Going Pro: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Athlete Experiences of Transitioning into Elite Sport.

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ABSTRACT

One crucial transition effecting athletes is the transition into the elite level of their sport. The purpose of the present study was to explore the changing social support associated with the transition into elite sport through six athletes' own lived experiences. Due to previous research focusing on single sporting disciplines, there is a gap in research looking at participants from different sport backgrounds, consequently ignoring the potential effect different access to social resources have on an athlete's elite transition. Using Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) developmental model, the research focused on the third (psychosocial) and the fourth (vocational/academic) layers in order to explore the importance of social support during the transition. Using a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews explored the athletes' experiences of entering into elite sport. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to develop three master themes from the athletes responses: (1) athlete-coach intersubjectivity, (2) shared experience with teammates and (3) simultaneous transitions. The research supports the Morris et al., (2016) finding that the coach becomes the main support for the athlete. The unique finding is the effect that changing coaches has on athletes: it is a necessity to have the previous coach available to rely on for emotional and tangible support whilst the athlete is trying to form a relationship with their new coaches. It is important for both the athlete and coaches to know and understand these findings in order to make the transition easier for the athlete.

KEY WORDS:	ELITE ATHLETE	TRANSITION	PHENOMENOLOGY	IPA	SOCIAL SUPPORT

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Introduction

The established psychological definition of transition is "an event or non-event [which] results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, and this requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships (Schlossberg, 1981:5). Nevertheless, Stambulova et al., (2009) adapted it to consider transitions as a coping movement, which athletes must experience throughout career changes. An elite athlete can be defined as an individual who is a master of their sport, who is consumed and responsible for their training and competition achievements and regularly make sacrifices in other elements of their life (Alfermann and Stambulova, 2007). The universal transitions elite athletes will experience are the move to the top level of competition in ones chosen sport and their retirement (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2011). Historically, sport psychology literature focused on exploring athlete's transition away from competition level to retire (Danish et al., 1997; Kerr and Dacynshyn, 2000). However, recent research conducted by psychologists identified the necessity to explore athlete's transition experience of moving up to the elite level, specifically the requirement to understand the social factors that affect an athlete's transition (Pummell et al., 2008). Research demonstrates that without a transparent understanding of how to support athletes' transition to the top level of their sport, it could result in added external pressures and therefore make the transition more stressful (Pummel et al., 2008). This finding supports the observations of Fletcher and Hanton (2003) who proposed that pressures from the wider society for an athlete to excel is a key predictor of stress, which can in turn hinder their transition. Critically, Wylleman et al. (2004) argue that such factors must be clearly identified in order to establish the necessary social support during this transitional phase.

A growing number of researchers (Morris et al., 2015; Stambulova et al., 2015) are using career transition explanatory models to interpret the elements that impact on coping and consequent transition achievement. Stambulova's (2003) Athletic Career Transition model depicts a transition as a development of an athlete's strength to cope with a sequence of demands through a collection of internal (e.g. knowledge) and external (e.g. peers and coaches) resources. If an athlete

effectively meets the demands, they are expected to have a positive and successful transition experience (Brown et al., 2015).

An alternative approach by Goodman et al. (2006) analyzed the factors that effect transition, four were established: *situation, self, support* and *strategies. Situation* refers to the cause of the transition, for example the coach suggesting the athlete progresses to the first team and the simultaneous features that may proceed as a result. *Self* conveys one's psychological resources and their personality disposition, for example, their values or knowledge on the process of their own transition. *Support* refers to their social circle that support the transition, for example, coaches and teammates (Morris et al., 2016). Lastly, *strategies* indicate the techniques individuals implement to cope with their transition.

