

**The Conceptualisation and Experiences of Flourishing in Retired Professional
Male Athletes**

Submitted by

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Bachelor of Health Science and Rehabilitation Counselling

Bachelor of Health Science with Honours

A thesis submitted in total fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Applied Science (HMASR)

La Trobe School of Psychology and Public Health
College of Science, Health and Engineering.

La Trobe University

Victoria, Australia

December 2020

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STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in this thesis were approved by the La Trobe University Faculty Human Ethics Committee (reference numbers E15/64)

This work was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship, a La Trobe University Postgraduate Research Scholarship and an Industry Postgraduate Scholarship Top-Up Grant.

Signed: *Sophie Knights*

Date: 17/12/2020

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my Mum and Dad: The completion of this thesis is a result of their unconditional love, support and belief. I am forever thankful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who have supported me during my Masters candidature; this thesis would not have been possible as an individual, and was made possible through numerous people that I would like to thank.

Firstly, thank you to my supervisors – Doctor Mandy Ruddock, Professor Emma Sherry, and Doctor Paul O’Halloran for your continuous guidance and support throughout this journey. It was not without its challenges, however, you each guided me through the lows and celebrated with me through the highs. This would have been impossible without your guidance, encouragement and belief in me.

Like life, my journey through my Masters candidature has been filled with many ups and downs. There is no way that I would have completed it without the support from my parents, Ian and Louise. It is impossible to put into words how thankful I am for your unconditional and endless support throughout this journey. You have both been my rock, a shoulder to cry on, you have celebrated all my wins, read endless drafts of my papers and assisted with tedious reference lists. Your support and belief in me are what kept me going, especially when I didn’t believe in myself. I am so very grateful for your unconditional support, patience and understanding. Thank-you. I love you

To my three brothers, Brad, Chris and Luke, thank-you for the laughs and helping me find the humour in the many years I have spent at Uni. I am so thankful to have three amazing men in my life who encourage and support me, even if that meant being a student much longer than ever anticipated.

To all my wonderful and beautiful friends, each and every one of you are so incredibly special to me. Thank-you for your support and patience during the years, you have all kept me sane when I was going insane.

To my partner, Matt. We first met when I had just started my thesis and in any way that you could support or help me you were always so willing. I am unbelievably thankful for your belief in me, especially when my self-doubt was at an all-time high. Your patience and understanding is something that I cherish and admire, as I definitely tested you at times. You continuously encourage me to follow my dreams. I will be forever grateful for your encouragement, belief, support and patience.

To Archy, my big friendly giant, my best friend. Thank-you for sitting by my side and keeping me company, no matter where I was in the country. Thank-you for being consistently you and for being unconditional and reminding me it's all going to be okay.

And lastly, this thesis would not have been possible without all my participants – I hope that your insights and contributions are justified through the published articles and this thesis as a whole. The importance of athlete well-being and positive retirement is a topic I am unbelievably passionate about and hold close to my heart. I will continue to work with athletes in the sporting domain to create an environment that not only supports athletes during their careers, but also in life after professional sport to ensure you continue to flourish.

SUMMARY

Australia has long been characterised as a sporting nation and is well known for its success on the field. The Australian Football League (AFL), National Rugby League (NRL) and Soccer (A-League) are regarded as three of the highest profile sports in Australia and are each multi-million-dollar businesses. The careers of these professional athletes are relatively short in comparison to most people, often retiring in their twenties or thirties. It has been well documented that retirement from professional sport can have a considerable impact on athletes' mental health and well-being, and this may be exacerbated by the set of circumstances peculiar to sport. There has been a substantial amount of research on athlete retirement which has predominately focused on the negative outcomes of retirement and the impact this has on the athlete's quality of life after sport as well as strategies to improve mental health and well-being outcomes. More recently, researchers have started examining factors that contribute to a positive transition and retirement from sport, however, the study and exploration of positive retirement and the experience of flourishing in life after sport is still in its infancy. More specifically, the understanding and experience of flourishing in retired professional athletes has yet to be examined in this cohort.

Therefore, the aim of this thesis was to explore the experiences and conceptualisations of flourishing with retired professional athletes and identify factors that make for a positive transition and retirement from sport. This thesis is made up of three different three different studies, with Chapter 3 (Study 2) and Chapter 4 (Study 3) drawn from a single data set with a different theoretical lens and analysis applied to each.

Chapter 2 was a systematic review, which analysed the body of work investigating factors that contributed to a successful end of career transition among elite athletes. The review included 10 studies, which examined positive outcomes guided by the flourishing constructs. The results from the systematic review guided subsequent studies within this

thesis. The systematic review suggested that although there has been extensive research examining the ramifications and effects of retirement and transition out of sport among elite athletes, there appeared to be no current literature explicitly examining flourishing within this elite athlete population. The results of the review have practical implications for sport psychology practitioners who are aiming to facilitate a successful transition for elite athletes through their end-of-athletic-career transition. The findings from the systematic review are discussed and the article provides recommendations for future research and for current applied practice.

Chapter 3 was informed by the results from the systematic review. The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which retired professional athletes conceptualised flourishing. This study recruited retired athletes from the AFL, NRL and A-league Soccer. Forty-five retired athletes took part in a semi-structured interview that lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. Participants discussed their personal understanding and definition of flourishing, in addition to their experience of flourishing in life after sport. Qualitative analysis from the semi-structured interviews identified four main themes: (a) Athlete flourishing: Purpose, passion, ambition and happiness; (b) What reflects flourishing: Physical appearance and financial situation; (c) Recipe to flourish: Prepare for retirement and plan for life after sport; and (d) The importance of social Support: Family, friends and community.

Chapter 4: The aim of this study was to examine the retrospective experiences of athlete's post-retirement. Chapter 4 investigated factors that made for a positive athletic transition and retirement. Forty-five retired athletes from the AFL, NRL and A-league were interviewed on a single occasion. Results identified two overarching themes: 1) prepare for transition and plan for retirement and, 2) the supportive environment. The findings from this study indicated four main factors that are required to experience a positive transition: 1) planned retirement, 2) preparation for life after sport, 3) social support and 4) organisational

support. In addition, it was found that the nature of transition could directly affect an athlete's experience of retirement from sport, thus, influencing their experience of flourishing in life after sport. This study identified a lack of support from the sporting club and governing bodies both during their transition and in retirement. Planning for retirement and preparing for the future positively affected the ability to flourish in retirement. Recommendations for sport managers and athlete support services are provided.

The contributions of the findings from this research project, and the practical implications that may assist professional athletes positively transition and flourish in life after sport are discussed.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFL.....	Australian Football League
AIMS.....	The Athletic Identity Measure Scale
AQR.....	The Athlete Retirement Questionnaire
BALANCE.....	British Athletes Lifestyle Assessment Needs in Career and Education
GHQ-12.....	The 12-Item General Health Questionnaire
M.....	Mean
NRL.....	National Rugby League
RfSS.....	Retirement from Sport Survey
SCTQ.....	The Sports Careers Termination Questionnaire
SD.....	Standard Deviation
SWLS.....	Satisfaction With Life Scale

NOTE:

- For the purpose of this investigation participants are described as *athletes, players or participants*

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PREFACE

This thesis contains a progression of chapters that may be read independently but can also be read in sequential order as part of the entire thesis. Chapters 2, 3, and 4, consist of studies that have been either published or submitted to peer-reviewed journals.

Sections of this thesis were not submitted for publication include Chapter 1 which introduces the topic of athlete well-being/flourishing, transition and retirement from professional sport; Chapter 5 synthesises the concepts arising from each of the individual chapters and a general discussion; and Chapters 2 to 4 include brief introductions to each published or submitted study.

Adding to the justifications and context of the research identified within Chapter 1, is my own personal experience of being a sibling to a retired professional athlete and working with the AFL, A-league Soccer and Cricket Victoria. I sat on the sidelines for 11 years and witnessed my brother playing in the AFL system and I witnessed the highs and lows of athletes I have worked with in professional sport. From my personal and professional experience, I have witnessed many athletes enter the sport-system, and I have witnessed just as many leave. With this, I observed first-hand the negative outcomes associated with being an elite athlete. As such, this thesis has been my own way of “giving back” to the world of retired professional athletes, in hope of assisting the future generation by providing evidence-based approaches to improving well-being and flourishing on and off the field of play.

This thesis uses APA 6th referencing style and is written in Australian English, except within the accepted and submitted studies where each study conformed to the respective journals’ submission procedures.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

1. **Knights, S.,** Sherry, E., & Ruddock-Hudson, M. (2016). Investigating elite end-of-athletic-career transition: a systematic review. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 28(3), 291-308.
2. **Knights, S.,** Knights, S., Sherry, E., Ruddock-Hudson, M., & O'Halloran, P. (2019). The End of a Professional Sport Career: Ensuring a Positive Transition. *Journal of Sport Management*, 33(6), 518-529
3. **Knights, S.,** Ruddock-Hudson, M., O'Halloran, P., Sherry, E. (under review). Experiences and Conceptualizations of Flourishing in retired Male Professional Football Players. *The Sport Psychologist*.

Chapter 1: Introduction

A body of evidence has documented the numerous psychological ramifications an athlete may experience when retiring from professional sport, such as: decreased self-esteem, decreased self-perceived quality of life, decreased self-efficacy, struggle with body image, lack of purpose, anxiety and depression (e.g., Lavellee & Robinson, 2007; Petrie, 2018; Stambulova, Stephan & Jäphag, 2007; Torregrosa, Ramis, Pallares, Azocar & Selva, 2015; Warriner and Lavellee, 2008). Research has also found that professional athletes can have great difficulty adjusting and adapting to their new life after professional sport and, can face substantial risks to their well-being due to a lack of planning and/or preparation for the next chapter of their lives combined with a loss of purpose, lack of direction and at times little to no transferable skills for the work place (e.g., Lavellee & Robinson, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2007; Torregrosa et al., 2015; Warriner and Lavellee, 2008). Research has also revealed various influential psychological variables, which help to explain the quality of athletes' career transitions and factors that make for a positive experience, including the voluntariness of the retirement decision (e.g., Cecic Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004), identity issues (e.g., Lally, 2007), and the degree of individuals' life skills development (e.g., Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008). Thus, participation in, and retirement from professional sport, can drastically influence the athletes' well-being and, ability to flourish in life after sport.

Research examining flourishing in the sporting realm has grown over recent years (Ashfield et al., 2012; Knights, Sherry, Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Stander, Rothman & Botha, 2017; Wagstaff, Fletcher & Hanton, 2012). However, evidence-based research regarding flourishing in athletes has been limited (e.g., Hone, Jarden, Schofield & Duncan, 2014). Furthermore, research on flourishing in retired professional athletes has been hindered by conceptual ambiguity, and as a consequence, it has been difficult to compare results across studies or generalise findings (e.g., Hone et al., 2014, Knights et al., 2016). These limitations

within the literature have prevented a clear picture of what flourishing in retired professional athletes looks like and what constructs need to be included and considered when measuring this phenomenon (Knights et al., 2016). Thus, research that examines the way in which retired professional athletes conceptualise and experience flourishing, underpinned by theory, is needed to further understand flourishing in retired professional athletes (Hone et al., 2014; Knights et al., 2016). Developing a comprehensive understanding of how retired professional athletes understand and experience flourishing has the potential to inform and advance current operational definitions of flourishing. Moreover, it has the potential to also inform models of care and management of retired athletes via interventions, which may, in turn, facilitate higher experiences of flourishing in retired professional athletes. (Knights et al., 2016).

Due to the concept of well-being having a longer history than that presented in research conducted within the sporting domain, this body of work will be discussed first. Further analysis of the literature specifically related to flourishing, the transition process, and retirement experience, and flourishing of retired professional athletes will follow. It is also important to note that the current thesis is set in Australia and exclusively examines retired Australian male athletes.

1.1 Well-being

Research in well-being has grown in recent decades and this continues to be a concept that researchers are exploring (e.g., Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Dodge, Daly, Huyton & Sanders, 2012; Keyes, Schmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Steptoe, Deaton & Stone, 2015; Statham, Chase, & Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre, Seligman, 2011). For over half a century, psychological research had almost exclusively focused on psychopathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000); as a result, the primary approach adopted in mental health has been

a deficit-focused model of functioning (Diener, 2003). Research in positive psychology is seen to enhance what is already known about human suffering, weakness, and disorder (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Undeniably, well-being is more than the absence of psychological or behavioral problems (Kern, Benson, Steinberg, & Steinberg, 2016), and suggests that the absence of a negative is not the same as the presence of a positive (Pawelski, 2016). Therefore, the study of optimum human functioning, and how to improve it, is in itself, an important gap that needed addressing.

There has been significant discussion regarding the definition of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). However, it is commonly accepted that well-being is a multidimensional phenomenon that includes the two theoretical traditions of *hedonia* and *eudaimonia* (Henderson & Knight, 2012; Keyes et al., 2002). It is the combination of feeling good and functioning effectively. Well-being does not demand individuals feel good all the time. The experience of painful emotions (e.g., disappointment, failure, grief) is a normal part of life and being able to manage these negative or painful emotions is essential for long-term well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Well-being is, however, compromised when negative emotions are extreme or very long lasting and impede with a person's ability to function in his or her daily life (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Well-being has been examined in the workplace (Holman, Johnson & O'Connor, 2018), in adolescents (González-Carrasco, Casas, Malo, Viñas & Dinisman, 2017), older adults (Petersen, Austin, Mattek & Kaye, 2015), patients (Seyed, Rezaei, Givari & Hosseini, 2006) schools, (Simmons, Graham & Thomas, 2015) and sport (Kouali, Hall & Pope, 2020). However, what remains largely unresolved is how well-being should be defined which, has given rise to blurred and overly broad definitions of well-being (Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, & Seligman 2011, p. 81).

1.1.1 Theoretical Underpinnings and Frameworks of Well-being

Current research on well-being has been derived from two general perspectives: the hedonic approach, which focuses on happiness and defines well-being in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance (Ryan & Deci, 2001); The eudaimonic approach, which focuses on meaning and self-realisation and defines well-being in terms of the degree to which a person is fully functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The hedonic tradition, which accentuated constructs such as happiness, positive affect, low negative affect, and satisfaction with life (e.g., Bradburn, 1969; Diener & Emmons, 1984; Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), is traditionally assessed using the concept of subjective well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Subjective well-being includes affective and cognitive components and long term affects and life satisfaction, respectively (Diener, Lucas & Oishi, 2005).

In contrast, the theoretical tradition of eudaimonia highlights positive psychological functioning and human development (e.g., Rogers, 1961; Ryff, 1989a; 1989b; Waterman, 1993). Eudaimonia suggests that well-being lies in the actualisation of human potential and calls on people to live in unity with their *daimon*, or true self (Waterman, 1995). Eudaimonia has been associated with well-being dimensions of psychological and social well-being (Lundqvist, 2011), and is linked with constructs such as resiliency and optimism (Adams et al., 2000; Barnard, 1994; Glantz & Johnson, 1999; Scheir, Carver & Bridges 2002).

Researchers have developed coherent frameworks to measure well-being (see Table 1.1). Nonetheless, despite the differences in approach, there is general consensus amongst researchers that well-being is a multi-dimensional construct (e.g., Diener, 2009; Stone & Krueger 2018).

