

# The End of a Professional Sport Career: Ensuring a Positive Transition

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The purpose of this research was to explore the experience of transition and life after sport in a group of retired professional athletes. A total of 45 retired athletes from three national football leagues took part in semistructured interviews. Two overarching themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) preparing for transition and planning for retirement and (b) supportive environment. For athletes in this study, four main factors were identified as critical to promoting a positive transition. The nature of the transition also directly affected athletes' experience of retirement from sport and, thus, their experience of flourishing in life after sport. The majority of participants in this study indicated that they lacked support from their sporting club and governing bodies both during their transition and in retirement. Planning for retirement and preparing for the future positively affected their ability to flourish in retirement. Recommendations for sport managers and athlete support services are provided.

**Keywords:** flourishing, professional athlete, retirement

Transition out of professional sport into retirement has been a topic of considerable research in recent years (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Torregrosa, Ramis, Pallarés, Azócar, & Selva, 2015). It is a given that throughout our lives we transition from one phase or stage to the next. Whether predictable or unpredictable, such transitions are often accompanied by a shift in self-identity as well as feelings of apprehension (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). This is especially relevant for professional athletes as they retire from their professional athletic career, experiencing this major life-changing event much earlier than individuals in other careers. Researchers in this field have examined the careers of elite athletes and the ramifications of retirement (e.g., Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Stephan, 2003). In addition, research on this life phase—moving from the public eye of elite competition into retirement—has identified several personal and organizational issues such as loss of identity, adjustment problems, and psychological and psychosocial challenges (e.g., Grove et al., 1997; Stephan, 2003).

Although sporting organizations globally have increased their focus on and recognition of the importance of athlete welfare and well-being, there are still numerous challenges both for athletes themselves as well as sport organizations regarding athletes' transition out of sport and their life experiences in retirement. Although there are support programs in place, it remains unclear whose responsibility it is to manage and support athletes at different stages in their career transition and retirement; thus, further exploration of this phenomenon is critical.

To address the paucity of research in this area, this study aimed to explore elite athlete transition among retired athletes

from three Australian football codes: the Australian Football League (AFL), the National Rugby League (NRL), and A-League Soccer. Moreover, this study examined whether retired athletes were satisfied with the support they received from their respective clubs and leagues, as well as if these supports influenced their ability to flourish in life post-sport. Participants were asked questions regarding their transition, retirement, and additionally their experience of flourishing in retirement. The focus of this study, however, is specifically on the transition process and retirement experience. For a review of work investigating flourishing in athlete retirement, please refer to Knights, Sherry, and Ruddock-Hudson, (2017). This particular approach assisted in identifying the expectations and needs of athletes during their transition and retirement, which could inform strategies to optimize elite athlete transition out of sport.

In the context of this study, there are three different organization types (the league, the club, and player associations) engaging in managing and supporting athlete transition. Although all three have a level of responsibility for the transition and retirement experiences of athletes, the extent to which each organization is responsible—and the point at which they should be involved in the transition—remains unclear. This research offers practical insights into initiatives, programs, and adaptations that elite sporting organizations could provide for retiring and retired athletes to create a more positive experience of life after sport. Given these aims, a naturalistic study design was used to address the following research questions:

- What factors influenced the transition experience out of professional sport, both positively and negatively?
- What factors influenced the experience of athlete retirement post-sport, both positively and negatively?
- Were retired athletes satisfied with the level of support they received during their transition and years in retirement?

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## Research Context

The following section provides an outline and explanation of the three football codes examined within this study. The three football codes are the AFL, the NRL, and the A-League.

### Australian Football League

The AFL is a not-for-profit sport organization that is both the governing body and professional league for Australian rules football. The AFL has become a central feature of the Australian sporting landscape and has been Australia's most successful sports league across a range of measures, including media reach, membership numbers, and revenue (Schmook & Gaskin, 2017). The league currently consists of 18 teams spread over the nation. Each team can have a senior list of 38–40 players plus four to six rookie players, for a total of 44 players, with only 22 named in the playing team each week (Schmook & Gaskin, 2017).

The average player wage is \$371,000, and the player salary cap is \$12.45 million (Schmook & Gaskin, 2017). At the end of the 2017 season, approximately 136 players from the AFL system either retired or were delisted and were not picked up by any other team within the AFL. On average, an AFL footballer plays for approximately 6.2 years, with an average of 90 games within that period (Schmook & Gaskin, 2017). The AFL Players Association (AFLPA) has developed an alumni group with 3,500 past players as members. These alumni members have access to a range of benefits and services and a number of well-being projects and programs to assist retired players (Schmook & Gaskin, 2017). The AFLPA also has a mental health and well-being department to support their alumni.

### National Rugby League

The NRL is a league of professional men's rugby league teams in Australasia. The NRL is a not-for-profit sport organization that consists of 16 teams, 15 of which are based in Australia and one in New Zealand. It is the most viewed and attended rugby league club competition in the world. Seventeen players are named as part of the starting team, including 13 starters and four substitutes (Browning, 2017). On average, an NRL player makes approximately \$120,000 a season and plays an average of 52 games in his career.

The NRL has a Rugby League Players Association; however, unlike the AFLPA, it does not have a specific alumni group. The Rugby League Players Association represents players contracted to play for a club in the Australian Rugby League Commission, NRL Competition, National Youth Competition, New South Wales Rugby League State Cup Competition, Queensland Rugby League State Cup Competition, or Elite Women's Competition (Browning, 2017). At the end of the 2017 season, approximately 160 NRL players either retired from the game or did not have their contract renewed (Browning, 2017).

### A-League

The A-League is a professional men's soccer league run by Football Federation Australia. At the top of the Australian soccer league system, it is Australia's primary competition for the sport. The A-League consists of 10 clubs, nine from Australia and one from New Zealand (Hay, 2006). Successful A-League clubs gain qualification into the continental competition, the Asian Football Confederation Champions League.

On average, an A-league player earns between \$100,000 and \$150,000 per season, the average career length is 8 years, and the average retirement age for a player is 35 years (A-League, 2018). Players from A-League are a part of the Professional Football Association, which like the Rugby League Players Association, focus predominately on supporting current players and building a better game, but does not have a specific group for alumni members (A-League, 2018).