A central principle suggested by Goodman et al. (2006) is the *support* factor, which emphasizes the importance of a strong network of support around the athlete when transitioning, corresponding to the third stage of Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) Model. Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) combined a developmental and holistic approach to create a lifespan model grounded on the normative career development of elite-athletes. The model is effective in exploring the transitions in the different spheres both inside and outside of the sporting environment and examining how they overlap to impact an athlete's development (Morris et al., 2016; Pummell et al., 2008). It is formulated using four levels: *athletic*, *psychological*, *psychosocial* and *vocational/academic* stages. The *athletic* development layer correlates to Bloom's (1985) conceptualization of talent; initiation, perfection and mastery with the inclusion of discontinuation suggested by Taylor and Ogilvie (2001). The next level looks at the *psychological* transitions that arise in infanthood, adolescence and adulthood. The third level is the *psychosocial* level that concentrates on an athlete's social development and how being an athlete affects this. The final layer explores the transitions throughout primary education to higher education and professional life. It is assumed that change or advancement at each level will in turn affect the individual's athletic progress (Pummell et al., 2008). This research will focus on the third and fourth layer of Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) framework.

The coach-athlete relationship is one of the most influential in athletes' sporting careers; it performs a significant role in young athlete's development both socially and physically (Philippe et al., 2011). Through the transition to an elite athlete the individual is likely to rely on the coach not only for guidance but also for emotional support from their personal sporting relationship (Jõesaar et al., 2012). Previous transition studies have mentioned the shift of support from parents to coach (Pummell et al., 2008; Bruner et al., 2008) but have not explored the possible change of coach and how the coach support will affect the transitional process.

Furthermore, athletes experiencing the transition to mastery of their chosen sport, are likely to be simultaneously moving from secondary to higher education and coping with the social and psychological challenges that result from those significant changes (Pummell et al., 2008). Wylleman et al. (2004) suggest these athletes will experience a shift in their interpersonal support network away from their parents to predominantly their coach and/or peers. The consequence of these multiple transitions on an athlete may be added stress and pressure. This addresses a gap in previous research that has highlighted but not specifically explored the changing of support to mainly the coaching team and how an athlete delicately handles simultaneous transitions. Furthermore, the collection of sports researched on elite athlete transition has been minimal (Morris et al., 2016). Bruner et al. (2008) suggests research on a greater collection of sports is needed as athletes involved in different sporting styles and environments may use different coping processes in their transitions. Therefore, this study will use athletes from six different sporting disciplines. This could have implications for practice as there may be findings not previously discovered in research that focuses only on a single sport.

Utilizing phenomenology is likely to be advantageous as it has been effective in Bruner et al. (2008)'s research on the transition into elite athlete sport. Richards and Morse (2012) propose the aim of phenomenological research is to understand the meaning of the experience direct from the athlete who has participated in the transition. Maypole and Davis (2001) indicate it is the most effective way of capturing the lived experiences of the athletes. Phenomenology has previously been used effectively to develop knowledge about depression in female athletes (Jones et al., 2014), the effect of music on athletes (Sorenson et al., 2008), partaking in extreme sports (Willig, 2008) and the role of spirituality in sport psychology consulting (Watson and Nesti, 2005). Collectively, the use of phenomenology in these sporting areas suggest it is therefore the most appropriate method to use in ascertaining first-rate information about athletes lived experiences. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen as it involves the intricate exploration of participants' 'lifeworlds'; their experiences of a phenomenon, the method of them making sense of these experiences and the meanings they fix to them (Smith, 2004). Lifeworlds is a Husserlian concept that aims to investigate the things themselves (Ashworth, 2003) whilst being evidenced temporarily by the mutual existence of individuals and their phenomenon (Todres et al., 2007). The sub-categories of phenomenology are intersubjectivity, temporality, spatiality and embodiment. The use of these categories whilst individually analyzing each interview will result in a more encompassing account of the athlete's experiences.

