 'people not involved in sport lived.' Enrolling in her university degree, albeit as a scholarship athlete, may have softened the 'big social shift' from a swimmer identity as she started 'hanging out with other people' and was introduced to other interests outside of her swimming community. It is evident, however, that to recreate meanings to live a relevant life outside of sport (Smith & Sparkes, 2009), Samira was able to construct them in relation to other people who lived a different life than the one based on the 'real athlete' narrative.

As I indicated earlier, Sonia's (figure skater) story is different from my other participants' stories, because she had two skating careers. Sonia's retirement from ice dancing at 18 coincided with the end of her high school. At the university she went "*off the deep end.*" However, Sonia talked about this as her experimenting period:

*I wasn't allowed to go to a dance or any...I couldn't ski, I couldn't snowboard, I couldn't...I did everything in university because I had never done anything before, including drinking to excess and you know, I didn't do anything else bad but in my parents' eyes I would have been a horribly, horribly [...] parented child because I, you know, I totally broke all the rules.*

At this stage, Sonia like Tania and Rochelle resorted to experimenting with behaviors like excess drinking that was not part of her life before. Sonia's second skating career lasted until she was 40

years old, when life priorities took over and she made a voluntary decision to retire from her sport. However, a terrible car accident interrupted her skating for a while and she considers this “*a really awful time*” in her life. While she was still recovering from the accident, she went back on the ice too early and re-injured herself. Unlike Tania, Ramona, or Rochelle, Sonia talked about replacing skating with exercise: “*If I can’t skate, then I’m exercising a lot to make up for the time that I used to spend on the ice.*” She had a difficult time recovering, because she could not skate or exercise and had too much time on her hands:

*What do I do with my five hours in my evening before I go to bed? Like it’s really difficult to fill up that time, so...and I don’t recall what I did, honestly. I skated a little bit and probably watched television, and it was a really awful time in my life.*

It is interesting to notice that Sonia did not mention the same feelings when she completely retired at age 40, as her time was now divided between son, husband, work, and school.

In summary, the athletes who considered themselves adjusting to their new lives after sport, all first struggled with having, all of a sudden, a lot of unstructured time. Similar to the retired athletes in Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) study, they felt “an enormous void” in their lives (p. 123). Tania, Rochelle, and Sonia, initially, filled this time with living a young person’s life with boyfriends, drinking, and parties, not accessible to them during their carefully structured athletic lives. Through these stories, a narrative of ‘normal’ young person’s life filled with ‘excesses’ and ‘wild’ experiences emerged, opposite to the ‘real athlete’s’ life immersed in absolute commitment to sport and its performance narrative. The participants storied themselves as somewhat rebellious at this stage, which was very different from their disciplined lives as sport women. Ramona recalled only a four-month period not knowing how to spend her time, but Samira, having already enrolled into a new university degree, found new friends and gave new

meaning to her life rather quickly. While these athletes assigned multiple meanings to their lives immediately after sport, they all had to fill the time not spent in sporting practices with some other meaningful activities and if successful, they storied their transitions out of sport as relatively smooth.

### ***“The Whole Time I Was Just Super Depressed:” Not Adjusting to the Life after Sport***

In previous literature (Erpic et al., 2004; Grove, Lavalley & Gordon, 1997; Jones et al., 2005; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Smith & McManus, 2008; Sparkes, 1998; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Warrnier & Lavalley, 2008), it has been reported that some athletes struggle emotionally, psychologically and socially with the transition out of elite sport, struggles that appeared related to athletic identity, the reason for retirement, or the age and stage in life at the time of retirement. Three of my participants (Nina, Alina, and Sheila), as well as myself, also talked about similar struggles, which, nevertheless, did not seem to be related to the above reasons. I now detail these athletes’ stories to more closely discuss their differences and similarities.

Nina (synchronized swimmer), who had an abrupt retirement, experienced a rough period of time until she found her way in life. Similarly, Alina (synchronized swimmer) and Sheila (cross country runner) encountered some difficult moments as they were forced to abruptly exit their sports. These three participants all experienced episodes of depression and had a difficult time adjusting to life after sport.

As became evident in the previous section, Alina’s story revealed that she felt awful, ashamed, insecure, and was very resentful of her sport after coming back from the national center for synchronized swimming. She went to university because that was what everyone else



was doing and was what was expected of her too. For two years Alina was able to go with the flow: going to school, partying, and drinking. However, deep inside she:

*was incredibly depressed and bulimic [Laughter] and gaining weight and not exercising. Yeah, yeah, so, and nothing my life had no purpose ... yeah, there was nothing. [...] I wasn't proud of myself and I had no identity and nothing felt good and I was just kind of going through the motions. Not doing well at school, like not doing well at anything, feeling just shitty about yourself all the time.*

After two years of this, Alina developed a major depression and had to take a year off from school. She attended therapy after which she started to build a new identity for herself, a new Alina:

*I'm not the same person. I don't know who that was, who that swimmer was [...] I like who I am now, and I like what I've accomplished and I finished school and I've done things that I'm proud of.*

After retirement from her sport, Alina also had more time which she filled with school, new friends and parties, and she developed friends outside of sport. All this, however, did not make her feel any better. In fact, it took Alina years to regain some of her pride and she was still working on discovering her strengths and developing as a person outside her sport at the time of the interview.

In her story, Nina, also a synchronized swimmer, had a difficult time after retirement. Due to negative experiences with her coach, she rejected her sport for a time. Now away from the synchronized swimming community, she had a lot of time on hands. When she has completed her undergraduate program, Nina did not know what career to pursue without guidance from anyone. Similar to Alina, Nina also had a depression episode and was hospitalized. She recalled:

*I think it was more attached to um, the fact that I was running my own show now and I didn't know how to do that. Like I was running my life and I could make my own choices and there was no forced opinion about it, which is what I think is hard about retirement.*

It took Nina a long time to rebuild her life and she is currently married with two sons and has a very satisfying career.

Sheila (cross country runner) also did not transition smoothly out of her sport. After she quit running, Sheila too started her undergraduate program, but felt terrible, useless, and became depressed:

*When university started and I had gotten, like full rides to the States and I decided not to take any of them 'cause I'm like, I'm useless. [Laughter] So I'm just not going to do, like go in that direction. Yes, so I just came to the U of A and the whole time I was just super depressed. I didn't want to be around anyone. I didn't want to be at school, I just wanted to be in my room by myself. [...] I usually would go to school and just put up with it, try to put on a happy face and then come back home and just, like, break down.*

Sheila storied her embarrassment of not making the Olympics as the cause for her depression: “*I just, like, couldn't meet the level that I wanted to achieve.*” After a bit of drinking and partying and a semester where she “*pretty much failed everything,*” Sheila had to switch schools and programs a few times and was on her way to finishing a degree of her choice at the time of the interview.

Similar to these three participants, I also experienced a difficult transition. Unlike Sheila, I felt that I accomplished the highest level possible in Romania at that time Yet, once retired, I also felt lost and depressed, not knowing who I was and what to do with myself. After a while, I

tried to fill out my time with other sports and activities, but nothing made me feel the same as being a high-performance basketball player.

Looking closer to these four retirement stories, both Alina and Nina (synchronized swimmers) were impacted by external negative experiences (i.e., national training center and relationship with coach, respectively), which may have created very specific experiences for these two athletes. In narrative research individuals give meanings to their experiences in relation to their social contexts. Thus, it was obvious that Alina and Nina interpreted their experiences based on their interactions with the other athletes and coaches in their training contexts. Similar experiences were reported by Barker-Rucht and Schubring (2016), Jones et al. (2005), and Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) who found external negative experiences in training centers or controlling coaches created more difficult retirement transitions for women gymnasts. One might think that Alina and Nina's difficult transition out of sport might have had to do with those external factors. However, both Sheila and myself also experienced a difficult retirement from sport, and our athletic stories were different. What is consistent among all four of us is that no matter how our athletic story was, no matter what our retirement reason was, we all experienced depression and felt lost.

In summary, three participants (Alina, Nina – synchronized swimmers, and Sheila – cross country runner) experienced a difficult transition out of their respective sports. In all these stories, they expressed difficulty determining what they could be good at besides their sports. The other seven participants, although having a rough time right after retirement from their sports, did not story that time as a struggle. They had figured out the required adjustments and created new meanings for their new lives, and then transferred from their sports into other activities. For example, one characteristic that I mentioned previously and that all participants

shared was that they were all high achievers, ‘real athletes’, who wanted to be the best at what they did. The seven participants who had a positive transition out of sport used their strengths in different contexts outside of sport, which gave new meanings to their lives. Thus, they used their tendency for high achievement to their advantage to get a degree and develop successful careers. I was also a high achiever (maybe I still am) and I used this characteristic after retirement. Thus, many would say I have been very successful on many levels (e.g., academically, professionally, personally), yet my story revealed that I still struggled emotionally. I still felt inferior, incomplete, insecure, that my achievements were not even near what I have achieved in basketball. Such contradictory meanings of success have not been looked at by the previous retirement research.

### **Shared Stories of Difficult Transitions**

Trying to understand why three participants had a rougher transition when the age and the reason for retirement did not differ, as a narrative researcher, I looked deeper into their stories. It appears that Alina, Nina, and Sheila had a few things in common. First, they saw their sports as the most important thing in their life, something that defined them. They were ‘real athletes’ in their sporting lives as I discussed in **Chapter V**. For Alina, synchronized swimming was

*“Everything. It was all that was so good in my life.”* Sheila was “a runner” and:

*Running was always something that defined me. Like that’s how people defined me as well, like “Oh, that’s the girl that’s the runner,” right? It’s like, I don’t know. There’s nothing else that I thought defined me.*

Nina also felt synchronized swimming was the only thing that she was good at:

*I didn't even know what I could do well, outside of swimming, so I think I kept doing it for that, because I could do it well and I knew how, until I figured out what else I was going to, I better keep trying. Um, [Pause] and I think that was part of not being able to think for myself, and even know what other options are out there.*

Interestingly, looking back at my own story and trying to make sense of my own retirement experience, I realized that for me as well, basketball was the most important thing in my life. And why would it not be? I was good at it, I felt accomplished, successful, I was fit, I traveled, and for months I was in training camps with good friends, away from a much more damaging environment at home and sometimes at school.

Second, Alina, Sheila, and Nina found everything else in life secondary. Nina did talk about some friends from outside her sporting environment, but Alina and Sheila did not mention any such friends. In addition, neither of the participants liked school very much, and they finished whatever was easy or convenient at the time. When it came to decide on a career, they either wanted to have a career in something related to sport (i.e., Sheila wanted to become a sports dietician) or they had no clue what they wanted to do (Nina and Alina).

I also found that everything else was secondary to basketball. I did not care about anything else. Similar to Krista (synchronized swimmer), my parents kept me on the right track when it came to school, because they demanded good marks. Yet, I did not like school either, at least not until I made it to university. I also chose to stay connected to sport by going to a university program that involved physical tests to enter (instead of just written exams) and a lot of physical activity classes during the program. At that time, I was thinking that maybe I could be a physical therapist for a sports team, and stay connected to the sport in that capacity.

Nina's, Alina's, Sheila's and my own stories of retirement have some elements similar to what Cavallerio et al. (2017) described as *entangled* narrative, where the athlete still values what was important during the athletic life (e.g., being better, being perfect, hard work, discipline), yet these values clash with the realities of a regular life. Thus, all four of us experienced the tensions and dissatisfaction with the new life, trying to fit in, to catch up, or to learn something completely new. Most importantly, we had yet to learn about the new US, as we were not 'real athletes' anymore. Even though these four stories resembled the entangled narrative (Cavallerio et al., 2017), they were also very different. Through my study I was able to capture a more detailed and complex view of retirement and the struggles some athletes go through.

In contrast to these four experiences, the other seven participants' stories, even though different and unique on their own, resembled Cavallerio et al.'s (2017) *going forward* narrative, in which the athlete feels being more like 'a former athlete' and now looks forward to the future outside sport. These seven participants told stories about things in their lives that they were able to fall back onto when they retired from their sports. Interestingly, skating was everything to Sonia until the car accident:

*So, it meant everything to me at that point. And up until, up until I quit skating again in my 29th, 30th year, 'cause of my car accident, it still was a really, really important part of my life. [...] skating has always kind of been there as a constant. It was something I've always done really well, so, and it gives me a lot of pleasure and makes me happy.*

It was, indeed, after the accident that Sonia had the roughest time. By the time she completely retired at 40 years old, she had already developed other interests and thus, the transition was easier for her at that time. Tania also mentioned that synchronized swimming was important for her, but it did not define her. Rather, she saw it as a hobby, which allowed her to not have "*the*

*resentment towards it that lots of people do, and that I can still be happy and involved and maintain those connections and friendships.”*

Previous researchers connect having a strong athletic identity with not exploring other possibilities outside sport (Erpic et al., 2004; Jones, Glintmeyer & McKenzie, 2005; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Smith & McManus, 2008; Sparkes, 1998; Warrnier & Lavalley, 2008). Alina, Sheila, Nina and myself, obviously, had developed strong identities following the ‘real athlete’ narrative. Previous researchers added that having a strong athletic identity can have a negative effect on the athletes’ psycho-social levels and sense of self (Erpic et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2005; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Smith & McManus, 2008; Sparkes, 1998; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Warrnier & Lavalley, 2008; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). The previous narrative researchers of sport retirement also suggest that immersion in elite sport culture shaped women athletes identities “around performance values of single-minded dedication to sport and prioritization of winning above all other areas of life” (Douglas & Carless, 2009, p. 213). In this regard, my findings concurred with the previous research. It then made sense why my three participants and myself, for whom the sport meant everything and who based the sense of self on being an athlete, could not find anything to replace sport once it ended. Still living the ‘real athlete’ narrative, we, consequently, were faced with a difficult time once retired.

Third, all four of us (Nina, Alina, Sheila and myself) lacked a support network. Having connections outside the sport realm was also found previously to be beneficial during the life after sport (Erpic et al., 2004). Nina, for example, had lots of friends during high school, but did not maintain them. Once she retired from her sport, she lost those connections as well and felt very alone. Alina and Sheila mentioned that they did not have many friends in high school or in

their sports and had to build a social network once they retired from their sports. I also did not have friends outside my team. I could not really relate with other possible friends my age, as we had different interests all together. Different than me, the other three participants talked about having a good relationship with their families, but that did not seem to be enough to help them through the transition. I, on the other hand, did not even have my family's support.

Forth, both Nina and Alina had difficult relationships with their coaches. Nina's coach indicated that Nina did not deserve to win which impacted her performance during the last few years of her synchronized swimming career. Alina had negative experiences with both the coaches and her fellow athletes at the national center. The coach-athlete relationships have been established to influence the athletes' retirement experiences (Johns, 1998; Johns & Johns, 2000; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). It is possible that Nina and Alina's negative experiences with their coaches and/or team mates led them to lose the contacts and made them feel very alone once retired. In contrast with these two athletes, I had good relationships with my female coaches. In fact, I looked up to two of them, one of them being like a mom to me. However, when I retired, I also lost that relationship. Even though the loss was not sudden and for a couple years I could still help with the junior practices, the relationship changed. I started to see her less and less. When I moved to Canada, I could only go back to her practices during the summer holidays when I visited Romania. I still hold a special place for her, as she does for me, but I was missing training under her, taking in her feedback and showing her that I was a 'real athlete' by following her advice.

Finally, all four of us did everything we could to be the best in our sports and built our self-worth solely based on our athletic performance. In addition, I now realize that the Romanian school system at the time was not helping students build self-esteem and self-worth. Neither did



my family. As a result, I was attached to my coaches, looked for external gratification from them, and I built my self-worth around basketball: the only thing that I felt I was really good at. Thus, when the athletic life ended, the four of us had nothing to support our self-worth. Consequently, we all felt miserable and developed depression. Alina was thinking: *“you’re not really worth anything interesting. [Laughter] And that’s awful, but to me, like unless you’re, like, the best of the best at whatever.”* Sheila also had a difficult time picking up other activities because *“it’s hard for me to, like whenever I want to do something and if I’m, like passionate about something, I want to be, like the best at it.”* It was, thus, difficult for her to just run for fun, or bike a little bit, without going back into that ‘I have to be the next Olympian’ operating mode. This was true for myself as well. Every time I tried a new sport, I wanted to know how I could get to competitions and how I could win medals. However, it never felt the same as when I was playing basketball. Deep down I knew it was not as serious, and my commitment was not the same. Yet, I continued to compete just to fill a void. In addition, I was also trying to mimic the intense training I did when I was playing basketball. Thus, there was a time in my early thirties when I would train for three sports in one day. In the early afternoon I would train with the speed swimming team, in the late afternoon and early evening I would train with the synchronized swimming team, and then I would go and train with the community basketball team. And yet, by the end of the evening I still did not feel as good as when I only trained for basketball in Romania.

In summary, the transition from the athletic life to a regular life for the ten participants was influenced by factors such as the role the sport played in their lives and the other interests that the participants pursued during their sporting careers. If the athletes continued to adhere to the ‘real athlete’ narrative and sport kept meaning everything to them, their transition out of sport

was more difficult. If the participants' self-worth was based on the athletic performance, they had a more difficult time adjusting to life after sport. This was also demonstrated by the previous narrative research on sport retirement: the athletes who continued to define themselves through the performance narrative had difficulty with retirement (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Finally, without connections and support outside the sport, it was difficult to start a regular life. However, although my findings verify the results from the previous research, they also demonstrated the complexity of the retirement process. Each of the participants' experience was unique and the meanings each of them attributed to them shaped how they storied their life. As educational and professional-related skills have been previously identified as factors that influence the retirement experience (Smith & McManus, 2008), I now explore the role education played in the participants' stories.

### **Education in the Athletic Lifespan**

According to previous post-positivist research, athletes tend to focus extensively on developing their athletic related skills, with educational, occupational, and social skills as secondary (Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008). However, going to school and developing other interests outside sport can have a positive influence on the quality of retirement from sport (Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008). Narrative researchers add that such involvements could provide the 'alternative narratives' to the performance narrative after sporting life and thus, ease the transition to retirement (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Based on their stories, all my participants finished their degrees or went even further into graduate studies, regardless of having a forced or a voluntary retirement. In addition, most of them were able to engage in other activities to replace their sports. In several ways, the timing of their retirement

seemed to direct these athletes' future paths. As the previous researchers have assigned education to be secondary to athletes' sport career, they have not examined athletes' educational paths in much detail. For example, while Elisabetta in Cavallerio et al.'s (2017) study and Laura in Kerr and Dacyshyn's (2000) study talked about attending university, the researchers did not explore the athletes' educational paths beyond stating that both athletes made new friends outside of sport. Thus, the findings presented here are quite unique amid the narrative literature on women's sport retirement. As some of my participants retired at high school age, I begin my discussion of these experiences to then highlight other participants' paths through post-secondary education. These stories may help establish if the schooling provided alternative narratives to the 'real athlete' narrative, particularly to the athletes who were able to move relatively effortless to the 'going forward' (Cavallerio et al., 2017) stage of their retirement.