Although all three football codes are elite and professional, it is clear that there are a number of factors that vary in each respective sport, such as athlete wages, length of career, ownership status (privately owned vs. not for profit), international opportunities, and the existence of alumni groups and programs.

## Literature Review

### Sport Transition Defined

*Transition* is "an event or nonevent which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Over the years, researchers in the sporting domain have had a great interest not only in the development of professional athletes' careers (Gordon & Lavalley, 2011), but also in the phenomenon of career transition (Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013). There are two types of transitions that an athlete can experience throughout their athletic career: (a) predictable and anticipated, or a "normative" transition or (b) a nonnormative transition (Schlossberg, 1984; Wylleman et al., 2004). During a normative transition (normal or planned), the athlete exits one stage and enters another stage (Wylleman et al., 2004). Thus, a normative transition is experienced as part of a sequence of age-related biological and social events or changes (Wylleman et al., 2004). Normative transitions also include nonevents, which are events that an athlete expects or hopes for but do not happen (Gordon & Lavalley, 2011). Nonnormative transitions result from an event that has occurred in an individual's life that is not part of a set plan or schedule (Wylleman et al., 2004), such as a season-ending injury, the loss of a personal coach, or an unanticipated termination from the team (e.g., delisted or dropped from the team; Moesch, 2012; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

Assisting athletes to cope with career transition is one of the most commonly encountered issues for sport psychologists, welfare and well-being managers, and others working within the field (Grove et al., 1997; Stephan, 2003). There are four main reasons why an athlete transitions from sport (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001): (a) injury (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), (b) aging (Whitbourne, 1996), (c) deselection, and (d) voluntary retirement (Alfermann, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). However, regardless of the nature of the transition, the experience remains a critical life event for each individual (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011).

In Schlossberg's (1981) model of adaptation to transition, which has been commonly applied to sport career transitions (e.g., Crook & Robertson, 1991; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990), adjustment following professional sport is influenced by cognitive appraisals of the transition, personal factors, and environmental characteristics. In addition, athletes may also experience a loss of identity (Lally, 2007), emotional difficulties (Giannone, Haney, Kealy, & Ogrodniczuk, 2017), or decreased self-confidence and life satisfaction (Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014). According to Stephan, Torregrosa, and Sanchez (2007), when athletes retire from

professional sport, they also face physical changes, which can potentially have a negative impact on their body image and self-esteem. Thus, based on the literature, it is evident that athletes may experience multiple challenges once they retire from sport.

Therefore, research is needed to identify the factors associated with a positive transition and flourishing among athletes in their life after sport. This research aimed to educate and assist sporting organizations and sport managers in preparing their athletes for career transition and retirement by focusing not only on negative experiences, but also the factors that promote positive experiences postretirement.

Previous research has also acknowledged a strong inverse relationship between voluntary transition and level of difficulty adapting to life postsport (Alfermann, 2000; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). By contrast, involuntary transition led to a number of psychological difficulties, including lower levels of perceived self-control (Werthner & Orlick, 1986); lower levels of self-respect (Crook & Robertson, 1991); and more frequent feelings of anger, anxiety, and depression (Alfermann, 2000).

For the purposes of this study, the term transition referred to the period of time from which an athlete voluntarily planned that they no longer wanted to continue their career, or from an unanticipated termination, up until the time they concluded their career.

## Sport Retirement Defined

*Retirement* is defined as withdrawing oneself from a specific activity (Brady, 1988). *Sport retirement* is defined as the separation of an athlete from their sport (DiCamilli, 2000). Sport retirement can either have a positive or negative impact on an athlete's life. A positive retirement from elite sport occurs when an athlete has successfully adjusted to his new life without regular participation in the sport (Brady, 1988). Retirement is not a single event or state; rather, it is a series of phases through which an individual relinquishes certain roles in his life and acquires other activities (Brady, 1988).

Individuals who prepare for their retirement may experience certain phases as they move through the process. Brady (1988) described nine phases associated with retirement from sport: (a) preretirement phase, (b) near phase, (c) honeymoon phase, (d) retirement routine phase, (e) rest and relaxation phase, (f) disenchantment phase, (g) reorientation phase, (h) routine phase, and (i) termination. Brady (1988) discussed how a retiree may not experience all of the phases or remains in any one phase for the same amount of time. Although these phases of retirement were originally designed to describe an individual retiring from work, elite sport can be viewed as being similar to a job due to the time commitment, financial reward, social aspect, and daily routine.

There are a number of factors that make retirement from sport different from retirement from nonsport or traditional career retirement, such as age, education, and athlete identity; as such, we argue that sport is unique in its social responsibility to serve transitioning and retiring athletes. A significant majority of retiring athletes—unlike nonathletes—have to find another or new occupation. In contrast, retirement in nonsporting careers is usually at a time when one is ready to retire wholly from the workforce. Statistics of average retirement age within Australia have been included to highlight the difference between sporting and nonsporting retirement. When comparing an athletic retirement with other career retirement, two factors have been identified that appear to make the process different: (a) the uniqueness of an “athletic identity” and (b) the special circumstances of early “forced retirement” (Webb,

Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). As a result, retired athletes are at greater risk for psychological difficulties postretirement (Webb et al., 1998).

Furthermore, as athletes often have dedicated a majority of their life to training and competing, many have not pursued further education or outside work experiences, thus making it difficult to secure alternative employment (e.g., Burden, Tremayne, & Marsh, 2004). Moreover, when comparing the difference between a sporting retirement and a nonsporting retirement, the nonsporting retirement typically occurs at a much older age. For instance, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017), the average age of retirement for men in Australia was 58.8 years for men and 52.3 years for women, with the most common reason being that they had reached retirement age and/or were eligible for superannuation/pension. In a nonsporting career, if an individual were to be let go from their employment, he or she would be able to seek out other positions based on their level of education and qualifications. Furthermore, in the nonsporting literature, the positive impact of retirement planning and preparation on retirement adjustment in individuals has been extensively reported (e.g., Donaldson, Earl, & Muratore, 2010). Although the sporting literature has identified that planning and preparing can help to buffer an athlete from the negative psychological effects of retirement from sport (e.g., Park et al., 2012), it has not examined the factors that promote a positive transition that allows athletes to flourish in life after professional sport.