Research Aims

This research aims to assess the changing social support associated with the transition into elite sport, as defined as an athlete who competes at the highest level of competition (Alfermann and Stambulova, 2007). Specifically, this research adopts a phenomenological perspective that will use Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) developmental model to investigate six elite athletes from a range of sporting disciplines. The research will inform members of an athlete's external support (parents, peers and coaches) with knowledge of the developmental difficulties that are faced when transitioning to an elite level of sport. In turn, the external supporter network will be able to aid the transition using informed practices that support the athlete. Due to the previous research being limited to singular disciplines such as ice hockey (Bruner et al., 2008), horse-riding (Pummell et al., 2008) and soccer (Morris et al., 2016), there is a gap in research on multiple disciplines, thus the potential effect differing access to social resources may have had on athlete's transition have not been explored. Accordingly, this piece of research will test the wider applicability of Morris et al.'s (2016) transitional finding that the coach becomes the most influential individual to the athlete.

Methodology

Design
A qualitative approach was adopted making use of phenomenological semi-structured interviews as previous literature found this method to be effective when investigating the phenomena of moving up to elite sport (Bruner et al, 2008). Phenomenological semi-structured interviews are effective as they generate a conversation between the athlete and researcher through the use of open-ended questions (Czech et al., 2004; Ryba, 2007; Sorenson et al., 2008). The use of open-ended questions also resulted in further reflection and explanation by participants on their opening accounts of their experiences, as suggested by Willig (2008). Data were gathered using one-on-one, face-to-face interviews enabling participants to provide more depth of information and flexibility for the researcher to adapt questions around their answers (Englander, 2012; Willig, 2008). The phenomenological method allowed the researcher to amass rich statements communicating the athletes' experiences of going through their individual transitions (Giorgi, 2009). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the selected as a result of its focus on lived experiences. Characteristics of IPA include an idiographic commitment at two levels; a commitment to a thorough, comprehensive analysis and a commitment to comprehending the experience from the athlete's personal perspective (Finlay, 2014). Moreover, IPA was considered most suited in comparison to thematic analysis, due to its focus on life transitions (Smith et al., 2009).

Participants
Purposeful sampling was selected to recruit a homogeneous sample of information-rich elite athletes who had participated in the experience of transitioning to becoming an elite athlete, however this resulted in snowballing of participants providing information of possible eligible participants (Jones et al, 2014; Palinkas et al., 2015). The strength of using these participants is that they have experienced the phenomenon being researched and they are able to depict their experiences in great detail, presenting anecdotal reports of their transition process (Englander, 2012). An inclusion criteria was used; (a) the individual had transitioned to becoming an elite athlete (participating in either national or international competitions for their chosen sport), and (b) they were eighteen or over. Six participants were recruited as suggested by multiple researchers for effective IPA analysis (Reid et al., 2005; Smith and Osborn, 2007; Smith et al., 2009), in which ensured the research could focus on gathering in-depth data. The use of six participants is further endorsed by evidence of its effectiveness in previous research on elite athlete transition by Morris et al. (2016) who used five participants and Bruner et al. (2008) who used eight participants. Details of the current studies' participants are given in the table below.

Table 1
Details of Participants

Participant	Age	Sport	Duration of Interview
Emma	21	Football	40 minutes approx
Dan	22	Judo	50 minutes approx
Joe	18	Water polo	45 minutes approx
Olivia	22	Show Jumping	50 minutes approx
John	22	Deaf Cricket	40 minutes approx
Bill	23	Gymnastics	40 minutes approx

*Participants' names have been replaced by pseudonyms to ensure anonymity

Materials
The phenomenological interview schedule was influenced by Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) developmental model of athlete transition. Similar to previous literature by Bruner et al. (2008) it focused on the third layer; psychosocial development of the athlete and the fourth layer; academic/vocational development, both in relation to their athletic involvement. This was used in practice as they found these stages to be the most significant in their results. This was reflected in this research's analysis in which found athletes emphasized the importance of social encouragement from teammates and challenges faced in terms of personal development (Bruner et al., 2008). An interview guide (appendix 1.8) was used that adopted three specific types of questions in order to facilitate the collection of rich sample of the language used by the participants (Guba, 1981). The first style of question was descriptive (e.g. "describe a test you have faced during your transition"). The second style of question was structural (e.g. "what tactics did you use to cope with the challenges of the transition"). The third style was contrast (e.g. "what differences if any at all did you notice between your previous level and your new level"). The interview scheme included five question areas as suggested by Morgan and Krueger (1998). These consisted of (i) opening questions; (ii) introductory questions; (iii) transition questions; (iv) key questions; and (v) ending questions. Specific probes were also used in order to provide the participants with