### **Timing of Retirement: Stories from High School**

Through Tania's (synchronized swimmer) story, we find that she retired the youngest of all the participants, at age 15, when she was still in high school. At that point she went from being a part time to a full-time student, which allowed her to choose and try out courses she could not have elected before. After graduating from high school, Tania pursued an education degree, following her passion of becoming a teacher. She is currently working as an educator in a French immersion school, which she recognized "*it took a lot for me.*" Being a goal-oriented person "*because of my past as an athlete,*" Tania currently plans "*to continue learning as much as I can as a teacher*" as well as fulfill some of her travelling goals. As noted earlier, Tania still loves her sport and continues to be part of its community as a coach.

Three athletes' retirement stories coincided with their graduation from high school. They all seemed somewhat confused with how to continue their lives without the sport and have gone through several attempts to find a career. For example, Rochelle (speed swimmer), whose retirement from swimming coincided with the end of high school, took a year off and became a waitress. Rochelle then moved to a different city to pursue an undergraduate degree in nutrition. She chose to become a dietician *"because I was obsessed with food and nutrition, so that's what I studied at university. It was a complete obsession."* However, a few years after, her relationship with her body and food ameliorated, as she was positively influenced by her husband. At the same time, Rochelle (speed swimmer) did not like the environment that she was working in. Those two reasons made her give up her dietetics career. At the time of the interview, she was self-employed, working in the insurance business.

Sheila, whose retirement from cross country running also coincided with the end of her high school, confided that she started an undergraduate program because everyone else did. Before she quit running, Sheila also wanted to become a sport dietician, because she was *"super focussed on sport and also nutrition and how it affects sport."* The next couple years were very difficult for Sheila as she started to doubt her chosen career. Following a few switches in programs and universities, Sheila realized that *"I can separate, like, the running from nutrition, that I still do love nutrition and I don't have to be a crazy runner to love nutrition."* At the time of the interview, Sheila was enrolled again in the nutrition program and felt good about her decision: *"I think it's better that I figure it out this way, that I can separate myself from, like, my future career in the sense that I don't have to be an elite athlete to be interested in sport nutrition."*

It is interesting to notice that both Rochelle (speed swimmer) and Sheila (cross country runner), even though they were not in aesthetic sports and they were not judged on their appearance, they felt pressure to control their food intake. As I discussed in **Chapter V (Eating Disorders)**, that obsession with food was so high that both wanted to learn more about it and pursued nutritional studies to become dieticians. In addition, both had to check with themselves if that interest was still there once they were retired from their respective sports.

Alina's story brought to light her considerable struggle once retired from synchronized swimming, which was probably the biggest struggle of all participants. Her retirement from sport also coincided with the end of her high school. Alina enrolled in an undergraduate program, because "*my parents wanted me to start university and so I started university.*" However, for the first two years Alina battled with everything. She was "*just about doing whatever was easiest [...] just did the easiest thing that would appease people.*" At the same time Alina was not feeling good about herself on all levels, being very insecure about herself and not doing well in school. Two years into the program she had a major depression, which caused her to take a year off school. With the help of therapy, she was able to return and finish her degree. At the time of the interview, Alina was working at an agency for immigrants helping people in various ways; it is a job that brings her a huge satisfaction and a different perspective on life.

### **Timing of Retirement: Stories from University**

All my participants enrolled in university programs at some point, but not all of them had a clear understanding of what they wanted to do. They each had different reasons why they pursued a certain program, thus their education took on different meanings. Both Samira

(swimmer) and Nina (synchronized swimmer) told similar stories where they made certain choices regarding their education path, because their sport helped to pay the costs.

Samira's story included several changes, as she initially enrolled in an architecture program at a university in United States (US). She thought that was what she wanted to do and she could get a scholarship as a swimmer. However, when she started working, she realized that architecture was not her passion. She then decided to move back to Canada and try to get into a physical therapy program "*because it would be close to sport without actually being in it and I'd be able to help people.*" For the last few years she has been working on completing the pre-requisites in order to be able to get into the physical therapy program. She is currently working an administrative job to support herself and her husband (who is a US citizen) in order to fulfill her dream to become a physical therapist.

Nina's sport also paid for her education, so she took courses that fit her swimming schedule and completed a degree that fit the courses that she had, because she did not know what she wanted and did not particularly like being a student. After she graduated, Nina went to Malaysia to coach and only after that she started to look into other career options for her. At age 28, Nina still did not know what her career would be, but "*figured I needed to start moving towards something.*" She was an advisor working with undergraduate students at the time of the interview.

While these two participants continued their education, it took them a while to figure out what they really wanted to do with their life. Their stories resembled Elisabetta's narrative in Cavallerio & al., (2017) study. Elisabetta also attended university, but was still 'making sense' of her life after sport and had no real future plans for her degree. In this sense, my participants storied their lives with what Cavallerio et al. titled as 'the making sense narrative' where the

athletes are in the process of leaving the performance narrative to seek other life narratives. The other interviewees, who retired later from sport, had a better-defined direction for their lives. Three athletes, however, attested 'loving school' and pursued graduate education.

Among all the participants, Krista (synchronized swimmer) seemed to have the most established meaning for her education. That gave her the greatest sense of direction: she knew exactly what she wanted to do all the way. She had the most control of her retirement, just as she had over her athletic life. Krista worked gradually towards her transition and, as I discussed earlier, storied her retirement as positive. Krista learned early on that her sport was secondary to what she wanted to do in life and that "*university is what's going to take me where I want to be.*" She remembered knowing quite early that she had two options: "*Cirque du Soleil, a national team or, you know, being... whatever else you want.*" With that in mind, she focused her attention on school and getting into the programs that she wanted. Krista's motto – "*This is what I want to do and this is where my life is going*" – kept her going in the right direction, helping her to be successful in her sport as well as in her education. As she was reducing her training on her own terms, Krista graduated from an undergraduate program and then continued her education pursuing a Masters degree in political sciences. At the time of the interview, Krista was looking into a possibly continuing with a PhD, or finding a job in her field. As I noted earlier, Krista indeed transitioned smoothly away from the 'real athlete' narrative without going through a set of retirement stages or having to rely on several different narratives to find a meaningful life after sport.

Ramona's (synchronized swimmer) story, in some ways aligned with Krista's story, as she also enjoyed school. During her athletic life, she had to miss a lot of school to concentrate on swimming. Ramona justified postponing her school in favour of swimming: "*you can do mental*

*work any time you want to, whereas, you know, swimming is a very short-term thing, before you get injured.*” Ramona also knew before she got injured that she was not going to be able to swim too long: *“your body starts breaking down, you get really tired”* and that as a woman, there is also a time limit for having children. Because Ramona *“loved, I loved, loved school,”* once her swimming career was over, she went back to school to pursue graduate and post-doctoral studies. She was working and researching in academia at the time of the interview. As I noted in **Chapter V**, Ramona also embraced the ‘real athlete’ narrative during her athletic career, yet it seems that she was always aware that narrative would end at one point in time. Thus, like Krista, she seemed to transition easier to another narrative once retired.

Misha (biathlete) also liked school. After her initial retirement from biathlon at age 18 and the one year of travel in Australia, Misha came back to Canada and completed an undergraduate then a graduate degree. At the time of the interview, Misha was living with her husband and daughter and pursuing post-doctoral studies at a famous research institute in Europe. She considered herself *“addicted to science”* instead of her sport.

While Sonia (figure skater), who retired in her 40s, was also completing a graduate degree at the time of the interview, she assigned a different meaning to her schooling. While training for synchronized skating, Sonia completed a physical education degree with the intention of going into sport medicine. However, different life constraints took her into another direction and Sonia did not pursue a career in medicine. Rather she completed a post degree in nursing and she is very pleased with where it took her: *“Not to say that I didn’t choose nursing, ‘cause I want...I knew I wanted to go into medicine of some sort, and it ended up being the right career for me.”*

It seems that for some of the participants, the alternative narratives started to form as they were still living the ‘real athlete’ life. For several, the academic pursuit held a strong meaning,



which lead to a smoother and more enjoyable transition out of elite sport. Others needed more time and different experiences in order to create a new meaningful life story. What is certain though is that the new meanings and the stories these athletes created sooner or later came from their experiences as athletes and can be understood if we understand their athletic stories and the meanings behind their 'real athlete' narrative.

An interesting point brought up by Ramona in her story was the idea of children, and the time limit the body has for having children. Even though other interviewees (Misha and Sonia) had children at the time of the interview, none mentioned this point. What meanings did they give to motherhood at this time? Were they aware of it at all? Is having children something that us, women, take for granted that it will happen once we are done with the elite sport? Is elite sport not compatible with having children? Sonia (figure skater) had her son around 40 years of age, and she had to give up even the lower level of skating that she was engaged in. Before I had my children, I thought I would be back playing and training after a couple months. However, that was not possible due to the demands of motherhood. While Ramona and Sonia seemed to have been okay with the switch to motherhood, I resented it. Just like Debbie in the Douglas and Carless' (2009) study, even though I wanted my children and did not want to hurt them, I felt restricted and resentful, which possibly contributed more to my prolonged retirement struggles. Douglas and Carless (2006) added, however, that it was possible to reconcile having children during one's sporting career if an athlete adopted what the researchers identified as 'discovery narrative.' In their study, Kandy, a woman golfer, found excitement in discovering activities outside of professional sport life. For example, having a daughter was a new, exciting part of her life while still playing golf. I return to the participants' meanings of having a family in the next chapter.

## **Age of Retirement – Multiple Meanings**

The age of retirement or the reason for retirement (i.e., deliberate versus abrupt retirement), were not directly connected to the participants' choice of career and level of education. Rochelle (speed swimmer), Sheila (cross country runner), Alina (synchronized swimmer) and Misha (biathlete), all retired around the end of high school (i.e., 17-18 years of age). Out of them, Rochelle was the only one who deliberately retired, while the others had abrupt retirements. However, Misha (abrupt retirement at 18 years of age) liked school, knew what she wanted to do, and pursued graduate and post-doctoral studies. The others were either disoriented about their future or changed their career sometime after graduation. Similarly, Samira (speed swimmer), Krista, Nina and Ramona (synchronized swimmers), who retired a little later, either during or after their undergraduate programs (i.e., 22-25 years of age) also differed regarding their career choices and paths. Samira (abrupt retirement at 22 years of age) changed her career, while Nina (deliberate retirement at 24-25 years of age) still did not know what to do with her life at 28 years of age. Krista (abrupt retirement at 24 years of age) knew from high school what she wanted to do, while Ramona (abrupt retirement at 25 years of age) knew before retirement she wanted to go back to school. Tania (synchronized swimmer) retired before the end of high school and had time to figure out her future passion of becoming a teacher. Sonia completed her two degrees when she was still competing and would have continued combining her career and athletic life if she did not have her son.

As for my education path, my story is a bit more complicated, due to the fact that I also moved to a different country very close to my retirement from basketball. In Romania I chose to study physical therapy, which was the right fit for me at that time. However, because there were no opportunities to improve and advance in my career, I wanted to move abroad to pursue

graduate studies. However, once in Canada, I realized that I could not practice physiotherapy, so I was left wondering what I could do with my knowledge. I started a graduate program in physical education, but everything was very new and I felt very behind compared to other students. I also learned that being a coach in Canada was much different than in Romania. In basketball, at beginner levels, it was a volunteer position, while being a swimming coach, another sport that I trained for, required a lot of certifications I did not have. So, in addition to my retirement from sport, I also struggled to know which direction to go in terms of a career in Canada. Thus, this instability regarding my future added to the insecurity I was feeling as a retired athlete, probably making the retirement process even more challenging.

In conclusion, unlike what was suggested by previous post-positivist research findings (Erpic et al., 2004; Price et al., 2010; Smith & McManus, 2008; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), my participants' reasons for retirement, the age when they retired, their schooling, and choice of career were not necessarily directly connected. Rather, it appears that the participants who liked school during their athletic careers also pursued graduate studies after (e.g., Krista and Ramona – synchronized swimmers, Misha – biathlete, and Sonia – skater). This provided them with a new and meaningful narrative, and a possibility to leave the 'real athlete' narrative behind them. The other athletes were not particularly passionate about school or they saw themselves as average students. They had some difficulty finding a different narrative from the 'real athlete' narrative after they retired. In fact, Rochelle and Samira (speed swimmers) fully completed undergraduate programs (programs that they had thought they were passionate about) and then completely changed their careers. Sheila (cross country runner) was still working out if nutrition was the right program for her, while Nina (synchronized swimmer) took a long time to figure out what to do with her degree. My career path was strongly dictated

by the limitations of my immigrant status. Even to this day (20 years after I graduated), I am still working on finding a good and suitable career path. It is noticeable that all interviewees were relatively ambitious in terms of their education, with half of them pursuing graduate studies. One would wonder if the high performance in sport has then transferred to high performance in academia, switching one 'addiction' for another.

Another interesting point is the participants' career choices. One might think that after being athletes for such a long time, or at such a high level, they would all be coaches, referees or playing some kind of other roles in their sport. For example, many of the Canadian varsity athletes in Miller and Kerr's (2002b) study chose physical education as their major. However, the ten participants in my study pursued different careers. Some indeed tried career choices connected to the sport. For example, Rochelle (speed swimming) and Sheila (cross country runner) studied to become sport dieticians. However, Rochelle realized that was not the right career for her and changed to the insurance business. Samira (speed swimmer), at the time of the interview was switching from architecture to physical therapy, which is more sport related. Ramona (synchronized swimmer) and Sonia (skater) completed physical education degrees, and Ramona pursued post-doctoral studies as an exercise physiologist. Sonia completed an after degree in nursing and is working with mothers and new born babies. Alina, Krista, Tania, Nina (synchronized swimmers) and Misha (biathlete) have completely different careers. However, Tania might have chosen hers based on the fact that she realized she really liked coaching that, in some ways, resembles teaching, her current career. Nina might have chosen to become a student advisor because she was looking for that information while trying to figure out what she wanted to do with her life.

Looking at the education and career choices of my participants as well as my own, I am wondering if some of us might have tried to prolong the ‘real athlete’ narrative by studying and working in environments related to sport. The participants who separated themselves from this narrative, seemed to be able to choose careers that they pursued later on. However, I would be curious to know what the others would have selected, if they were not as immersed in the ‘real athlete’ narrative. Would have they have still needed time to explore or would they have known faster what interested them? Since I have not explored this aspect with my participants at the time of the interviews, I can only speak to from my story. It seems that for myself, my interest in sport remains high. The meaning of sport continues to play an important role in my life, so my education and career choices continue to revolve around sport.

While not necessarily in sport related professions, the participants reflected upon their current connections with sport in their stories. In the next section, I explore their current involvement with their respective sports.

### **Involved or Not Involved? Sport after Retirement**

Although one might think that their love for the sport and being proud of the ‘real athlete’ narrative and commitment to the performance narrative would mean that the participants also wanted to practice the sport forever, it was not the case with my ten participants. This was an interesting and unique aspect of their lives that my participants brought up, that has not been addressed in previous research on retirement from sport. In this section I examine the meanings that the participants gave to their current physical activity participation.

Three synchronized swimmers with quite different retirement experiences are still active in their sport community and now have different meanings for their sport participation: one as a swimmer, one as a coach and one through her family involvement with the sport. Out of all the participants, Nina (synchronized swimmer) is the only one who is still involved in the sport, practicing it at a much lower level. As noted earlier, Nina was still not quite sure of the direction for her life, after retiring from sport. Because of her love for synchronized swimming, the year after she retired, Nina became:

*the Athlete's Rep for Canada, for Synchro Canada, reporting on what the athletes still wanted. So, I kind of, I wanted to stay connected and have an impact and do something, um, [Pause] I think, because I love the sport and because it gave me meaning.*

In addition, after graduating from university, Nina went to Malaysia to coach their team for the Commonwealth Games. Things went well for a period of time. However, due to a combination of cultural differences, politics of the club, and another intervention of her former coach, Nina left the club before her contract ended. After returning to Canada, Nina did not want anything to do with the world of synchronized swimming: *"in fact I didn't even go to the pool. I didn't even tell people I was back, ... I didn't want to show up at a competition, I didn't want to see it, I didn't care."* Nina moved on with her career, but returned to the sport because:

*I still enjoyed swimming after that and I [Pause] looking back now, I'm the only one that's swimming, so I clearly loved the sport [...] Not to say, whatever, you know, people move on and do their own thing, but I'm like, [Pause] I love swimming. [...] Like, I, swimming, going swimming by myself in a pool just isn't cutting it. [Laughter] That's not swimming. It is, but it isn't, and I did other sports, I did kayaking and I did other sports that involved*

*water and that helped and that was good, but it never, [Pause] you don't work together at the same level.*

At the time of the interview, Nina was swimming with Synchro Masters club once a week, and because she liked to be challenged, she swam with a younger age group that was more challenging than her own age group. Even though Nina was not living the 'real athlete' narrative anymore, she realized that synchronized swimming still meant a lot to her, thus she was able to purely enjoy the sport without having to live the performance narrative.

Tania (synchronized swimmer) was also actively involved in her sport at the time of the interview. Tania talked about going travelling for a year after high school, yet she always remained involved in some kind of aquatic activities, either lifeguarding, or teaching swimming lessons. When she returned from her travels, Tania started *"a little synchro club at the YMCA where I was teaching swimming lessons. That was my first [Pause] endeavor back into the sport, which would have been [Pause] five or six years of nothing, of no synchro."* At that time, Tania did not have a coaching certificate, but decided to get one, when her little club expanded from 6 people to 26 in a year. At that point more coaching opportunities came her way. While coaching at one of the clubs, Tania found out about the University Synchro Club and, eight years after she stopped swimming, she decided to join the club and try it out. As she continued to love the easier training and the competition, she swam for a couple years with the university club, after which she decided to try out swimming with a masters club. However, Tania found that the masters club was not challenging enough for her. She remained there as a coach and found that to be:

*... the best coaching job. You're coaching basically your friends. They're all our peers, they're all also coaches, so it's fun to collaborate on stuff and there's the best traveling opportunities because they compete at world championships. So every two years there's a*

*cool competition somewhere. This year is in Montreal and in two years is in Russia, so it's always fun to have those opportunities, and I've also, last year, took my judging course, so that's one way that I still feel like I'm drawn to the sport to stay involved, because I probably won't swim again because to this day my shoulder [...] it's not the same.*

Tania cannot swim anymore due to her shoulder injury, but she obtained coaching and referee certifications and still considers herself to belong to the synchronized swimming community. Because of her injury, Tania knew that the 'real athlete' narrative could not continue, that she could not swim competitively anymore, but because her sport had such an important meaning for her, she was happy to coach and teach other girls the skills and intricacies of synchronized swimming.