For the purposes of this study, the term retirement referred to the period of time after the athlete officially exited the sporting arena and embarked on a life after sport. In addition, it has been found that though many professional athletes retire from their competitive careers, some transition into coaching or administrative roles within their sport (Berg, Fuller, & Hutchinson, 2018). In this study, athletes who had transitioned into coaching or administrative roles were still considered as retired professional athletes, as they are no longer competed as athletes at the professional level.

## Athlete Experiences of Transition and Retirement

Retirement from professional sport marks the beginning of a transition that may be particularly stressful (e.g., Grove et al., 1997; Stephan, 2003). Professional athletes dedicate numerous years to their careers, and earlier research has found that during their transition out of professional sport—and continuing into their years of retirement—athletes can experience a variety of challenges (e.g., Grove et al., 1997; Stephan, 2003). These challenges may include the impact of retirement on their sporting identity, level of social support, and preparation for retirement.

Lally (2007) identified that athletes who strongly identify with their sporting identity have a more difficult time adjusting to life after sport in comparison with athletes who do not strongly identify with their sporting identity. A theory that supports this notion is the social identity theory (SIT). SIT was first proposed by Tajfel (1978) and assumes that we show all kinds of group behaviors, such as solidarity within in-groups and discrimination against out-groups, as part of social identity processes, with the aim of achieving positive self-esteem and self-enhancement (Tajfel, 1978). SIT is made up of four main categories: (a) social categorization, (b) social comparison, (c) self-identity, and (d) self-esteem. *Social categorization* refers to categorizing individuals into groups to simplify our understanding of the world and to structure social interactions. *Social comparison* refers to the process of evaluating social categorizations against other groups. *Self-identity* is defined

as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Finally, *self-esteem*, refers to enhancing feelings toward the self by evaluating in-group and out-group dimensions that lead the in-group to be judged positively and the out-group to be judged negatively (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, Worchel, 1979; Turner, 1982). Based on SIT, it could be argued that athletes who strongly identify with their sporting identity are likely to struggle more in their transition and postathletic career than athletes who are less connected to this identity.

When elite athletes transition out of sport into retirement, many need to reevaluate their reference points in social, professional, and physical domains (Kim & Moen, 2002). Literature within the sport transition space has found that social support during this time period is critical, as it can potentially minimize the negative ramifications of retirement, enabling more positive experiences, and thus fostering flourishing among athletes in their life after sport (Gordon & Lavalley, 2011). Social support has not only been identified as a factor promoting positive outcomes in the sporting literature (Willard & Lavalley, 2016), but it has also been identified in the nonsporting literature (e.g., Holahan & Moos, 1982; Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014; Wing & Jeffery, 1999). Research has found that social support has assisted individuals undergoing weight loss (Wing & Jeffery, 1999), facing challenging adjustments (Holahan & Moos, 1982), and coping with stigmatized identities (Weisz, Quinn, & Williams, 2016). Social support has also been shown to enhance life satisfaction (Oh et al., 2014).

Sport transition literature has also focused largely on the athletes’ levels of preparation (e.g., Park & Lavalley, 2015; Torregrosa et al., 2015). Researchers have discussed how athletes’ level of preparation for their postsport life is closely related to their readiness for retirement (Park & Lavalley, 2015). It has also been found that athletes struggle with their readiness for life after sport due to a lack of vocational preparedness as well as a perceived lack of psychological preparedness.

Therefore, based on the findings from previous literature identifying the numerous challenges faced by athletes, along with the factors that assist in making the transition to retirement, it is essential to explore the factors that can potentially minimize negative experiences with retirement. In addition, as research within the sport transition realm has primarily approached this area from a deficit point of view, a focus on positive experiences may provide insight to practitioners on what is required to foster flourishing among retired professional athletes (Authors, 2017). The following section will outline the research method and approach undertaken in this study.

## Methods

### Participants

To examine the transition from elite sport into retirement, eligibility was confined to individuals who met the following criteria: (a) male; (b) retired from elite professional sport; and (c) played professionally in AFL, NRL, or A-League national competitions. To recruit participants, personal contacts were initially used to reach one athlete from each of the three football codes. Once this initial group of athletes was recruited, snowball sampling (Browne, 2005) was employed to obtain the remainder of participants. Appropriate human research ethics approvals were received for this study. In total, 46 retired athletes participated in the study.

Fifty-three percentages of participants were retired AFL players, 24% were retired A-league players, and the remaining 22% were retired NRL players. Participants for this study were between the ages of 22 and 60, with a mean age of 36 years. Participants had been retired from their respective sport for 5 months to 25 years ( $M = 8.27$ ) and had previously played within the elite professional system for 2–22 years ( $M = 16.85$ ).

At the time of their retirement, 26 participants were either married or had a partner, with 11 of them having children. Furthermore, when they had retired from sport, 28 out of the 46 participants said they had completed or were completing higher education. When asked about their postsport career employment, only 22 of the 46 participants said that they had new employment secured once they retired. It is also important to note that athletes from earlier generations were often playing professional football as well as holding a second job for paid employment, whereas the more recent athletes did not need a second job, as football by this stage was a full-time commitment and professional career option.

Demographically, there were a number of differences among the football codes. Participants who played soccer were more likely to experience longer careers, playing into their late 30s, whereas participants from AFL and NRL retired at a younger age. In addition, 23 participants had a planned retirement from sport and 22 participants had an unplanned retirement. Out of the 46 participants, three who planned their retirement said it was due to injury, which did not allow them to continue playing. Finally, nine out of the 46 participants transitioned into coaching once they had retired from sport, with the remaining 37 athletes leaving the professional sporting realm all together.

### Interview Guide and Procedure

A semistructured interview guide was used to interview participants. The questions were derived from relevant flourishing and transition literature (e.g., Huppert & So, 2009; Keyes, 2002). The interview protocol consisted of three parts: (a) discussion of retirement and type of transition, (b) discussion of support received from sporting club and other sport organizations or key people during and after retirement, and (c) discussion of experience during and after transition. Each participant provided informed consent and granted permission for the interview to be digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. The interviews ranged in length from 30 to 90 min and had an average length of approximately 50 min.