Consequently, the diversity of dimensions has created a confusing and contradictory research base (Pollard & Lee, 2003). Psychological well-being has been operationalised in

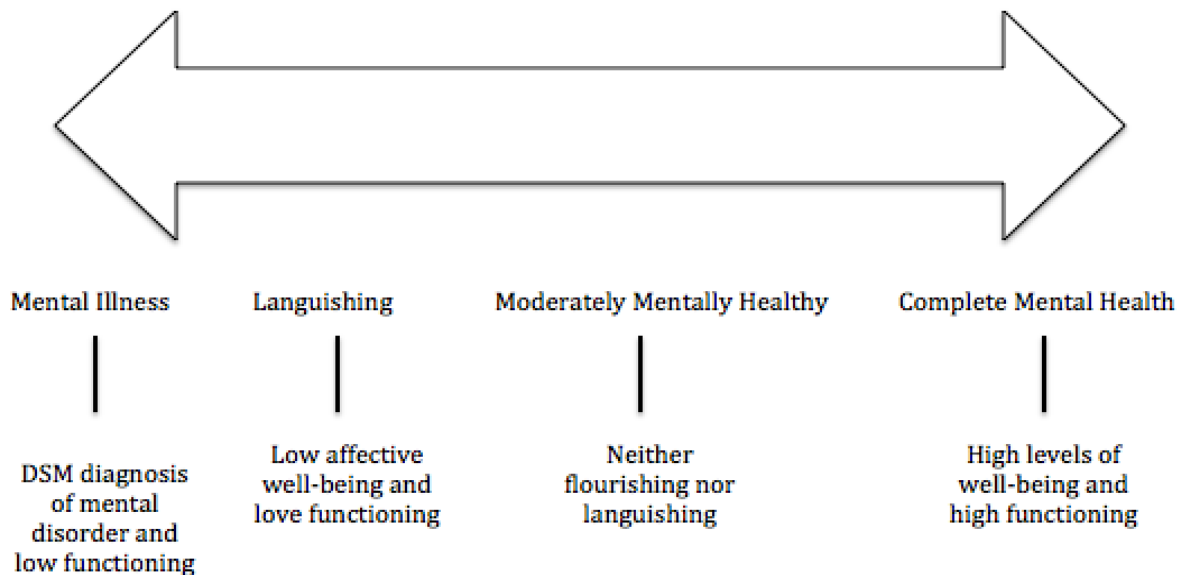
two main ways: initially by Ryff (1989) and by Self-Determination theory (SDT: Ryan and Deci, 2001). SDT includes three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness and suggests that fulfillment of these needs, is fundamental for psychological growth and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Although self-determination theory identifies the main factors that nurture well-being, Ryff's (1989) definition of psychological well-being is theoretically and operationally defined through six distinct aspects of human actualisation: autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery, and positive relatedness. Ryff's (1989) investigation of well-being integrated literature aimed at defining positive functioning; for example Jung's (1933; Von Franz, 1964) construction of individuation, Erikson's (1959) psychosocial stages model, Allport's (1961) conception of maturity, Rogers' (1961) view of the fully functioning person, and Maslow's (1962) conception of self-actualisation. Understanding that the nature of human well-being and inquiry goes beyond the self. Keyes (1998) proposed five dimensions when defining social well-being which are: social acceptance, social actualisation, social integration, social coherence, and social contribution. All five dimensions are embedded in philosophy, social psychological theory, and cultural analysis (Keyes, 1998).

1.2 Flourishing

Flourishing is a condition that has been described as optimal human functioning and is directly associated to growth and resilience (Stander et al., 2017). Flourishing is one way of conceptualising high levels of well-being (Knights, et al., 2016). It focuses on the top end of the mental health spectrum, as opposed to the opposite end of the spectrum, which focuses on mental illness and languishing (Huppert & So, 2009). For an individual to be described as flourishing, one must demonstrate complete mental health and present high levels of well-

being (Keyes, 2002). In contrast, individuals who are experiencing difficulty and unhappiness in their daily lives, but do not meet the criteria for a common mental health disorder, can be described as languishing (Keyes, 2002).



*Figure 1.1. Mental health continuum. From *What Percentage of People in Europe are Flourishing and What Characterises Them?* (p. XX), by F. A. Huppert and T. T. C. So, 2009, paper presented at the meeting of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies, Florence, Italy. Copyright 2009 by The Well-Being Institute, University of Cambridge. Adapted with permission.*

The term flourishing was first applied and defined by Keyes and Haidt (2003). Keyes and Haidt (2003) defined flourishing as a state where people experience positive emotions, positive psychological functioning and positive social functioning. To be classified as flourishing, an individual is required to demonstrate the combined presence of high levels of emotional, psychological and social well-being (Keyes & Haidt, 2003). The self-report method involved an assessment of personal functioning and societal functioning. Omitted from future flourishing definitions, Keyes and Haidt's (2003) integrated social well-being into their definition. This focused on aspects such as social contribution, social integration and social acceptance as an integral aspect of flourishing. The importance of social well-

being has also been emphasised within the flourishing literature as it allows for an evaluation of an individual's public functioning, as opposed to purely focusing on personal feelings (Hone, Jarden, Schofield, & Duncan, 2014).

Consistent with well-being, there has been extensive consideration concerning the definition of flourishing, as a definition has both theoretical and practical implications (Hone et al, 2014). However, it is generally accepted that flourishing is being “within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth and resilience” (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005, p.678). Although researchers have had difficulty agreeing on a single definition of flourishing, there appears to be two consistent factors. Firstly, flourishing refers to high levels of subjective well-being (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, Shmotkin & Ryff, 2002; Seligman, 2011); and secondly, flourishing is a multi-dimensional construct that cannot be adequately measured using a single-item assessment (Hone et al., 2014). As such, flourishing has been a term used to define well-being, by focusing on the healthy end of the mental health continuum (Huppert & So, 2009), see Figure 1.1.

Flourishing is a key concept within the field of positive psychology and has been shown to increase psychological and emotional resistance, improve physical health, and create sustainable happiness and well-being (Blissett, 2011). For instance, Keyes (2007) examined a sample of US adults who had no mental disorders and were classified to be flourishing for the last 12 months and revealed a number of positive outcomes as a result. It was found that those who are flourishing have less missed days of work, healthier psychosocial functioning, lower risk of cardiovascular disease, fewer health limitations of daily living and lower healthcare utilisation (Keyes, 2007). Furthermore, research has found that individuals who are flourishing learn more effectively, work productively, have better social relationships, and are more likely to contribute positively to their community (Diener et al., 2015; Huppert

& So, 2009). The subsequent sections will discuss how flourishing has been operationally defined.

1.2.1 Theoretical Underpinnings and Frameworks of Flourishing

Flourishing is one of the most important and promising topics studied in positive psychology (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007), and has been said to hold the key to improving the quality of life for people around the world (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007). Flourishing moves beyond the confines of simple happiness or well-being; it encompasses a wide range of positive psychological constructs and offers a more holistic perspective on what it means to feel well and happy. The construct of flourishing is purported to include the following: competence, emotional stability, engagement, meaning, optimism, positive emotion, positive relationships, resilience, self-esteem, and vitality (Huppert & So, 2013). The PERMA framework, developed by Seligman (2011), is another framework that includes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Whereas there are five dimensions in Huppert and So's (2013) framework: 1) positive relationships, 2) engagement, 3) meaning and purpose, 4) positive emotions, and 5) accomplishments. More specifically, Huppert and So's (2013) framework has included an additional 10 dimensions in their framework, which are not in the PERMA framework: 1) self-acceptance, 2) social contribution, 3) social integration, 4) social growth, 5) social acceptance, 6) social coherence, 7) environmental mastery, 8) personal growth, 9) autonomy, and 10) life satisfaction. Even though the four frameworks of flourishing share some commonalities, there are still many differences among them (Hone et al., 2014), such as the number of constructs included in each. Thus, it is difficult to determine which model/s will most accurately represent flourishing for a specific population (Hone et al., 2014).

In the past, there have been numerous psychological theories developed on human flourishing (Huppert, 2009; Keyes, 2002, Ryff & Singer, 2000). For example, Fredrickson

(2001) developed the “broaden and build” model of positive emotions that encompasses the notions of flourishing and languishing. Fredrickson (2001) characterised flourishing by exploration, creativity, use of intuition, developing social connections, enhanced coping strategies, resilience, and the building of a connected environmental knowledge base. Fredrickson (2001) further characterised languishing by avoidance, feelings of hollowness and emptiness, and the narrowing of thought, which is said to occur in the circumstance of extended negative emotions (Fredrickson, 2001). In addition, Losada and Heaphy (2004) examined flourishing via a survey to measure the role of positivity and connectivity on the performance of business and teams. Participants completed daily reports of experienced positive and negative emotions over 28 days in 60 high-performing companies and organisations. Results indicated that the optimal conditions for individuals to flourish in a team were characterised by positivity, such as support, encouragement and appreciation.

To date, there are four core conceptualisations and operational definitions of flourishing in the psychological literature (Diener et al., 2010; Huppert & So, 2009, Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011). Keyes was the first psychologist to use the term flourishing to describe high levels of well-being (Hone et al., 2014). Keyes’ polythetic approach was derived by examining the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual’s internationally agreed diagnostic criteria and identifying each symptom’s opposite (DSM; American Psychiatric Association, 1987). Keyes’ (2002) definition requires the combined presence of high levels of emotional, psychological and social well-being symptoms. Furthermore, Keyes conceptualisation also needs the presence of hedonic symptoms and positive functioning for a person to be classified as flourishing.

Huppert and So’s (2013) theoretical and conceptual definition of flourishing were designed to mirror the internationally agreed upon methodology used in the DSM of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), as well as the International

Classification of Diseases (World Health Organization, 1993). It also requires the presence of opposite symptoms to Major Depressive Episode (DSM-IV), Depressive Episode (ICD-10), and Generalised Anxiety Disorder (terminology common to both systems). Identifying the opposite symptoms of these mental illnesses provided Huppert and So (2013) a list of ten positive features: competence; emotional stability; engagement, meaning; optimism; positive emotion; positive relationships; resilience; self-esteem; and vitality.

Diener and colleagues (2010) created the Flourishing Scale (FS) as a brief summary measure of psychological functioning, designed to complement other measures of subjective well-being (Schotanus-Dijkstra, 2016). The FS was first introduced as the Psychological Flourishing Scale in a 12-item format (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2008) but has since been refined to eight items. Based on earlier humanistic psychology theories, the FS assesses several identified universal human psychological needs, combining these with other theories of well-being (Diener et al., 2010). Specifically, the eight-item scale combines dimensions of well-being that Ryff (1989), and Ryan and Deci (2001), suggest are important for positive functioning (for example competence, self-acceptance, meaning and relatedness), in addition to optimism, giving, and engagement, which have also been shown to contribute to well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001; Seligman, 2011). Since the development of the FS, a number of studies have been conducted to examine the psychometric properties of the FS to evaluate its reliability and validity (e.g., Silvia & Caetano, 2011; Sumi, 2014). For instance, Silvia and Caetano (2011) explored the psychometric properties of the FS from two different sample groups in Portugal. The first sample group consisted of employees ($N = 717$), who work in a full-time job, aged between 20 to 50 years; the second sample consisted of university students ($N = 194$), whose ages ranged from 18 to 65 years. Results concluded that the Portuguese version of the FS scale had psychometric properties similar to those verified in the original study (Diener et al. 2010),

and showed satisfying reliability, factorial and convergent validity. However, it was recommended that the psychometric properties should be examined further in different populations to further support the FS reliability and validity. Similarly, Sumi (2014) examined the reliability and validity of the Japanese versions of the FS scale using a sample of 520 Japanese college students. The Japanese version of the FS had acceptable reliability and validity, similar to the properties of the original version. Recommendations from this study also suggested that it would be desirable to use different samples in exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to assess the factor structure.

Whilst the FS has been applied and adapted to different countries and individuals and has supported validity and reliability within these sub-groups, a number of limitations have been identified (e.g., Huppert & So, 2013; Silvia & Caetano, 2011; Sirgy 2012; Sumi, 2014). One of the main limitations identified in the studies conducted by Silvia and Caetano (2011) and Sumi (2014) was their lack of diversity of their samples, thus making their findings difficult to generalise to other populations. Another limitation in the flourishing literature came from the research of Huppert and So (2013) when developing their definition of flourishing. Whilst their definition of flourishing and the resulting ten features were derived in an objective manner, they found that some elements of subjectivity were unavoidable. Thus, subjective judgements were involved in the selection of survey items to be used as indicators of these features, as well as the cut-off score on each item to establish whether it is present or absent, and the number of features required to meet the criterion of flourishing. As a result, Huppert and So (2013) chose item cut points based primarily on their response format, but also made an adjustment if responses were very skewed; and the operational definition was largely based on the factorial structure of the data. Other studies which use different surveys and different items as indicators of the ten features of flourishing might reach a different conclusion about cut points and the number and combination of features required.

Seligman (2011) established the fourth operational definition of flourishing, known as PERMA. Seligman theorises that well-being has five components that can be defined and measured as separate, but correlated, constructs (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning in life and Accomplishments; PERMA, Seligman, 2011), based on the theoretical grounds that these are what individuals chose freely, “for their own sake” (2011, p.97). The PERMA-Profiler was created in the absence of a brief, validated instrument that specifically measures all five PERMA domains. The 16-item PERMA-P has three items representing each of the five PERMA components, and one item representing ‘overall well-being’. Each item is scored on an 11-point Likert scale, anchored by 0 (never) to 10 (always), or 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely), while experiences are assessed via a range of different response scales, for example, ‘in general, ‘how often, ‘to what extent’, and ‘how much of the time’. Similar to the FS, PERMA has been rigorously examined for its validity and reliability (e.g., Ayşe, 2018; Butler & Kern, 2016; Umucu, Sanchez, Brooks, Chiu, Tu, & Chan, 2020; Watanabe et al., 2018). Studies have adapted and applied PERMA to different samples such as, Turkish university students (Ayşe, 2018), the Japanese workplace (Watanabe et al., 2018) and veterans from the United States (Umucu et al., 2020). Whilst studies found that PERMA could be adapted and proved to be reliable and valid (Ayşe, 2018, Umucu et al., 2020; Watanabe et al., 2018), one of the main limitations of the studies and recommendations for future research is for these types of studies to be conducted on different sample groups (Ayşe, 2018; Umucu, 2020; Watanabe et al., 2018). This limitation and gap in the research further supports the notion and rationale for the need to investigate flourishing in other samples.

As data in Table 1.1 would suggest, whilst these four research teams (Keyes 2002; Huppert & So, 2013; Diener et al., 2010; and Seligman et al., 2011) have operationalised flourishing in different ways, the four conceptualisations still share commonalities. All four approaches adopt the theoretical model combining feeling and functioning originally brought

together in a conceptual model of flourishing by Keyes (Keyes, 2002) and as a result, considerable conceptual overlap exists. Additionally, engagement appears in all four operationalisations, although in Keyes' model it falls within the emotional well-being component as an item assessing 'interest'. All four conceptualisations require endorsement of positive relationships, reflecting the important evidence-based role that relationships have for flourishing. Meaning and purpose also feature in all four operationalisations, although Keyes refers more narrowly to 'purpose in life', Huppert and So (2009) to 'meaning', while Diener et al. and Seligman et al. use a broader definition grouping both constructs together (Hone et al., 2014).

However, there are still many differences between the conceptualisations (Hone et al., 2014; Knights et al., under review). The first notable difference is the number of items that is contained within each conceptualisation (Knights et al., under-review). For instance, Keyes (2002) identified thirteen items to conceptualise flourishing, Huppert and So (2009) and, Diener et al., (2009) identified six items, and Seligman's (2011) conceptualisation consisted of only four items (see Table 1.1). The second noticeable difference indicates that, the four models do not include all of the same characteristics (Knights et al., under review). Each conceptualisation places value into different characteristics and the necessary factors of flourishing. However, Keyes is the only framework, which includes life satisfaction in his operationalisation. Whilst flourishing has been conceptualised and operationalised by several means, the variance and inability to agree upon one operational definition makes it difficult to identify which conceptualisation and operational definition most accurately measures flourishing for specific populations (Hone et al., 2014). It has also been argued that there are difficulties when trying to replicate the four models (Hone et al., 2014). Hone et al (2014) stated it was challenging to "stay true to the theories and conceptualisations of the original

models, whilst also remaining consistent with their methodology, therefore highlighting a major gap within the current literature (Hone et al., 2014, p. 76-77).

Table 1.1

Four different conceptualisations of well-being/flourishing (modified from Hone, Jarden, Schofield & Duncan, 2014)

<i>KEYES</i>	<i>HUPPERT & SO</i>	<i>DIENER et al.</i>	<i>SELIGMAN et al.</i>
Positive relationships	Positive relationships	Positive relationships	Positive relationships
Positive affect (interested)	Engagement	Engagement	Engagement
Purpose in life	Meaning	Purpose and meaning	Meaning and purpose
Self-acceptance	Self-esteem	Self-acceptance and Self-esteem	-
Positive affect (happy)	Positive emotions	-	Positive emotion
-	Competence	Competence	Accomplishment/Competence
-	Optimism	Optimism	-
Social contribution	-	-	-
Social integration	-	-	-
Social growth	-	-	-
Social acceptance	-	-	-
Social coherence	-	-	-
Environmental mastery	-	-	-
Personal growth	-	-	-
Autonomy	-	-	-
Life satisfaction	-	-	-
-	Emotional stability	-	-
-	Vitality	-	-
-	Resilience	-	-

Note. From “Measuring Flourishing: The Impact of Operational Definitions on the Prevalence of High Levels of Wellbeing,” by L. C. Hone, A. Jarden, G. M. Schofield, and S. Duncan, 2014, *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 4, p. XX. Copyright 2014 by L. C. Hone, A. Jarden, G. M. Schofield, and S. Duncan. Adapted with permission.