Krista (synchronized swimmer) also did some coaching for a little bit, but currently *“my work schedule isn't very compatible with a synchro schedule and [Pause] I don't know, I'd only really be able to do weekends if I did it, and my weekends are already fairly busy.”* Although *“I'm not active in it anymore,”* Krista considered herself still part of the synchro community, as her mom was a judge, and her cousin was still swimming at the time of the interview. Even though her schedule did not allow her to swim or coach, Krista was connected to the community through her family and through volunteering at different fundraising events. In addition, Krista not only kept all her medals, ribbons, and competition suits, but she still knew exactly which competition they were for. When she travels from place to place, Krista takes some of these treasures with her. She was still so very fond of what they meant to her, that when I asked her to bring something at the interview that represented her athletic career, she was among the few who had something to share. Thus, Krista brought a large selection of medals, ribbons and custom-made swim suits, and was able to talk very specific about the competitions she used the suits,



who made them, and other stories related to each of her treasures. Even though Krista was not directly involved with her sport at the time of the interview, synchronized swimming still had a very high meaning for her, which she kept alive through other members of her family. Her new life commitments didn't allow her to swim or coach, yet she talked very fondly of her athletic life and carries some parts of it with her when she travels.

### **My Stories of Involvement in Sport Across Cultures**

Similar to Nina, Tania and Krista, I also wanted to remain connected to my sport, as basketball was still very meaningful for me. However, my life circumstances made it difficult. In Romania, only very well known (i.e., internationally renowned) athletes get special opportunities such as positions within the Ministry of Sport, or somewhere in their sporting governing body. I was not that caliber of a player, and at that time, even a much lower position at a club, as a woman, would have implied sexual favours that I was not willing to do. In Canada, I have not encountered that kind of bribing for a position. However, as an immigrant, I found it difficult to stay connected with my sport. These barriers added to my struggles as a retired athlete, which caused my internal turmoil to continue for years. I wanted to give back, to coach, to be part of a team, but the cultural differences in the coaching styles of women's basketball between Canada and Romania caused a lot of double guessing myself. In Romania, the game centered around physical agility and correct mastering of the skills, where in Canada the game is based on body size and strength. In addition, coaching in Canada presented its own challenges. As a community team coach, I struggled to keep myself motivated, as the athletes were not focused on high performance. They were not living a performance narrative, while I was trying to coach them from that perspective. I also found the sport system different, for example having to play all the

players in a game, no matter if they were good or not so good. This idea is based on children 'having fun' rather than 'winning at all costs.' Some of these concepts were quite foreign to me, and I had a lot of learning and adjustments to make. At that time, I only knew how to live as a 'real athlete' and I was not familiar with any alternative narratives. Thus, after one season I did not want to coach community sports, as it did not bring any satisfaction then. My feelings were similar to Ramona (synchronized swimmer), who also did not like coaching low level athletes, but different than Tania (synchronised swimmer), who enjoyed coaching at the masters level. I am wondering if Ramona might have experienced the same conflict as me, trying to coach from a different narrative than the athletes we were coaching.

Yes, basketball was still very meaningful in my life and I still wanted to be connected with it in some way. Thus, I thought that if I played rather than coach, it might bring back some of the good feelings I had when I was playing in Romania. Therefore, I started playing every year for university Corporate Challenge (a once-a-year competition between different corporations in the city), but needed more and looked into playing for a community team. After finding a team, I loved being able to play, but there was no formal training. The actual game was also different from what I was used to in Romania: it was more about body size, brute force, pushing and shoving that the referees would not call as faults. Therefore, I found myself not being able to use some of my agility skills for fear of getting hurt. While playing community basketball in Canada was somewhat satisfying, I was waiting for the summer months to go back to Romania and properly train with the junior teams. They played the game I was used to and I was very happy during those months. Nothing else except basketball mattered again. It seems that going back to Romania and train with the juniors was bringing back the 'real athlete' narrative that I was so missing. Even though I was not playing in their championship anymore, being among the young

players and training with them once again helped me re-live the story that I was longing.

Because my body was still very fit and I could still play at high levels, I could still not imagine life without basketball, or life outside the ‘real athlete’ narrative.

That mentality got me to even try out for the university varsity team in Canada one year, thinking that I could potentially continue my ‘real athlete’ narrative here. I did really well on the physical tests, even though I was about 10 years older than the other players (I was 30 by then). However, the other athletes trying out were much larger size than me and played the very rough Canadian style basketball. I realized that I was too small and too weak for basketball in Canada. This was such a paradox for me as I was exceptionally strong and fit in Romania. I did not get selected for the team, so I continued to look for other opportunities to stay connected with basketball.

About 10 years after this, when my children started school, I got the opportunity to coach basketball at their school. Again, the Canadian rules and regulations around sport and sport in school were new for me and I had to learn them on the go. In addition, based on my sport background from Romania, I found the children less prepared to participate in sport. During the second year, I had an assistant coach who had played in high school, but did not have the fundamental skills that we were taught in the Romanian system. It was clear that participation was much more important than winning at that level, while for me winning and training hard were once core values in my high-performance club. Once again, that left me questioning my ability to coach, or if I even liked coaching. Of course, I also wonder if things have shifted in Romania during my absence: perhaps coaching sports nowadays there resembles more what it is here in Canada.

It seems that for me, the ‘real athlete’ narrative continued to interfere in my life after elite sport and it showed not only in my athletic activities, but in coaching too. As at that time I was not familiar with any other values, I did not know how not to be an elite athlete in every aspect of my life, therefore I struggled to live a meaningful life outside of the ‘real athlete’ narrative.

***“There is No Point in Teasing Myself:” Stories of Keeping Distance***

Other participants told stories about having to keep a distance from their sport because of their previous adherence to the ‘real athlete’ narrative and their devotion to performance. If they got too close to their sports, they would miss it so much and they would get too involved in the sports again. For example, Misha’s story demonstrates how she was ‘pulled back’ into biathlon several times and started living the ‘real athlete’ and performance narratives. That cycle happened until her life after sport became more meaningful. After her initial retirement, Misha shared that while she was coaching, she realized she could still do well as an athlete. Thus, she started to train again, making the times for the national team once more. After her second retirement she was asked to coach again and decided to help out a small club. She helped for a couple years, after which she felt that it was necessary to keep her distance from biathlon and not get involved, fearing she might be pulled again into training at a high level. At the time of the interview, Misha had not been involved with the biathlon world and she had even sold her rifle the previous year. She explained:

*When I was at the race, I realized that they needed rifles. They’re not common, they’re really specialized and they have a long lifetime as well. So, they’re worth about \$3500 and mine was just sitting there and I was keeping it purely for nostalgia and because it’s something that I’m really good at. I was one of the best shooters in the world. I was one of*

*the best shooters in the world cup circuit and so I had a hard time letting that go because it was something that I was really talented at, but I sold it in the end because I knew that the sport would benefit more from having that rifle in circulation than for me holding onto it for... just to go shoot once every three years for fun.*

At this point, Misha obviously had left her sporting career as she anticipated not going ‘shooting’ for fun. For Misha, to shoot without being a ‘real athlete’ was not part of a meaningful narrative.

Sonia also told stories about keeping a distance from her sport because she missed skating very much. She mentioned that she even found it difficult to watch:

*But in the last year or so, I feel myself missing it when I watch TV, when I watch the Olympics. Like when I watched the Olympics this last go-around, it was really hard to watch it. [...] So I just don't watch it because I get a little bit, you know, "Oh, I really want to go back," and then I start thinking about how I can make my...how I can get myself back and it's not feasible. So, there's no point in teasing myself about, so I just don't watch the TV so then I can avoid the yearning and that sort of thing. [...] I've put my energy into a different interest so that hopefully I'm not missing it as much, but my friends will post on Facebook, some of my other mommy friends that skated with me that also have kids, they'll say, "Oh, I was out on the ice and it smelled so good and I miss it," and you know, I'm like, "Oh, please don't do that!" [Laughter] 'Cause it makes me miss it too. But it's just not feasible.*

While Sonia clearly felt that going back to sport was ‘not feasible,’ she could not even participate recreationally without missing her athletic life. Instead of skating, Sonia was keeping fit as much as her time permitted, preparing routines and teaching Zumba classes. Sonia was one of the few participants in my study who switched from sport to exercise. It seems that she created

a meaningful narrative around exercise that is different from the performance narrative that she lived as a skater. In this sense, her experience parallels Jones and Denison's (2019) narrative account of the first authors' exploration of moving from professional level training in football (soccer) to finding appropriate exercise practices as a leisure time physical activity. Jones and Denison reported, however, that this was not a straight forward switch of physical activities, but required a shift from thinking exercise as work to exercise as something 'free' of the disciplinary sport training. Sonia, even though employed to teach exercise, continued to engage in it as work finding it satisfying and meaningful in her new life.

Similar to Misha and Sonia, other participants also found it really difficult to continue with their sports once they retired, because they could not do it to the extent that they were used to. Like Sonia, they either tried other sports or stopped being active. Two participants in particular told stories of 'all or nothing' attitude. For example, Rochelle (speed swimmer) kept very active by racing in different triathlon events. During her university years, Rochelle had the opportunity to swim with the varsity team but instead chose to try out other sports:

*I tried rock climbing and all that kind of stuff, outdoorsy type activities. [...] It was too hard for me to actually do it because I didn't...if I was going to swim, I was going to be a full athlete again, you know? It was no...I couldn't go in with a half effort, you know? And I just, mentally and emotionally was drained from the course. I was...it just took a lot out of me and I wasn't prepared to go down that road anymore.*

Sheila (cross country runner) also had the same 'all or nothing' mentality. After she retired, Sheila tried to go back to running a number of times, but she could only do it with the same performance narrative frame of mind. Because she would reinjure herself, Sheila had to stop running completely. Currently, Sheila tried to run just for fun and was looking to cycle more to

prevent her shins from hurting. Similar to Sheila, Ramona (synchronized swimmer) also kept active by being involved in other sports. However, she found that not to be challenging enough for her and not as pleasant:

*Still worked out, not eight hours a day. I did triathlons, I did a bit of running, I used to bike, some swimming but not much, and swimming was a transition. I've always been active, but no, not anywhere close to the same extent, for sure, [Pause] at all. [...] and, you know, it's like, if you're pushing towards a goal, it's not as exciting to be lifting the weights as much anymore, so you do it more for maintenance and then, you know, if there's a race, then it's fun to go out and race people and stuff like that, get the competitive juices going. But [Pause] yeah, it's not the same, so yeah. [Laughter] It's just not as fun.*

Once her daughter was born, Ramona became less active because she preferred to “*be playing with my little daughter and running around than going and working out for a couple hours a day. It's like, it's all trade-offs.*” Unlike Nina, Tania or Krista (synchronized swimmers), Ramona was not doing any synchronized swimming at the time of the interview, and did not even want to be involved in coaching because she ‘hated’ it:

*No, just like play around in the pool and just like, yeah, you can't do anything. I've got lots of people asking me to do masters and it was like, yeah, no interest, mostly because, you know, I go from training on the best team in Canada, to [Pause] training with random people. [...] Yeah, it's, it's just very different from being able to do anything you want to, to [Pause] you know, barely being able to do anything. It's not a challenge, it's just sort of, you do it but... so I didn't do it.*

Currently Ramona found meaning in her life by dividing her time between her daughter, husband, and academic work. Like Ramona, Alina (synchronized swimmer) talked about moving

away from her sport after her abrupt retirement due to her negative experience at the training center. Alina left her sport with a bitter taste. She also tried to go back a few times, but she found it very difficult, as her body and mind were flooded with the emotions of everything that had happened. Alina also found it very difficult to “*just facing myself and [Pause] facing myself in a bathing suit.*” Regardless, Alina is now considering helping out with a new synchronized swimming club.

For Samira (speed swimmer), an injury prevents her from running or swimming without pain. She mentioned that:

*I can swim but not in a consistent manner. I can't go swim everyday or I wouldn't be able to swim a 5K workout like I used to, which was a standard distance for just training workouts, but I can go once or twice a week and do about 2000/3000 metres and it's fine.*

Samira continued her sport participation, but through a different narrative than the ‘real athlete’ narrative. As a retired athlete, she was able to adopt a more recreational meaning for her training and that story became the meaningful one for her.

Based on my analysis, the participants’ involvement with their sport after retirement is not related to their reason for retirement or age of retirement. This finding appears to be unique, as it does not come up in previous retirement studies. Based on their stories, the athletes’ personal meanings towards the sport in their earlier athletic lives appeared to play a critical role. Looking at the ten participants, only Alina (synchronized swimmer) had a negative emotional experience with her sport, while Nina (synchronized swimmer) had a negative experience with her coach, which led her to hate swimming for a short while. Sheila (cross country runner) also experienced some negative feelings when she retired, yet those were related to recurrent injuries. Out of these athletes, Nina is still swimming, while Alina has started to show an interest in coaching. Sheila is



trying other sports with less impact on her shins. Looking at the other participants' stories, they all retired in more positive terms, either deliberate or due to injuries, yet the only one actively connected to their sport is Tania. Tania (synchronized swimmer, abrupt retirement) was quite involved in coaching. The other participants were active in different ways, but not actively connected to their sports. As for myself, I will not shy away from opportunities to stay involved with basketball in different capacities, despite the cultural differences to which I have found it difficult to adjust.

### **Leaving the 'Real Athlete' Narrative Behind**

My qualitative narrative approach revealed a more nuanced impact of the athletic lives to diverse transition and adjustment experiences that may have taken several years. It appears that my participants' retirement experiences were related to what was meaningful for them, and how they storied both their athletic and retirement experiences.

In this chapter, I followed a lifespan approach to detail my participants' experiences of retirement from sport. I discussed the different ways my participants retired (abrupt or deliberate), the adjustment to life after sport (adjusting well or struggling to adjust), and finally, the participants' enrolment with other pursuits than high performance sport (education, recreational physical activities or sports). In terms of the type of retirement, I found that injuries forced five of my participants to retire. Another athlete was forced to retire when her funding was withdrawn. Four athletes were able to deliberately decide how to end their sport careers, and indicated that they would still compete if their lives had taken a different turn. Most of my participants considered their retirement process smooth despite first having to get used to a significant amount of unstructured time. Some filled their current time with activities not

accessible to them during their highly structured athletic lives (dating, drinking, and parties), while others replaced sport with education and finding new friends. While all participants were high achievers, the seven participants who had a positive transition out of sport used this to their advantage to get a degree and develop successful careers. Three of my participants, nevertheless, had a difficult transition out of their athletic lives as they struggled to find another fulfilling activity to replace sport. My participants' reasons for retirement and their choices of schooling or career were not necessarily directly connected. While some pursued graduate studies after retirement (e.g., Krista and Ramona – synchronized swimmers, Misha – biathlete, and Sonia – skater), others were not particularly passionate about school or changed their careers after obtaining an education. All my participants, nevertheless, obtained a high level of education with half of them pursuing graduate studies. While some of my participants opted for sport related careers (sport nutrition, physical education, physical therapy), a few stayed connected with their sports either as coaches or active participants.

There does not seem to be a consistency between the previous studies related to retirement and my findings. For example, previous studies indicated that athletes are more susceptible to difficulties post retirement if they experience an involuntary retirement, they retire at a later age, or they do not have a developed socio-educational status (Erpic et al., 2004; Price et al., 2010; Smith & McManus, 2008; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). In terms of adjusting to life after sport, seven of my participants found themselves adjusting rather smoothly to their 'new' lives while three athletes and myself struggled to find meaningful narratives to replace the 'real athlete' narrative in our lives after sport. Thus, my narrative lifespan perspective showed how retirement from elite sport is a very unique and individual experience. My participants did not seem to move through clear stages of retirement, such as entangled, to

moving forward, to making sense, or from performance to relational (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009). Some, nevertheless, tended to live their post sport lives with some connection to the performance narrative. Some embraced new meanings either in different sports, within their families, or through their studies. My research uncovered several meanings that have not been disclosed in previous studies. First, each of the participants storied their own reason for retirement, were at a different age, and had different types of support. In addition, their own views and personalities made their retirement stories unique. Their experiences as athletes also influenced their educational choices, which for some of the participants changed once outside of the 'real athlete' narrative. Their athletic experiences further impacted the participants' decisions to remain connected with their sport. Some continued to be part of that community on some levels, while others had to distance themselves from their sports in order to move away from the 'real athlete' and performance narrative and find new meanings in life. In addition to the actual retirement period, my participants talked about what was meaningful for them at the time of the interview when they were living their post-sport lives. In the next section I explore these aspects.

## CHAPTER VII

### Living a Regular Life

In this chapter I continue to analyze the athletes' retirement experiences as a continuous narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), but I now focus on the final stage of the lifespan approach that highlights the athletes' experiences after retirement from sport. Here my research expands the previous narrative research on sport retirement that has tended to only focus on the actual retirement process. Although some of the previous narrative research discussed athletes moving from the performance narrative to a new stage of life (e.g., relational narrative), it was presented as a linear process of finding a successful alternative to the athletic life (Douglas & Carless, 2006; 2009). From the participants' stories, however, there were multiple and varied alternative narratives that were derived from different meanings they attributed to their new life, away from the 'real athlete' story that characterized their athletic lives. It was also obvious that the reason for retirement (abrupt or deliberate), or their age, were not a defining factor in my participants' successful retirement. At one point, they all realized that life is much more than being an athlete. Some realized that sooner than others and were able to make decisions around the time and manner of retirement (e.g., Krista – synchronized swimmer), while others needed some distance from the sport in terms of time and space to be able to see life from a different angle (e.g., biathlete Misha, synchronized swimmer Alina). Regardless of the circumstances of their retirement, at the time of the interviews, all but one participant talked about having a variety of interests and having different roles that gave different meanings to their lives. In this chapter, I discuss the themes and sub-themes related to the participants' current lives as they were generated from the stories. At this stage of their athletic lifespan, balance with family and work, seeking self-care and happiness, and using sport skills to explore context outside of sport turned

into different narratives, away from the ‘real athlete’ of their athletic lives. Currently living their lives after sport, I was also interested in what advice the athletes now had to assist other athletes in the retirement process. This chapter is composed of five main themes: ‘What is More Important Now,’ ‘What Helped OR What Did Not Help,’ ‘Transferring Sport Skills into Life After Sport,’ ‘Suggestions for Smoother Sport Retirement Experiences,’ and ‘Successful Retirement Requires a Change in Individual Athlete or a Change in Sport?’