clarification of a question (Patton, 2002). The interviews were individually audio recorded for verbatim transcription by the researcher for the analysis process; the method resulted in greater accuracy and access to non-speech communication of the athletes e.g. pauses (Chenail, 2011).

Data Collection
Prior to the interviews, participants were sent an invitation email (appendix 1.6) and participant information sheet (appendix 1.5) to provide them with sufficient information on the research to enable informed consent. Participants read and signed the consent form (appendix 1.4) with opportunity to ask questions (Holloway, 1997). The interviews were conducted in a safe place of the participants choosing e.g. their home, in order to make them feel comfortable thus eliciting in-depth information from them (Doody and Noonan, 2013). The interviews lasted however long was required in order to illicit adequate information (Jones et al., 2014). All interviews were conducted in person as Polkinghorne (1994) emphasized they generate genuine and rich explanations of phenomena due to the interviewer's facilitation of trust in the interview environment. They were recorded on a password protected electronic device by the researcher. Following the interview, participants were fully debriefed (appendix 1.7) and given the opportunity to ask questions (Harris, 1998). The interview data were transcribed verbatim with all identifying information being removed or changed to ensure anonymity. Once the interviews were transcribed the data were deleted.

Ethical Considerations

Capron (1989) identified key elements of sound ethical research to be beneficence, consideration for the individual, integrity and autonomy. Knowledge of these elements acts as a guide to make the research objective and the safety of the participant of equal importance (Orb et al., 2000). All participants were given an information sheet to read and a consent form to sign prior to taking part in the study; this ensured informed consent (Holloway, 1997). Participants were explained their right to withdraw from the study at any point up until the data started being analysed. To ensure anonymity the participants choose a pseudonym in which they were referred to throughout (Grbich, 1999). All participants' information were kept on a password-protected file and deleted after use. There is little risk involved as the interviews will be conducted in a safe environment of the participant's choice. To ensure researcher safety the researcher told colleagues their whereabouts before and after each interview as suggested by Paterson et al. (1999) and the MMU Lone Worker Policy (MMU Health and Safety Unit, 2006). After the participants had been interviewed they were fully debriefed to eliminate any anxiety about the interview or what the data will be used for (Harris, 1998). The intention of the debrief is to ensure the participant will leave the interview with a similar mind frame they arrived with (Aronson et al., 1998).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
Due to the focus of the research being gathering insight into the experiences of the athletes, IPA was selected because of its focuses on ideography by ensuring detailed analysis whilst also placing an emphasis on the researcher understanding the phenomenon from the participant's perspective (Pringle et al, 2011). Furthermore, with IPA supplementary layers of interpretative and/or reflexive processing are strongly encouraged (Smith, 2011). Guidelines of IPA informed by Smith et al. (2009) were followed to inform the analytical strategy. Step one was to immerse oneself with the data through listening to the recording and reading the transcript simultaneously. Preliminary comments were written in the left margin, they consisted of a combination of descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments (Smith et al., 2009). The following step was to use the right margin to develop emergent themes exploring any psychological significance affiliated with the research aim. Step one and two also ensured double hermeneutics. Step three saw connections between emergent themes followed by abstraction to organize similar coded emergent themes, thus establishing a sub-ordinate title for the colored cluster. The iterative process of constructing sub-ordinate themes was repeated for each case to guarantee idiographic engagement. Finally, three master themes were established as suggested by Dickson et al. (2008)

through manipulation of a cross-case analysis, which encapsulated the research aims. In order to establish dependability of the analytical procedure, an audit trail was used to record the progress of the analysis procedure thus aiming to minimize interpretive bias (Philippe et al., 2011).