### Data Analysis

To ensure familiarity with the interview data, the principal investigator repeatedly read the transcripts and analyzed them via thematic analysis utilizing NVivo10 (Melbourne, Australia). Both inductive and deductive analysis processes (Braun & Clark, 2006) were used when coding and analyzing data. Themes identified in this study were guided and developed by previous theory and literature (deductive), along with emergent codes and themes (inductive). Member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000) and intercoder reliability (Tinsley & Weiss, 1975) were utilized to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Two independent coders analyzed a subset of interviews, and then all coders collaborated to discuss the extent to which they arrived at similar conclusions and to resolve discrepancies in the data. There were no major discrepancies identified, with both coders reaching comparable conclusions. To assess the accuracy of the data, all participants were sent a copy of their interview to ensure that the

transcript accurately reflected what they reported as well as their intentions. In addition to the thematic coding, differences between the three football codes were also examined and analyzed.

## Results and Discussion

Data revealed that the transition from professional sport into retirement was predominantly influenced by (a) the support offered by various sport organizations, (b) the athletes' planning, (c) preparation for retirement, and (d) positive influences on transition. Four emergent themes best reflected the retired athletes' experience. These four themes were then categorized under the following two domains: (a) preparing for transition and planning for retirement and (b) supportive environment.

### Preparing for Transition and Planning for Retirement

The first domain within the study includes two themes: planning for retirement and preparation for life after sport. This research identified that both planning and preparation are key to a positive transition, enhancing athletes' ability to flourish in life after sport. Furthermore, this study identified that for athletes to experience an optimal and positive transition, planning, and preparation work in tandem. Planning for retirement or a planned retirement, refers to the athlete being organized and ready for their retirement from professional sport. By contrast, preparation, or being prepared for retirement, refers to athletes knowing what they are going to do once they have retired from professional sport. A quadrant matrix, as depicted in Figure 1, was developed to demonstrate the different levels of preparedness and planning that athletes experience. The

following section provides a narrative of a typical athlete for each quadrant, each drawn from one of the participant's stories. Stories include descriptive quotes to support the narrative.

**Planned and prepared.** This particular quadrant includes athletes who have both planned for their retirement along with being prepared for life after sport. From this study, it appeared that these particular athletes had dealt with their transition and retirement from sport in the best possible way. Athletes expressed a sense of autonomy around their retirement, meaning that they could finish their career with a sense of pride and on their "own terms." In addition, having prepared for life after sport provided athletes with a sense of purpose and an identity beyond being an athlete, which provided them with goals and direction.

This quadrant is typified by Athlete 1 (A1). This particular athlete expressed how he had both planned for his retirement along with preparing for his future beyond football. When interviewing A1, he shared not only his transition experience but also what choices he made during his career to ensure he would be successful in life after sport. A1 was recruited into the professional sporting arena at the age of 18. During his career, A1 played 103 professional games of football and had an 11-year career. Unfortunately, he experienced multiple injuries which resulted in him missing many weeks and indeed entire seasons away from the game. However, it was during his injury time when he reflected on a life without football and what he was going to do once he was no longer playing. A1 began to plan for a life without sport halfway through his career, especially during times when he was injured: "Yeah—through my career, especially in the latter half of my career, I spent a lot of time and energy thinking about life after football, so when I did move out of football that I had something to run to."

	Planned retirement	Unplanned retirement
Prepared for life after sport	<p><b>PP:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accepts retirement</li> <li>- Strong identity beyond athletic realm (even during career)</li> <li>- Has goals and direction outside the sporting arena</li> <li>- Optimistic about future</li> <li>- Sense of autonomy</li> </ul>	<p><b>UP:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identity beyond sporting realm</li> <li>- Struggles with retirement acceptance</li> <li>- Tends to have goals and direction outside the sporting arena</li> <li>- Optimistic about future</li> <li>- Feelings of anger, disappointment, and regret about career end</li> <li>- Lack of autonomy</li> </ul>
Unprepared for life after sport	<p><b>PU:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accepts retirement</li> <li>- High athletic identity</li> <li>- Experience psychological ramifications</li> <li>- Lacks direction and purpose</li> <li>- Anxious about future</li> <li>- Experience psychological ramifications (e.g., anxiety, depression)</li> <li>- Sense of autonomy</li> </ul>	<p><b>UU:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Struggles with retirement acceptance</li> <li>- High athletic identity</li> <li>- Experience psychological ramifications (e.g., anxiety, depression)</li> <li>- Lacks direction and purpose</li> <li>- Holds onto past</li> <li>- Feelings of anger, disappointment, and regret about career end</li> <li>- Anxious about future</li> <li>- Lack of autonomy</li> </ul>

**Figure 1** — Athlete preparation for a positive retirement. PP = planned and prepared; UP, unplanned and prepared; PU, planned and unprepared; UU = unplanned and unprepared.

Furthermore, A1 also discussed how he started thinking about and preparing for retirement from professional sport roughly 4 years before he had actually retired: “I was thinking about retirement probably for the last 4 years.” In addition, A1 expressed feelings of excitement and relief when discussing his transition and retirement from sport.

Finding a “passion outside of football” gave him a sense of purpose and identity beyond being a professional footballer. He also shared that he was not scared about life after sport because he knew that he was starting a new and exciting chapter in his life, and it was something that he had been working on during his time playing professional football. He also discussed how figuring out his passion beyond football really helped him excel after his transition.

Making a plan helped A1 to develop a strong sense of belief in himself. He also explained how he was a highly organized individual and did not want to leave anything in the hands of fate. He shared how his level of preparation gave him confidence when looking for a job beyond football; if unsuccessful, he indicated that it would be due to a lack of qualification: “I knew it wasn’t for the time or lack of preparation or planning, but it was something I wasn’t cut out to be and that was okay.” This mentality gave him a sense of comfort in what he was doing.