***“I Like to Be Able to Go Home to See My Family:” What is More important Now***

Once out of the athletic environment, the participants started to see and appreciate other important parts in their lives. Similar to Douglas and Carless’ (2009) study where Debbie and Bernie (former professional golfers) began to see that golf and winning was not everything, for some of my participants family and work became more important than sport. Their lives now began to shift to relational narrative where winning, success, and glory of performance narrative no longer compares to relationships with others in one’s life (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006). However, while Sonia, for example, talked about getting the most joy from the time spent with her son and husband, she was also really engaged with her work, school and instructing Zumba, that currently gave meaning to her life. Therefore, she had identified multiple different ways that gave her a lot of satisfaction and defined the narrative that she lives by today. She concluded:

*“I’m more balanced than I was, but it’s taken a long time to get there.”*

Ramona also talked about having family as her main focus at the time of the interview, but also identified work as an additional meaningful part of who she was and what she was doing:

*Yeah, grow a nice, healthy, normal, happy family. You know, I love my job but it’s not my life. Like, it’s like, I like to be able to go home, see my daughter, see my husband, you*

*know, not have to do too much work on the weekends, be able to go away and, you know, cut off work and [Pause] but when I'm at work, it's fun, it's exciting, it's challenging. I do a good job with what I do, hopefully make a difference in people's lives. If I don't, well [Pause] then I don't. [Laughter] But yeah, no, I'd say family is [Pause] probably the most important thing right now, yeah.*

Family and work were also meaningful in Nina's (synchronized swimmer) life. Nina had two sons with her husband, but her husband also had three other children who were living with them. Nina found that she needed the combination of family and job to have a meaningful life that worked best for her after the athletic life. It gave her the structure that she needed to function at her best:

*I really need to come to work. I don't think I need to come to work full time, if I could work three days a week or shorter hours or something, that'd be great, but I need [Pause] I need to get out of the house. I need the social part of what I have at work. Um, [Pause] and it gives me that structure. I mean sure, I love holidays, but if I was home all the time, I [Pause] I don't think, I don't think I'd feel as good.*

Going to work provided a different meaning from family life: it was self-care for Nina who found home life “a chaos,” having many children, whereas at work she had time to think and organize things.

The family theme was also important in Alina's (synchronized swimmer) story. Even though she did not have a family at the time of the interview, she aspired to have one in the future:

*Now really, all I want is a nice, you know, a partner in my life that we love each other, a good collaboration, a career where I'm happy and I want kids! [Laughter] You know, I*

*want just really normal things.*

Both Tania and Krista (synchronized swimmers) were also looking forward to a family of their own as they both were getting married soon. However, like Nina and Ramona, they did not use the relational narrative as the only new way of defining their lives. They were also at the beginning of their work careers and got a lot of enjoyment from spending time with their future husbands and their work.

For Misha (biathlete), family was also important now that she was not a ‘real athlete.’ The reason for her last retirement was to maintain a relationship that later turned into marriage, and therefore, Misha did not move linearly from the ‘real athlete’ narrative of her athletic life to a relational narrative after retirement. Towards the end of her athletic life Misha had realized that being a ‘real athlete’ meant to be very selfish and self centered, very strict, “*where one person has to be exclusively above the other in all aspects, food, everything,*” and where “*everything in your life that you’re working for was at stake and you make a one second mistake and it’s all gone.*” Even back when she was 18 and retired due to the army withdrawing their financial support, Misha realized that having the money for training was not worth sacrificing “*my real future and university to keep skiing.*” She currently appreciated being able to treat her colds with appropriate medication, being able to have a drink and enjoy her friends’ company until later at night, which one could story as ‘real life’ narrative.

Through the ‘real life’ narrative these athletes indicated finding a level of ‘normality’ in their lives after sport, that obviously seemed as a somewhat strange way of living, as they reflected upon it in the present. While it may have taken a long time, as Sonia indicated, they could now have ‘a normal, happy family’ (Ramona, synchronized swimmer), ‘do normal things’ (Alina, synchronized swimmer), or ‘enjoy friends’ company at night like normal people (Misha,

biathlete). This ‘normality’ of the ‘real life’ narrative currently made the participants happy, even if it required a balance between work and family life (Nina, synchronized swimmer).

Not all participants felt like they reached their ‘real life’ narrative. Samira (speed swimmer) talked about it as an incomplete, undefined narrative (as opposed to the strictly defined ‘real athlete’ narrative) that allowed her to follow her own dreams, and enabled her to make her own decisions and be open to any opportunities that came her way. As an athlete, she worked hard to make the national or Olympic team but to the exclusion of everything else:

*I still want to be a physical therapist, so I’m still working towards that and so I’m still studying and I’m still...I’m not really going to let that dream go, so it’s meaningful to me that I’m still pursuing my goal, you know? And it’ll eventually go but I’m also staying more open minded to other possibilities. I don’t want to pursue it so doggedly that I miss out on anything else, which is different than it used to be in swimming, you know? So I’ve hopefully grown that way [Laughter] where I can say, you know, I do have this goal and I’m still working towards it, but not to the exclusion of everything else anymore.*

Interestingly, Samira also talked about taking a very long time to get to where she was: “*I think I’m still transitioning that way.*” Her husband was a former Olympian and was still competing in water polo at the time of the interview. They still had friends in the water sports and, during the interview, she still saw herself as somehow different from the ‘normal people:’

*So, I’m still a little bit set apart. I don’t know that I’ll ever fully make the transition to feeling like I’m a part of the regular crowd or the normal people. I still have all the vernacular of swimmers, so when I go to the pool and I do my 2000, I still talk about public swimmers as set apart, even though I’m now swimming with the public swimmers. [...] So, it’s still there. I don’t know that I’ll ever truly transition but it was a lot right at the*



*beginning of having retired from the sport. It was a huge transition and it was a big bell curve right there, and now it's pretty tapered out. I've come to accept, you know, I may never truly be normal, [Laughter] in a lot of ways. I've come to accept that I am a bit weird in some ways.*

Samira considered herself to be destined as a 'bit weird' for the rest of life due to her career as an elite athlete and the 'real athlete' narrative that defined her then. This was an interesting finding from the lifespan approach of my study. Many qualitative and narratives researchers (e.g., Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016; Cavallerio & al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2009; Jewett & al., 2019; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) found athletes still making sense of their new lives after sport, but did not report anyone seeing themselves permanently different due to a sport career. These researchers seemed to assume that, at some point, the athletes will find an alternative narrative to the performance narrative of elite sport to adjust successfully to 'normal' lives.

Rochelle (speed swimmer), on the other hand, at the time of the interview admitted she was struggling to pinpoint what was meaningful for her, and thus, not being able to define a new narrative. Her life had multiple stories of which she continued to make sense. Her work was not satisfying enough for her, although she changed her career from a dietician to insurance business to match her current goals. In fact, Rochelle dreamed of combining the two careers by working half the year in Canada (in the insurance business) and half in Costa Rica, where she would open a restaurant and surf all day. At the time of the interview, she was thinking of ways to achieve her dream. Rochelle was also divorced after 10 years of marriage and did not have anyone significant in her life at the moment. She mentioned that being alone has been a difficult time for her. Rochelle assumed she would feel a bit better if she got more involved with the triathlon as "I

*hold that so close to my heart, I love it, like it just gives me such a sense of self and purpose right now because my career certainly doesn't do that for me."* She also liked travelling and was grateful that her work allowed for that to happen financially.

Rochelle also realized that as a 'real athlete', she was very critical of herself and never proud of what she accomplished. Even though she won competitions and got medals, she was never good enough in her own eyes, a fact that led to the end of her swimming career:

*I mean part of the reason why I think I didn't even go all the way to the Olympics because I didn't love myself enough. [...] I had such low self-esteem. It was unreal, like nothing about myself was good enough, so yeah, I think if I had a better relationship with my body and myself and it was positive...that's partly why I quit too. I think maybe, you know, you're talking about the pressures of swimming, I think part of it too, like the pressure is to be perfect in my eyes, you know?*

Rochelle reflected on the limitations of the strict requirements of the 'real athlete' narrative. The constant competitiveness in sport and thus, comparisons to other athletes, lowered her self-esteem. There was a huge pressure to be 'perfect' that she felt never to have achieved. She could only reflect upon it now, having some distance from the performance narrative of sport. It took her sometime to learn *"how to not, you know, put the pressure of being perfectionism, like learning how to be normal. And you know, appreciate and learn gratitude and just retraining my mind on how to live life."* Rochelle also talked about 'normal life' versus the 'strange life' of sport. Interestingly, however, she took the blame of her low self-esteem entirely without a substantial critique of her sport, lack of support while an athlete, or the strict requirements of the 'real athlete' narrative.

The only participant who was still trying to figure out an alternative narrative for her new

life was Sheila (cross country runner). She was also only four years into retirement (the youngest of all participants) and had not had time to learn what she liked, what she would be good at outside of running, or what her career goals were. With time, however, it seemed that all other participants found new meanings that helped create new narratives in life.

In conclusion, the participants now started to appreciate ‘the regular’ life with family and work. They started to develop and enjoy other interests outside of their sport, that involved playing with their children, spending time with partners, or working. I labelled this the ‘real life’ narrative that had more meanings than just the relationships in the Douglas and Carless (2009) relational narrative. In addition, some participants took longer, while for others it was much easier to switch from the ‘real athlete’ narrative to a more rounded and enjoyable life.

Consequently, the athletes in my study did not follow a linear, uniform process, but found meaningful narrative(s) after sport through multiple ways of engaging with their new lives.

Some participants also talked about what was helpful for them to get to where they currently were. I discuss these issues in the next section.

### ***“I Didn’t Know How to Deal with the Mountains:” What Helped or What Did Not Help***

As some athletes took significant time to find alternative narratives to their sporting lives, I wanted to know what eventually helped them go through the process. I wanted to learn how my participants storied what helped them and what meanings they attributed to that help. Alina (synchronized swimmer), who had one of the roughest experiences transitioning out of her sport, told about three things that were essential for her during the years right after her retirement from sport: her parents’ support, her therapy sessions and her medication. Reflecting on her therapy, Alina realized that the athletes storied their sport careers as something that was not normal, that

was rare. She also mentioned that for the therapy to be effective, it was important to find the right person who could understand “*such a rare experience.*” Another big component was to learn that she was allowed to cry:

*It was allowed to not be the strongest, best person in the room. [Pause] but it was really hard because you come from a mentality where you're, you can't be weak and you suck it up, whether it be physical or mental and so ... I was very defensive at first, but therapy, therapy was probably key, and just letting me talk about it and explore things on my own.*

As a part of the ‘real life’ narrative, crying and being vulnerable needed to be learned as they were not aspects of the ‘real athlete’ narrative. However, this process allowed Alina to make the transition to ‘normality.’ Interestingly, therapy did not work as well in Sheila’s (cross country runner) story. Sheila found that it was good to tell someone how she was feeling, but she did not learn how to move further:

*I think, like, once or like a couple times I went to, like, a sports psychologist but, like, that's just, like, getting a rant out, but I had no other tools to, like, now what? After I vent, I go back and then it's the same thing. [Laughter] I didn't know how to, like, deal with the mountains.*

‘Venting’ to someone else obviously did not, alone, help Sheila to move from the ‘real athlete’ narrative of sport to the ‘real life’ narrative of the ‘regular’ life. She needed to explore on her own to discover what was meaningful for her. People telling her what to do did not help her before or after she retired from running:

*I don't think, like, someone telling me this would have changed any patterns over the four years. Even when I was running a lot and people would tell me, “You're going to get injured, your body hates you right now,” like they could say that to me, but it would just*

*leave the other ear. Like, it didn't matter what anyone would say to me and I needed to figure that out by myself and I did when I got injured so many times [Laughter] and then broke down. So it's the same cycle when I'm, like, getting back into it. I need to figure it out on my own 'cause people telling me stuff is not going to help.*

Even though it was difficult for her during the first few years after retirement, Sheila “*also learned that to build myself, I can't build it on just one thing. I have to have a variety of things 'cause if one thing is pulled out [Laughter] then I won't be hooped.*” In other words, Sheila learned from her own experience that holding on to the ‘real athlete’ narrative, where becoming an Olympian was the only thing that mattered, was going to be a struggle once that goal could not be achieved any longer (see also Douglas & Carless, 2009; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Unlike Sheila, Samira (speed swimmer) also felt supported in many ways after she retired from swimming. Her scholarship continued to allow her to finish her degree, which helped her stay connected with her friends in the swimming community. Thus, even though she was not swimming competitively anymore, Samira was still part of the swimming community, and she was able to keep in contact and spend time with her swimming friends. In fact, she even married a former Olympic swimmer. Although Samira did not need therapy, she also mentioned that counselling was available to her at the university, another tool that helped Alina (synchronized swimmer).

My participants here talked about the emotional struggles related to sport retirement. The emotional support was also discussed in the previous research on retirement programs designed specifically for elite athletes. The studies indicated that when asked to assess these programs, the athletes identified this aspect as crucial for retirement process, but also indicated that attention to self-esteem or learning coping strategies were missing in such programs. (Jackson et al., 1998;

McKnight et al. 2009; Smith & McManus, 2008). My study verifies that a successful retirement from sport requires an emotional process to find a different narrative with multiple meanings and thus, more than moving into a new life as, for example, a student.

While Alina (synchronized swimmer) found allowing to show weakness helped and Sheila (cross-country runner) had to find many things to “be pulled out from her sport mentality,” Nina (synchronized swimmer) had also been through different types of therapy programs, but none of them really helped her. Time and work did not make her feel better either after her retirement from synchronized swimming. She was already working and felt that her career was going OK, yet she was missing something, a structure:

*I wasn't there yet. [...] I wasn't at the stage in my life that I wanted to be by the time I was that age either. I wanted to be married and I wanted to move towards having kids and that wasn't happening for me. [...] Maybe that's part of MY value system, that I really wanted to be married and have a family.*

Nina needed more than just a work narrative to create a ‘real life’ narrative for herself. She needed a relational narrative and she felt fulfilled once she had a family. She believed that her husband and the family they developed were responsible for her being off the antidepressant medications that had been prescribed for an undetermined period of time:

*I don't think I fully got better until I met John, and I had somebody important in my life who I could talk to about things, who could be, have meaning for things and help me figure things out, who I knew I could kind of rely on. [...] We always joke that he was my medication, because I was on anti-depressants and a whole bunch of stuff, and my doctor said, “You're probably never going to be able to go off,” like it was so bad. [...] I met John ... Not only did he give me someone to talk to, he gave me kids and a family and structure.*

*And then just going home to him with three kids, was busy and structure and we had to follow their schedule and it was exciting because I gave up a lot of the things that I had been trying to be involved in, 'cause I didn't have time anymore, and it was fun and exciting. [...] But it's the same kind of crazy, busy structure that I had when I was swimming, that a family just gives you, I think. You have no choice. You've got to accommodate all their, their things.*

A strong aspect of Nina's athletic life was to accommodate others to the expense of her own life. Thus, she needed something similar to her athletic life, such as the busy marital structure, and the tight schedule for a successful 'real life' narrative. Besides all these, Nina also looked at her marriage as a commitment, much like the commitment she had while being a synchronized swimmer:

*I mean there's times in a marriage that it's very difficult and frustrating and I think a lot of stuff that I've dealt with, a lot of people would walk away. People have even asked me, "Why don't you walk away?" Well, [Pause] That's not what marriage means to me, and I have that commitment level which, I don't know, maybe I learnt it from swimming because other people would walk away.*

In a way, Nina found some of the values that she had during her 'real athlete' swimming life were fulfilled by having a structured family life, a commitment to her marriage, and an important person who was always there for her. That combination of different stories gave her the meaning that she needed to create her 'real life' narrative.

It appears that family provided a significant help for the athletes' after sport, in addition to having friends outside their sport, their job or even their personality. This is another unique piece of my narrative study, as previous narrative research did not focus on the family support after

retirement from athletic careers. In my study, Nina talked about her husband's invaluable role in her 'real life' narrative, which helped her find meaning in her new life. Other participants had the opportunity to have some great friends or family members to guide and support them during their athletic careers. This support was also invaluable when it came down to decisions about their futures. For example, in Krista's (synchronized swimmer) story, both her parents were teachers who emphasized the importance of school: *"I was lucky that I really had an emphasis on school and a clear direction of what I wanted, early on, and it became a way to keep synchro in my life with what I wanted to do."* Krista also had *"friends at school, a lot of people who are very academically minded."* The combination of those friends and Krista's competitive nature was considerably beneficial for her future, as she realized early what she wanted: *"to push those grades," "to get early acceptance"* and get through her academic programs easily. Unlike Rochelle (speed swimmer) who lost her self-esteem due to the competitive pressures she felt in her sport, Krista flourished as she was able to build on her athletic story.

All participants felt supported in some way by their parents, brothers, or sisters. Both Tania and Ramona (synchronized swimmers) who had a great relationship with their families, were able to talk to them and felt supported before and after their retirement. In her story, Tania (synchronized swimmer) also brought up her school friends, who indirectly helped her go through the transition period much easier. These friends were involved in other sports, which allowed Tania to join their teams and their other extra-curricular activities. These relationships contributed highly to her transition period, as they filled her time after she stopped swimming. However, this decision came easy to Tania, as for her, joining her high school swimming team required less physical effort, was more fun, not as serious, and she was better than most students who joined, because of her previous years in swimming. In my study, Tania seemed to be a



curious exception because she was the only one who was interested in joining another sport. However, her new sport was close to her previous sport, yet at a much lower and more fun level. Tania thought she could perform very well in this sport too.