Analysis

Overarching patterns of experiences were established from the verbatim transcripts; from this three master themes were developed: (1) Athlete-coach intersubjectivity, (2) Shared experience with teammates, and (3) Simultaneous transitions. The proceeding extracts are illustrative of rich and extensive interviews. Extracts are provided below that capture the conceptualization of these themes. Table 2 shows the master themes and sub-ordinate theme codes below.

Table 2
Master themes and Sub-ordinate themes

Code	Master Themes	Code	Sub-ordinate themes
1	Athlete-coach intersubjectivity	1.1	Forming a new coach relationship
		1.1	Original coach vs. new coach
2	Shared experience with teammates	2.1	New teammates
		2.1	Support from within team
3	Simultaneous transitions	3.1	Academic and sport life
		3.1	Transferable confidence

Theme 1: Athlete-coach Intersubjectivity

The *athlete-coach intersubjectivity* theme is comprised of the exploratory way that intersubjectivity between the athlete and coach is presented. Intersubjectivity in phenomenology can be defined as experiencing another person as a subject rather than an object amongst objects, thus allowing empathy (Smith, 1976). From this master theme, two sub-ordinate themes were conceptualized: *forming a new coach relationship* and *original coach vs. new coach*.

In the following extract, John highlights how changing coaches created more stressors in the transition to becoming an elite athlete:

> 'Probably the biggest challenge I've faced is the change of coaches…my role in the team is very tactical so it takes time for the coach to learn me…in the last five years I've had three new coaches at national level which is kind of like having to re-learn a new game.' (John, 50-54)

The impact of having to form a relationship with a new coach and learn their techniques is an extra factor in which can be overlooked when exploring the transition to becoming an elite athlete. The athletes have to work hard to create a relationship with their new coach so they can understand how to complement each other's strengths. The interactions with the lived other are a core component within the transition. For Bill, the change in training space coupled with a new full-time coach adds to the adjustments he needs to make in himself to cope with the changes happening around him, thus mapping onto the sub-theme of *forming a new coach relationship*:

> 'Moving onto a different coach full time as opposed to just having training sessions with him once or twice a week is like a massive difference' (Bill, 188- 189)

Moreover, in order to cope with the changes happening around them, John, Joe and Dan keep a close connection with their previous coaches, demonstrating they have their 'full trust' (Dan, 83). There is an existing strong bond with the old coach and they are a stable person in the time of transition:

'I've been with my new coach for 18 months, I think he's great…but I don't know him enough to fully consider him in the same level as my club coach. Although I know his knowledge is above and beyond…he doesn't know me as a person whereas my home coach knows me as a person' (Dan, 84- 88)

In the following extract John demonstrates his coping tactic of interacting between the old and the new coach by managing the different levels of support from them, the new coach will help develop new skills whilst relying on the old coach for assurance:

'My home coach, I still stay in touch with him…he really understands me so if I ever have anything I can message him and get him to explain something, then assure me what I need to do' (John, 76-79)

For Dan as an athlete his club coach has been with him throughout his judo experience and having shared so many experiences together results in a close relationship beyond just the coach and athlete boundaries. Having the constant source of support throughout the transition made it easier for him:

'I've had a coach who has stuck with me for a long amount of time…Chris has taken me from 12 till still ongoing and I can't see that changing for the next 4/5 years' (Dan, 120-124).

The previous extracts highlight the effect coaches have on athlete's elite transition. Although they may train with a new coach, they rely on their already strong relationship with their previous coach to aid them through the transitional period.