A1 strongly believed that the reason he did not “struggle” like many of other athletes and had such a successful and positive experience transitioning from sport—as well as into retirement—was due to his preparation for retirement and planning for life after sport:

People that are a little bit unprepared, sometimes they don’t do as well. I think it’s the people who haven’t prepared and then not having a plan with what they want to do with their life after sport—they are the ones who I think really struggle.

**Planned and unprepared.** Athletes who fit within this quadrant (planned and unprepared [PU]), had planned for their retirement; however, they were unprepared for life after sport. Similar to athletes in the planned and prepared quadrant, these athletes were able to retire on their own terms; however, they appeared to struggle a lot more in the years after retirement. For instance, PU athletes expressed lacking purpose in their life, finding it difficult to let go of their past and experiencing some psychological difficulties. In addition, PU athletes tended to discuss what they wished they had done to better prepare themselves for life after sport, and struggled to move on with a new chapter in their life.

The PU quadrant is typified by Athlete 2 (A2). A2 had a successful career with 130 professional games of football in his respective code. Similar to many of the athletes in this study, A2 experienced a major injury; however, this was not the cause of his retirement. Though A2 had planned and announced his retirement, he was not prepared for life after sport. Similar to many of the athletes in this study, A2 expressed how having control over when he retired from football allowed him to walk away from the game with a sense of pride. And, although his retirement was planned, A2 still shared how he was disappointed with how his career ended. A2 shared that the club where he finished playing was probably not going to offer him a new contract due to a change in head coach; however, they would have likely assisted him in finding another club if he wanted. Further, he shared how his club gave him the opportunity to take them up on this offer or to announce his retirement.

Although he expressed how this was a “nice gesture,” he was still disappointed with how it all evolved:

I guess that was the only thing that was a little bit disappointing—was probably the club not letting me know where you’re at earlier. I think they would have known a long time before it happened. To be waiting for them to tell me was a little bit disappointing, but certainly being given that opportunity was not.

Although A2 had engaged in some study during his career to prepare for life after sport, it was something that he felt too difficult to juggle with full-time professional football. A2 explained that focusing on the demands of being a professional footballer and at the same time pursuing higher education was too much for him. During his career, he was encouraged to study, however. A2 said, “If study isn’t for you, I felt like there was not much else for you to do.” This became a regret following his retirement from sport; he described feelings of apprehension and not knowing what direction his life would take following professional football:

Still, when it happened, I was a little bit apprehensive about what was going to be happening in the future—not really sure what path I would be going down. Apart from the study that I knew I was going to continue with, it was literally up in the air.

On top of A2 already feeling apprehensive about life after sport, he was also soon to be a first-time father. This added more stress as he prepared for the birth of his first child. He discussed how he had no idea what he was going to do or how he was going to make money. A2 discussed how he fell into a state of “depression” and struggled to “find motivation” in his day-to-day life. He then found himself having regrets about his career and the way he finished:

I didn’t finish the way I wanted to. That sort of affected that part of it, and I suppose you could say [my] ability to flourish . . . I hadn’t really had anything prepared for after football . . . It was just a hard fight. Day by day, trying to get through, and trying to peel myself off the couch.

A2 discussed how if there were anything he could change about the way he retired from professional football, it was being more proactive in the next stage of his life. Further, he discussed how if he had known how difficult it was going to be to find a job that instilled a sense of purpose, and if he were better prepared for the psychological struggles (e.g., filling the void that was once filled by football), he would have approached his transition much differently:

If I could give advice to my younger self, it would be to be very early in your career—to get work experience in whatever area it is that they feel like they would go into post-football . . . Think about what you’re going to be doing post-football.

**Unplanned and prepared.** The unplanned and prepared (UP) consists of athletes who had an unplanned retirement but were prepared for life after sport. When comparing UP with PU athletes, UP athletes did not experience as many of the psychological difficulties expressed by PU athletes. As previous research has suggested, having a purpose, direction, and identity outside of sport allows for a more positive transition (e.g., Webb et al., 1998). Therefore, it appeared that athletes who had prepared for life after sport—compared with those who had not—experienced a slightly more positive transition. However, although these athletes did not experience as many of the psychological difficulties faced by PU athletes, they still expressed disappointment around the ways their careers ended. Many athletes shared how they were left in the dark

and were completely unaware of what was going on. A number of athletes who did not plan for their retirement expressed feelings of disappointment and anger toward their club.

The UP quadrant is typified by Athlete 3 (A3). This particular athlete discussed how he had an unplanned retirement; however, he was always prepared for life after sport. Unlike the experiences of planned and prepared athletes, A3 was aware of his retirement and had prepared for the event; however, he had not prepared for life after sport. A3 played 42 professional games of football during his career; however, he unfortunately experienced a number of injuries. A3 shared how his retirement from professional football was not unplanned. Although he had endured a number of injuries, in his last season, his training and fitness improved and he was feeling better than he had in previous seasons. Even though his contract was coming to an end, A3 had believed fully that he would be signing another contract and, therefore, did not plan for his retirement.

As a result, A3 discussed struggling to come to terms with his unplanned retirement: “I wasn’t glad to see the end of it. I still thought I had a few more years in me because I was only—I think 20, 23—maybe, 24—at the time.” Furthermore, A3 also expressed his disappointment regarding how the club dealt with his retirement:

I finished at my club after being with them for 8 years. I got delisted on Monday. About 20 minutes later my bags were packed . . . I got told to clean my locker out, and I’ve never been back since. I haven’t had a phone call from anyone in the administration.

Although A3 had an unplanned retirement—and was disappointed and devastated that his professional football career had ended—he always was prepared for life after sport. He discussed how his sense of preparation was instilled by his grandfather. A3 reflected on how he believed his grandfather’s support and encouragement was instrumental to both his decisions in his football career as well as his life after sport.

**Unplanned and unprepared.** The final quadrant is unplanned and unprepared. Athletes in this cohort appeared to struggle the most with their transition and life after sport, because they had neither planned for their retirement, nor had they prepared for life after sport. As a result of these athletes not being ready for their retirement and not having a Plan B for what they were going to do after their athletic career ended, athletes in this cohort expressed a lot of anger, frustration, and disappointment. In addition, some of these athletes discussed turning to drinking and gambling, and as a result of these negative behaviors, their relationships broke down, they lost many close friends, and they became involved with the wrong groups of people. Similar to UP athletes, athletes in this cohort felt lost, with no direction or purpose in their life. Some athletes discussed feeling depressed, embarrassed, and like a failure because of how their life had turned out.