Unlike my participants, my family was not as supportive during my transition from sport. This might have been because in Romania at that time, the majority of parents were not involved in their children's sporting lives. Very few parents knew or understood what it meant to be an athlete, let alone an elite athlete. Most of my athletic life I went to practices, games, and training camps on my own. My parents allowed me to participate in sports, however they did not come to watch any of my games, so when that life ended, they would have not realized what a huge transition it would be for me. In their minds I just had more time on my hands, so I should be able to study more. I also did not have friends outside my athletic environment, so there wasn't anyone to talk to, who would understand what I was going through.

Some of my participants found inspiration for their 'real life' narrative from people outside of sport. Rochelle (speed swimmer) stopped swimming because she lost interest in the kind of life she was having as an elite athlete. Rochelle's closest friends were not from the swimming community. Rather they were "*actually lazy and overweight and partied and boys ...*" Rochelle wanted to experience that kind of life and that influenced her decision to retire from swimming.

In Misha's (biathlete) case, her career choice after sport was influenced by one of her cousins. When Misha was about ten years old, she learned her cousin was working towards a PhD. Misha found that life to be very interesting and different and when she quit her sport, she knew she wanted to pursue graduate studies at one point.

In conclusion, all participants felt supported during their athletic careers, but once they retired, some found the support insufficient. This was also one of the problems previous

researchers associated with the retirement programs that target athletes who still actively compete, providing no attention to already retired athletes who can feel abandoned or disregarded by their sport organizations (Jackson et al., 1998; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Smith & McManus, 2008; Warriner & Lavalleyé, 2008).

Although their families and friends were there to help and some attended therapy, other athletes, like Nina (synchronized swimmer), felt very alone, because their parents did not know how to guide them. Similarly, Sheila (cross country runner) had to come to terms with her experience on her own, and did not find her family support or therapy that helpful. Alina (synchronized swimmer) who found therapy most helpful, mentioned how supportive her parents were, yet that did not make her experience any easier. Alina, however, also felt unsupported during her sporting career when she revealed how alone and misunderstood she felt when she returned from the national training center where she had not developed any friendships, and her coach and former team mates did not understand what she had been through.

It is clear from the participants' stories that the same solution did not work for everybody. Each athlete needed different supports and would benefit from different aids during their transition out of sport. For example, therapy worked really well for Alina (synchronized swimmer), but not so well for Nina (synchronized swimmer) or Sheila (cross country runner). Similar, family support during transition was helpful for some participants, but not for Nina, Sheila, and Alina, who found other ways to help themselves during their difficult transition. However, it seemed like some support was necessary for the athletes to be able to move away from the 'real athlete' narrative and successfully create alternatives such as the 'real life' narrative with multiple meanings. In the next section I discuss how the participants used the skills drawn from the 'real athlete' narrative in their life after sport.

## ***“Doing Something Every Day to Get Towards a Goal:” Transferring Sport Skills into Life after Sport***

In previous post-positivist studies, athletes have reported that identifying and understanding how to transfer skills learned from their athletic careers to regular life is a priority (Petitpas et al., 1992), because they may lack the general life skills which can lead to an inability to cope with the new and unfamiliar lifestyle (Smith & McManus, 2008). McKnight et al. (2009) further argued that increasing awareness of life skills will empower the athletes and may lead to a more positive transition. My narrative approach revealed a much more complex story where skills from the athletic lives embedded in the ‘real athlete’ narrative did not automatically transfer to the current ‘real life’ narrative. Learning general life skills and building a new narrative was not necessarily easy and took multiple different paths.

To rebuild their lives, have new interests and goals, gain families and new friends, the participants had to learn new things, make adjustments to what they used to value, know and do as athletes. Years after they retired, several participants realized that some of the skills that they learned during those years translated well in the life after sport. They discussed such sport life skills as time management, perfectionism, work ethic, self-discipline, confidence, communication skills, and accountability, which translated to the ‘regular’ life in different ways. For example, time management skills were recognized by all participants as something that they had to learn early on, as they had to schedule everything around their training and competitions. Both Krista and Tania (synchronized swimmers) learned how to be efficient with their time, or how to schedule things. Krista explained:

*time management was still very important where, you know, if I had a break during a class, it was, you know, do I go to the [library] and sit down and, and go through and work on*

*the essay that I know is coming in a month and a half, because it's for 30% of my grade, or should I go get coffee? It was kind of like, well I'll get a coffee on my way to the [library]. Yeah, so it was, it was, time management has always been a huge asset that came out of my experience with synchro. So, it was still very relevant. (Krista, synchronized swimmer).*

Both Rochelle and Samira (speed swimmers) also attributed the success in their careers to transferable skills such as work ethic, self-discipline, mental stamina, perseverance, accountability, and credibility. Rochelle found being able to set goals and consistently work towards them invaluable also in her 'regular' life:

*The idea of doing something every day to get towards a goal that is so far away and so risky, but that working everyday at it, I don't think I would have been that sort of a person without it, definitely.*

As Rochelle explained, she learned perseverance to work towards long term goals from her sport. That helped her to be disciplined everyday and little by little accomplish her goals. These participants, as also suggested by the previous research (Petipas et al., 1992), found their skills very useful even after they finished with their sport.

As a unique finding from the athletes' stories in my research, Alina (synchronized swimmer), on the other hand, felt that she used time management skills while she was an athlete, but those did not work for her after she retired:

*In a way I had a passion and a purpose, and then not having that anymore and then being expected to still be accountable and things, and following through, but [...] you know, you're happy about things, but you're not... it's not the same, you don't feel the same way about it. And [...] also your life is so linear, right, when [...] all you really focus on is swimming. I never learned to really juggle a whole lot, right? Like it was just swimming*

*and school and home. Time management skills, yeah, definitely. Definitely, and it helped me then, but then leaving that environment and not having the same kind of pressures, the same passion about something, [...] it's not the same. That concept of time.*

As I mentioned earlier, Alina had the most difficult retirement period of all my participants. At the time of the interview, Alina was still struggling with issues such as following through and accountability, and as a matter of fact, she almost cancelled the interview. She was still learning about herself and how to juggle the many things in her current life and thus, she was still 'writing' her 'real life' narrative.

This idea of not knowing how to juggle more things instead of singular focus on sport was also brought up by Nina (synchronized swimmer) who felt that she learned to manage her time well when she had to juggle only between swimming and school. After she retired, she faced a more complex life with many meanings to her new narrative. It took her time to learn to go back and forth between family, work, and her leisure activities, and she had to learn how to negotiate her multiple roles as a parent, professional, and masters athlete.

There were also two other skills, perfectionism and leaving 'things at the door' that were useful for the performance of the 'real athlete,' and focused on success and winning. However, these skills were not so helpful in life outside of sport. Perfectionism, for example, worked well for the participants during their athletic lives. However, after sport, the perfectionist tendencies were not equally helpful. For example, Rochelle (speed swimmer) had to learn how to give up some of those tendencies because it affected her life and marriage, and they did not make her happy anymore. *"If it's not perfect, then I'm not happy and I'm not happy if it's not perfect."* Nina (synchronized swimmer) was taught to really focus on what she needed to get done as an athlete. When other things interfered with her focus, she was asked to: *"Leave it at the door; pick*

*it up when you leave.*” While this storyline worked very well for her while she was swimming, she found it potentially harmful in her regular life: by always leaving things at the door, one delays the issues that one needs to deal with, which can have potentially harmful consequences.

Another potentially transferable skill that athletes discussed in relation to their ‘real athlete’ narrative was confidence. Their stories, however, revealed complex meanings regarding how the confidence of the ‘real athlete’ helped the women now living ‘real life’ narratives. Both Tania (synchronized swimmer) and Rochelle (speed swimmer) mentioned confidence learned in sport as a beneficial quality after retirement. Tania was confident that she could be good at other sports outside synchronized swimming and it helped her to connect with her school friends after she retired. Rochelle talked lengthily about finding some of the lost confidence from her athletic life in her current life. After developing low self-esteem due to appearance and the constant surveillance of her body in a swim suit, Rochelle told about finding confidence in herself through her work. Rochelle was confident: *“to know that if I really want something done...if I want something, I’ll get it, you know? Having that confidence to know that, yeah, that if I work hard at something I can get that result.”* Further, she was able to notice that not all former athletes were able to find that confidence in their life after sport. Rochelle had friends who, instead of transitioning to the “real” world, made attempts to return to sport:

*I have friends who have retired and they try to...a few of them have tried to do comebacks or you know, get back into a sport, which I think is really, really sad because it’s sort of an admission of defeat in making it in the real world, you know? Like I’m just not good enough at anything else, I want to do what I’m good at and you know.*

Rochelle storied these friends as failing: they did not manage to move away from the performance narrative to alternative life narratives (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2009) outside

of sport. Reflecting on Rochelle's comment about her friends, I realized I felt a similar struggle. I gained a lot of self-confidence through my sports, yet I seemed to lack confidence in every other aspect of my life. I seemed to have gained self-worth from the success as it was framed through the performance narrative – I was still storying myself as a 'real athlete.'

It was clear that the participants referred to confidence in various ways. Alina (synchronized swimmer) and Rochelle (speed swimmer) referred to self-confidence in general, as well as related to body shape and size. They both talked about their struggles with their weight and eating and a very low self-confidence. According to several researchers, many women athletes, similar to Alina and Rochelle, suffer from body image issues and related low self-confidence (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Chapman, 1997; Johns, 1998; Jones et al., 2005). Other athletes discussed confidence when telling stories about successfully engaging in activities outside of sport. For example, Samira felt very confident in what she could do related to her plan to train as a physio therapist. Tania was able to pick up other activities, confident that she could do well in those as well.

It is noteworthy to acknowledge that the three participants who experienced a rougher retirement from their sports (Nina, Alina – synchronized swimmers, and Sheila – cross country runner) all seemed to lack confidence. They had a more difficult time figuring out what else they would be good at. That makes me question how self-confidence is developed in athletes. Does sport really increase confidence? Are there different ways to instill a long-lasting confidence, not just related to sport performance? What alternative stories did my athletes create?

Other skills were mentioned in my participants stories: Tania (synchronized swimmer) learned communication skills, team work, and how to take feedback. She felt that in synchronized swimming:

*it's rare that you do something perfectly. Your coach will rarely say, "That was great," and nothing else. There's always something you can do better, and so that's why I think I've been, I was successful in university because I could take feedback from papers or from profs and not be offended. It's just kind of, "Okay, thank you." I accept it and I'm thankful for it, and even through becoming a teacher, in the practicum sections of becoming a teacher, you're observed, basically, for weeks and weeks and weeks with your classroom, and it's intense. But I think that I learned a lot because I had the ability to have a veteran teacher, you know, fill my brain with as much information as possible and I can take it openly [...], without feeling judged or without feeling bad about it or without feeling incompetent. I just thought, okay, that's what I need to do to get better. [Laughter] So for me, that's the main skill that I got out of it.*

Tania seemed to successfully transfer her ability to accept the coaches 'control' required in successful sport performance to accept 'judgment' and critique from other authority figures and thus, managed to modify the norms and behaviors learned through the 'real athlete' narrative to other contexts. If Rochelle earlier indicated that the strive to unobtainable perfection lowered her self-esteem, Tania was able to mobilize her experience in sport more productively. However, similar to Amelia, former Olympic synchronized swimmer in Barker-Ruchti et al.'s (2012) study, Tania, as a 'real athlete,' had learned to be mentally strong, but also submissive, use self-control, and push physical limits (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012). It was obviously helpful for a teacher trainee like Tania, to learn that taking feedback from supervising teacher was similar to adhering to coach's control. Tania however, seemed to trust her supervising teacher to give good advice without questioning.

In conclusion, as most participants in their sporting lives were 'real athletes' – 'go-getters,'



self-motivated, goal-oriented people – the majority of them were able to use those skills outside their sport. However, three participants, Nina, Alina, and Sheila who also struggled after retirement found it difficult to motivate themselves to do other things and transfer the skills learned in sport into other endeavors in their lives. It was clear, however, that not everything the participants learned as ‘real athletes’ automatically transferred well into the ‘real life’ narrative. For example, perfectionism did not work for Rochelle and time management did not work for Alina.

### ***“Having Different Interests:” Suggestions for Smoother Sport Retirement Experiences***

Even though the majority of my participants successfully, over time, were able to displace the ‘real athlete’ narrative with a new ‘real life’ narrative, they all thought of things that could be beneficial for others going through the process. They suggested, for example, finding multiple different interests, getting help with proper nutrition and career planning, as well as having access to other retired athletes’ stories, which could be helpful in creating alternative narratives to the ‘real athlete’ narrative of elite sport. I now provide more detailed stories to support their suggestions.

A few participants mentioned having a more balanced life, something that was difficult to achieve while they were competing at that high level. Alina (synchronized swimmer) thought that *“being active is important, but having different interests is important too. Different experiences.”* In their study, Douglas and Carless (2006) identified such ‘different experiences’ from sport guiding an alternative, discovery, narrative to sport performance narrative. By adopting the discovery narrative, athletes can find exciting opportunities outside sport to discover other ways of living. In discovery narrative, one’s self worth is no longer dependent on

success in sport. This type of narrative helped some of my participants who had other interests than their sport to retire more smoothly. Samira (speed swimmer) had her architecture program and the internships that she was very thankful to have done. Krista (synchronized swimmer) did piano and voice training, was interested in drama, and after sport she joined a debate club. Ramona (synchronized swimmer), however, argued that obtaining other interests was easier said than done, because many of the elite athletes wouldn't listen if this was suggested to them. This was the case with Sheila (cross country runner), who recalled that when she was still competing, she was told that she would break down if she continued training at that intensity. Yet, she continued running. At the time of the interview, she realized that she had not been in the right frame of mind to listen to those kinds of comments, but now recognized she had to "*build myself*" on more than just one thing.

One large issue with which the participants battled after sport was proper nutrition and eating. They explained that they would have benefited from having more information about eating after they retired and the changes that happen in their body. Developing strategies to deal with changing body shapes is not typically an aspect of any retirement program (McKnight et al., 2009; Petitpas et al., 1992; Smith & McManus, 2008), yet my participants expressed needing significant guidance with this aspect of their retirement. Rochelle (speed swimmer), Alina, Tania, and Nina (synchronized swimmers) did not realize how much their bodies would change once they stop the training. They also mentioned that right after they retired, they kept eating the same way, but they were not consuming the same energy. As a result, their body changed quite drastically in a short period of time, a change that was very uncomfortable for them. Tania (synchronized swimmer) would have liked to have learned "*about my new body and how to [Laughter] not have an athlete's physique anymore.*" Accepting the new body, she continued,

required, nevertheless, a “*huge adjustment.*” Learning about healthy eating was also a desire for Rochelle (speed swimmer), who explained that while swimming she would eat large amounts of food in one meal to keep up with the energy used for her training. As a result, her satiety cues were off as she was not used to stopping when she was full, but rather continued until she could not eat any longer. After she retired, Rochelle did not know when to stop eating, she put on weight, battled with bulimia, and even had to deal with depression around this issue. Nina (synchronized swimmer) also experienced a weight gain period when she went travelling for four months right after high school, but once she returned to training, she was able to lose the weight. However, when she retired from the sport, she gained weight and was not able to return to her training weight. While at the time of the interview, she found the change acceptable, Nina would have benefited from “*hearing more peoples’ stories*” or seeing “*the real people after,*” and being more aware of the changes in body shape and size. Previous literature (e.g., McKnight et al., 2009; Petitpas et al., 1992; Smith & McManus, 2008) on programs for retired elite athletes provided advice on occupational, educational, and financial support, but they typically did not include personal experiences from other athletes. The athletes in those studies, however, expressed a need for more emotional support and attention to body changes after athletic career (Jones et al., 2005; Kerr & Dachysyn, 2000; Stephan et al., 2003) similar to Nina (synchronized swimmer). As I was in a need for support when my body changed after retirement from sport, I would also have benefitted from emotional support, particular from stories from former athletes.

Unlike me, Samira (speed swimmer) had a chance to learn from other athletes’ retirement experiences. Those stories were an eye opener for her and helped her feel better about the circumstances of her own retirement. Other participants mentioned they knew a lot of other athletes who experienced negative transitions and the important lessons they learned from those

stories. These kinds of stories from retired athletes are obviously important to current athletes to help with the transition from the 'real athlete' narrative of athletic life to the multiple meanings of 'real life' narrative. This is where my narrative approach in this thesis can concretely contribute to the retired athletes wellbeing.

Nina, who struggled with what to do after she retired from synchronized swimming, also mentioned that she would have benefited from some kind of career planning program:

*I didn't really even know options, so maybe not just career planning and figuring out what I might be good at and how I could get there, but different programs to join or take part of or internships and ways to get experiences. I think probably today it's a lot easier to find that kind of stuff if you go looking for it, just with the internet and stuff like that, but still you need to know what you're looking for, and if, if you've never had to look for anything before, you don't know how to look, and where to find it.*

In addition, Nina would have found it helpful to have some guidance related to money management. She felt privileged that her parents paid for everything, but that left her not knowing how to manage her affairs in real life:

*I just didn't even realize how much things cost, you know? Um, [Pause] could have never done it unless my parents paid all the bills along the way, but just [Pause] yeah, a reality of what that's like. I think it would have helped me.*

After she retired, Nina missed having a connection with her fellow athletes and would have benefited from having someone or something (e.g., a center) that would facilitate more formal meetings between former athletes. She explained:

*I think that somehow encouraging, at least, if not helping maintain connections with the people that you have been involved in ... some people stay involved in the sport that they*

*were in, and a lot of people don't ... because whatever, hard feelings, they don't want to be involved. I have my own reasons that I didn't want to, [Pause] but if there had been somebody there, helping with the process, encouraging me to maintain that contact, maybe I would have and I think that might have helped, 'cause of the similar structure and maybe if there had been a system, maybe people who'd gone through it before me would have stayed in contact too and they could have been my mentors, but they were gone too. They wanted nothing to do with it, do you know what I mean? So, I think something that would encourage that. I'm not sure what that would be, but...*

The current programs do not typically help the athletes maintain connections to their sports after retirement (McKnight et al., 2009; Petitpas et al., 1992; Smith & McManus, 2008). However, as Nina mentioned, these kinds of connections could help the retired athletes feeling like they contribute positively to their sports. It would be ideal if the retirement programs could facilitate contacts between former elite athletes. For example, reunions could be a good way to maintain connections.