Theme 2: Shared experience with teammates
The second theme centers around two sub-ordinate themes: *new teammates* and *support from within the team*. The meaning behind this is the effect that creating new relationships with peers in new teams has on the athlete and the significance of integrating well to alleviate the stress of the transition and gaining the support of ones peers.

Transitioning into a team or individual sport can be a stressful experience for athletes. However, it is likely as an athlete that the individuals have been in a prior situation whereby they have needed to integrate. Therefore, they can transfer those learned skills into the elite sport level. For example, through his previous lived experiences, Joe is able to interact with others well due to the opportunities given to him in sport:

'I'm more confident to go up to more people now that I don't know because I've had to do it to make friends in different squads that I've played for' (Joe, 26-28)

The experience of being the only new person who joined from a different team to be part of the elite squad on a new football team means it is imperative to make friends with the new squad members:

'When I moved up to the first team I was the first new player signed for my new team that hadn't come through the youth set up…so it was a new environment where I didn't know anyone' (Emma, 90-92)

Repeatedly, having someone that the athlete is already familiar with in the team helps to buffer the big jump by having an existing relationship and using it as a technique to create new relationships:

'The London boys…are the ones who've helped me improve and integrate in the national squad…they helped me make more friends…I was able to make friends through them' (Joe, 104-110)

'I was intimidated but there was that one person who made me feel at ease…the transition was very quick, so I felt at home very quickly but was intimidated at first' (John, 135-138)

Even in individual sports to have teammates to train with provide a high level of support, to be able to share experiences with someone so that they know how to support each other through not only your transition but also ongoing challenges:

'Teammates are there to build you up when things go wrong, to help you get through those tough days in the gym…I guess to share the good times' (Bill, 112-115)

The preceding excerpts demonstrate the importance of being able to integrate into a new team and creating relationships with *new teammates*. This, coupled by *support from within the team*, works by supporting the athlete through the transition by reflecting on shared experiences.

Theme 3: Simultaneous transitions
Simultaneous transitions refer to the external factors that are happening around the athlete at the time of transition. This final master theme is formulated from two sub-ordinate themes; *academic and sport life* and *transferable confidence*.

For most athletes the transition age will be approximately sixteen, which is when they are finishing school and deciding on what next. This is the age of 'big drop out rate' (Dan, 94). Athletes are required to carefully balance the transitions. Dan explains how if not balanced correctly it can hinder the speed of transition:

'I was studying my A-levels, I didn't train as much as I should've done at that point it had a big impact on my development because I'd probably be a lot further on in my career now if I would've used those years' (Dan, 256-259)

Juggling academic and sport together can make it difficult for athletes to put their full effort into both elements of their lives. It is important to have the first two themes of coaches and peers in place to cope with the simultaneous transition affecting the athletes:

'I'd been based in a club until I was about 15, then I was invited by the national coach to come and train twice a week at a national training center whilst doing my GCSE's and A-levels' (Bill, 179- 181)

Nonetheless, it appears a positive to come from experiencing *simultaneous transitions* is the confidence that grows within an athlete due to the help and support around them that aided them to transition successfully. As a result of having a strong coaching team around him who were able to help him through his transition when he injured himself, Dan felt confident he would be able to recover and stay in the elite squad:

'It makes you feel more confident in terms of the support staff you get in terms of physios because they're specifically for your sport' (Dan, 51-52)

The previous extracts demonstrate how the spheres outside of the athletes' sporting lives have an impact on their athletic career. Thus highlighting the importance of balancing both aspects of the athlete's life with help of their external support.

Overall, the participants' experiences are complementary of each other centering around all three master themes, a commonality across the analysis of the three themes was that support from coaches having the greatest effect on the athlete's transition.

Discussion

The research explored the transition experiences of six male and female athletes who entered into elite sport. Using a conceptual framework proposed by Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), three master themes emerged as imperative support factors in athletes lived transition experiences. Applying the findings to Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) conceptual framework, the themes of *athlete-coach intersubjectivity* and *shared experience with teammates* refer to the third (psychosocial) level of the model whilst '*simultaneous transitions*' refers to the fourth (vocational/academic) level of the model.