Based on the four models, there is the challenge of identifying how closely the conceptualisations of flourishing reflect and align with the laypeople's real world understanding of flourishing (Hone et al., 2014). As well, the extent to which lay concepts of flourishing correspond with these models has been identified as an empirical question that warrants investigation (Hone, et al., 2014). Therefore, based on the lack of published empirical research exploring the conceptualisation of flourishing, further examination between lay and academic conceptualisations of flourishing needs to be conducted. Thus, this could enable for a more precise application of which of the four models of well-being/flourishing most accurately measures flourishing in specific cohorts (Hone et al., 2014; Ryan, 2019). Furthermore, investigating flourishing with a sample of retired athletes may also provide valuable practical knowledge for practitioners working with athletes who are transitioning out of elite sport (Hone et al., 2014; Ryan, 2019). Understanding how flourishing is conceptualised within a sample of retired professional athletes may potentially enhance academic knowledge and practical guidelines for health care professionals when working with these individuals (Hone et al., 2014). This research may also complement career development and career transition research by including the flourishing model to identify factors that predict a positive transition and life after sport experience (Stambulova et al., 2020)

1.2.2 Flourishing in Sport

The transition out of elite sport is complex. Some retired athletes may languish, while others may flourish in their life after sport (Brown, Webb, Robinson & Cotgreave, 2018). In recent years, there has been an increased interest focusing on the spectrum of athletes' mental health and well-being (Uphill, Sly, & Swain, 2016). Within the sports psychology literature, there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of athlete well-being during their sporting careers (Ryan, 2019). It is well understood that participation in sport can promote

positive well-being and health in children and adults (Lundqvist, 2011). However, the nature of a competitive athlete's lifestyle presents substantial physical and psychosocial pressures (Gould, Dieffenbach & Moffett, 2002). Therefore, maximising athlete well-being is essential to optimal physical and mental performance (Uphill et al., 2016).

It has been said that athlete happiness comes from the maintenance of self-belief, lack of distress and mindfulness (Denny & Steiner, 2009). Likewise, it has been found that emotional intelligence, a desire to achieve, and attentional control resulted in the flourishing of athletes during their careers (Denny & Steiner, 2008). As a result of this, sport psychology research, specifically examining flourishing, has begun to grow over recent years (e.g., Ashfield, McKenna, & Backhouse, 2012; Ferguson, Epp, Wuttunee, Dunn, McHugh & Humbert, 2019; Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack & Sabiston, 2014; Kler & TriBe, 2012; Wagstaff et al., 2012). For instance, researchers have examined flourishing in scuba divers (Kler & TriBe, 2012) student athletes (Stander et al., 2017), in sporting organisations (Wagstaff et al., 2012), in sports marketing (Bush, Bush, Clarke, Bush, 2005) and, during an athletic career (Ferguson, et al., 2014). However, research understanding how retired athletes conceptualise and experience flourishing in life after sport, has yet be investigated.

Although research has examined constructs considered closely related to flourishing, such as coping mechanisms (Park, Tod & Lavallee, 2012), life satisfaction (Martin, Fogarty & Albion, 2014), positive emotions (Park, Tod & Lavallee, 2012), and optimism (Scholes, 2017); flourishing has yet to be investigated in terms of athlete retirement. Furthermore, there still appears to be a lack of studies specifically examining the ways in which different groups conceptualise flourishing (e.g., Hone et al., 2014) which has made it difficult to compare results across studies or generalise findings (e.g., Hone et al., 2014; e.g., Silvia & Caetano, 2011; Sumi, 2014). Thus, research with a sample of retired professional athletes has been hindered by conceptual ambiguity. These limitations have prevented a clear picture of the

understanding of flourishing in retired professional athletes and what constructs need to be included and considered when measuring this phenomenon (Hone et al., 2014).

Whilst flourishing research in sport has developed attention over recent years (e.g., Ashfield et al., 2012; Stander et al., 2017; Wagstaff et al., 2012), to the authors knowledge there appears to be no current research that has examined how retired athletes conceptualise flourishing, in addition to the factors that promote and enhance an athlete's ability to flourish in life after sport. For instance, Ashfield and colleagues (2012) aimed to provide an empirically derived conceptualisation of flourishing with current athletes through qualitative methods. Results from the research identified similarities between flourishing as described by the athletes, and subjective well-being (SWB) and happiness. Additionally, the perceived importance of life areas can be compared to how value acts as a moderator in subjective well-being (Cohen & Cairns, 2012); an individual's value-orientation moderates the sense of satisfaction in any activity. Thus, in the current study, importance acts as a moderator in experiencing flourishing; as flourishing occurs when important areas of life are optimised (Ashfield et al., 2012). Overall, for these athletes, flourishing consisted of positive feelings and affective states and the fulfillment of areas of perceived importance (Ashfield et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the athletes' conceptualisations of flourishing did not parallel the existing literature. For example, in the conceptualisation suggested by Fredrickson and Losada (2005), the concept of generativity is proposed, however this specific construct is absent from the four most commonly used operational definitions of flourishing (see Table 1.1). Moreover, it was also found that a facilitative sporting environment and schedule are also influential in athletes experiencing flourishing, which is not considered in the existing conceptualisations of flourishing (Ashfield et al., 2012).

Consequently, research that examines the understanding of flourishing, underpinned by theory, is needed to further understand flourishing in retired professional athletes (Ashfield et

al., 2012 Hone et al., 2014). It has been said that psychology must establish ways in which flourishing can be promoted and must put forward practical suggestions to create contexts in which this can be achieved (Younkins, 2010). Thus, by comprehensively understanding how retired professional athletes conceptualise flourishing, research can potentially inform and advance current operational definitions of flourishing. Further research has the potential to also inform models of care and management of retired athletes via interventions, which may in turn, facilitates higher experiences of flourishing in retired professional athletes.

1.3. Life After Sport

1.3.1 Transition from Professional Sport

An athletic transition commonly results from one or a combination of events (Lavallee, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001) that are perceived by the athlete to bring about personal and social disequilibria (Wapner & Craig-Bray, 1992). These disequilibria are presumed to be beyond the ongoing changes of everyday life (Sharf, 1997) and cause “a change in assumptions about oneself” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). These transitions are, among others, developmental in nature (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Wylleman, De Knop, Ewing, & Cumming, 2000), and can be characterised by predictability and developmental context of occurrence.

Over the decades, the concept of “transition” has been related to a variety of topics including individual life span development (e.g., Erikson, 1963; Wylleman et al., 2004), occupational planning (e.g., Hopson & Adams, 1977), educational processes (e.g., Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000), social support (e.g., Cutrona & Russell, 1990), and the processes of aging, retirement, and dying (e.g., Cummings & Henry, 1961; Kübler-Ross, 1969). As a whole, a transition has been related to the occurrence of one or more specific events that not only brings about “a change in assumptions about oneself”

(Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5), but also a social disequilibrium (Wapner & Craig-Bray, 1992) that surpasses the ongoing changes of everyday life (Sharf, 1997).

In the field of sport psychology, the notion of transition was introduced during the 1970s and early 1980s. During this period, psychologists and social scientists' interest in how former athletes coped with the event of retirement from high-level competitive and professional sports was on the rise (e.g., Haerle, 1975; Hallden, 1965; Mihovilović, 1968). However, over the years, researchers re-appraised the termination of the athletic career as a transitional process rather than a singular event (McPherson, 1980) and that the athletic career termination should be seen as an opportunity for "social birth" (Coackley, 1983).

Although competitive sport is unpredictable, it actually is characterised by two types of transitions (a) normative transition or (b) non-normative transition.

1.3.2. Transition Types: Normative Vs. Non-Normative

During a normative transition (normal or planned), the athlete exits one stage and enters another stage (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Thus, a normative transition is experienced as part of a sequence of age-related biological and social events or changes (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Normative transitions also include non-events, which are events that an athlete expects or hopes for but do not happen (Gordon & Lavalley, 2011). However, non-normative transitions result from an event that has occurred in an individual's life that is not part of a set plan or schedule (Wylleman & Reints, 2010) 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). Research has shown that involuntary and sudden retirements from sport were perceived to be extremely negative (Mihovilović, 1968) with athletes experiencing several traumatic experiences upon their athletic career termination, including alcohol and substance abuse, acute depression,

eating disorders, identity confusion, decreased self-confidence, and attempted suicide (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982).

Transition out of professional sport into retirement has been a topic of considerable research in recent years (Brown, Webb, Robinson & Cotgreave, 2018; Hansen, Perry, Ross & Montgomery, 2019; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Torregrosa, Ramis, Pallarés, Azócar, & Selva, 2015). This is especially relevant for professional athletes as they retire from their professional athletic career, generally experiencing this major life-changing event much earlier than individuals in other careers. Research on moving from the public eye of elite competition into retirement has identified several personal issues such as loss of identity, adjustment problems, and psychological and psychosocial challenges (e.g., Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Stephan, 2003). As highlighted by Chamalidis (2000), career termination begins a transition from an exciting existence oriented toward adrenaline rush to a more sedentary professional situation and lifestyle. Many athletes have emphasised the difficulty of adjusting to a totally different lifestyle in which they are suddenly like everyone else (Lavallee et al., 1997). Transitional athletes are confronted with new daily timetables (Gearing, 1999; Wylleman et al., 1993) and have to adjust to “getting up, commuting to work, working in an office, working indoors” (Gearing, 1999, p. 50). It has been reported that former athletes miss the sport atmosphere, the competition, stimulation, fame, and pushing the body to exhaustion (Harrison, Vickers, Fletcher & Taylor, 2020; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Stambulova, 2001), thus, resulting in a feeling of emptiness in their lives (Menke & Germany, 2019). The risks with this type of transition are that athletes must reconstruct and adjust themselves on the basis of a new lifestyle, along with the athletes needing to adapt to a new social status and professional responsibilities.

There are four main reasons why an athlete transitions from sport (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001): injury (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Werthner & Orlick,

1986); aging (Whitbourne, 1996); de-selection and 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., Hansen et al., 2019; Stokowski, Paule-Koba & Kaunert, 2019; Wall, Fetherston & Browne, 2018), adjustment following professional sport is influenced by cognitive appraisals of the transition, personal factors, and environmental characteristics. Additionally, athletes may also experience a loss of identity (Lally, 2007), emotional difficulties (Giannone et al., 2017), and decreased self-confidence and life satisfaction (Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014). It has also been acknowledged that when athletes retire from professional sport, they face physical changes, which can potentially have a negative impact on their body image and self-esteem (Stephan et al., 2007). Thus, based on the literature it is evident that athletes may experience multiple challenges once they retire from sport.

Previous research has also acknowledged a strong inverse relationship between voluntary transition and level of difficulty adapting to life post sport (Alfermann, 2000; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). By contrast, involuntary transition led to several 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). However, earlier research conducted by Ogilvie and Taylor (1993), indicated that transition difficulties are more likely to occur when transition is involuntary, however, voluntary retirement does not preclude termination difficulties. For example, it was found that athletes who voluntarily transitioned from sport also described their transition as either difficult or very difficult (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993). Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) found that, athletes who voluntarily transition from sport, were prompted by

either conflict or dissatisfaction with their coach or by the high stress associated with their sport. Similarly, Koukourise (1994) found that athletes' felt compelled to retire as they found themselves in impossible situations. This suggests that the distinction between voluntary and involuntary transition may be artificial in some situations, or voluntary and involuntary disengagement can coexist. Furthermore, it must not be assumed that athletes who do voluntarily transition are exempt from adjustment difficulties (Koukouris, 1994).

For the purposes of this thesis, the term transition referred to the period 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.

1.3.3. Retirement

Retirement typically refers to withdrawal from paid working life (Denton & Spencer, 2008). However, retirement now no longer refers to the end of an individual's working career but reflects a phase extending to various forms of full or part-time employment (Davis, 2003; Pettican & Prior, 2011). It is a long-term process involving a pre-retirement period, the act of retirement itself, and post-retirement adjustment. Theory and practice around workplace retirement have also identified a transitional period, often involving delayed retirement, phased retirement, or bridge employment (Lytle, Foley, & Cotter, 2015). In some cases, people may choose to work beyond the age of retirement, while others may prefer to gradually phase out of their current job (Lytle et al., 2015).

Retirement from the workforce can be voluntary or involuntary; it can be gradual or sudden; and it can also be temporary or permanent (Denton & Spencer, 2008). However, it has been argued that in the later part of the working life "the transition from employment to retirement ... is far from the smooth transition that ... has long been presumed. [Instead] multiple transitions occur into and out of employment and into and out of the labour force" (p 86). That creates difficulties for the measurement of retirement (McDaniel, 1995). Negative

involuntary retirement and positive voluntary retirement are commonly distinguished through ‘push’ or ‘pull’ factors. Push factors tend to be involuntary and associated with lower levels of well-being, such as ill health or dislike of one’s job (Hanks, 1990). Pull factors tend to be voluntary reasons for retirement, such as becoming eligible for a pension or leisure interests (Nordenmark & Stattin, 2009). Push and pull factors operate interchangeably to influence satisfaction post-retirement. This can be complex because what may be determined a pull factor by some, may be considered a push factor for others (Nordenmark & Stattin, 2009). Once retirement occurs, the push and pull factors, which led to retirement, continue to influence an individual’s life in various ways. One combination of pushes and pulls may lead the individual to believe they have been forced out of a satisfying career, while another combination may lead the individual to believe they had a great career and now it is time to move on (Hardy & Quadagno, 1995). Shultz, Morton, and Weckerle (1998) found that those who were forced to retire had lower self-ratings of physical and emotional health and lower life satisfaction.

In Australia, the average age of retirement is 59.5 years for men and the average retirement age for woman is 52.1 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2019). There are a number of reasons why individuals retire from the workforce; for instance, they have reached an age where they are eligible for their superannuation or pension, they cease work due to sickness, injury or disability, they are retrenched, dismissed or there is no work available, or they wish to pursue leisure activities or have holidays (ABS, 2019). Furthermore, when individuals retire from the workforce there are a number of sources in which they continue to make an income, such as, dividends or interest, superannuation or pension or government allowances (ABS, 2019).

In the survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019), it was found that of the 3.9 million persons who completed the survey, 1.6 million persons (40%) did not

know at what age they would retire. Whereas of those who did indicate an age, it was found that 20% intended to retire at 70 years and older, 50% intended to retire between 65 and 69 years, 23% intended to retire between 60 and 64 years and 7 % intended to retire between 45 to 59 years.

1.3.4 Retirement from Professional Sport

Investigating retirement from sport has been a subject of interest in sport psychology from pioneering work in the late sixties (e.g., Mihovilović, 1968) to current times (e.g., Park et al., 2012). Indeed, studies on retirement from sport have increased substantially both in quantity and quality since the end of the 1980s (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009). 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 or her new life without regular participation in the sport (Brady, 1988).

A body of evidence has documented numerous potential psychological ramifications when a professional athlete retires from sport such as: decreased self-esteem, decreased self-perceived quality of life, decreased self-efficacy, struggle with body image, lack of purpose, anxiety and depression (e.g., Lavellee & Robinson, 2007; Petrie, 2018; Torregrosa et al., 2015; White, 2019). For example, White (2019) examined the retirement experiences of former footballers in Ireland, with reference to factors affecting their mood and well-being. Athletes expressed feelings of mental difficulty of losing motivation, combined with the psychological struggles of maintaining a strong exercise routine and health nutritional behaviours. Additionally, results from the study indicated the potential for the development of poor coping mechanisms, such as stress eating and excessive alcohol consumption, due to both free time and the lack of professional necessity to enforce strict diets (White, 2019).