One interesting suggestion came from Misha (biathlete) who was among the few of my participants to critique the 'real athlete' narrative. She felt that athletes get free rides when many things were "done for them." As a consequence, Misha believed the athletes do not learn how to take responsibility for their own actions and do not live up to their potential once they retire from their sport. For example, Alina and Nina each explained how they did not know at all how to take responsibility of their own lives or be accountable to keep the commitments outside of sport. Misha saw "*the athletic lifestyle is like an extended adolescence and where you really think that things in life come easy.*" She strongly believed that in order for the athletes to have a better transition:

*Athletes need to know that they aren't really that special[...]. My boss here at the MPI, [Laughter] he advertises me as, "Oh yeah, she was an athlete, like she was almost an Olympian," and people are always, like, "Ooooh, wow! It's something amazing!" but you're not really that special. Once you're not an athlete anymore you're somebody who used to do something and I think that people do athletes no favours in telling them they're something amazing, because as soon as you aren't doing that sport anymore ... you have those successes, but it doesn't guarantee you any more success in life.*

Misha asserted that a new career did not automatically follow from just being an elite athlete and thus, she clearly did not believe that the skills learned as 'real athletes' readily transformed into a new type of work life. She had a number of friends as examples of that. She provided an example of one athlete who was:

*... in her 30s and she has no education. She has no work experience. She has no Olympic gold medals. She has Olympian on her CV but that only gets your foot in the door. You don't get a career just because of that, so I really think that I made the right decision to leave when I did.*

Samira (speed swimmer) also talked about a current swimmer colleague who was struggling to get a job:

*I have a girlfriend right now who is struggling, who was even better than I was at swimming, but much later in her life and she is struggling extremely hard right now through depression and through trying to get a job when no one will hire someone with no work experience and you know, she's really struggling.*

Considering that there are several assistance programs for retired Olympians (e.g., (Alfermann et al., 2004; Baillie, 1993; Jackson et al., 1998; Petitpas, et al., 1992; Sinclair &

Orlick, 1993; Smith & McManus, 2008; Stambulova et al., 2009; Stambulova, Stephan & Jäphag, 2007), it is interesting to notice that Misha's and Samira's friends did not access the support. Further, Misha believed that athletes would have a better retirement if during their athletic career someone would remind them that *“what you've done is amazing but it's not going to get you anywhere if you don't work really hard and think about what else you're good at in life.”*

This interesting point is echoed in Sonia's (figure skater) story, as she explained how athletes lose their fame as time goes by. Sonia mentioned that right after the Olympics she could get a coaching job just by opening the door and saying who she was, but these days no one knows her name and less the name of the Olympian couple who got a silver medal back then:

*No one knows me in the sport anymore either. I mean in the 90s I could have walked into an arena and said “My name is Sonia [?],” and most people would know, in that particular time, that “Oh yeah, I know who you are.” So,[...] for synchro it was the same. I mean I was on the Canadian team for a long time so people...and I was the captain of the team for a long time so it was an identity to me, and it's...that's not relevant to anybody anymore, so.[...] Yeah, it's just like there's a figure skater that does commentary for the Canadian Olympics and any of the other international Canadian sports ... or figure skating events that are going on to television, Tracy Wilson, and she was the dance pair that was, that I was there to kind of...support because her partner was ill and many of our young skaters don't know who she is, like and she was, she won a silver at the Olympics. Like it...it's so far ago that no one cares.*

If Sonia used to say: *“Oh, well I'm a nurse and I figure skate,”* at the time of the interview she did not mention her past skating career, as it was not relevant to anyone anymore. In her 'real

life' narrative, she now focused on her nursing career and all the other roles she had in life.

In conclusion, my participants suggested several ways to help retired athletes. For example, they advised that gaining access to other retired athletes' stories would have helped them ease their own transition. They also suggested that having continued connection with their sports would have been beneficial. In addition, they emphasized that it was important to recognize that an athletic career did not necessarily lead to success in a career outside of sport, or using the narrative approach, the 'real athlete' narrative did not readily transfer in a 'real life' narrative without hard work. During the interviews only Nina mentioned trying one of the programs designed to prepare athletes for retirement, but she found it unhelpful. The other participants did not mention them or had access to such programs. I was surprised that even the ones who were eligible to access the assistance programs, did not do so. Although my participants suggested ways to build a 'real life' narrative with less struggles, many of them, after all, believed that they had successfully created and integrated into their new narratives. While living their new 'real life' narratives, were my participants more reflexive of their previous commitment to the 'real athlete' narrative of sport?

### ***“Would You Change Anything?” Reflecting Back on the ‘Real Athlete’ Narrative***

Most of the participants in the study told positive stories about moving out of sport to a 'regular life.' Only three of them had a rougher time in retirement, with only one, Sheila (cross country runner) still trying to figure out her life. This participant is the closest to the time of retirement compared to the others who had more time to settle into their new life. Listening to their stories, with the ups and downs, with the small or big adjustments that each had to make, I wondered if they would change anything in their stories. If they were to have the power to go



back in time, would there be anything that they would want to change? Following Smith (2016), I also expand on how the participants made sense of the social and cultural world of sport that provided the 'real athlete' narrative.

When I asked if they would live their sporting lives differently, no matter what their experiences were, positive or negative, most participants answered NO, they would not change anything about their athletic life. I was not surprised by that answer. Thinking back at their athletic stories and the meanings they held for the participants, it made a lot of sense that they accepted the 'real athlete' narrative despite the struggles it might have created for many of them during their sporting careers, or during and after retirement. However, a small number of the participants questioned some decisions they made at that time, but also saw the benefits of those decisions. For example, Samira (speed swimmer) wondered if it had been better not to pursue an architecture program in Unites States aided by her swimming and instead do a physical therapy degree. However, she met her current husband there and was very pleased with the skills she gained from her schooling. Rochelle (speed swimmer) wondered if she had gotten further in her athletic career if she had taken the opportunity to move away to train when she was 16. Nina still wondered if it was the right decision for her to continue swimming after the coach told her she did not deserve the results she had achieved. She also questioned her decision of swimming and entering university versus swimming and working. Although they had questions and doubts about their decisions, all my participants cherished their lives as athletes and the life skills they learned during that time. Thus, they continued to embrace the 'real athlete' narrative as the way to make sense of themselves as athletes.

It was also not uncommon that, as active athletes, my participants did not question their sports, the enforced performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2009), or the singular dedication

required from a 'real athlete.' That seemed to have carried over into their life after retirement, as the athletes struggled to leave the 'sporting mentality' behind. Furthermore, some of them found it comforting to organize their new lives similar to their sport lives: they structured their days with similar 'busy timetables,' they 'lived for others,' they assumed a similar position to their coach-athletes position, or cherished the competitive achievement orientation and perfectionism characterizing sport in their new lives. A busy family life seemed to be a way my participants were able to leave the athletic lives behind. Playing with their children, spending time with husbands and boyfriends became more important for most of them than working out and be the best in a sport. Nina (synchronized swimmer) and Misha (biathlete) even mentioned that they still loved to be committed, but they were now committed to their husbands and/or their work. However, when living the 'real life' narrative, Nina and Misha were able to understand commitment in a different light: while sport was a commitment for a short period of time, marriage was a commitment for life.

At the time of the interview, most of my participants indicated enjoying and cherishing their new lives post athletics. Even though some had a more difficult transition out of sport, they all moved on and re-built their lives. It is interesting to notice how the participants reflect back on their athletic lives and how they currently see it, having built and lived a 'real life' narrative. While they all appeared to have detached from that very rigid 'real athlete' narrative, where they were only focused on what they needed to do in order to win, many still retained and cherished the values and behaviors they learned in sport quite unquestioningly. Therefore, the participants did not typically challenge the social and cultural world of sport in their stories. The only person who critiqued her sport was Misha (biathlete), who, in the discussion of the previous theme, was able to see the limitations of an athlete's life once she returned to training after an absence from

the sport. Misha argued that sport makes athletes believe they are special, with ready-made services, schedules, and goals for their lives simply because they were successful athletes. Similarly, I became more critical of basketball when I returned to play with the senior professional team. At that point, I saw how commercialization changed the game and I no longer found basketball genuine.

During the interviews, some athletes also started to compare and contrast the ‘real athlete’ narratives and their current ‘real life’ narratives. Samira (speed swimmer) talked about having goals that were now different from sport, where the successful performance as a goal excluded everything else. Once she finished her athletic career, Samira also realized that it was difficult to know one’s interests when outside of sport: ‘regular life’ is more like a journey, unlike sporting life, where there is a very clear set goal. Similarly, Alina (synchronized swimmer) now had a much broader perspective of life and her new ‘real life’ narrative made her aware that everything comes with experience. Her current work with immigrants allowed her to see what other people struggle with and it put everything into perspective for her. This allowed her to change her view of life and made her feel better about her sport experience that now appeared as somewhat narrowly constructed through the ‘real athlete’ narrative. It was clear that the athletes in my study did not really struggle financially, and some even stated that they did not quite know how to take care of their own finances. It also seemed that they could afford good education as well as therapy, to move from sport to ‘regular’ life. These factors may also have aided their adjustment to life after sport and enabled them to build new meaningful ‘real life’ narratives.

Interestingly, a few participants missed being elite athletes, but not the life that came with being that athlete. This intriguing re-storying of the ‘real athlete’ narrative was revealed through my life span approach to retirement. For example, Nina (synchronized swimmer) missed being a

high-performance athlete for the fitness part and the travelling, but not at all for the rigid schedules and for people telling her what to do. Here Nina offered a small critical reflection of her sport, but instead of calling for change in its social and cultural context, she accepted these as necessary aspects of sport that she no longer wanted to embrace. She continued enjoying the sport once a week, not being able to be more committed. Ramona (synchronized swimmer) missed the athletic body that she had during her training years, yet now it was more important to spend time with her daughter than working out to maintain that “*amazing body*.” The other participants also missed their fit athletic bodies without really wanting to go back to their rigid training lives again. In their study, Jones and Denison (2019) addressed longing for the athletic body shape from a retired male athletes’ perspective. While different from my participants’ experiences, Jones, the first author, reflected on his ‘evolving’ athletic body shape when he struggled to re-create “a newer, more adaptable version” (p. 893) of his athletic self who is able to develop new meanings for exercise from the disciplinary sport training. It appeared that women athletes in my study did not feel the same compulsion of having to exercise in the same manner as they did as sport women. Jones struggled to create a new relationship with his body despite having family support (relational narrative), having education and moving to a different country (discovery narrative). The authors argued that as the athletes moved further away from the ‘bubble’ of the sport performance narrative, it became more difficult to follow ‘a re-storying logic’ of creating counter narratives due to unpredictability and “fluid challenges of everyday life” (p. 893).

Although not as far from their retirement dates as Jones, my participants definitely experienced diverse circumstances as they negotiated their regular lives. While their narratives, consequently, had elements of performance, discovery, and relational narratives, they, instead of

‘re-storying’ their lives according to singular narrative logic, created ‘real life’ narratives with multiple meanings, some of which still embraced aspects of the ‘real athlete’ narrative of sport. Although they struggled, similar to Jones (Jones & Denison, 2019), to make sense of their bodies and lives after sport, their stories revealed different possibilities for building new ‘real life’ narratives in their new social and cultural contexts.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In this chapter, I mapped my participants’ lives after their transitions from retirement to living ‘regular’ lives. As such, I entered the final stage of my participants’ athletic lifespans. Although most studies on women athletes’ retirement did not follow their participants beyond the initial transition out of sport, I was particularly interested in this part of the athletic lifespan that I labeled ‘the regular life’ due to my own long-time struggle to reach meaningful life after my sporting career ended. I purposefully selected participants at least two years after their retirement from sport to explore this stage of their athletic lifespan hoping to find how they may have settled into ‘regular life.’ My analysis revealed that the athletes, indeed, constructed what I titled as ‘real life’ narrative to re-story the ‘real athlete’ narrative that dominated their sporting lives. However, the athletes constructed ‘real life’ narratives with several different meanings to suit their individual, interpersonal, and social circumstances. This differed from the previous narrative research that, while identifying such different possible narratives as performance narrative, relational narrative, or discovery narrative in sport retirement tended to assign an athlete re-storying their lives by following one clearly defined narrative. I, instead, found my athletes’ narratives varied: one successful re-storying did not necessarily work for the others. The main themes I generated from the athletes’ stories at this lifespan stage were: what was more

important than sport now; what helped the athletes move into the regular life; what sport skills transferred to 'regular life;' and finally, the athletes' suggestions for smooth transitions to regular life.

At this stage of their athletic lifespan, the participants now started to build successful 'real life' narratives. They now appreciated their lives outside of sport: they had developed interests outside of sport as they had families and had embarked in different work careers. However, the process of creating their new narratives differed. For example, the length of re-storying their lives varied with some athletes taking long time while others switched relatively smoothly to 'regular life.' The participants also discussed what helped them through the retirement period to find a meaningful 'regular life'. All my participants had felt supported by their sport clubs or organizations during their athletic career, but did not find similar support after they retired, despite the support by family and friends. Some attended therapy which did help athletes like Alina, but not others like Sheila, who negotiated her retirement period on her own. Some skills such as goal-orientation, self-motivation, and confidence acquired through their sporting careers assisted in the transition, but other skills required for successful sport performance such as perfectionism and a singular focus on sport performance (leaving 'things at the door') did not aid in transitioning to regular life and thus, were not readily translated into the 'real life' narrative. My participants also offered suggestions for a smoother transition out of sport to then help re-story the 'real athlete' narrative. They indicated a need for more emotional support and nutritional knowledge as their body shapes changed. Some also reflected upon the sheltered lives they had lived as athletes and how it was difficult to deal with such basic life skills as financial management.

Under the final theme ‘Successful Retirement Requires a Change in Individual Athlete or a Change in Sport?’ none of the participants would have changed anything in their sporting careers and thus, did not question the social and cultural context for the ‘real athlete’ narrative, but did enjoy the chance to spend more time with family and friends after setting new goals for their lives.

As the participants left their sporting lives behind, alternatives to the sport performance narrative began to emerge from their stories. Douglas and Carless (2006, 2009) offered two alternative narratives, used particularly by women athletes. First is the ‘relational narrative’ in which the athletic identity strongly attached to the performance narrative (an obsessive attachment to sporting performance) is replaced by care of others, as a solution to finding meaning in life outside sport. While most of my athletes, me included, also now had families, this relational narrative did not on its own guarantee happiness without sport. In this sense, my findings align with Jones and Denison’s (2019) male athlete who could not let his disciplinary, docile athletic self entirely go despite having family responsibilities and acting as a role model for his son. In his narrative, Jones, the first author, revealed, similar to my athletes, wanting to sustain the athletic body, but without the high-performance training regime. He, nevertheless, struggled to find alternative ways of thinking about exercise away from the high-performance training.

As a second narrative, Douglas and Carless (2006) identified discovery narrative in which the athlete begins to discover exciting and new activities outside of sport. My participants also found new friends, new jobs, and different travel experiences that they were able to entertain in their regular lives. Jones and Denison (2019), however, questioned the power of the athletes ‘re-storying’ themselves through adopting these narratives: Jones found that after the initial years of

retirement, the broader society, instead of sport, had taken control over his exercise regime with an expectation that he lives a healthy life. My participants did not express feeling this type of control, but neither were they as far in the retirement as Jones when recounting his exercise experiences.

My athletes' stories contained elements of the previously identified alternative narratives, the relational and discovery narrative, to the performance narrative. However, my narrative approach revealed a more complex narrative construction process, where the athletes made sense of several aspects of their new lives (e.g., commitment to family, relationships to friends in and out of sports, work-life balance, opportunities to travel and have hobbies, changing lifestyles, body shape, and confidence levels, emotional turmoil, mental ill-health) that then were re-storied into several meaningful 'real life' narratives. It is also notable that some of my participants included elements of the 'real athlete' narrative that they continued to cherish somewhat unquestioningly into their new 'real life' narratives.



## CHAPTER VIII

### Conclusion

In my thesis I adopted a narrative approach to examine elite women athletes' retirement experiences. My narrative approach examined athletes' stories during their athletic lifespan and after retirement. I drew on a combination of a narrative approach combined with specific aspects from narrative inquiry to explore ten women athletes' retirement stories. Through my reflexive thematic analysis, I found athletes divided their narratives into three overarching themes: life as an elite athlete, life after elite sport, and living a regular life. To conclude my thesis, I return to my research questions: *How did the athletes experience their athletic lives? How did the athletes experience their retirement? What supported and/or hindered the athletes' transition out of elite sport? How did female athletes create new meanings and re-story their lives?* To answer these questions, I summarize the findings that emerged under each of the overarching themes. These themes highlight the lifespan approach that enabled me to tell the athletes' stories over time. I then emphasize the significance of the unique meanings that elite women athletes derived from their athletic lifespans and how these findings contributed to the existing narrative literature on sport retirement. While addressing the limitations of my study, new research questions were sparked, and I conclude with future suggestions for studying women's athletic lifespans.

#### **Life As an Elite Athlete**

My interviewees described very similar experiences during their lives as elite athletes. They all talked about their commitment to their sport and teammates, as well as their responsibilities and sacrifices inside and outside their sporting life. The participants' stories were also insightful about the costs to health associated with elite sport, such as injuries and eating disorders. Despite

such health concerns, my interviewees loved their respective sports. Being an athlete was their second nature: they could not imagine life without sport. However, they also discussed at length a much darker side of sport, less known to the outside world. This included fierce competition, for the same spot on the team, huge rivalry that resulted in efforts to ‘sabotage’ their peers’ success, and the extreme self-centredness required at the elite level. Although some participants experienced some of these darker aspects, they continued their careers as athletes, as it was all part of living a ‘real athlete’ narrative. These experiences, nevertheless, led to retirement as several athletes later revealed when discussing their lives after elite sport.

My story as an elite athlete was very similar to my participants: I loved my sport beyond anything and could not imagine life without it. My participants’ discussion of costs to their health and the dark side of sport was not surprising to me, as I also had similar experiences. I could relate to their stories and now wondered, why we continued as athletes, in light of our negative experiences. Our stories as ‘real athletes’ were very similar to those described by previous researchers who indicated that the performance narrative dominating elite sport overrode the impact of any negative experiences (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2019; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009). The impact of those negative experiences laid the groundwork for decisions made later in the athletes’ lives.