This quadrant is typified by Athlete 4 (A4). This particular athlete discussed how he had an unplanned retirement and was also unprepared for life after sport. When sharing his experience surrounding his retirement, A4 expressed many feelings, such as anger, frustration, disappointment, and regret. He had been in the professional football system for 6 years, and when he was not offered a contract renewal, expressed being “absolutely devastated.” A4 also discussed how the decision (i.e., ending his career) was made without him: “It wasn’t my decision. My decision was taken away from me, which will be the biggest life lesson—to never be in that position ever again.”

In addition to the shock of his unplanned retirement, A4 had also not prepared for life after professional football. He discussed how this was the lowest point in his life. He found himself in a meaningless job, was going out most nights, and was partaking in high-risk behavior. He further explained how he blamed a lot of his lack of preparedness on his arrogance, describing footballer stereotypes (e.g., “untouchable”) and believing that because he was “earning good money,” he “didn’t even think about life after football.” A4 also discussed how after his retirement, his “confidence was knocked out of” him. Moreover, he shared how he felt a lot of “self-pity” and “depression:” “I probably went through a period there where I didn’t really care about much and I didn’t care about myself. I felt as though I had all these things happen to me that just weren’t fair.”

Although the findings of this study are consistent with previous research (Alfermann et al., 2004; Diener et al., 2010; Keyes, 2002) in that it identified differences between athletes with planned and unplanned retirements, this study may also offer important insights regarding the theoretical concept of transition (Alfermann et al., 2004; Diener et al., 2010; Keyes, 2002, 2003). For example, we identified that both planning for retirement and preparation for life after sport are critical when it comes to an athlete having a positive transition. It is also important to identify that planning and preparation are interrelated in that for an athlete to experience an optimal and positive transition, both areas must be achieved.

Another important finding from this study was that an athlete could still experience a somewhat positive transition if they had only planned or prepared. Although these particular athletes still reported experiencing some negative consequences, which have been identified in previous research—a lack of purpose (Webb et al., 1998), regret (Stephan, 2003), loss of identity (Lally, 2007), and struggle with letting go of the past (Lally, 2007)—this group of athletes still had a greater chance of experiencing a positive transition in comparison with those athletes who had neither planned or prepared for their retirement and life after sport.

These findings are useful as they may assist sporting organizations in helping and promoting a positive transition and experience of life after sport for retired professional athletes. As stages of planning and preparation occur throughout athletes’ careers, this information could help to revise existing transition models or to develop new models. Although the three football codes in this study have a number of the programs for past players, all of these programs require past players to proactively reach out and engage. If sporting organizations were to alter their approach to be more proactive in reaching out to players during their transition, this would likely increase athletes’ engagement in these programs. Another suggestion to enhance transition programs is for player development managers and sporting organizations to, again, become more proactive in assisting players in planning for life after sport during their careers. For instance, development managers could work with athletes to understand what they would be doing if they were not playing professional sport and guide them to achieve this goal during their career. This would help athletes to build an identity outside of football and to start preparing for life after sport early in their sporting careers. Finally, sporting organizations should clearly identify staff and specific support services to assist with the transition process. This study found that athletes both presumed and expected to receive support from their clubs; however, they typically did not receive specific services. Therefore, providing a clear framework for players and the larger sporting organization would help to reduce uncertainty and set clear expectations.

## Supportive Environment

Two main themes were identified within the second domain in this study: social support and organizational support. Similar to previous research, participants indicated that their key social support networks were extraordinarily important during the transition phase into their retirement (e.g., Grove et al., 1997; Willard & Lavallee, 2016). However, the support role played by sport organizations (clubs, leagues, and player associations) during athletes' transition has been less addressed in prior research. Figure 2 shows how the two primary support networks (social support and organizational support) are interrelated and serve to promote a positive transition.

**Social support.** Findings from the current research identified the importance of a strong social support network. Bianco and Eklund (2001) defined social support as “social interactions aimed at inducing positive outcomes” (p. 85). Social support helps one to feel that he or she is cared for, loved, and valued (Bianco & Eklund, 2001). Consistent with previous research, athletes in this study discussed how having a strong support network not only helped them get through hardship and struggles during the transition period, but also during their retirement from professional sport. All of the athletes shared how they received support from their partners, family members, and friends. A large number of athletes discussed how the support they received was not only in times of hardship, but also throughout their entire career. For example, one participant shared the following: “During and post my career, I always had a good support network—first of all being my partner, then of course my family and friends” (A3, A-league).

Furthermore, all of the participants discussed how having “strong and unconditional support from family and friends” (Athlete 8, NRL) made their transition out of professional sport much easier, “especially when going through struggles—just seeing them, without having to say something, is support” (Athlete 12, AFL). One athlete specifically discussed how family and friends not only provided emotional support when he was missing the game, but also supported his decisions regarding his post-sport career. Athletes also discussed how having strong social support during times of struggle was the most helpful aspect of his transition. These findings are consistent with Taylor's (2011) findings that people with high levels of social support experience less stress when in stressful situations and are able to cope with stress more successfully.

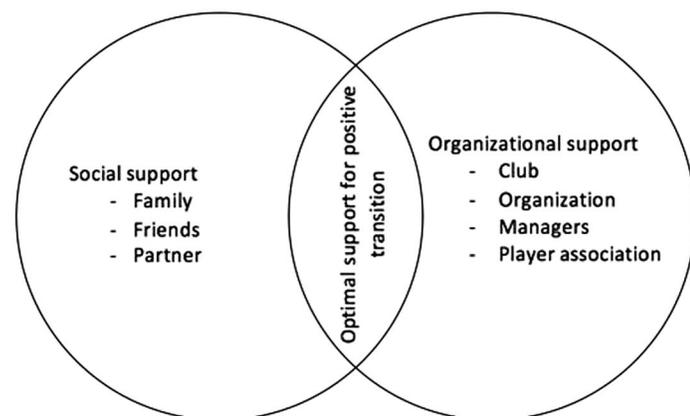


Figure 2 — Athlete transition: social and organizational support.