Furthermore, professional athletes can have great difficulty adjusting and adapting to their new life after professional sport and can face substantial risks to their well-being (Stephan, 2003). This can be due to a lack of planning and/or preparation for the next chapter of their lives, in addition to a loss of purpose, lack of direction and at times little to no transferable skills for the workplace (e.g., Lavellee & Robinson, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2007; Torregrosa et al., 2015; Warriner & Lavellee, 2008). For instance, Stambulova, Stephan and Jäphag (2007), examined the dynamics of subjective well-being during transition out of elite sport with 16 French athletes who were retiring from sport following the Sydney Olympic Games. Results from the study demonstrated that athletes' feelings and attitudes during the transition ranged from initial difficulties facing the substantial changes in all life areas to reconstruction of and adjustment to a new lifestyle and a new socio-professional situation (Stambulova et al., 2007). Thus, participation in, and retirement from professional sport, can drastically hinder the well-being of an athlete in life after retirement (Warriner & Lavellee, 2008).

Brady (1988) described nine phases associated with retirement from sport (refer to Table 1.2). Brady (1988) discussed that a retiree may not experience all phases or remain in any one phase for the same amount of time. While these phases of retirement were originally designed to describe an individual retiring from work, elite sport can be viewed in a similar manner due to the time commitment, financial reward, social aspect, and daily routine.

However, for football players, the reality is that their sport careers will end much earlier than other professions (e.g., accountant or teacher) through age-related decline, injury, or de-selection (Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Lavallee, 2005; Pink, Saunders, & Stynes, 2015).

1.3.5 Occupational vs. Athletic Retirement

When comparing an athletic retirement to other career retirement, there are some similarities between the two; however, there are some fundamental differences, which will cause the two to be incomparable and un-generalisable (Fortunato, 1996).

There are several major distinctions that have been considered to make the process different: the uniqueness of an “athletic identity” (the degree to which an individual identifies with their role as an athlete) and the special circumstances of early “forced retirements” (involuntary retirement such as injury or de-selection) (Webb et al., 1998). As a result, retired athletes are at a greater risk of experiencing a number of ramifications psychologically post retirement (Webb et al., 1998), such as loss of identity (Grove et al., 1997), a loss of purpose (Lavallee, Gordon & Grove, 1997), anxiety (Giannone et al., 2017), depression (Weigand, Cohen & Merenstein, 2013) and substance abuse (Ungerleider, 1997). Furthermore, due to athletes having dedicated most of their lives to training and competing, many athletes have not undertaken further education or outside work experience, thus, making it difficult to secure alternative employment (e.g., Burden et al., 2004).

Another major distinction is that the non-sporting retirement typically occurs at a much older age. In general, athletes typically begin their athletic careers long before a traditional working career, and often retire at a much earlier age in comparison to those retiring from the workforce (Ryan, 2019). While there is no mandatory age of retirement for athletes, skill and strength deteriorate to a point where the high physical demands of sport begin to take their toll, usually causing athletes to retire in their late twenties to early thirties (Ryan, 2019). The effects of declining performance are somewhat hard to predict, and the likelihood of injuries further inhibits ease of anticipating sporting retirement (Ryan, 2019).

On the other hand, in a non-sporting career, if an individual was to discontinue their employment, these individuals can seek out other employment due to their level of education

Table 1.2

Nine Phases of Retirement

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Occurrence</i>	<i>Nature of phase</i>
(1) Remote Phase	Pre-retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retirement is seen as something that will happen in the long-term future. • Individuals make non-specific plans and may even begin to create strategies around financial savings. • Thoughts of retirement within this stage are usual in frequent and vague
(2) Near Phase	Pre-Retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occurs when we age and individuals tend to orient themselves to a specific retirement. • Two critical things happen in this stage. • People begin to prepare themselves for separation of their careers and; • Individuals often develop detailed images of what their retirement will be like
(3) The Honeymoon Phase	Post Retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual is filled with feelings of bliss. • People often experiment with new activities and roles
(4) Retirement Routine	Post-Retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals settle into a retirement routine which bring them happiness and stability.
(5) Rest and relaxation Phase	Post-Retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals may experience periods of low activity • This phase is seen as a period of slowing down

(6) Disenchantment Period	Post-Retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals can experience a number of challenges, such as a loss of identity
(7) Reorientation Phase	Post-Retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occurs among a few retired people who are disappointed with retirement. • Individuals tend to pull themselves together in this phase and develop a more realistic view of retirement.
(8) Routine	Post-Retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occurs with or without the experience of the disenchantment phase. • Individuals have established and settled into a long period of routine. • Many people pass into this phase directly from the honeymoon period • Others reach it only after difficult periods of struggle and reassessment and re-evaluation of their goals.
(9) Termination Phase	Post-Retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The retirement role will eventually end for everyone. • Some individuals choose to return to full-time work from boredom whilst the retirement role is cancelled by disability or illness and the retirement role is displaced by the sick and disabled role.

Note. From *Retirement: The Challenge of Change* (p. 195), by E. M. Brady, 1988, Portland, OR: University of Southern Maine. Copyright 1988 by University of Southern Maine. Reprinted with permission.

and qualification. Furthermore, the positive impacts that retirement planning and preparation has on individuals have been reported in the non-sporting literature (e.g., Donaldson, Earl & Muratore, 2010). For instance, Donaldson et al. (2010) found that future planning creates a sense of control, which in turn, enhances life satisfaction. Furthermore, individuals who engage in more pre-retirement and post-retirement planning behaviours will feel a greater sense of mastery and control, which will promote better retirement adjustment (Donaldson et al., 2010). In general, while there are some similarities between workforce retirement and athletic retirement, there are some fundamental differences, which will cause the experiences to be incomparable and un-generalisable. For the purposes of this study, the term retirement referred to the period after the athlete officially exited the sporting arena and embarked on a life after sport.

1.3.6 Positive Predictors of Transition and Retirement from Sport

Although earlier literature has focused on the causes and consequences of retirement, research has also moved on to identify predictors for the quality of athletes' career transitions (Wylleman et al., 2004). In one of the largest systematic reviews conducted on sports retirement (Park, Lavalley & Todd, 2013), it was identified that the quality of the post-sport career adaptation is influenced by an interplay of various personal and developmental factors of the athletes (e.g., athletic identity, educational and financial status) and assisted by pre-retirement planning, searching for a new career/interest, psychosocial and professional support (Parks et al., 2013). In addition to this, positive associations were identified between marital, social, educational, and financial status, and the quality of career transition (e.g., Lotysz & Short, 2004; Marthinus, 2007). Likewise, positive associations have been recognised between the quality of the athletes' career transition and the athletes' involvement in programs to prepare for life during their athletic careers (Park et al., 2013).

Another predictor of a positive transition is the level of preparedness and planning of an athlete prior to their retirement (e.g., Stambulova et al., 2020; Torregrossa et al., 2015). Research has found that an athlete who is well prepared and planned for life after sport, experiences less psychological ramifications compared to athletes who have not planned or prepared for their transition and/or retirement (e.g., Park et al., 2012). In a study conducted by Torregrossa et al. (2015), examining fifteen Olympic athletes, it was found that retirement planning along with, a voluntary retirement, availability of social support and active coping strategies, were factors that aided in a positive retirement from elite sport. However, athletes who showed a lack of retirement planning, involuntary termination, lack of social support and reactive coping strategies, had a much more difficult transition experience (Torregrossa et al., 2015).

Researchers have also made recommendations on how to support athletes, not just in terms of the support they need (e.g., social, tangible, emotional), but also when this support should be provided. O’Leary, Murphy and Chen (2009) introduced five types of social support (i.e., emotional, esteem, information, network, and tangible). Researchers have said that certain forms of social support (e.g., tangible, emotional) may have more influence on specific types of stress than others. Therefore, by identifying which types of support and examining the forms of support athletes receive during career transition can potentially help practitioners design appropriate social support-based interventions (Park et al., 2013), thus enhancing the athletes’ ability to have a positive transition out of professional sport and flourishing in life after sport (Ashfield et al., 2012; Ryan, 2019).

However, whilst literature has identified the ramifications of retirement along with factors associated with a more positive transition; research-investigating flourishing in the context of athletic transition and retirement is yet to be examined (Ashfield et al., 2012;

Ryan, 2019). Given the attention that retirement and transition from professional sport has received, this gap in the literature is one that warrants further investigation.

1.4. Methodology

In line with the purpose and objectives of this thesis, the ontological and epistemological assumptions, which informed this thesis, was post-positivist/critical realist philosophical position (Poucher, Tamminen, Caron & Sweet, 2019). Post positivism believes in generalisation and adopts a critical realist stand (Bisman 2010; Downward et al. 2002) in recognising social reality and social phenomena in the social world (Wahyuni 2012). Critical realist perspectives also view social reality as an ongoing construction but goes further to suggest that discourses created in shifting fields of social power shape social reality and our study of it (Sefotho, 2015). In Chapter 3 (Study 2) and Chapter 4 (Study 3), both deductive (emphasised in post-positivism) and inductive (emphasised in critical realist) approaches were utilised. The deductive approach allows the researcher to test theory or hypothesis against data. Whereas an inductive approach establishes theory directly from the data (Sefotho, 2015). Given that the ontological and epistemological assumptions that this thesis is situated within, the methodology is largely qualitative. As this thesis is about the lived experiences of people, phenomenology was an appropriate theoretical perspective to employ. ‘Phenomenology is a philosophical perspective that helps researchers to explore and understand everyday experiences without pre-supposing knowledge of those experiences’ (Converse, 2012, p. 28). When a study adopts a phenomenological approach, it is primarily to understand a particular phenomenon and area of interest to the researcher. Semi-structured interviews drawn from the qualitative paradigm were employed within this thesis to investigate the unique perspective and experiences of retired professional male athletes.

1.5. Aim of Research, Research Objectives, and Research Questions

The overall aim of this thesis was to gain an understanding of how athletes conceptualise and experience flourishing in life after sport, and whether their personal conceptualisations align with current models and frameworks. To date, there is yet to be a study that examines the way in which retired professional athletes conceptualise and experience flourishing, underpinned by theory (Hone et al., 2014). Therefore, the need to further understand the conceptualisation and experiences of retired professional athletes is critical to addressing this gap within the literature (Hone et al., 2014). By conducting such research, this then has the potential to inform and advance current operational definitions of flourishing. In addition, further knowledge may also inform models of care and management of retired athletes via interventions, (Ryan, 2019). Therefore, three specific research objectives with corresponding questions were developed, and appropriate methodologies were utilised. These objectives, questions, and aims for each of the studies can be found in Table 1.3.

Chapter 2 (Study 1) was a systematic review, which examined the extent of existing research related to flourishing with retired professional athletes.

Chapter 3 (Study 2) examined how a sample of retired male professional athletes conceptualised flourishing. Given the paucity of high-quality research on flourishing in this population, it was necessary to understand and define flourishing to inform the delivery of appropriate support and interventions.

Chapter 4 (Study 3) investigated the factors that promote a positive experience of transition and life after sport in a group of retired professional athletes.

This thesis is presented as a series of published and unpublished studies, and each chapter is presented in manuscript format. The intention is for each publication to stand-alone; however, the entire thesis can be read in order. The exception to this is the current chapter, which introduces the key topics and research, and Chapter 5, which discusses the key

findings, practical implications of the research, strengths and limitations, as well as provides direction for future research.

Table 1.3

Research Objectives, Questions, Chapter and Aim(s) of the Study

Objective	Research Questions	Chapter	Aim(s) of Study
Objective 1: Qualitatively explore flourishing in retired professional athletes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there any research that explicitly explores flourishing in retired professional athletes? • What factors promote a positive outcome in transition and retirement from professional sport? • Is there a specific tool that is utilised to measure flourishing in retired professional athletes? 	2: Systematic review (Study 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish the quality of existing research examining the literature concerning elite athlete career transition. • To review the literature pertaining to flourishing/positive outcomes in end-of-athletic-career transitions. • Review and identify the major gaps within these two areas of interest
Objective 2: Explore the way retired professional male athletes conceptualised flourishing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do retired professional male athletes conceptualise flourishing? • What differences and/or similarities exist between the current conceptualisation and operational definition of flourishing, compared to retired athletes through qualitative approaches? 	3: Qualitative study (Study 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To establish the way in which retired professional athletes conceptualised their understanding of flourishing and whether their understanding aligned with current literature, thereby complementing the findings of Chapter 2 (Study 1).
Objective 3: Explore the experiences of transition in retired professional athletes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What factors influenced the transition experience out of professional sport, both positively negatively? • What factors influenced the experiences of athlete retirement, both positively negatively? • Were retired athletes satisfied with the level of support they received during their transition and years in retirement? 	4: Qualitative study (Study 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To investigate the positive experience of transition and life after sport in a group of retired professional athletes.

Chapter 2: Investigating Elite End of Athletic Career Transition - A Systematic Review

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 identified there are numerous challenges that influence an athlete's experience of transition and retirement from professional sport. These factors can hinder or enhance the quality of post-athletic life. It highlighted the existing lack of research surrounding the positive outcomes of retirement and the experiences of flourishing in athletes once they had transitioned from the professional sporting realm.

A systematic review was conducted to analyse the available evidence of literature investigating factors that contributed to a successful end of career transition among elite athletes. The first aim of this systematic review was to examine the literature concerning elite athlete career transition. The second aim was to review the literature pertaining to flourishing/positive outcomes in end-of-athletic-career transitions. The third specific aim was to review and identify the major gaps within these two areas of interest. Chapter 2 presents the systematic review.

Chapter 2 is presented in its published format (Knights et al., 2019): Knights, S., Sherry, E., & Ruddock-Hudson, M. (2016). Investigating elite end-of-athletic-career transition: a systematic review. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 28(3), 291-308.

Abstract

This article presents a systematic review of the literature investigating factors that contribute to a successful end of career transition among elite athletes. The systematic review included 10 studies, which focused on elite athlete retirement that in part measured positive outcomes, which fall under the flourishing construct. Results indicated that although there has been an abundance of research examining multiple effects of transition out of sport among elite athletes, there appears however, to be no current literature explicitly examining flourishing within this elite population. The results of the review have practical implications for sport psychology practitioners who are aiming to facilitate a successful transition for elite athletes through their end-of-athletic-career transition. The findings from the systematic review are discussed and the article provides recommendations for future research and for current applied practice.

Keywords: elite athlete, flourishing, transition, retirement, career

Major life changes and transitions are regularly viewed as stressors that place the individual under pressure to adjust (Wheaton, 1990). Research has found that transition can produce a wide range of effects on individuals' mental health (Wheaton, 1990). There are many types of transitions that individuals face throughout their lifespan; for example, transitioning from middle school to high school (e.g., Alspaugh, 1998), transitioning from adolescence into adulthood (e.g., Corijn, 1996), transitioning into retirement (e.g., Marshall, Clarke, & Ballantyne, 2001), and career transition (e.g., Lavalley, 2005). Career adjustment is a major life-changing experience (Wheaton, 1990), in particular with elite athletes (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011). Previous research found that one could experience multiple changes and difficulties during this shift (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011). Taylor and Ogilvie (1997) identified numerous challenges that athletes may experience during this transitional period, including adjustment difficulties, occupational/financial problems, family/social problems, psychopathology, and substance abuse issues. In addition, Brewer, Van Raalte and Petitpas, (2000) further identified that athletes also struggle with identity issues when transitioning out of elite sport.

For decades, researchers have taken interest in how athletic career transitions influence and impact athletes (e.g., Baillie & Danish, 1992; Hallden, 1965). Participating in elite sport can challenge an athlete not only physically, but also mentally during his or her career (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008). During the elite sport experience, the transition between significant points in a career has been identified as a specifically critical period (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). While existing research (e.g., Baillie & Danish, 1992; Bruner et al., 2008; Hallden, 1965) has focused on career transition, there appears to be an abundance of research focusing more on the negative ramifications of retirement from elite sport and, a lack research exclusively focusing on the examination of flourishing within the elite athlete career transition literature. Although research has examined various constructs of

flourishing in elite athlete transition for example, positive emotions (Alfermann, Stambulova & Zmaityte, 2004; Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007) and life satisfaction (Erpič, Wylleman & Zupančič 2004; Perna & Ahlgren, 1999; Stambulova et al., 2007), no research has purely focused on flourishing in the elite athlete transition process.