The transition by athletes to compete in the elite level of their sports often entails joining new teams or training centers and therefore being trained by new coaches (Martindale et al., 2007; Jowett and Nezlek, 2012). Previous research suggests that initially athletes have to adapt their behaviors to correspond with their new coaches requirements before they have succeeded in building a strong athlete-coach relationship (Philippe et al., 2011). When first transitioning, the athlete-coach relationship will be functional through which the coach has the role of the instructor. However as they integrate more it becomes more of a supportive nature, whereby the coach and athlete create a personal bond (Philippe et al., 2011). This was observed throughout the interviews as an important aspect of the transition with the athletes having to work at achieving rapport with the coach to get the support from them. Jowett and Nezlek (2012) found that once the athlete is able to express their opinions and share the decisions, it enables the development of a stronger connection, thus resulting in further support and greater intersubjectivity between the new coach and athlete.

The effect of coach-athlete relationships has been overlooked on previous research into athlete transition. In the current research, athletes discussed how their relationships with both new and old coaches are affected by the transition and the strategies they implemented to successfully balance them. The 3c's model (Jowett, 2007) can be applied to the transition to explain why athletes need the strong interdependent relationship with their old coach to help whilst they are forming the relationship with their new coaches. The 3c's model is defined by three constructs: closeness, commitment and complementary. *Closeness* refers to the interpersonal relationship between coaches and athletes. *Commitment* refers to the maintenance of the relationship overtime. *Complementarity* refers to the co-operative acts including responsiveness between the athlete and coach (Jowett and Nezlek, 2012). This model is a suitable explanation because the athlete would have achieved all three components with the old coach, thus explaining why they are able to support them through the transition. Jowett (2008) believes time effects athlete-coach interdependence suggesting because of the many years they have trained together the old coach and athlete have created a strong relationship aiding them through the transition. The present work builds on this by providing evidence of the importance for old coaches not to drop athletes when they move up; but rather, to keep in close contact and be available to provide tangible support during their transition.

Previous research into transition found teammates to be a critical source of support, specifically when entering elite sport (Bruner et al., 2008). As mirrored in the present research, teammates provide social support to the athlete in terms of emotional and tangible support that aids possible struggles such as integrating into existing teams (Morgan et al., 2013). The lived experience that teammates share of all having gone through the transition is an experience that they connect over. As a result, they are able to provide each other with the appropriate support from reflecting on their own transition experiences.

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In the current research, the athletes experienced multiple transitions along with moving to elite level such as, progression to college or higher education. This is echoed in the Goodman et al. (2006) 4s's model in which suggested that the situation an athlete is in can influence their transition based on other stressors they may be facing. Therefore, the present research can inform an athlete's support circle that they need to be supported not only in their sporting career but also through their academic career. Specifically the institutions that they attend must be made aware of the strong commitments that these athletes have to their sport. A limitation of this study is that because of the use of young adult athletes who transitioned at approximately the same age, the research cannot be transferred to older athletes who compete in sports where the elite transition age is older and therefore have different needs from their social support. For example, Sanders and Winter (2016) found social support from athlete's spouses is more important to triathletes transitioning to the elite level than coaches.

A commonality from the interviews with the players was that they identified balancing the resources that they gain from people around them and noted the importance of understanding how to identify who can support them most in different aspects of their sport and outside lives. Habitually, athlete transition research focuses on the individual and underplays the individual-context relationship (Morris et al., 2015). Nonetheless, Rosso (2015) explored the influence of person-in-context relationship around athlete's career. His findings suggest that an athlete's social capital and having the 'right' social networks play a big role in the outcome of sporting careers. Future research could build on the present findings by focusing on how an athlete's social capital is important specifically in the transition into becoming an elite athlete in multiple sports and if it can predict the outcome of the transition.