**Organizational support.** The second theme identified within the supportive environment domain was organizational support. Nineteen athletes reported experiencing a lack of support from their respective leagues, clubs, and player associations. When asked about the support they received during or after their transition to retirement, 13 participants discussed the lack of support from their clubs. Only three athletes reported receiving support, whereas the remaining 31 athletes discussed how neither clubs nor associated organizations (e.g., leagues, players associations) provided direct or indirect support. One athlete shared the following: “Clubs are there to win premierships and [there is] a solid focus on that. There’s not too much support outside that, other than the AFLPA funding courses, really” (Athlete 13, AFL). In addition, another athlete discussed how he completely lacked support from his club or the organizational sporting bodies.

However, for the three athletes who did discuss the support from their respective clubs, they spoke about the positive experience of their transition and how the level of support they received assisted them during this difficult period. They discussed their feelings of respect and appreciation. Moreover, they did not report animosity toward club, league, or player association; whereas athletes who felt they did not receive any support, regularly expressed hurt and disappointment.

Although the football codes included in this study all have existing player associations and programs to assist players during their transition, athletes in the study generally did not access existing support programs. They may have perceived a lack of support from their respective clubs and organizations, ultimately limiting their engagement in support programs. Furthermore, although there are four different potential sources of organizational support (club, league, athlete manager, and player association), it is unclear which organization is expected to provide which support at each of the different stages of athletes' transition into retirement. This could be reflective of higher level organizational issues, leaving unclear structures for transitioning athletes. As a result, athletes will likely not know who to turn to for support during their time of need.

Participants also shared their feelings toward their clubs after their playing contract was not renewed, and how the experience of being delisted was surreal, leaving them in disbelief and shock. It was evident that some of the athletes in this study who were delisted felt a particular lack of support from their clubs and coaches, which consequently had a negative impact on their retirement experience (Chow, 2001). Some athletes in this study also discussed how there was no support from the clubs for their family during the transition and retirement process. For example, Athlete 5 of the A-league stated, “Basically, I felt like there was no consideration for my family life or anything at the club.” Players discussed a perceived lack of loyalty from their respective clubs; they felt that there was always a constant pressure to be loyal to their clubs; however, the loyalty was not returned: “After all those years that I gave to you and I was loyal and all this, you’re just going to throw-me-out kind of thing” (Athlete 12, AFL).

It is apparent that athletes in this study who felt they did not receive any support from their respective sporting club or league experienced a number of negative emotions, which many still reported years after their transition. As previous research has identified, retirement from professional sport—in comparison with a traditional career retirement—is very different due to the age at retirement, athlete identity, and education (Webb et al., 1998). Unlike careers outside the sport industry, athletes cannot be performance managed into a longer career. More likely than not, if

the athlete is not performing, once his contract has expired, he will be delisted and forced into an early retirement. As previous research has identified, there are multiple negative ramifications of career retirement, such as a loss of purpose, loss of identity, and a number of psychological difficulties (Lally, 2007). Therefore, there is a moral obligation to assist athletes to be better equipped for life after sport, as it is inevitable that they will need to transition into a different career. As a result of this, sport organizations need to be more proactive in reducing the negative consequences of retirement by providing more support and being more empathetic toward athletes during the transition process. Furthermore, it is critical to reach out to retired athletes in more personalized ways, such as via phone calls, as discussed by one of the athletes in this study. Athletes could be contacted at specific stages—for instance, at 1 month, 3 months, 6 months, and 1 year postretirement. Finally, it would also help to evaluate the support programs currently in place to assist with the transition process to identify ways of promoting flourishing in life postsport.

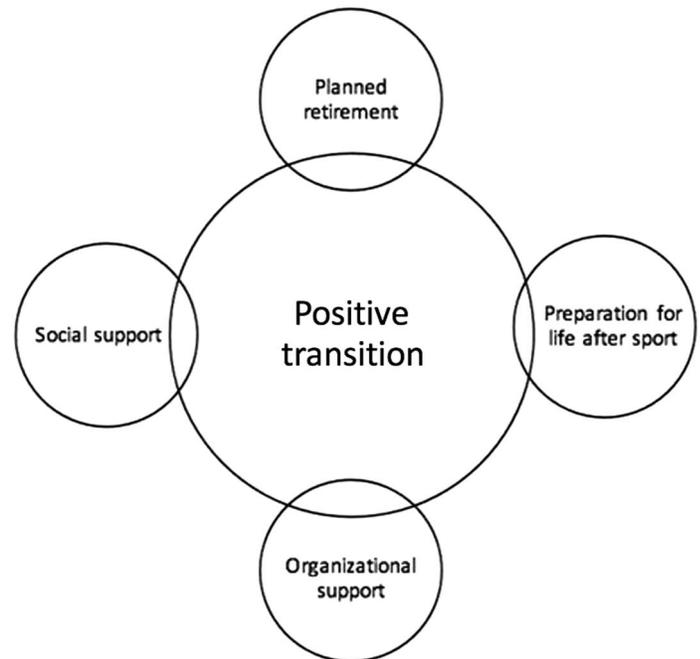
When reflecting on their experiences, participants frequently referred to the business of sport and their perceived lack of support during the transition to retirement. One athlete shared how he was extremely disappointed with how his transition was handled, believing the club saw him as just another number: “That’s why I suppose it’s so disappointing when a club, they see you as a number and not as human” (A4, NRL). Some players shared how sporting organizations and clubs said many things to their parents and the general public; however, the reality was far from what they portrayed. For example, A2 of the A-League shared the following:

[The] reality is they’re making millions of dollars. They’re not going to change. They’ll say lots of things just to keep everyone happy because they know what the mums and dads of the aspiring players want to hear. That’s the way the world works now.

As illustrated by A2’s comments, once players entered the elite system, it became apparent that being an elite athlete looked far more glamorous than when viewing the organization as an outsider looking in. However, the athletes definitely had a different experience of elite sport, especially once they had retired.