Flourishing is defined as a state in which an individual feels positive emotions toward life and is functioning well psychologically and socially (Keyes, 2003). Flourishing is one of a range of ways of conceptualizing well-being, by focusing on the healthy end of the mental health spectrum (Huppert & So, 2009). In the positive and social psychology realms, the concept of flourishing has been of interest to several researchers (e.g., Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Keyes, 2010; Ryff & Singer, 2002). Individuals can move up and down the mental health spectrum during different stages of their lifespan (Huppert & So, 2009); it is therefore important to be aware of the circumstances that may provoke this movement, such as transition.

Past literature on elite athletic career transition has revealed that among the numerous ramifications that athletes may experience post career, only a few studies have identified some of the positive outcomes (e.g. Alfermann et al., 2004; Erpič et al., 2004; Stambulova et al., 2007). Finally, within the sport psychology literature there is an abundance of research emphasizing the importance of athletes' well-being during their athletic careers (Blanchard, Amiot, Perreault, Vallerand, & Provencher, 2009; Reinboth & Duda, 2006). In effect, uncovering the factors that influence and promote flourishing would align well with and extend previous research (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004; Erpič et al., 2004; Stambulova et al., 2007).

The purpose of this study was to systematically review the literature investigating athlete transition post-retirement. The first aim of this systematic review was to examine the literature concerning elite athlete career transition. The second aim was to review the

literature pertaining to flourishing/positive outcomes in end-of-athletic-career transitions. The third specific aim was to review and identify the major gaps within these two areas of interest. After reviewing the literature, it was discovered that the authors could not identify any literature that explicitly focuses on flourishing. Therefore, the sample was delimited to those papers, which in part, measured positive outcomes (e.g., positive emotions) that fall under the constructs of flourishing. It is important to note that a meta-analysis was not conducted due to the absence of a comparison group.

Transition

Schlossberg (1981) characterizes *transition* as “an event or non-event, which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (p. 5). During the 1970s and early 1980s, psychologists and social scientists introduced the concept of transition into the field of sports psychology (e.g., Haerle, 1975). Sport psychologists have shown great interest not only in the development of the elite athletic career (Sosniak, 2006; Wylleman, De Knop, Menkehorst, Theeboom & Annerel, 1993), but also in the occurrence of career transition (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavalley, 2004; Wylleman, Lavalley, & Theeboom, 2004). One of the most commonly encountered issues for applied sport psychologists involves assisting athletes coping with career transition (Murphy, 1995). The quality of adaptation to post-sport life is significantly determined by the degree of voluntariness (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) and is understood as both a result of antecedent factors (e.g., Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) and mediating factors (e.g., Alfermann, 2000).

Athletes will face one of two types of transitions throughout their athletic career: (a) predictable and anticipated or “normative” transitions, or (b) non-normative transitions (Schlossberg, 1984; Wylleman et al., 2004). As a result, a systematic understanding of the phenomenon of career transitions and career stages is essential in order to support elite

athletes' career transitions (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). During a normative transition, the athlete typically exits one life stage and enters another stage (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). A normative transition for athletes may be the transition from junior to senior level sport, from regional to national level competition, from amateur to professional status, or from active participation to discontinuation from competitive sport (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004).

On the other hand, non-normative transitions are commonly unpredicted, unanticipated, and involuntary (Schlossberg, 1984). They also include non-events, or events that an athlete expects or hoped for that did not come to fruition (Schlossberg, 1984). In the athletic domain, these types of transitions could be a season-ending injury, the loss of a personal coach, or an unanticipated termination from the team.

To date, transition in sport has examined athletes' ability to cope with retirement and transition from competitive sport (e.g., Grove, Lavelle & Gordon, 1997), loss of identity issues (Grove et al, 1997; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004), athletes' perception of transition (Harrison & Lawrence, 2003), reactions to transition (Alfermann et al., 2004), and athletic effects (e.g., Erpič et al., 2004).

Flourishing

There are numerous conceptual definitions of flourishing or related concepts such as psychological well-being or positive mental health (e.g., Jahoda, 1958; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Flourishing refers to a state in which an individual experiences feeling of positive emotions towards life (Keyes, 2002). It is a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively socially and psychologically (Huppert, 2009). Furthermore, flourishing is closely associated with high levels of mental well-being, and it epitomizes mental health (Huppert, 2009; Keyes, 2002, Ryff & Singer, 1998).

An operational definition of flourishing was developed based on 10 features (competence, emotional stability, engagement, meaning, optimism, positive emotion, positive

relationships, resilience, self-esteem and vitality) from the hedonic and eudemonic aspects of well-being (Huppert & So, 2013). The hedonic approach focuses on happiness and defines well-being in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance; whereas the eudaimonic approach, focuses on meaning and self-realization and defines well-being in terms of the degree to which a person is fully functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

To be described as flourishing, an individual must encompass all core features and three of the six additional features. The core features consist of (a) positive emotions, (b) engagement/interest, and (c) meaning/purpose whilst the additional features consist of self-esteem, optimism, resilience, vitality, self-determination, and positive relationships.

There have been numerous psychological theories developed on human flourishing (Huppert, 2009; Keyes, 2002, Ryff & Singer, 1998). For example, Fredrickson (1998) developed the “broaden and build” model of positive emotions that encompasses the notions of flourishing and languishing, and characterized flourishing as exploration, creativity, use of intuition, developing social connections, enhanced coping strategies, resilience, and the building of a connected environmental knowledge base.

More recently, Diener et al (2010)—the most prolific researcher in the field of subjective well-being—created the Flourishing Scale, consisting of eight items describing important features of human functioning ranging from positive relationships to feelings of competence, to having meaning and purpose in life. The Flourishing Scale has been applied in number of studies, including studies examining optimism and pessimism in young adults (Palgi, Shrira, Ben-Ezra, Cohen-Fridel, & Bodner, 2011), measuring well-being for public policy (Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, & Seligman, 2011), and flourishing across nations (Huppert & So, 2009). As of yet, the Flourishing Scale has not been applied to the sporting context.

As has been demonstrated, transition out of elite sport is a complex and multidimensional, multilevel, and multifactor process and experience (Martin, Fogarty & Albion, 2014) and thus, the need for a review of the literature pertaining to elite athlete transition is warranted. A systematic exploration of this area will allow for a comprehensive understanding of the elite athletes' experiences of transition/retirement out of sport. Not only will the review enrich the literature, but it will also provide insight to sport psychologists and practitioners working with these elite individuals to promote the best possible outcome for their athletes' post-athletic careers.

Method

Search Strategy

The purpose of this paper was to set out to investigate athlete transition and flourishing post athletic retirement. However, after systematically reviewing the literature the authors that there is no research within the field of elite athlete transition that has an explicit focus on flourishing. Therefore, the sample of papers included in the review was those papers that in part, measured positive outcomes that fall under the constructs of flourishing.

To acquire articles, eight electronic databases (MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Embase, AMED, CINAHL, SPORTDiscus, Scopus, and Web of Science) were searched from commencement of each database to March 2015. Database specific search terms within the “core features” and “additional features” of flourishing, elite athlete, and transition were combined with their synonyms and Boolean operators, wildcards, and truncations were used. Only English language articles that contained data relevant to flourishing, elite athletes, and/or transition were included in the present review. Key phrases included: *professional athlete, athlete, sport, Olympic, phase transition, psychological adaptation, change, transition, career transition, retirement, end of career, quality of life, mental health, positive psychology and well-being*. Studies that examined athletes competing at levels below

national, international, or the highest professional level in their particular sport were excluded from the review. Additionally, papers were excluded if the sample of athletes had a disability or secondary disability, as it is imagined that the issues of flourishing and transition will be different for this population of athletes.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria consisted of elite level athletes competing at the national, international, highest professional level in their particular sport, or American collegiate athletes. It is important to note that although college athletes in the United States of America are not recognized to be competing at the top of their sport, in comparison to other countries it is the equivalent to their state or national level. Therefore, American collegiate athletes were included and considered as elite athletes within this systematic review. Athletes came from an individual or team sport. All ages, ethnicities, along with both male and female athletes were included. The study design had to be of a quantitative or mixed method approach, with results measuring positive outcomes. The studies had to be full peer reviewed articles in English.

Articles that were excluded from the review involved studies that only examined athletes competing at a district/regional and club/community level of sport, where it was not clear if the sample can be distinguished from recreational leisure participation and sport. If athletes had a disability or secondary disability or if studies only included individuals participating in leisure or recreational activities or social sport were also excluded from the current review. Furthermore, if studies were of a qualitative design, if there were no positive outcomes measured and the publication type was either a single-method qualitative research, narrative review, thesis, opinion piece, abstract, book chapter, report, case report, editorial, report from conference presentation, letters to the editor, review papers or commentary, they were also excluded from the current systematic review.

Procedure

Two reviewers independently assessed the methodological quality of the included articles. The initial search strategy yielded 3,787 articles that were assessed for eligibility. A total of 12 studies originally met the inclusion criteria through to the quality review process. All 3,787 articles were reviewed for relevance and whether or not they met the inclusion criteria. The remaining articles then went through a strict screening process in which the two reviewers read through the remaining articles to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria.

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009) were used to inform the design, implementation, analysis, and reporting stages of this systematic review. The two independent reviewers using a customized form based on five criteria carried out quality assessment simultaneously during the data extraction period. The quality criteria addressed sources of bias related to participant selection, recruitment, confounding variables, and the reliability and validity of outcome measures. These criteria were included given the expected broad range of quantitative study designs, as well as to ensure studies displayed both an appropriate degree of internal validity and results permitted accurate conclusions to be drawn. Each reviewer rated the five criteria as “satisfied”, “partially satisfied,” or “not met.” Ratings were compared and any disagreements were resolved by including a third party member to review the article under question and coming to a consensus. Two studies were excluded on the basis of quality. Furthermore, results of this quality assessment were accounted for when interpreting the data and making recommendations. Once these criteria had been satisfied, data were extracted by one reviewer and checked by the second reviewer. Data extraction included information about study design, participant characteristics (sample size, age, gender, country, sports, sporting level), recruitment method, and outcome characteristics of flourishing (outcome measures used, main results, and limitations).

The studies, which were systematically reviewed, are listed in Table 2. In addition, the reviewed studies are indicated with an asterisks within the reference list.

Results

Characteristics of Included Studies

The 10 studies included a total of 1,089 elite athletes; the majority of athletes were male ($n = 517$), 414 were female, and 158 did not specify. The age range of athletes was 14 to 59 years. Athletes competed at collegiate ($k = 1$), national ($k = 5$), international ($k = 6$), or Olympic level ($k = 1$) across 45 sports, drawing from a variety of Olympic sports and specific professional sporting codes.

The final 10 studies identified in the current review were analyzed to identify key research design and population data (e.g., country of study, age, gender, sports, measures, and concepts) and presented as summary tables in the results sections. First, characteristics of the studies (sample size, gender, mean age, competitive level, time post retirement, planned and unplanned retirement, country/continent and number of sports examined in each study) were summarized by a frequency count. Second, the means and standard deviations of all measures used within the included studies were examined. Third, a table with a summary of the main findings/conclusions, limitations, future research recommendations, and practical implications (where available) was provided.

Analysis of the data provided a clear picture of the types of samples recruited and the types of research designs employed in order to investigate the constructs of flourishing and transition in sport. Thus, gaps within the literature could be highlighted in these specific descriptive aspects.

Table 1
Demographics

Characteristics	Studies	
	<i>n</i>	%
Sample Size		
< 40	1	10
40–59	2	20
60–79	2	20
80–99	1	10
100+	4	40
Gender		
Male only	1	10
Female only	—	—
Combined	7	70
Not stated	2	20
Mean age		
< 20	1	10
20–39	6	60
Not stated	3	30
Competitive level		
Collegiate	1	10
National academies/institutes	1	10
National	1	10
International	3	30
National/international	3	30
Olympic	1	10
Time post-retirement (<i>M</i>)		
< 1 year	1	10
1–5 years	3	30
6–10 years	3	30
11+	1	10
Not stated	2	20
Examination of planned and/or Unplanned-retirement		
Planned	4	40
Unplanned	—	—
Combination	3	30
Not stated	3	30
Total	10	100

Table 1 provides a summary of the characteristics of the included studies and reveals that the studies within this systematic review had relatively small sample sizes. Over half of the studies recruited samples of both genders (70%). Sixty percent of the eligible studies

reported a mean age of 20 to 39 years. Athletes examined in the studies had a relatively early retirement age of less than 40 years; however, this is generally anticipated for a professional athlete. National athletes, or the combination of both national and international athletes, were recruited most frequently (60%), whereas collegiate athletes (10%), national academy/institute athletes (10%), national athletes (10%), and Olympic athletes (10%) were examined in only one study each. In addition, there was a wide spread of years post-retirement: less than 1 year (10%), 1 to 5 years (30%), 6 to 10 years (30%), more than 11 years (10%); only two studies did not report the years post-retirement. It is important to note that no single study solely investigated athletes with unplanned retirement.

Table 2
Demographic Information

Study	Country/Continent	No. of Sports Examined
Alfermann et al. (2004)	Germany, Lithuania and Russia	11
Dimoula et al. (2013)	Greece and Spain	20
Stephan et al. (2003)	France	7
Sinclair & Orlick (1993)	Canada	Not Stated
Erpič et al. (2004)	Slovenia	17
Martin et al. (2014)	Australia	9
Stambulova et al. (2007)	France and Sweden	19
Grove et al. (1997)	Australia	13
Perna & Ahlgren (1999)	America	3
Lavallee (2005)	England and Scotland	1

Table 2 provides a summary of the demographic information of the included studies; half of the research examined European athletes (57%), the remaining 43% was distributed among Australia (15%), the United Kingdom (15%), Canada (7%), and the United States (7%). The studies in the review examined numerous sports, with a third investigating

between 16 and 20 sports (30%) at one time. Only one study (Lavellee, 2005) examined a single sport.

Flourishing Constructs

The studies reviewed in this paper indicated numerous findings. The constructs which were explicitly measured in the review were..... The findings stated below are all identified within the 10 papers included within the systematic review. No external papers are discussed or included in the ‘flourishing constructs’ or ‘study outcomes’ section.

Table 3 provides a summary of the instruments employed by each of the included studies. The means and standard deviations for each of the flourishing measures for all studies are provided. Ten instruments were adopted to measure the subjective well-being and satisfaction with life of retired/retiring athletes. Four of the instruments were used twice in 10 of the included studies (Alfermann et al., 2004; Dimoula et al., 2013; Erpič et al., 2004; Lavellee, 2005; Martin et al., 2014; Stambulova et al., 2007), while the remaining two instruments were only used once.

The first study solely focused on male athletes (Grove et al., 1997), whereas the other study examined both male and female athletes (Martin et al., 2014). The studies were conducted 17 years apart, which may potentially make it difficult to compare results because sport and athlete well-being and welfare literature has dramatically developed over this period of time (e.g., Henry, 2013; Kleiber & Brock, 1992; Stephan et al., 2003). The Retirement from Sports Survey (Alfermann et al., 2004), the Athlete Retirement Questionnaire (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), and the Sports Career Termination Questionnaire (Erpič, 2001) were each utilized in five different studies (Dimoula et al., 2013; Erpič et al., 2004; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stambulova et al., 2007).

Results from these five studies revealed very similar outcomes for both the means and standard deviations. Outcomes were also similar for the 12-item General Health

Questionnaire and the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS). However, the range between the General Health Questionnaire and the SWLS outcomes was significantly different from outcomes on the Retirement from Sports Survey, the Athlete Retirement Questionnaire, and the Sports Career Termination Questionnaire measures.

Grove et al. (1997) utilized the Athletic Identity Measure Scale (AIMS) and the COPE Inventory measure, with the results from these two measures being almost identical. Interestingly, results from Lavellee (2005), who adopted the British Athletes Lifestyle Assessment Needs in Career and Education measure, revealed a much larger mean outcome in comparison to the results from the other studies.

Study Outcomes

Table 4 presents the main findings, limitations, recommendations for future research, and practical implications.

Examination of planned and/or unplanned retirement was one of the main areas of focus of the included studies (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004; Erpič et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2014; Stambulova et al., 2007). Alfermann et al. (2004) emphasized that the athletes who planned their retirement in advance in comparison to the athletes who had an unplanned retirement had higher cognitive, emotional, and behavioral readiness for their career transition.