Overall, it has been identified how athletes' lived experiences of transitioning to elite level of their sports are aided undoubtedly by multiple spheres of support that need to be in place for a successful transition. Highlighted within this exploration is the importance of not only having natural talent to become an elite athlete, but the necessity to have all the elements around the athlete in place for successful transition. This is echoed by Van Tassel-Baska (2001) who believed the stage-approach by Bloom (1985) demonstrated the evolutionary, dynamic and complex interactions an athlete must have controlled in order to optimize development. As long as the constants of temporality and the embodiment of the athlete is appropriate to the level they will be moving to, the key theory in negotiating potential transition success is the intersubjectivity of new relationships. This conclusion is consistent with the Goodman et al. (2006) 4s's model, which defined support to be vital in transitions. It is therefore likely that all the athletes in the present research had the necessary social support required for their transition to becoming elite athletes.

Reflexive Analysis

A reflexive study should assume the co-constitution of meaning within a socially positioned situation, therefore enabling a holistic approach to phenomenological research (Shaw, 2010). Heidegger (1962) argued we experience new things as already being interpreted, therefore meaning-making is at the center of human experience, thus enabling us to make sense of our experiences within the constraints of the world we live in (Bruner, 1990). Willig (2008) identifies two categories of reflexivity; personal and epistemological in which will be examined underneath.

To begin with it is essential to be personally reflexive due to the effect of pre-assumptions, individual experiences and vales on shaping the researcher's view of the studied phenomenon (Haynes, 2012). The starting point of why I pursued research into elite athlete transition was due to my brother had recently gone through the experience. From my perspective as part of his wider circle of social support I was concerned with the pressures facing him and how others and myself could help his transition experience. Consequently, my passion in exploring elite transition emanated from that and is why I chose to study individual's elite transition experiences. Due to my experience I expected to find that families were important but quickly realized that although having

a solid family support was needed, the relationships with those within the sport (coach and teammates) was more important.

When reflecting on my own experience of conducting the interviews, I believe my last interview was most successful as I used the skills I had built up from the previous interviews and was able to be reflective on what the participant had said and use their words back at them. Therefore, making it more directly question their experience and thus demonstrating to them I was listening and understanding what they were saying. Upon reflection, I would conduct a pilot interview (Kim, 2011) before conducting the study to gain the skills prior embarking on the interviews, as after my first couple of interviews I was able to rephrase my questions into being more open-ended and suitable to the individual in the last interview compared to the first. This may have affected the responses the participants gave me.

Additionally, epistemological reflexivity is critical as the philosophical assumptions grounding the study are likely to influence the decision making throughout the research (Keso et al., 2009). Whilst reflecting on my ontological viewpoint, I assumed a pre-social reality exists whereby phenomenon is constructed through experience as opposed to determined by interpretations (Willig, 2008). Through the aim to understand the essence of knowledge, the researcher is also involved in the processes of understanding and interpreting experiences of the phenomena (Smith et al., 2009). Consequently, this might restrict the data findings as there may be multiple perceptions from different viewpoints, whilst I also understand my own interpretations could change depending on my future experiences.

Moreover, as phenomenological epistemology was chosen, the viewpoint also influenced the research aim, which centered on exploring athletes lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA shaped the design that was deemed most appropriate for the study, as it had to provide a homogenous sample enabling an intricate analysis of athletes who share the experience of elite transition. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that because the participants interacted with me in the interviews, it results in a co-construction of the subject (Larkin et al., 2006). Thus, making it important to understand access to the phenomena is complex. For example, if I as a researcher had built up more of a rapport with one participant than the other it would be likely to result in me getting a greater understanding of one participant's lived experience than another's. Therefore, an alternative method could have been to meet up with each participant on separate occasions a few days before the interview to build a rapport with him or her and gain his or her trust prior to carrying out the research (Jacob and Furgerson, 2012).

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