This first overarching theme also provided answers to my first research question: How do athletes experience their athletic lives? Although our athletic lives were full of sacrifices and costs, we did not perceive it as such. On the contrary, we really enjoyed our lives as sports women. Our achievements brought us a status of being different, unique, special, and precious, and along with feeling as though we were on top of the world. As a result, most of us gained self-confidence from external factors such as competitive success, coaches’ reinforcement and the

general status we gained through sport (e.g., being THE athlete in the school). Narrative researchers Douglas and Carless (2006) explain that this type of social recognition is an integral aspect of the sport performance narrative within which self-worth and successful sport performance become inseparable. A similar type of gratification was very difficult to find in life outside of sport, and is problematic when no longer supported by the performance narrative. Bryn's narrative in Jewett et al.'s (2019) study exemplified this connection: Bryn, as a star athlete at her university, drew her self-confidence from her athletic identity, but felt entirely lost when her varsity athletic career ended with no more support and comfort from the performance narrative.

### **Life after Elite Sport**

Although my participants and I shared similar stories as elite athletes, the retirement experiences were unique to each of us. While some interviewees made a deliberate decision to retire from their sports, others were forced to abruptly retire due to different reasons. For example, Krista (synchronized swimmer) and Sonia (figure skater) were able to choose when and in what way to retire, while Alina and Tania (synchronized swimmers) had to terminate their athletic careers due to mental stress or physical injury. Contrary to the previous research (e.g., Erpic et al., 2004; Smith & McManus, 2008; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Wylleman & Lavallée, 2004), the reason for retirement, as well as the participants' age or stage in life, did not necessarily render their retirement experience either as positive or negative. The retirement experiences were much more individualized and nuanced than reported by earlier researchers (Erpic et al., 2004; Price et al., 2010; Smith & McManus, 2008; Stephan & Bilard, 2003; Stephan et al., 2003a; Wylleman et al., 2004), and were based more on how each participant understood

and made sense of their athletic life. While they all loved their sports, some had negative experiences (e.g., extreme rivalry and competition, injuries, the mental games associated with their sport) that influenced their decisions not to continue in their sports. For example, Alina's experiences at the national center for synchronized swimming were so negative due to the extensive rivalry between the swimmers, that she decided to retire from her sport.

Independent of their sporting experiences, some athletes adjusted easily to their 'new' lives once retired. For example, Krista (synchronized swimmer), who had prepared for her exit from sport early on in her career, found her retirement process to be a smooth transition. Other athletes struggled to find their new lives meaningful. For example, Sheila (cross country runner) was still trying to find what to do after she had to abruptly retire due to stress fractures. However, both Tania and Ramona (synchronized swimmers), even though their injuries forced them to retire, their retirement experiences were positive. This demonstrated the diversity of the athletes' retirement experiences.

The interviewees also talked about their involvement with sport after retiring from the active athletic career: only few remained connected with their sport. This finding was unique and somewhat surprised me as I continued my career as an athlete in several sports, including basketball. Reflecting upon my participation in other sports, I now realize that I tried to relive the gratification of my basketball career, yet none of the sports brought the same satisfaction as playing elite level basketball. Although not continuing their active sporting involvement, my participants discussed how sport influenced their education and career path. Most of them pursued studies related to health and all studied at the university level. Some had also completed graduate degrees, or, similar to me, were working on their doctoral degrees.

This second overarching theme also provided answers to my second research question: How did the athletes experience their retirement? As a summary, the participants' stories of their retirement experiences were a lot more complex and nuanced than their experiences of their athletic lives. For some participants, like Krista, careful preparation starting early in the athletic lifespan appeared to ease the retirement process. While several experienced injuries, these did not necessarily lead to an abrupt retirement. Therefore, injuries did not necessarily lead to a difficult retirement process, but neither did they make the participants to start carefully planning for retirement. The internal competition in some sports, however, was traumatic and career ending for several athletes. However, these deeply emotional experiences did not necessarily lead to difficult retirement. It does seem, however, that if an athlete planned for retirement, it was easier to replace the 'real athlete' self and performance narrative with other aspects of life. However, only one athlete in my study did such planning. This speaks to the strength of 'real athlete' and performance narratives in the lives of my athletes.

Each athlete had a unique retirement story that was related to their own interpretations and meanings that they gave to the relationships with their sports, their coaches and other athletes. Reflecting now on their athletic lives, it was interesting to note that the participants realized what at the time seemed to be a complex sporting life, was, in fact, a lot simpler and more organized than their current 'real' lives, where they had more responsibilities and more things to manage.

### **Living a Regular Life**

My lifespan approach enabled my interviewees to also talk about the breadth of their athletic lives at the time of the interview. Most participants had an established career after sport, and a few were still students, pursuing studies for a career of their choice. Several also had families,

some with children, others just a spouse. Regardless of their perceptions of their retirement as a positive or a negative experience, they had a clearer idea of what they wanted in life, professionally and personally. Based on my research, the retirement experience did not proceed linearly from a good athletic career, to a good retirement experience and well-adjusted life post retirement, or conversely, a difficult athletic career did not lead to a negative retirement experience and difficulty finding new meaning after sport. For example, Tania's (synchronized swimmer) injury cut her career short, but she did not perceive this as negative. While she looked for meaningful life, she also enjoyed having many 'normal' life experiences before completing her university degree in education. Sonia (figure skater) who retired from ice dancing and then returned to synchronized skating to later deliberately retire after a long career, still had mixed feelings about missing her sport in some ways, but at the same time, enjoyed her new career as a health professional and having a family life. Alina's (synchronized swimmer) case, as well as mine, are even more complicated: we both loved our sports, we both had some negative experiences during our athletic lives, experiences which in Alina's case led to her career ending. Once retired, we both struggled to find new meanings, and we both perceived the transition as negative.

Finally, when reflecting back on their athletic lifespans, all the participants indicated they would not change anything, regardless of a positive or a negative experience. Except for one participant (Misha – biathlete), the athletes did not question the dominant norms and values—dedications of their lives to training, preparation, and competition (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006)—imbedded in their sports or sporting culture in general. Drawing on this dominant performance narrative in sport, the athletes learn to accept such values as important of success

and discipline and behavioral norms such not skipping training sessions in the pursuit of becoming ‘real athletes’ (e.g., Cavallerio & al., 2017).

My interviewees also discussed transferable skills that made them successful athletes such as goal-orientation, self-motivation, perfectionism, focus, and time management. However, many of these skills did not translate to being useful when they retired. For example, perfectionism and a singular focus on sport performance (leaving ‘things at the door’) no longer worked well in their regular lives that offered a variety of challenges instead of a singular goal of winning sport competitions. While time management was also important in life after sport, during the athletic careers it was tightly controlled by others who managed the athletes’ lives. In their regular lives, my participants had to take this responsibility themselves, not always successfully. As a result, they offered suggestions of what would have been helpful for them to transition easier to life after sport. For example, they indicated that hearing other retirement stories and being able to keep connected to their peers in their sports would have facilitated an easier transition to life after sport. This aspect has not been addressed by previous research that has primarily focused on providing educational or career advice to former athletes (e.g., Jackson et al., 1998; Petitpas et al., 1992). Several of my participants mentioned having a family as a new focus for their lives. Their stories, I believe, drew parallels with Douglas and Carless’ (2009) research, who also explored how one female athlete replaced her performance narrative (i.e., their athletic life) with a relational narrative: a deeper relation with her family shifted the focus from performance driven self to a more balanced self after an active athletic career. Some of my athletes talked about a similar change in narrative once they created their own families. I became curious how this relational narrative, particularly having children, is specific to women athletes and discuss this further in connection with my section on future research.

This third overarching theme also provided answers to my third research question: What supported and/or hindered the athletes' transition out of elite sport? As the retirement processes were diverse, there was no singular answer to this question. It was obvious that different things helped different athletes. For some, therapy was essential (e.g., Alina – synchronized swimmer), while for others having supportive family and friends were vital (e.g., Nina, Ramona and Krista – synchronized swimmers, Sonia – skater, and Misha – biathlete). Several athletes indicated that planning for their education, even during their sport career, appeared as a positive factor during their retirement. What seemed to have been lacking was the support from their sports in maintaining connection to their former teammates and their sports. Some also felt that they lacked life skills (e.g., managing their finances and time, as well as having proper nutrition) and as such, elite sport did not prepare them for 'regular life' (e.g., Nina and Tania – synchronized swimmers, Sheila – runner, and Rochelle – swimmer). It was evident that there were no programs to assist my participants in their retirement process. As I indicated in my literature review, the only such support program in Canada is offered by the Olympic Athlete Career Centre (OACC) that targets athletes during their athletic careers, not after their retire. In addition, it is available only for the Olympic level athletes. While some athletes in my study competed at this level (e.g., Samira, speed swimmer), only one participant (Nina, synchronized swimmer) had accessed this type of assistance. She, nevertheless, did not find the programming helpful precisely due to the lack of information on how to actually live a regular life. My participants suggested that one good way to learn such skills would be to hear other athletes' stories. My research now provides these stories that can be shared, hopefully, through research publications as well as talks to sport organizations and clubs.



In my case, I also experienced a lack of support from my sport in Romania. My story after sport retirement, however, differs from my participants' narratives. I left Romania to move to Canada to continue my studies at the graduate level. As I arrived alone, I did not have similar family support as some of my participants. With this move, however, I not only left sport behind, but as an immigrant I lost my status as a trained physiotherapist, as my qualification was not recognized in Canada. Consequently, my previous education, at this point, did not provide me with the same security as was the case for some of my participants. I also entered a different culture, having to learn a different language. These factors also influenced my financial status and consequently, I struggled to support myself. This did not seem to be the case for my participants, who were able to afford education and therapy if needed. These multiple changes influenced my understanding of myself as a competent and successful athlete and a budding physiotherapy professional, and made me a lot less confident. In addition, the Romanian political and educational systems in which I grew up were not focused on developing confident individuals, but subjugating their citizens, emphasized unquestioningly following authorities.

This last theme also provided answers to my last question: How do female athletes create new meanings and re-story their lives? As I analyzed my participants stories, it became evident that the athletes replaced their high intensity athletic lives with a similar high intensity type of life. For example, Misha (biathlete), mentioned how she switched from sport addiction to study addiction (referring to life as a graduate student). This new focus enabled her to move from an elite level in her sport to another elite level in education. Similarly, Ramona (synchronized swimmer) and Sonia (figure skater) pursued the highest level of education in their fields, as I did too. Nina (synchronized swimmer) mentioned how her marriage now requires a similar

commitment to her previous sport commitment: her children keep her schedule busy and organized, just like she had as a synchronized swimmer.

Nevertheless, some of my interviewees also had to create new and different meanings in life after sport. Although having a family and obtaining an education now resembled aspects of some athletes' sporting careers, the others found alternative meanings in their 'regular lives.' They indicated that family and work gave them satisfaction in life that differed from the performance narrative of sport. They now invested in multiple aspects of their lives such as education, family, and relationships, which turned into the new meanings. These new meanings enabled the retired athletes to feel satisfied with their lives in a similar way their sport accomplishments did.

As I observed before, the athletes generally loved their sporting lives and consequently, did not question any aspect of their sports despite noting some negative consequences for their health (i.e., eating disorders, injuries). The only athlete who questioned the performance narrative per se was Misha (biathlete), who expressed a serious critique of how sport makes athletes feel 'too special' about themselves, when success in sport does not necessarily secure success in life in general. Misha's observation, however, was informed by her absence from her sport after which she returned to it with a different attitude. Having this distance from her sporting life possibly enabled her to take a more critical view of the impact of sport on an individual athlete's life. I had a similar experience when I returned to play basketball in a more professional context. I then questioned the way the commercial premise changed the game. Eventually, I decided not to continue with the team. Reflecting upon it now, the distance I had from the sport may have helped me realize that sport has different meanings in different contexts, which I could no longer accept.

## **Contributions and Significance**

My narrative study expanded the previous research by demonstrating the importance of examining the entire athletic lifespan to reveal the complexities of women athletes' retirement experiences. This allowed me to move beyond focusing on a single aspect of retirement experience, or draw entirely from one narrative framing (e.g., performance narrative), to obtain a more holistic understanding of elite athletes' retirement as a process.

Like all narrative researchers, I assumed that the athletes' lives were organized and interpreted through stories and narratives. Athletes are meaning-makers, who make sense of their experiences (Smith, 2016) by using narratives shaped by the social and cultural world of sport they live in. This meant that I placed the participants' stories as my starting point, rather than a particular pre-determined narrative (i.e., the performance narrative). I refer to sport retirement research that uses this approach as well as the performance and relational narratives (e.g., Barker-Ruchti et al., 2019; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009). However, I did not frame my research with these pre-determined concepts. I realized that I could have also used Cavallerio et al.'s (2017) classification of retirement stories as entangled, going forward, and making sense narratives. However, my participants' stories were much more complex and could not be forced into one of those categories. Therefore, I was able to obtain deeper and more nuanced retirement experiences by combining a more traditional narrative approach with aspects from narrative inquiry. This helped me to expand beyond the current narrative research to consider the uniqueness of each athlete's story, instead of locking them into a particular narrative type.

Following Frank (2010), I was also able to clearly explore what the athletes saw as possible and worth doing in sport. They had well-defined goals, training regimes and very organized

lives. However, once these goals were removed, their perspectives on life had to change and they could no longer see clearly what was worth doing. Consequently, I demonstrated the significant complexity of the retirement experiences. It is important to consider this because all athletes are different and experience their lives differently. Based on my research, narrative studies on sport retirement should explore each story in its context, not necessarily locate it within a pre-determined narrative structure. It is also important to bring in different social and cultural experiences and their influence on the retirement process. Each sport has its own culture to which the athletes have to adjust. This will determine the athletes' retirement experiences. As I highlighted the impact of the sporting culture on these experiences, my narrative research may also help the athletes to think more critically of their sport.

Individuals can understand the world in multiple ways, and social and interpersonal meanings develop over time (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). In my study, the athletes had multiple ways of understanding their retirement. My narrative research considers my participants' lifespan whereas the prior research tended to focus just on the actual retirement, or on an incident leading to retirement. Therefore, the multiple meanings became more evident in my study. For example, although I had stories from five synchronized swimmers, no story was identical. Krista and Ramona were able to acknowledge at one point during their athletic career that there would be a time when they would retire. Alina had a very difficult time after her negative experience at the national center and this impacted her retirement transition. Tania had to abruptly retire due to a shoulder injury, while Nina had a difficult relationship with her coach. When I followed their stories, I realized that their retirement experiences were also very different, as well as their adjustments to life after sport. This richness would not have been possible without the lifespan approach of my study.

Furthermore, narrative researchers assume a necessary relationship between the researcher and the researched (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Being a former elite athlete myself helped me to build a relationship with the participants. Several other sport retirement researchers were also previous elite athletes, but did not include themselves in their research. My thesis included 'a narrative beginning' (Clandinin et al., 2007), where I detailed my story as an elite athlete. Departing from other researchers, I evocatively showed my own experiences as an athlete and detailed my own relationship and personal interest in my research topic. This narrative beginning helped me to identify the personal, but also the practical and social importance of my research. Personally, I was able to make sense of my own story in relation to the other athletes' stories. Practically, it helped me to consider different support options for retired athletes, especially when I spoke with the other athletes in my study. Socially, I was able to look more critically at sport, although most athletes in my study did not challenge their sport in any way. My story adds to the richness and complexity of the elite women athletes' retirement stories by providing a different cultural background (i.e., Romanian) to reflect upon my participants' experiences. As well, my background as an interpretive narrative researcher gave me a research-informed perspective on women's retirement experiences from elite sport. Considering these significant findings, my study provides a unique contribution to the literature on women athletes' retirement from elite sport.

### **Limitations**

While my interpretive narrative lifespan approach to elite women athletes' retirement enabled me to expand the previous research in several ways, there were also limitations to my research. My narrative approach that combined a more traditional narrative with elements from

narrative inquiry, provided me with deep data from sport retirement. Nevertheless, it also created some challenges for me. The first challenge was presented by the ethics procedures required by the University's Ethics Board. The University's Ethics Board (REB) requested that I contact my participants only via secondary contacts, such as coaches, possibly to ensure a more 'objective' sample. This requirement did not align with my interpretive narrative approach that acknowledges subjective epistemological stance and consequently, narrative researchers typically access their participants directly. As my sampling procedure was controlled by the REB requirement, that did not allow me to approach possible participants directly. I was only allowed to contact coaches and was, thus, dependent on their goodwill to obtain participants for me. This limited my sample to specific sports. While I was able to obtain participants through posters as well, the coaches remained my main contact point. Thus, it was not possible for me to reach athletes directly, for example, through snowball sampling, and I may have missed participants who wanted to tell their stories at length. Consequently, while I was able to have a substantive sample of ten athletes, several of my participants come from the same sport. This may have provided a limited understanding of athletes' retirement experiences.

The recruitment procedure may have further impacted my data collection. In my narrative approach, I used narrative interviews. While the premise of this type of interview is designed to encourage participants to share their stories, some participants were not readily talkative. Although I relied on the interview guide, I was also true to my narrative approach, waiting for the interviewees to provide their stories, not me necessarily probing with a relatively tightly structured interview guide often used in semi-structured interviews. Thus, sometimes the answers were short or had information that could have been explored further. Reflecting back

now, I realize that during the interview I could have followed up further on some of their answers to obtain deeper information for the athletes' narratives.

As an interpretive researcher, I also carefully acknowledged my positionality as both a retired athlete and a researcher. I believe that my background as an athlete facilitated further discussion even with the participants whose answers tended to be short. While it helped me to understand their experiences, reflecting upon this now after my analysis, I realize that all of us, me included, appeared to unconditionally love our athletic lives without questioning our negative experiences in it or challenging the role of our sport organizations in our retirement experiences. Although I now see these contradictions more clearly, I could have explored further the athletes' comments regarding what now could be considered abusive behavior (e.g., a coach telling one athlete that she did not deserve to be selected to a team) or body shaming (e.g., my coaches pointing to 'fat jigging'). In addition, in Romania, I was aware that some athletes used sexual favours to the male coaches to advance their basketball careers. None of my athletes mentioned these types of incidents, but as more of them now have come to the public eye, I could have expanded more on the athletes' comments regarding possible abuse.

Including my own experiences in this study has also expanded the previous narrative studies of sport retirement and also placed me as an interpretive researcher close to my participants' experiences. Through my analysis, I have become much more aware of the differences between the cultural contexts of Canada and my cultural background in Romania. This has definitely enabled a deeper understanding of the diversity of elite sport women's retirement experiences. However, I had not developed this awareness during my interview process during which, I now suspect, I may have considered my participants' meanings through my own cultural lens. In addition, many participants talked about their families and children, and I could have looked

further into this aspect in relation to their athletic and retirement experiences. As I am now aware of the extent that the social context impacted the athletes' individual retirement experiences, I also could have examined and analyzed further what my participants thought about their sport and the responsibility of the sport governing bodies and coaches to help with the retirement process.