Additionally, findings from the review indicated that retired/retiring athletes experienced a variety of emotional reactions and difficulties, such as being confronted with feelings of loss and void (Stephan et al., 2003). Furthermore, Sinclair and Orlick (1993) found that athletes who had a smoother adjustment to retirement tended to retire after they had achieved their sport-related goals. Martin et al. (2014) found that athletes who experienced involuntary retirement were at greater risk for experiencing adjustment issues. In the included studies, athlete identity was another major factor influencing retirement.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Flourishing Component of Measures

Study	Retirement from Sports Survey (RfSS)	The Athlete Retirement Questionnaire (ARQ)	The 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12)	The Sports Career Termination Questionnaire (SCTQ)	Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)	The Athletic Identity Measure Scale (AIMS)	COPE Inventory	British Athletes Lifestyle Assessment Needs in Career and Education (BALANCE)	A shortened 5-item version of the scale of Brewer et al. (1993)	12-item coping scale from a coping questionnaire developed by Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989)
Alfermann et al. (2004)									<i>M</i> = 3.3, <i>SD</i> = 1.2	<i>M</i> = 2.8, <i>SD</i> = 0.8
Dimoula et al. (2013)	<i>M</i> = 2.9, <i>SD</i> = 1.10									<i>M</i> = 2.9, <i>SD</i> = 1.1
Stephan et al. (2003)			<i>M</i> = 22.5, <i>SD</i> = 3.8							
Sinclair et al. (1993)		<i>M</i> = 4.2, <i>SD</i> = 1.0								
Erpič et al. (2004)				<i>M</i> = 4.1, <i>SD</i> = 0.8						
Martin et al. (2014)					<i>M</i> = 25.7, <i>SD</i> = 5.2	<i>M</i> = 33.1, <i>SD</i> = 6.1				
Stambulova et al. (2007)	<i>M</i> = 3.1, <i>SD</i> = 1.0									
Grove et al. (1997)						<i>M</i> = 12.9, <i>SD</i> = 5.1	<i>M</i> = 12.8, <i>SD</i> = 5.1			
Perna et al. (1999)					<i>M</i> = 25.4, <i>SD</i> = 4.9					
Lavallee (2005)								<i>M</i> = 68.7, <i>SD</i> = 3.7		
Total	2	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	2

High levels of athletic identity were typically associated with adjustment difficulties (Erpič et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997; Martin et al., 2014), lack of retirement planning (Dimoula et al., 2013; Erpič et al., 2004), and more frequent and severe psychological difficulties (Erpič et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997).

Additionally, findings from the review indicated that retired/retiring athletes experienced a variety of emotional reactions and difficulties, such as being confronted with feelings of loss and void (Stephan et al., 2003). Furthermore, Sinclair and Orlick (1993) found that athletes who had a smoother adjustment to retirement tended to retire after they had achieved their sport-related goals. Martin et al. (2014) found that athletes who experienced involuntary retirement were at greater risk for experiencing adjustment issues. In the included studies, athlete identity was another major factor influencing retirement. High levels of athletic identity were typically associated with adjustment difficulties (Erpič et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997; Martin et al., 2014), lack of retirement planning (Dimoula et al., 2013; Erpič et al., 2004), and more frequent and severe psychological difficulties (Erpič et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997).

A general consensus was that an athlete's athletic identity strongly influenced the individual's experience of retirement from an elite sport. Furthermore, Erpič et al. (2004) also found that non-athletic factors, such as educational status and negative non-athletic transitions, significantly influence the quality of sport career transition and adaption to life after sport. Lastly, examination of life satisfaction and coping strategies were thoroughly explored in the current review.

Across the various studies, a number of research- and participant-focused recommendations were proposed: a) examination of athlete retirement from a qualitative approach, with both prospective and retrospective designs (Dimoula et al., 2013; Grove et al., 1997), b) focus on involuntary retired athletes (Stephan et al., 2003), c) research with multi-

method approaches to develop a richer understanding of the transition to post-career (Grove et al., 1997; Stambulova et al., 2007), and d) understanding how athletes use their support network, along with the efficacy of behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social interventions for athletes in transition is needed (Lavellee, 2005).

Practical implications and recommendations were also provided. There was large emphasis on the need for the implementation of psychological training programs for athletes (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004; Dimoula et al., 2013; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), such as the implementation of positive interventions—including continuing financial support (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), seminars regarding adjustment (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), practical resource centers (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), and mental skills training programs (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).

In addition, there is a need for the development of interventions, progressive detraining programs (Dimoula et al., 2013), and sport career assistance programs for the athletes during and after retirement (Dimoula et al., 2013). Furthermore, practitioners should be encouraged to assist athletes in becoming more aware of, developing, and using transferrable skills, which may provide direction and motivation during their post-athletic careers.

Discussion

Results from this review offer insight into the extant research on transition to retirement for elite athletes. Given that the present analysis is based on 10 studies, the results need to be considered in this light, and caution is necessary when interpreting these findings.

Elite athletes face various challenges that influence the course of their career (Wylleman & Reints, 2010) and life after sport. The current analysis provides support for the notion that athletes face numerous challenges during the transition to retirement, including

Table 4

Summary of Outcomes

Study	Main Findings/Conclusions	Limitations	Future Research Recommendations/Practical Implications
Alfermann et al. (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Control planned = positive adaptation to life after the sport career than unplanned retirement. - Planned retirement = higher cognitive, emotional, and behavioral readiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Different sports of the participants in different samples - Some differences in the procedure of data collection 	Psychological training programs (for athletes approaching sport career termination but still active in competitive sport and also for already retired athletes).
Dimoula et al. (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Retired athletes had a high athletic identity during sports career - Athletes turned to a positive reinterpretation and coming up with strategy or plan as means to cope with retirement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very small/mixed sample size - Retrospective design (recall bias) - Quantitative (fail to capture entire complexity of retirement process) - Risk of objectifying culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Qualitative approach (prospective and retrospective design) - Development of sport career assistance programs
Stephan et al. (2003)	<p>Athletes were faced with feelings of loss and void</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The sense of job accomplishment and competence = increase in subjective wellbeing. 	<p>Retrospective study (recall bias, memory decay)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Goal developing skills - Timing and type of assistance during transitional period - Progressive detraining program <p>Practitioners should help athletes become aware of, develop, and use transferable skills that may provide direction and motivation in their post-athletic career.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on involuntary retired athletes - Methodology – semi-structured interviews during a 1-year period

Sinclair et al. (1993)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Achievement of sport related goals = smoother transition - Three reasons for retirement (a) tired of the circuit or lifestyle/time to move on, (b) had achieved their goals, and (c) had difficulties with the coaching staff. 	Not Stated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implementation of positive interventions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continuing financial support - Seminars regarding adjustment - Practical resource centers - Mental skills training programs
Erpič et al. (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulties of sports career termination: voluntariness of career termination, subjective evaluation of athletic achievements, and prevalence of athletic identity. - Non-athletic factors educational status and negative non-athletic transitions have a significant effect on the quality of sport career transition and adaptation to post-sport life. 	Not Stated	Sport psychology practitioners to diagnose both athletic and non-athletic aspects of the athletes life
Martin et al. (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High levels of athletic identity may be associated with adjustment difficulties. - Career planning = positive life satisfaction - Involuntary retirement = greatest risk of adjustment issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low power associated with the small sample size. - Retirement status and age were confounded - 5-year gap between data collections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Important to continue support for athletes post-retirement - Athletes are and should be encouraged to access individualized support services through programs
Stambulova et al. (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Retirement planning = favorable emotions and coping behaviors in the transition 	Retrospective design (recall bias, memory selection/reinterpretation small sample size)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More research in transition to the post-career and to emphasize the role of some

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Athletes used a combination of coping strategies - Retirement planning = more favorable emotional and behavioral reaction to career termination 	Measurements should be improved	<p>principles/approaches in the psychological work with retiring/retired athletes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Applied sport psychologists should analyze not only the athletes' micro-social environment but also macro- and meso-social factors
Grove et al. (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coping strategies = Acceptance, positive reinterpretation, planning - Athletic identity at the time of retirement exhibited significant relationships to coping processes, adjustment, pre-retirement planning, and anxiety 	Not Stated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A multi-method approach to research in this area in order to achieve a better understanding of the retirement process, - The collection of prospective data
Perna et al. (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Injured athletes were significantly different from non-injured athletes in their ability to state an occupational plan. - Non-sport or sport-related career plans = higher satisfaction with life - Vocational plans = higher degree of life satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Athletes designated themselves with respect to injury status as opposed to a medical professionals determinations - Time between injury occurrence and Satisfaction With Life 	Not Stated
Lavallee, 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Life development intervention can significantly assist elite athletes who experience career termination adjustment difficulties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intervention protocol varied - Small sample size - Long recruitment period - Potential selection bias 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding how athletes use their support networks. - The efficacy of behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social interventions for athletes in transition

occupational/financial problems (Dimoula et al., 2013), and family/social problems (Erpič et al., 2004). Additionally, within the sport retirement literature a significant amount of attention has been dedicated to life satisfaction (Dimoula et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2013; Perna & Ahlgren, 1999), coping strategies (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004; Dimoula et al., 2012; Grove et al., 1997; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stambulova et al., 2007), and planned versus unplanned retirement (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004; Erpič et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2013). Although researchers have thoroughly examined the consequences (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004; Dimoula et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2007) and factors of retirement (e.g., Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000), the transition from sport has been predominantly approached from a deficit perspective. While the literature has identified some positive outcomes of elite athlete retirement, there appears to be no study that has focused solely on measuring and examining flourishing/positive outcomes among retired elite athletes. It may be useful to examine aspects of flourishing such positive emotions, engagement, purpose, optimism, resilience, and self-determination. This knowledge will aid practitioners in assisting athletes to achieve and sustain a flourishing life post athletic career.

Studies included in this review had a relatively even distribution of male and female athletes. However, there appears to be a paucity of research examining a single gender, or comparing male and female athletes' experiences of transition/retirement from elite sport. Previous research has identified that there are several differences based on gender (Crocker and Graham, 1995). There is also evidence that females and males cope differently with performance-related stress in sport (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). There may also be gender-specific differences in flourishing, and future studies should aim to compare male and female athletes' levels of flourishing post-retirement.

Athlete transition/retirement has been studied at various competitive levels. Collegiate (Perna & Ahlgren, 1999), national (Alfermann et al., 2004), international

(Stambulova et al., 2007), and Olympic sports (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), studies included in this review examined athlete retirement at 1 to 10 years post-retirement; to date, only one study has examined a sample of athletes immediately after retirement, or during the exit process (e.g., Stephan et al., 2003). Therefore, it would be beneficial to the literature to provide more insight into the initial reactions of elite athletes immediately after their retirement.

Half of the studies in the present review were conducted in Europe (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004; Dimoula et al., 2013; Erpič et al., 2004; Stambulova et al., 2007; Stephan et al., 2003). Furthermore, the majority of studies examining retirement and transition in elite athletes assessed multiple sports at one time (e.g., Dimoula et al., 2013; Grove et al., 1997; Martin et al., 2014; Stambulova et al., 2007; Stephan et al., 2003). Rather than focus on multiple sports, it may be beneficial for future research to examine a single sport. It may also be of benefit to conduct a comparison study between athletes from different sports. Athletes may have different experiences based on a number of factors—type of sport, level, team versus individual, exposure, and salary, among others.

One critical outcome of this current analysis was that it revealed that there appears to be no instrument to solely measure flourishing in athlete transition. Across the 10 studies included, 10 different psychometric measures were utilized. None of the measures utilized in the included studies focused specifically on flourishing. Although a number of researchers have conducted qualitative research around transitioning athletes (e.g. Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007) there appears to be no research that has explicitly focused on flourishing/positive outcomes among retired elite athletes. Therefore, to identify which measure is the best, most suitable, and most accurate measure of flourishing, additional qualitative research with transitioning athletes is warranted.

It has been well documented within the area of career transition/retirement from elite sport that athletes are faced with an extensive range of psychological, interpersonal, and financial adjustments when they end their competitive careers (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). While it is inevitable that an elite sporting career will come to an end, the way in which it ends plays an influential role in the athlete's transition experience. For example, studies have revealed that athletes who planned or had a voluntary retirement experienced higher self-efficacy with respect to post-athletic career adaptation (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; McPherson, 1980; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001). The majority of studies included in this review focused specifically on planned retirement, as opposed to unplanned retirement (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004; Erpič et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2013). Therefore, it would be of benefit to the transition literature to further investigate the effect of unplanned retirement in elite athletes.

Numerous limitations were identified within the included studies in the present review; however, it is important to note that limitations were not explicitly stated in all of the studies. Nevertheless, a number of inherent methodological limitations were identified. For example, a) retrospective studies (i.e., Dimoula et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2007; Stephan et al., 2003) could lead to recall bias and memory selection/reinterpretation; b) data collection procedures (Alfermann et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2014); c) sample size (e.g., Dimoula et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2014; Lavalley, 2005; Stambulova et al., 2014); and d) measurement (i.e., measures failing to capture the entire complexity of the retirement process; Dimoula et al., 2013). Quantitative research can typically provide breadth but often lack depth in findings, which was noted in one of the studies (i.e., Dimoula et al., 2013). In addition, there were multiple limitations specific to individual studies, such as small and/or mixed samples (Martin et al., 2014; Stambulova et al., 2007), inconsistent data collection procedures (Alfermann et al., 2004), examination of different sports compared across different samples (Alfermann et al., 2004), weak measurement tools (Stambulova et al., 2007), participant self-

selection method (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004; Lavalley, 2005), and long recruitment periods (Lavalley, 2005).

Future recommendations

Based on the current review, it is suggested that future research is required—in particular, a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding and focus of flourishing among retired elite athletes, with a larger sample size, and an examination of athletes who have just entered into the transition phase of retirement. A qualitative approach using both a prospective and retrospective design is recommended to capture a richer experience of retired athletes' post-career transition. Furthermore, research should focus on involuntarily retired athletes, as well as implementing interventions to assist athletes through this stage of their career. In effect, research examining elite athletes at the period of retirement could help provide a more comprehensive picture of the life cycle of the elite athlete. Such research could lead to the development of more tailored interventions aimed at helping improve post-career athletes' mental health.

Chapter 3: Experiences and Conceptualizations of Flourishing in Retired Male

Professional Football Players

3.1 Introduction

As reported in Chapter 2, there appears to be a focus on the consequences of retirement and transition from professional sport with a much lesser focus on the positive outcomes. Whilst research has identified some positive outcomes of retirement from professional sport to date, no study has focused exclusively on measuring and examining flourishing in this specific cohort of individuals.

The aim of the study reported in this chapter was to establish the way in which retired professional athletes conceptualised their understanding of flourishing and whether their understanding aligned with current literature.

Please see Appendix A for the semi-structured interview guide for this study.

The subsequent section, Chapter 3 is presented as a manuscript formatted for submission to *The Sport Psychologist Journal* Knights, S., Ruddock-Hudson, M., O'Halloran, P., Sherry, E. (under review). Experiences and Conceptualizations of Flourishing in Retired Male Professional Football Players. *The Sport Psychologist*

Abstract

This study was designed to explore how retired professional male football players experience and conceptualize flourishing. Forty-six retired male football players participated in a semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis was performed on the qualitative data regarding their experience and conceptualizations of flourishing. Four main themes were identified from the analysis: (a) athlete flourishing: purpose, passion, ambition, and happiness; (b) what reflects flourishing: physical appearance and financial situation; (c) steps to flourish: prepare for retirement and plan for life after sport; and (d) the importance of social support: family, friends, and community. Findings revealed that retired male football players considered additional factors that influences flourishing that have not yet been captured by the four pre-existing conceptualizations and operational definitions of flourishing. Findings contribute practical insights and can provide valuable knowledge for practitioners who are working with male football players' retiring/retired from professional sport.

Keywords: flourishing, life after sport, transition, professional athlete flourishing, post-retirement

Flourishing: Retired Professional Athletes Experience and Conceptualization

Over the past three decades, research on career transition in sport has grown gradually (e.g., Park, Lavallee & Tod, 2013). As a result, investigators have found numerous predictors, which influence the quality of the career transition process for the athletes (e.g., Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007; Park et al., 2013). Whilst researchers have largely focused on athletes languishing in retirement (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007; Torregrosa et al., 2015; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008), more recent studies have started examining factors that can influence a positive transition out of professional sport (e.g., Park et al., 2013; Stambulova, Ryba & Henriksen, 2020).