Although the findings regarding social support were consistent with previous research (e.g., Bianco & Eklund, 2001), this study identified that the level of support, and the perceived empathy received from members of sporting organizations, ultimately influenced athletes’ experiences of transition into retirement. This suggests that athletes in this study needed to not only plan and prepare for retirement, but also receive support from friends and family as well as their respective club and sporting organization. Therefore, for athletes in this study, an optimal transition out of professional sport would have likely required planning for retirement as much as possible; preparing for life after professional sport; having a strong support network consisting of friends and family; and, finally, having a strong sense of support from their club and sporting organization (see Figure 3).

The themes that emerged from this study emphasized the importance of understanding the complexities of athlete transition and retirement from elite sporting organizations. This study is significant in that little research exists that explores how the different organizations and stakeholders within the sporting environment work together to promote a positive transition into retirement. Furthermore, this study specifically investigated transition and retirement as two separate events. Loss of identity, loss of



**Figure 3** — The positive transition model from professional sport.

purpose and direction, negative thoughts and feelings, and lack of organizational support were persistent concerns among the retired professional athletes in this study.

## Conclusion

Although participants reported a lack of organizational support, they were satisfied overall with their social support networks, which consisted of partners, family members, and friends. However, what did remain a problem was the culture of professional sport, which was characterized as more business driven than person driven. This may have a detrimental impact on the athlete’s well-being and mental health in life after sport. This is problematic for sport organizations in that although many have athlete support and transition programs in place, it appears that the athletes are not necessarily benefiting from them or receiving the help they need. Furthermore, it is unclear which sport organization, or which role within each organization, was ultimately responsible for the duty of care for athletes during the transition and retirement phase—the club, their player agent, the league, or the player association. Although athletes need to be proactive in their transition and life after sport, organizations—especially alumni groups (as they are actively involved with retired players)—also need to be more proactive in reaching out to athletes. As this study identified, athletes felt like no one within their respective club and/or organization reached out to them during their transition after retirement or delisting. Though organizations provide well-being and welfare services, these services need to be delivered in a way that encourages athletes to utilize them; that is, athletes should feel that they are taken care of. The findings from this study could help sporting organizations to enact clearer, more effective, and more proactive assistance to athletes during their transition out of elite sport and during their retirement. Moreover, there needs to be a very clear and established process in place for athletes who are in transition toward retirement, whereby all parties involved are aware

of who is responsible to provide support—as well as the degree of support—at each particular stage. This could make the transition process more transparent for athletes, potentially reducing their dissatisfaction with sporting organizations and increasing their positive experiences in life after sport.

Therefore, there was evidence to suggest that for athletes in this study to experience a flourishing transition and retirement, they needed to not only plan and prepare for transition, but also have a strong social support network of friends and family as well as strong support from their respective sporting organization.

## Implications of the Study

This examination of athletes' transition out of professional sport and life after sport in retirement has contributed to the research literature in a number of ways. To date, no study has ever used a sample of retired professional athletes from the three main football codes in Australia and examined their experience of transition into retirement along with the support they received from their respective sporting organizations. Although previous research has examined the transition from elite sport among athletes from Asia (Chow, 2001) and Europe (Wylleman et al., 2004), the level of professionalization of sport is vastly different in Australia, especially when considering the financial scale and career opportunities.

Furthermore, within Australia, once athletes retire from playing at the professional level, there are limited opportunities to compete within the country, and for the AFL, there is no other international competition in which to participate. This is unlike a number of other nations where when professional athletes retire, they can continue playing at a semiprofessional level either in their home country or internationally. In this context, for many athletes, retirement from Australian professional sports is much more abrupt and finite. Therefore, this study has further contributed to the literature by identifying that to have an optimal and positive transition out of professional sport, four areas need to be fulfilled: (a) planning for retirement, (b) preparing for life after sport, (c) social support from friends and family, and (d) organizational support. These findings are likely generalizable to other professional team sport contexts globally.

Second, this study also identified that although athletes were largely satisfied with the level of support they received from family and friends, many discussed the lack of support from their respective sporting organizations and clubs. This is important, as there is a growing emphasis in professional sport leagues globally on the well-being of athletes (e.g., Dutton, 2018); however, this study identified that there appears to be a gap in support provided by organizations to their athletes during the transition to retirement and after their career, thus affecting the athletes' ability to experience a positive transition. Therefore, it is suggested that player development managers and sporting organizations need to not only be more proactive in their support, but also to work together with athletes earlier in their careers to help them develop retirement plans. Finally, the process for athletes who are delisted could be improved simply by instilling a more empathetic and personal approach to help athletes manage the abrupt and unexpected transition. For example, athletes could work with a club psychologist or player development manager during the exit process and at key follow-up intervals (e.g., 1 month, 3 months, 6 months, and 1 year postretirement).

## Limitations and Future Research

This study examined only Australian male athletes, and the time that athletes had been retired from their professional sport ranged

from 5 months to 25 years, which included an extraordinary breadth of experiences. Arguably, the sport business environment and league structures for those newly retired players are markedly different than for those with a career in the 1980s or 1990s. Finally, another potential limitation is that some athletes were asked to reflect on experiences that occurred 15–20 years ago. First, this could have led to retrospective bias and, second, over the last 20 years, sporting organizations have evolved and developed a number of protocols and processes to assist athlete transition and retirement.

To combat these potential limitations, a number of recommendations will be offered for future research. To overcome bias when asking athletes to reflect over long periods of time, it would be useful to examine the transition and retirement experience using a longitudinal design. This may provide a more accurate and timely account of events as opposed to having athletes recall distant events.

Future research should also consider the impact of player trade (i.e., the exchange of an athlete from one club/team to another) and contractual agreements within league and club structures on athletes and their experiences of transition and retirement. Although there has been a large focus on what sporting organizations and the parties involved can do to foster a smooth transition from professional sport into retirement, few studies have examined the effects of trade on the athlete and how sporting organizations can facilitate athletes' adjustment during the trading process. Finally, further exploration is needed in sport and athlete management to identify practices to assist retiring and retired elite athletes; further research could also identify organizational structures that could be developed to support and enhance this transition.

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