### **Future Research**

In my study, sport retirement experiences emerged as a complex and nuanced process that varied based on the individual athletes' sporting experiences, as well as on the social context of their retirement and its impact on entering a 'normal' life after sport. These diverse experiences have also inspired several suggestions for future research.

As the social context, particularly the family, appeared central during the athletic lifespan of the participants, I would now like to explore more the role of the family support, but also the role of having one's own family responsibilities after sport career. Although connected to the relational narrative of sport retirement (Douglas & Careless, 2009), the complex meanings of creating one's own family have not been currently explored at length.

In my study some athletes either had to give up their sport to have children or saw having children (motherhood) incompatible with sport. I would like to explore further the link between having children and being an athlete. I am also interested in exploring how media represents women athletes after having children and returning to sport, as the pregnancy changes the body in multiple ways.

I am further intrigued about life after sport, as I am currently negotiating my own family responsibilities with my own sporting needs. Consequently, I am curious about exploring the



experiences of master athletes. While many retired elite athletes may continue to compete at the masters level in the same sport they trained, only one of my participants had explored this option. I am now interested to find out if, indeed, the masters athletes are former elite level athletes, if they have possibly explored an entirely new sport, or perhaps they do not have any previous sport experience. How do diverse backgrounds shape masters athletes' experiences? What differences may there be between different sports at this level?

Following narrative inquiry, my research opens with a 'narrative beginning.' I really enjoyed this type of writing and now wish to continue to develop my writing skills to represent my future research in a more storied and evocative narrative form. To take an initial step towards this type of research, I conclude my study with a narrative of the self.

## **Epilogue: *I AM ... Still an Athlete?***

*Ahhh .... Auuu ...*

I hear myself saying, as I bend down to set myself on the blockstarts.

*Ahhhh .... Auuuu ... ahhhh ..*

The same sounds reach my ears from both directions, left and right. I am surprised to hear that the athletes next to me on both sides make similar sounds to mine. It is not something I am used to. I am surprised because athletes are supposed to be in the best shape, any movement should be easy for them, but no, it is not the case anymore.

The sound of my master colleagues surprised me, but is also very familiar. I realized I do it often, not just when I train, but every day, at home, at work. I am at the start of the 60m sprint race, next to some other masters athletes. Most of them are older than me, but it makes no difference. We seem to all suffer from different pains and aches. Bending the back, bending the knees, are not easy anymore.

I am thinking back to my younger days, when I could have been woken up and dragged out of bed, and still be able to perform amazingly. These days ... I wake up, check to see if my back hurts, if not, I try to put my feet down and wait until the discomfort goes, before I walk on them. What a difference compared to my younger self as an athlete!

*So, am I still an athlete? What is an athlete then?*

And yet, I am an athlete. All of us at the start line are. All of us can still run. Not only that, we compete against each other. Now it is not a matter of who trains harder, or longer. It is a matter of can we make it to the practice with everything else we have to do (take care of children, cook, wash, clean, job). Also, it is a matter of can we still train, or are we injured

today? Injuries seem to be very easy to come, one wrong move and you are out for a while. Not like when I was young and I could train with an injury.

I thought an athlete is someone extremely fit, with no pains, ready to compete at all times and under all circumstances. Now ... I choose what events I do, how many I can do, I protect myself. *Is this an athlete? Am I still an 'real athlete?' Should it have been like that when I was young?*

Another interesting thing that I noticed when I train with the track Masters athletes is that there are not that many, and the majority of them are men. Not to mention that in my age group, there are barely any women. The women that I met are over 50 years old. I believe it is because of the child responsibility that women my age would have. I see how difficult it is for me. I can only train because my children train at the same time with me. Another interesting part about training for track that I can see now, as a mature athlete, is that it is hard on the body, and not many older people can do it. I noticed a lot more masters athletes in swimming, than in track. Then, not many can do certain longer events, such as 400m. There are a lot more that do throws, jumps or sprints, than 400m and up.

*It is afternoon, I just picked up my children from daycare. I need to quickly take them home, be OK with them being on electronic devices, because that is the only way I can get 2 hours for myself and go train without them. But today is different. Dominique has a tummy ache! She can barely walk from the car to the apartment. I really want to go training, but I feel horrible for not taking care of my daughter! What kind of mom/parent am I? If I don't go, what kind of an athlete*

*am I? How can I improve my strength and technique when I do not go to training? I have to decide what to do, and I need to do it fast!!*

*I decided to leave her home, but I gave her my phone, quickly taught her how to use it when a new number pops up. All that took time, and I left with a very heavy heart. At the track I am late, and then I also have to arrange with one of the coaches to call my number, so Dominique can see where to call, if she needs me. I am 10-15 minutes late already. For a young athlete this would have been unacceptable. This coach is very young, maybe just under 25 years. I wonder if she understands my situation at all, or maybe she thinks I always ask for special favours. It seems that is the deal with me almost every practice, because almost every time there is some other fire that I need to put out.*

*I start the practice. I shorten my warm up so I can catch up with the others. Would that make me more prone to injuries, or am I just more efficient? Then I have a difficult time focusing, because my mind goes to Dominique. I wonder how she is. Is she going to call? Did she understand how to operate the phone? Is she feeling better? Ohh .. What kind of a mother am I?*

*So, am I still an athlete? I am definitely not a 'real athlete'?*

When I was young, I knew I was good at basketball. I was very good at it!! I was good at the game, and I was very good at respecting rules and training hard. As a student then I did not care, I was good enough so I can play basketball. These days I do not feel I am good at anything. As a mother ... I leave my child at home with a stomach ache. As an athlete ... I am not focused, I am distracted, I shortcut everything. As a student, I am always late with everything. It seems that

now I do so much more, but the quality of them has to be “*just good enough*”. Bye bye perfection, bye bye performance .. **JUST GOOD ENOUGH.**

*Tonight I am training next to my kids’ group. I am warming up and I can also see them. I am proud of them! I wish my mom was like me, training with me, keeping an eye on me. There are very few masters athletes training tonight; I saw maybe two others. We are at the end of the practice. My group trains for two hours, and my kids’ group trains for one and a half hours. So, they have to wait for me for 30 min. Usually they find something to do, but tonight Vlad is not himself. We are practicing high jump and I am focused on my steps. Then I see Vlad, laying on the grass, covered with our coats. He does not look good. I make a sign to Dominique to go check on him and then report to me. What kind of a mother am I, sending another child to check the sick one, rather than me rushing to him and see for myself? Am I putting my own selfish interests first, before my child’s? I sometimes think that I push them to do track because I want to train. I want them to compete because I want to compete too. Vlad is not feeling well, yet I do not stop. I quickly check on him and ask if he can make it through the next ten minutes. I want to do two more jumps, then we can go home. Everyone else had time to do another jump, while I checked on Vlad. I did not ask permission to leave the group, I just went to Vlad. What a difference between me as a young athlete and now! I would have not dared to leave the group without permission. Now ... I come and go when I need to. I wonder what the other athletes and the coaches think of me.*

*So, am I still an athlete?*

A couple weeks ago I did not go to practice, because I had some meat in the fridge that I needed to cook, or it would have gotten bad. So, I gave up the practice because it took a long time to prepare and cook it. Other times I did not go for other reasons that needed my attention more. For the last 3-4 Saturdays I wanted to go to practice, but kids' activities, play dates, or other things came first. So, I had to give up my schedule. I realize how my schedule is so much more fluid. I cannot have one thing important all the time, like basketball used to be. My priorities change, sometimes every hour, sometimes unexpectedly. I never know how things work out until they happen or do not happen.

*So, am I still an athlete?*

Is this what a master athlete is then? A few masters athletes that I met are cancer survivors, and they do hard training for their health. Are they athletes? I guess my mentality of what an athlete is differs a lot from what I used to call an athlete. Does one have to have national team or Olympic goals in mind to be an athlete?

Medals also do not mean the same. I got more medals in my post elite sport life than during that life. Yet, I do not feel as proud of them. These days I get them because there are very few competitors in my age category to do these events. Or some fast athletes do not come or are injured. I do not feel I necessary deserve them. I do not feel I train for the medals anymore. I train more to feel good, to be in shape, maybe healthy. But I wonder ... is this training making me or keeping me healthy? Or am I damaging my joints, putting my body through strain?

*I woke up this morning and my right shoulder is frozen. It is not as bad as three years ago, but my mobility is very limited. How am I going to throw the javelin? I will have to take a few days to rest it and try to make it better. I will only run, no throws.*

*I am back at practice after almost a week. I try to throw with my right arm, but the pain is too much. I cannot do it. Well .. I guess I have my left arm. I will give it a try. My throwing coach looks at me funny when I say I will throw with my left. She thinks I am joking. I am not. I go to the runway and figure out my steps on the left side. Then I throw. WOW! My left arm throws actually better than my right! This is awesome! My coach cannot believe it either!*

*So, am I still an athlete? What is an athlete?*

I often train alone. At the masters club there are many different ages, with some people in their 60s, 70s, or even 80s, so not everyone can do the same drills. Because I am the youngest in the group, I usually do more, with less breaks. The others cannot keep up. But then some men in their 50s are much stronger than me, so I get paired up with them, yet I cannot keep their pace. So I end up training alone many times. It is not the same cohesion that I am used to during my days as a younger athlete.

It is the same loneliness I feel when I train with the children in my club. I feel like an outsider. They do not include me, and it makes sense. What would they talk about with a 40 something year old mom? So I feel lonely there too. Though they have their groups, they are obviously social among themselves, I am not part of their group.

*So, am I still an athlete? What is an athlete?*

That feeling was brought up again in preparation for a competition in Calgary. There were arrangements made for hotel booking and possibly traveling on the bus. At my current club there is this rule that only U16 and up can travel on the bus, but not under that age. I found that strange, since back in Romania we traveled with the gymnasts who were as little as 3 years old. Myself, I would qualify to travel on the bus, but my children do not. I cannot even be a chaperon, because I train with them. I do not understand how supervising adolescents and also training with them is not possible. Again, all that makes me feel very alone, something that I have not experienced before. Before it was all about the team, the travel together, the bonding. I miss that connection with the coaches and the deep friendships I had when I was playing basketball. Yet, these days I am developing another kind of connection, one that is between my children as athletes and me as an athlete. In this relationship, I go between being a mom, a coach, a supporter, as well as an athlete. This connection is different, more complex, maybe harder. Even though I miss my previous life as an athlete, I feel that these current roles are more difficult, yet more fulfilling. Winning championships and medals was difficult to achieve, yet a simplistic goal. Raising emotionally stable children, possibly future elite athletes, is much more complex, difficult, draining, and fulfilling all at the same time.

*So, am I still an athlete? What is an athlete?*

As a mature athlete I realize now how important recovery is. As an elite athlete I would come from training and I would have the time to have baths, relax, lay on the bed, while my mom would prepare the food. I had time to have naps and sleep in during days off. I actually had days off! Now, after a hard practice, I have to rush home, wash the kids, prepare supper, do homework with them, clean. I barely have time to have a quick shower, before the kids get into



trouble. By the time I put the kids down I am so exhausted, and I am the first one to pass out. Then there is never enough sleep to properly recover and my body probably takes a much longer time to recover. I feel that I need at least one day between practices. In my early days, I was always ready for two or even three practices a day!

*So, am I still an athlete? What is an athlete?*

I must still be an athlete, maybe not a 'real athlete', but still an athlete. Everything I tried and trained for I was able to do with some confidence. Since my retirement I have competed at provincial, national and international levels in swimming, as a master athlete. Then I competed at the western and national university levels in synchronized swimming. I also competed in ballroom dance. Now I train in track and field as a master athlete, and compete at provincial and national competitions. I feel I am a lot more rounded, a more complete and complex athlete than when I was during my elite level. This is interesting to notice, as it would have not been something I thought of during my elite level athletic life. My thinking around sport has shifted. I hope my learning as a researcher, as a mature athlete, as a mother, teacher, coach, will help raise more rounded athletes, starting with my children.

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# Appendix 1

## INFORMATION LETTER

**Title: Re-writing a life story: A narrative exploration of women's retirement experiences from elite sport**

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Greetings!

Thank you for your interest in this study that examines women's retirement experiences from elite sport.

### **What is this study about?**

The **purpose** of this research is to explore the retirement experiences of female athletes and seeks to understand how they create new meanings in life. For this reason, I am interested to hear your story. Your experience might help other female athletes, as well as coaches, and/or parents to better support the athletes throughout their careers and prepare them for a healthy retirement.

### **Who can take part?**

I want to speak with (1) women 18 years of age or older; (2) who participated in a sport at an elite level (i.e., trained a minimum of 20 hours per week all year round and competed at national and/or international levels but not in the Olympics); and (3) have been retired from their sport for at least two years.

### **What is involved?**

Participants will take part in 1-2 interviews, each about 1 hour in length. They are also invited to bring personal item(s) with them to the interview (e.g. pictures, personal writing, etc.). I will ask them to tell me about this item(s) and how it reflects their experience. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants may choose which aspects of your experience to share. They can also ask to have the tape recorder switched off at any time during

the interview and/or to withdraw from the interview or the study at any time without explanation or consequence. In addition, you have one month after the last interview to decide if you want to withdraw any of your information/materials used in the study.

**Are there any risks to taking part in this study?**

Talking about some parts of their experience might be upsetting. If this happens, I will offer immediate support and call the participant within 24 hours of the interview to make sure that they are well. If they need further support, I will provide a list of mental health resources.

**Are there any benefits to taking part in this study?**

There are no material benefits to participating in this study. However, sharing your story with an empathetic listener may be a positive experience.

**What about confidentiality?**

Once you are in the study, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym ('fake name') to protect your identity. Your real name will never be used in connection with the study and will not appear when the results of this study are presented or published.

Anything you say will be confidential unless the law requires me to report it (e.g., if a person says that they intend to harm themselves or someone else or that a child is currently in danger or being harmed in any way).

All materials (e.g., consent forms, questionnaires, and transcripts, etc.) will be stored in a locked cabinet, in my Supervisor's (Dr Lasiuk's) locked private office. Electronic materials are stored on the password protected Faculty of Nursing server.

Only members of the research team (listed at the top of this form) will have access to these materials. All study materials will be destroyed 5 years after the study is completed as per University of Alberta policy.

If the information collected during this study is used in other research, it will undergo another review by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (REB).

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or about your rights as a research participant, please call the Research Ethics Board at 780-492-0839.

Thank you for considering this project.

Andreea Mohora



### Appendix 3 PARTICIPANTS

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>Level of Competition</b>	<b>Perception of Retirement</b>	<b>Degree</b>
Alina	Synchronized swimming	Competed at national level and tried out for national team	negative	Undergraduate degree
Krista	Synchronized swimming	Competed at national level	positive	Master's degree
Tania	Synchronized swimming	Competed at national level and tried out for national team	positive	Undergraduate degree
Ramona	Synchronized swimming	National team member	positive	PhD degree
Nina	Synchronized swimming	National team member	negative	Undergraduate degree
Sonia	Figure skating	Olympic team member	positive	PhD degree
Samira	Speed swimming	Competed at national and Olympic levels	positive	Undergraduate degree
Misha	Biathlon	National team member; competed at Worlds	positive	PhD degree
Rochelle	Speed swimming	Competed at national level	positive	Undergraduate degree
Sheila	Cross country running	Competed internationally and in Pan American competitions	negative	Undergraduate student

## **Appendix 4**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

I am interested in your story about your athletic career and the transition out of it. Let's start by you telling me how you became an athlete. How was it for you as an athlete?

What did you like about what you were doing?

Who supported you?

What drove / motivated you to continue for so long?

How was it to be an athlete at that level?

What did you have to compromise? How did you feel about that?

How was it to finish that kind of life?

How did you feel? What did you do?

Who was around you? Did you feel supported?

How long did it take you to rebuild your life, to create new meaning for yourself?

What/who would you have needed in those moments?

What are you doing now?

Looking back at your experience, is there something you would change or would have done differently?

Would you choose the same path again?

Do you have any personal items that would speak about / represent / add to your story?

## Appendix 5

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Title: Re-writing a life story: A narrative exploration of women's retirement experiences from elite sport**

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- |                                                                                                                                                                  | <u>Yes</u>               | <u>No</u>                |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?                                                                                            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet?                                                                                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study?                                                                         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?                                                                                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you understand that the interviews will be recorded?                                                                                                          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you understand that you are free not to answer any questions or to withdraw from the study?<br>at any time, without giving a reason and without consequences? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you understand that you have one month after the last interview to decide if you want to<br>withdraw any of your information/materials used in the study?     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you?                                                                                                          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you understand who will have access to the information you provide?                                                                                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I agree to take part in this study:                                                                                                                              |                          |                          |

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Participant Signature

---

Printed Name

---

Date

PLEASE TURN OVER

THE INFORMATION SHEET MUST BE ATTACHED TO THIS CONSENT FORM AND A COPY GIVEN TO THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANT.

Would you like to receive a summary of the study results?  Yes  No

If yes, would you prefer us to send the study results to you by  mail  email?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
*First* *Last*

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
*Apt* *Street*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*City* *Province* *Postal Code*

Primary Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ *(home)* \_\_\_\_\_ *(mobile)*



## Appendix 6 THEMES

### Themes and sub-themes related to athletic life

Main Themes	Sub-themes	
General Characteristics of Elite Athlete's Life	Early Start	
	The Commitment and Responsibility	
	Moving Away to Train	
	Missing out? ... The Compromises	
	The Unknown Side	The Training at Elite Levels
		The Politics of the Sport
	Health Costs	Training with Injuries
		Body Image and Body Type
Eating Disorders		
The Engine that Kept them Going		

### Themes and sub-themes related to life after sport

Main Themes	Sub-themes
The Retirement	Abrupt retirement
	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <span>due to injuries</span> <span>due to other reasons</span> </div>
The transition	Deliberate retirement
	Time on hands? – The adjustment
	The un-adjustment
Education: Attending School	
Involvement with Sport after Retirement	

## Themes related to participants' current life

### Main Themes

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More important ... now

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What helped ... or ... did not help ...

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Transferring into life after sport

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Suggestions ... things that participants would have found helpful to have during their transition from sport

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Would they change anything?