Retirement from sport refers to the process of transition from participation in competitive sport to another activity or set of activities (Coakley, 1983). The existing literature surrounding retirement from professional sport had largely focused on the ramifications that an athlete faces in the years following retirement, such as: loss of identity (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), denial of retirement (Torregrosa et al., 2015) and, alcohol and drug abuse (Stambulova et al., 2007). It has also been reported that a relevant indicator of potential problems during and after retirement from elite sport is an athlete being exclusively focused on sport and having a strong and uni-dimensional athletic identity (Anderson et al., 2012; Stambulova, Alfermann, Stalter & Côté, 2009; Torregrosa et al., 2015). This derives from anecdotal evidence on elite athletes having severe problems after retirement from elite sport and research in career transitions (see Park, Lavallee et al., 2012).

Another challenge that retired athletes face is the physical changes that their body undergoes once they cease playing at the professional level (Papathomas, Petrie, & Plateau, 2018). The body plays a key role in the construction of the athletes' identity (Loland, 1999; Saint-Phard, Van Dorsten, Marx, & York, 1999;), who are particularly attuned to their self-perception in the physical domain (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993), and derive much of

their self-worth from their perceived competence in the physical domain (Saint-Phard et al., 1999). The perception of the deterioration of the body, after devoting years of time and effort, therefore, it is expected that changes in their body and physical appearance to be particularly stressful and threatening for the self-esteem of the athletes (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignie`res, 2003). Research found that when athletes were planning for life after sport, they focused exclusively on starting a professional career, taking a degree, having a family, and enjoying life in general (North and Lavallee, 2004). However, body changes due to retirement from competitive sport were not an aspect considered by athletes as a part of their plan (Stephan et al., 2007). Therefore, the bodily transition may potentially be a source of distressful reactions because the new professional career often does not allow the former elite athlete to keep fit and, even if an exercise programme is maintained, a substantial discrepancy remains between the after retiring healthy exercise activity and the sporting training activity developed during the athletic career (Chamalidis, 2000).

Whilst previous literature has focused on the causes and consequences of retirement, research has also moved on to identify predictors for the quality of athletes' career transitions (Wylleman et al., 2004). Parks et al. (2013) summarized findings of athletic retirement research based on 126 studies published in English between 1968 and the end of 2010. In their summary, it was identified that the quality of the post-sport career adaptation is influenced by an interplay of various personal and developmental factors of the athletes' (e.g., athletic identity, educational and financial status) and facilitated by pre-retirement planning, searching for a new career/interest, psychosocial and professional support (Parks et al., 2013). It has also been identified that there are positive associations between marital, social, educational, and financial status, and the quality of career transition (e.g., Lotysz & Short, 2004; Marthinus, 2007). Furthermore, positive associations have been established

between the quality of the athletes' career transition and the athletes' involvement in programs to prepare for life during their athletic careers (Park et al., 2013).

Preparing for retirement and planning for life after sport is one of the most popular measures in the scientific literature on retirement (e.g., Stambulova et al., 2020; Torregrossa et al., 2015). Researchers have identified that planning and preparing for sport can reduce a number of psychological ramifications (e.g., Park et al., 2012). For example, Torregrossa et al. (2015) examined fifteen Olympic athletes and found that retirement planning along with, a voluntary retirement, availability of social support and active coping strategies, were factors that aided in a positive retirement from elite sport. However, athletes who showed a lack of retirement planning, involuntary termination, lack of social support and reactive coping strategies, had a much more difficult transition experience (Torregrossa et al., 2015).

Researchers have also made recommendations on how to support athletes, not just in terms of the support they need (e.g., social, tangible, emotional), but also when this support should be provided. Murphy (2009) introduced five types of social support (i.e., emotional, esteem, information, network, and tangible). Researchers have said that certain forms of social support (e.g., tangible, emotional) may have more influence on specific types of stress than others. Therefore, by identifying which types of support and examining the forms of support athletes receive during career transition can potentially help practitioners design appropriate social support-based interventions (Park et al., 2013), thus enhancing the athletes' ability to have a positive transition out of professional sport and flourishing in life after sport (Ashfield, McKenna, & Backhouse, 2012; Ryan, 2019). However, whilst literature has identified the ramifications of retirement along with factors associated with a more positive transition; research-investigating flourishing in the context of athletic transition and retirement is yet to be examined (Ashfield, McKenna, & Backhouse, 2012; Ryan, 2019).

Given the attention that retirement and transition from professional sport has received, this particular gap in the literature is one that warrants further investigation.

Flourishing has been a term used to define optimal well-being, by focusing on the healthy end of the mental health continuum (Huppert & So, 2009). Flourishing is currently highly varied in both definition and conceptualization (Hone, Jarden, Schofield, & Duncan, 2014). One useful starting point to understand flourishing has been suggested by Fredrickson and Losada (2005), who described flourishing as being “within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth and resilience” (p. 678). Flourishing is also said to possess conceptual similarities with optimal well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 2000). There is evidence to suggest that there are a number of factors that contribute to flourishing; for example, resilience, personal growth, goal striving, and good interpersonal relationships (Ryff & Singer, 2000). While there have been variations on a single definition of flourishing, there appears to be an agreement on two factors. Firstly, flourishing refers to high levels of subjective well-being (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Seligman, 2011); and secondly, flourishing is a multidimensional construct that cannot be adequately measured using a single-item assessment (Hone et al., 2014).

Based on these two factors, the psychological literature identifies that there are currently at least four different conceptualizations and operational definitions of flourishing (Diener et al., 2010; Huppert & So, 2009; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011). While the four conceptualizations share some commonalities, there are still many differences among them (Hone et al., 2014; see Table 1). The first notable difference is the number of items contained within each conceptualization. For instance, Keyes (2002) identified 13 items in his conceptualization, whereas Huppert and So (2009) and Diener et al. (2010) identified six items in their conceptualizations, with Seligman’s (2011) conceptualization consisting of

only four items. The second noticeable difference is that the four models do not include all of the same characteristics, and each conceptualization values the various characteristics and necessary factors of flourishing differently. Thus, it is difficult to determine which model/s will most accurately represent flourishing for a specific population (Hone et al., 2014).

In addition, based on the four models, it is challenging to align the current conceptualizations of flourishing with the layperson's real world understanding of flourishing (Hone et al., 2014). The inconsistency in conceptualization of flourishing suggests a lack of agreement about what characterises flourishing (Ashfield et al., 2012). The diversity of definitions suggests a lack of conceptual clarity, as many are derived from research into psychological functioning or subjective well-being, rather than research into understanding the human experience (Ashfield et al., 2012). Certainly, there are a number of studies on the lived experience of flourishing (Bergland & Kirkevold, 2005, 2006; Gilroy, 2005; Stanford, 2006). However, no research has yet examined flourishing in the retired athlete population, despite the lives of athletes providing prolific ground to explore notions of living well, not least since successful athletes appear to have a clear life purpose (Lundqvist, 2011) while also maintaining productive and meaningful relationships (Ashfield et al., 2012).

To date, research has explored flourishing within organizations (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008), societies (Keyes, 2007), nations (Huppert & So, 2013), and the general public (Keyes et al., 2002). However, in more recent years, researchers examining flourishing in the sport context have grown (e.g., Ashfield, McKenna, & Backhouse, 2012; Ferguson, Epp, Wuttunee, Dunn, McHugh & Humbert, 2019; Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack & Sabiston, 2014; Kler & TriBe, 2012; Wagstaff, Fletcher & Hanton, 2012). For instance, researchers have examined flourishing in scuba divers (Kler & TriBe, 2012) student athletes (Stander et al., 2017), in sporting organisations (Wagstaff, Fletcher & Hanton, 2012), in sports marketing (Bush, Bush, Clarke, Bush, 2005) and, during an athletic career (Ferguson, et al., 2014).

However, Ashfield et al. (2013) are the only researchers to attempt to provide an empirically derived conceptualisation of flourishing through qualitative methods in a sample of athletes. It was discovered that athletes' conceptions of flourishing are similar to pre-existing conceptualisations but are not identical. Furthermore, their research has provided evidence that flourishing is to be defined as an individually-specific notion of optimal well-being. Nonetheless, despite the increase of flourishing research in the sporting literature and positive association with transition out of sport, no research has yet to examine flourishing in the retired athlete population. Though, to help athletes flourish in life after sport, or to know which factors influence flourishing in retired athletes, examining their conceptualization of flourishing is vital. Therefore, it has been recommended that research in the sport realm explore the ways in which retired athletes conceptualize flourishing (Ashfield et al., 2012; Author et al., 2016; Hone et al., 2014).

From a practical standpoint, exploring the experiences of flourishing and how retired athletes conceptualize flourishing may provide valuable practical knowledge for practitioners working with athletes who are transitioning from elite sport (Hone et al., 2014). For instance, by understanding, which factors lead athletes to flourish, practitioners can proactively work on developing those specific areas with their patients. Additionally, it could potentially enhance academic knowledge and practical guidelines for health care professionals when working with athletes by working within a framework or applying an operational definition for this specific cohort. This will allow for a more tailored and specific approach suited for the individual, which, in turn, may increase the number of retired athletes flourishing in life after sport and potentially reduce the negative ramifications of retirement. Lastly, this type of research can enhance and complement the literature on retirement using the flourishing model.

Therefore, the current study had two primary goals, which align with recommendations from previous literature (Ashfield et al., 2012; Author et al., 2016; Hone et al., 2014). The first goal was to understand how retired professional athletes conceptualized flourishing, and the second goal was to explore athletes' experiences of flourishing after their professional sporting career.

KEYES	HUPPERT & SO	DIENER et al.	SELIGMAN et al.
Positive relationships	Positive relationships	Positive relationships	Positive relationships
Positive affect (interested)	Engagement	Engagement	Engagement
Purpose in life	Meaning	Purpose and meaning	Meaning and purpose
Self-acceptance	Self-esteem	Self-acceptance and Self-esteem	–
Positive affect (happy)	Positive emotion	–	Positive emotion
–	Competence	Competence	Accomplishment/Competence
–	Optimism	Optimism	–
Social contribution	–	Social contribution	–
Social integration	–	–	–
Social growth	–	–	–
Social acceptance	–	–	–
Social coherence	–	–	–
Environmental mastery	–	–	–
Personal growth	–	–	–
Autonomy	–	–	–
Life satisfaction	–	–	–
–	Emotional stability	–	–
–	Vitality	–	–
–	Resilience	–	–

Table 1. Four different conceptualizations of flourishing. Adapted from “Measuring Flourishing: The Impact of Operational Definitions on the Prevalence of High Levels of Wellbeing,” by L. C. Hone, A. Jarden, G. M. Schofield, and S. Duncan, 2014, *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 4, p. 65. Copyright 2014 by L. C. Hone, A. Jarden, G. M. Schofield, and S. Duncan.

Methodology

Participants

This study included 46 retired professional male athletes from the three largest professional football codes played in Australia: 25 from Australian Rules football (Australian Football League; AFL), 10 from rugby league (National Rugby League; NRL), and 11 from soccer (A-League). The three football codes were chosen because they had the longest established player associations, which meant that all codes were able to provide large player bases from their established alumni groups. In addition, all football codes share a number of similarities; for example, they are all considered professional sports and the athletes are highly paid and required to commit full-time to training and playing. Additionally, all football codes have similar sporting pathways into their professional competition and share similar average retirement age.

Participants had been retired from their respective sport for a period of time ranged from 0.5 years to 25 years ($M = 16.52$, $SD = 35.87$) and had previously been involved with the elite professional system for a period of time ranged from 2 years to 22 years ($M = 12.68$, $SD = 9.87$).

All participants had played at the national and/or international level in their sport. The mean age of the 46 retired male football players was 36.22 years and the standard deviation was 22.6. Although this is a large standard deviation, it is important to note that 60% of the retired male football players, who participated in the study, fell between the ages of 25 and 40. All participants volunteered to participate in the study and no incentives were offered. Appropriate ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee was provided to undertake the research.

Data Procedure

Upon ethics approval, the first author contacted retired AFL, NRL, and A-League player associations via email with an invitation to send to their alumni groups to participate in the study. Personal contacts were also used to reach one athlete from each of the three football codes. Once an initial group of retired male professional football players were recruited, snowball sampling (Browne, 2005) was employed to obtain the remainder of participants. All participants were then invited to take part in a semi-structured interview lasting between 45 and 60 minutes (see Appendix A). Upon commencement of the interview, the first author informed participants about the study's objective; method; and related ethical issues, such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time. An interview protocol was established based on gaps identified in the literature (Hone et al., 2014) and the four operational definitions of flourishing (Diener et al., 2010; Huppert & So, 2009; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011).

Interview questions included:

- In your own words, what is your understanding of flourishing for a retired athlete?
- Based on your definition of flourishing, can you recall any moments since you have retired from sport when you believe you were truly flourishing?
- Since you have retired from professional sport, are there any factors that you believe have assisted and helped you flourish? If so, can you please discuss what they were and what they provided for you?

The principal investigator conducted all of the interviews in person or via phone.

Data Analysis

In line with the purpose and objectives of this research, the ontological and epistemological assumptions, which informed this research, was post-positivist/critical realist philosophical position (Poucher, Tamminen, Caron & Sweet, 2019). The steps taken

throughout the research process aligned with this position and helped to ensure the coherence of this study (Poucher et al., 2019).

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and the first author analyzed the transcripts via thematic analysis (TA) utilizing NVivo 10. TA is one of a cluster of analytic approaches used, when identifying *patterns* of meaning across a qualitative dataset (Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016; 2006). To ensure that the data analysis was conducted thoroughly, correctly and at a high quality, researchers followed the 15-point ‘checklist’ for good TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006), along with, following the six-stage guidelines suggested by Braun and colleagues (2016):

- Phase 1-2: Familiarization and coding
- Phase 3-5: Theme development, refinement and naming
- Phase 6: Writing up

To ensure that the research process was thorough, trustworthy and rigorous, inter-rater reliability was conducted (Smith & McGannon 2018). Inter-rater reliability was adopted within the study, as it is the most extensively used reliability technique within the field of sport and exercise psychology (Culver, Gilbert & Sparkes, 2012). This technique was achieved by three researchers operating in isolation from each to independently code data without negotiation. Researchers then came together to compare codes and reconcile through discussion whatever coding discrepancies they may have for the same unit of text (Smith & McGannon 2018). Once a high level of agreement/consensus was demonstrated at the end of this process, the coding was deemed reliable (Smith & McGannon 2018).

To further enhance the rigor of the current study, the use of ‘critical friends’ was adopted. This was achieved by introducing an outside person and the researchers giving voice to the interpretations of findings. This process encouraged reflexivity by challenging each other’s construction of knowledge’ (Cowan & Taylor, 2016, p. 508). The critical friend

provided a theoretical sounding board and encouraged reflection upon, and exploration of, multiple and alternative explanations and interpretations as these emerged in relation to the data and writing (Cowan & Taylor, 2016).

Results

Four themes were developed from the analysis: (a) athlete flourishing: purpose, passion, ambition, and happiness; (b) what reflects flourishing: physical appearance and financial situation; (c) steps to flourish: prepare for retirement and plan for life after sport; and (d) the importance of social support: family, friends, and community. The following section outlines these results in detail.

Athlete Flourishing: Purpose, Passion, Ambition, and Happiness

The current theme reflects how participants understood and conceptualized flourishing. Participants within the study commonly used words and phrases such as being happy, content, healthy, acceptance, and doing well, when defining their understanding of flourishing. Factors that participants believed influenced their ability to flourish following retirement from professional sport included: having a purpose, career or job stability, having a happy family, successful marriage, along with having work-life balance.

Most participants described flourishing as having a purpose in life. For instance, doing something that they were “passionate about doing every day” along with “having goals and ambitions” were factors that encouraged and enhanced an athlete’s chances of flourishing in life after retirement. This is reflected in the following quote:

You need to have a passion and a drive and a focus on something else. Whether most of that’s going to business or whether they fall into a job that allows them, just like their sporting career, to make goals, to progress up the food chain. They’ve got to balance family life and I think the biggest thing that we’ve seen these days is, their mental health is in shape. (Participant 3, A-League)

Having a strong identity beyond a professional footballer was also discussed as a factor that conceptualized flourishing post-retirement. Participants who “held on to who they once were” and whose “self-image, self-esteem was wrapped up in their ability to play football” reportedly struggled more with their retirement and transition into life after sport in comparison to those who had a broader perception of themselves.

In addition, having an “optimistic outlook on life” toward retirement was another frequently used phrase by many of the participants when defining flourishing. Some participants expressed that the way in which they evaluated their retirement assisted their transition, thus allowing them to flourish. For instance, “embracing the future” and having “confidence” in themselves:

There was a sense of excitement I was comfortable, I felt like I could achieve anything. If I could achieve things in sport, I felt like I could achieve what I wanted to achieve. That was my thinking. That’s the way I thought. (Participant 1, A-League)

Acceptance was used in terms of enabling athletes to flourish. For instance, one participant shared, “It was that acceptance that I am retired, that I am finished. That was the hardest part.” However, once he had accepted his retirement, his life started to slowly come together: “After 6 months, I eventually just had to let it go. All right, get on with it. Start this new life. . . . That’s sort of where I was able to transition a little bit easier.”

What Reflects Flourishing: Physical Appearance and Financial Situation

The second theme that was reported from the study was the physical and financial experiences of flourishing. Most of the participants discussed how their body image, physical appearance, and financial situation influenced their experience of flourishing in life after sport. Thirty-two athletes specifically discussed that being fit and in shape were indicators of flourishing and were therefore concepts that they included in their definition

when conceptualizing flourishing in retired athletes. Struggling with body image and the changes their bodies went through once they had finished playing professional sport was described as a crucial influencing factor in their ability to flourish. Participants shared that they missed “being super fit, feeling ripped and healthy” and once they were retired these specific expectations were much harder to achieve and maintain. A large portion of participants reported that fitness was a particularly important factor that influenced flourishing post-retirement. A number of participants also considered good overall physical and mental health to be part of their conceptualization of flourishing. Several participants shared that having a “pain-free” body allowed them to do what they wanted to do physically, and therefore was a key influencing factor in the concept of flourishing. For example, one participant shared, “Flourishing after retirement. That’s a very good question. Having good health. For me, health that would be physical and mental. Devote a bit more time to your own personal health and well-being” (Participant 12, AFL).

Financial stability was another factor that participants felt influenced flourishing. Financial stability was discussed in terms of owning a house and having no financial debt, thus allowing the individual to live the life they wanted. This may have consisted of traveling overseas and taking holidays with their families or owning their car. One participant shared the following:

Apart from being happy, I suppose I look at flourishing as probably having enough money to be able to retire when I’m ready to retire—to be able to have an investment property or to be able to drive the nice car that I want. That would be how I’d see success and flourishing in retired life. (Participant 7, NRL)

Steps to Flourish: Prepare for Retirement and Plan for Life After Sport

Planning for retirement and preparation for life after sport appeared to play a critical role in the athletes’ experience of flourishing. Participants who had planned for their

retirement in addition to being prepared for the end of their career described their transition out of retirement as a positive experience. Feelings of excitement were expressed, as the athletes were ready for the next stage of their lives. For example, “I was optimistic about my future, and I still am, because I already had good businesses and I was ready to take that on.”

Participants who were prepared for their retirement shared that their career ending was not a shock. Preparation gave them time to plan for their future; therefore, it didn’t feel that their life had been “turned upside down.” Participants with a plan shared that, once their football career had ended, they were ready to start their new chapter and were excited about what was ahead of them. It gave them a sense of purpose, direction, and self-worth knowing that they would be actively doing something that they had a passion for after their football careers. For instance, one participant shared how having a plan helped him achieve what he wanted to after his football career and gave him a sense of comfort and satisfaction knowing he had something to achieve after his football career:

I didn’t want to leave anything to chance and that’s how I approached my transition as well. Because I think it is tough transitioning from a sport—because although you don’t have job experience in terms of a regular person—I was never ho hum about what I was going to do after footy finished. I knew what I wanted to do, and I was going to do everything I could to get there. Having that mindset and knowing what I wanted to do after football gave me a sense of calm. I was ready and excited for the next chapter of my life. (Participant 14, AFL)

Additionally, it appeared that for retired male professional football players who had planned for life after sport expressed fewer struggles and negative ramifications associated with their retirement, when compared to those who had not planned for their future. Participants discussed how they believed having a job or something specifically organized for them to do after they retired from sport provided them with a sense of purpose, autonomy,

and even connectedness with their new life and identity, thus assisting them to flourish in life after sport. For instance, retired male football players discussed how they felt that having something outside football gave them purpose and meaning, a goal to achieve every day, just like they did as an athlete. For example:

To do well after sport, you need to have a deep understanding of yourself. You need to have a broad self-awareness of who you are, what your strengths and weaknesses are. You must know that who you are, is not exactly what you do. I also think getting some fulfillment in whatever you're doing, and a sense of purpose. I feel like if you've got some purpose, you get some reward. (Participant 9, A-League)

In accordance with this, many participants believed that the reason they had flourished in retirement was directly related to the level of preparation and planning they had achieved during their football careers. For instance, during spare time some athletes would contemplate what they would be doing if they were not playing football, and therefore they have had such positive experiences of life after football. For example:

I didn't want to leave anything to chance, and that's how I approached my transition and life after footy. . . . It must be something from my parents and, you know, instilled in me, I suppose. If I wanted to achieve something and that's what I wanted to do, I was going to do everything I could to get there, but also knew the reality of it, and I suppose that gets into you as well throughout my career. . . . It was all about preparing myself for after footy. (Participant 11, AFL)

In addition, participants who had a plan post-retirement shared that it gave them a sense of security, along with a sense of optimism about their future. For example, some participants discussed the feelings of excitement and confidence for the new chapter of their life, as well as their ability to be successful away from sport. One participant stated:

Especially in the latter half of my career, I spent a lot of time and energy thinking about life after football. I invested in business and in myself because nothing in life lasts forever. I wanted to make sure that whilst I wasn't playing football, I was definitely spending time in those areas, so when I did move out of football, I had something to run to. (Participant 4, AFL)

Individuals who were prepared shared that they spent a lot of time investing in themselves, such as networking with people in areas of occupational interest, taking the time to figure out what it was they were passionate about other than football, and mentally preparing for the end of their careers by talking to family and friends. These participants expressed that their level of preparation allowed them to reconnect with a normal life sooner, therefore experiencing flourishing much sooner in their life after sport. These particular individuals reflected on how they have been able to readjust their lives, discover new passions, establish their families, and be grateful for what their athletic careers enabled them to do once they had retired:

I look back with fondness. Complete fondness. I think, being a professional athlete, you learn great discipline in life—just a great grounding for everything. Learning to work within team environments, especially whatever you choose post-football. I chose hospitality, and it's the same thing. You're still working within a team environment here, and I try to use a lot of my football experiences with the staff to make sure—you want to keep them happy at work, motivated, part of the team. If they're having a bad day, you want to be there to console them. (Participant 10, NRL)

The Importance of Social Support: Family, Friends, and Community

Support from families and a partner was another theme that was reported from the data. Participants highlighted that social support enhanced a positive experience and

transition to retirement. Teammates were considered as a source of support for each other during the transition and retirement process. For instance, participants spoke about how their support networks gave them a sense of belonging and connectedness to the community, specifically with youth community programs and community sport. Having a good social support network increased positive emotions, improved athletes' outlook on life, and provided exposure to healthy relationships, as participants felt they had a place that they not only belonged to, but which provided them with purpose. One participant shared the following: "Networking's a huge tool to be recognized and to actually embrace while you're playing, because it can really help you after footy, especially when looking for work opportunities" (Participant 5, AFL).

Participants also reported that their social support networks provided job opportunities, which enhanced their sense of purpose and self-identity; thus, enhancing their ability to flourish in life after sport. For instance, one individual shared that during his career he made sure that he gave a lot of time to sponsors and established relationships with them, so that when he transitioned from football, he had made good friendships and connections with people that he felt could provide opportunities. Some players even discussed benefiting from established relationships with their teammates' parents, who provided advice and assistance for life after sport:

One of my mates' old man [father] was a builder, so I used to have good chats with him about what I had to do once I finished. It was just good having someone give you some advice and kind of see you as a person and not just as a footy star. Because I played with his son, he knew the nature of the game. I don't know if he really knew how much I appreciated the advice or just how nice it was for him to let me chew his ear off about stuff. But that kind of support and having that person really helped me with direction once I finished playing footy. (Participant 12, AFL)

The most commonly reported sources of social support were partners, parents, and friends. These social connections provided retired athletes with emotional and informational support in the years following sport. Players reflected and discussed how their partners and families had been there through the ups and downs, would move their entire lives for their careers, and provided unconditional support. For example, one athlete shared how highly he regarded the support from his family:

Family, I think, is so important when you're going through your struggles. No matter what the situations—when you get family support, it's very spiritual and it's very psychological in terms of who they turn to. . . . They seem to effect change within your thought, change within your emotional state. Just seeing them, without having to say something, is support. (Participant 8, A-League)

Support from former teammates was also considered to be helpful, as it provided current athletes with a realistic perception of what life after sport was like. Participants discussed how talking to former teammates normalized their experience and made them feel that they were not alone; that the “roller coaster of emotions” was all a part of the experience. This support was regarded as an extremely important factor during the years after sport and was consistent across all 45 athletes. Emotional and informational support were described by many players as significant factors that enhanced their outlook on life, along with increasing their positive emotions and having unconditional support from those around them, particularly in the 6 to 12 months post-retirement.

Discussion

In response to the gaps identified in previous studies, such as the lack of research examining flourishing in retired athletes and the absence of a specific operational definition of flourishing for this cohort of individuals (Ashfield et al., 2012; Author et al., 2016), the current study extends previous research by exploring retired professional athletes'

conceptualizations and experiences of flourishing in life after sport. This study provides some insight into how retired male football players conceptualize flourishing in addition to factors that influence the flourishing process in life after sport. Furthermore, this study also complements the literature on retirement by using the flourishing model and identifying indicators for a positive transition.

Findings from the current study indicated that the athletes' understanding and conceptualization of flourishing shared commonalities with the four widely used and preexisting conceptualizations of flourishing (Diener et al., 2010; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Huppert & So, 2009; Keyes, 2002); such as engagement with their community, family, and friends; having meaning and purpose in their life; feelings of happiness (positive emotions); and having a sense of accomplishment. Participants also shared that partaking in social engagement and having a sense of satisfaction with their life after sport, along with having the ability to be resilient and demonstrate qualities of personal growth, were factors of flourishing. Participants' language was also consistent with the constructs that the current conceptualizations use, such as engagement, meaning and purpose, optimism, life satisfaction, and happiness (Diener et al., 2010; Huppert & So, 2009; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011). Furthermore, findings from the current study also supported research by Huppert and So (2013), whereby participants described flourishing as obtaining positive emotions, having a sense of purpose, and being engaged with community, rather than just a singular experience. Therefore, results from the current study would support the notion that flourishing has been described similarly by both non-athletic samples (Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, 2007) and athletic samples.

Although there were several similarities among previous research findings, there were also additional factors discussed which were not identified in any of the current conceptualizations. The identification of additional factors in the current study demonstrates

that special consideration needs to be taken when measuring flourishing using the preexisting models. Furthermore, the identification of additional constructs by the retired male professional football players in their conceptualization of flourishing allows for a more accurate understanding of flourishing in this specific cohort. Moreover, it provides better knowledge for practitioners who are working with athletes to better assist them for life after sport.

A number of participants considered financial security, having a successful marriage, and strong social support as factors that influence flourishing. Whilst these factors have been identified as indicators and predictors of a positive transition and retirement from professional sport, they have not been identified as characteristics in extant flourishing literature (Diener et al., 2010; Huppert & So, 2009; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011). The idea of financial security is supported by the human needs theory (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002). The human needs theory suggests that an individual's basic psychological needs are satisfied when there is the presence of income and wealth, which can also lead to increased well-being (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002). Furthermore, it extends the theoretical contributions of Maslow (1943) by proposing that money is most strongly—and maybe only—related to well-being when it is used to help satisfy basic needs (e.g., food, clean water). In addition to this, the stress-buffering model (Cohen & Wills, 1985) assists the notion of social support. The stress-buffering model posits that social support mitigates the relation between negative life events and the onset of depression (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Therefore, when reassessing the measurement or constructs that lead to flourishing in athletes, it may be beneficial to consider both financial security/well-being and social support as influencers.

These findings suggest that an athlete's experience and conceptualization of flourishing require further consideration and in-depth exploration. For instance, a

quantitative study could be conducted measuring flourishing with the preexisting constructs of flourishing and the inclusion of the newly identified factors within this study. Conducting such a study may help to identify whether there is a correlation between flourishing and the new constructs. This particular finding and suggestion support previous recommendations made by Ashfield et al. (2012) that, in order to appropriately measure flourishing in retired athletes, we need to first understand how they perceive flourishing as a construct. Thus, when examining perceived flourishing in retired athletes, factors such as financial status, social support, and successful relationships may need to be considered to obtain an accurate assessment.

Body image and health were also specifically discussed when defining flourishing in retired male professional football players. For example, several participants mentioned that when they saw other retired athletes who were not in the best physical shape, they considered this as an indicator that they were not coping or doing well in life after sport. Whilst previous literature has identified body as a ramification of retirement from sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008), along with it being a facilitator of a healthier retirement (e.g., Stambulova et al., 2009; Torregrossa et al., 2015) it has not previously been suggested as a characteristic or measurement of flourishing. For retired male football players who have built a career and identity on their physical skills and ability (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990), this finding is not surprising. This notion is further supported by the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), which suggests that athletes who strongly identify with their sporting identity are more likely to struggle during their transition and post-athletic career than the athletes who identify less strongly with their sporting identity. The importance of physical fitness, and indeed their athletic identity through their physicality, can be considered key factors in retired-athlete flourishing. This implies that when measuring flourishing in this specific

cohort, body image and health could be useful to consider and incorporate in a measure of athlete flourishing.

Findings from the present study regarding the role of social support and retirement from sport have in part been supported by previous literature (e.g., Huppert & So, 2013; Murphy 2009; Torregrossa et al., 2015); as social support has been identified as a predictor of a positive transition and retirement from professional sport. This notion is further supported by the stress-buffering model which suggests that social support alleviates the relation between negative life events (Cohen & Wills, 1985), such as retirement (Panagioti, Gooding, Taylor, & Tarrier, 2014), rehabilitating from injury (Bianco, 2001), along with the development of professional athletes (Stephan et al., 2003). However, while the benefits of social support have been recognized in sport settings, social support has not previously been considered as a core feature of flourishing in retired male professional football players. Nevertheless, participants in the present study held their social networks in high regard and identified these as being both an indicator and enabler of flourishing in life after sport. A potential explanation as to why participants placed particular emphasis on their social support networks may be that athletes are accustomed to team-based environments in which they must work cohesively with others to attain common goals. Research has found that group cohesion is a dynamic process whereby the group tends to remain together and united in the pursuit of its goal for the satisfaction of the affective needs of group members (Veatch & May 2005). Group cohesion, especially within the sport realm, is an essential variable and is something that teams work toward to achieve success (Onağ & Tepeci, 2014). Thus, given that athletes have been embedded in an environment whereby team cohesion and working with others to achieve a goal was essential, relying on their support networks during retirement is something they may heavily rely on, especially in time of need. Therefore,

supportive networks, friends, family, coaches, and staff would be equally as important in the post-career phase of life as in their athletic careers (Stephan et al., 2003).

Strengths and Limitations

The current study complemented and extended previous literature by using the flourishing model and identifying additional variables that are considered important in the flourishing process. One of the main strengths of the current study was the qualitative nature of the research, which allowed participants to provide a detailed conceptualization of flourishing. Another strength is that, by not restricting the length of retirement period of the participants, the researchers were able to explore whether the length of time spent in retirement altered the athletes' perception of flourishing in life after sport.

Although this study provides insight into how retired elite athletes experience flourishing in life after sport, some issues need to be considered when interpreting the findings—for example, the age of the participants and the retrospective nature of the interviews. Nevertheless, there are a number of important practical implications that can be drawn from the current study. A deeper understanding of athlete flourishing may assist sport psychologists, welfare managers, and player development managers to more comprehensively understand the necessities for post-athletic retirement. For instance, sporting organizations can create frameworks and develop tailored programs for their athletes based around the flourishing constructs identified within the current study. A better knowledge of flourishing may also allow for improved programs to be implemented, which better prepare athletes for life after sport and provide more specific and accurate resources for athletes once they have retired. These findings may also be transferrable to other professional male sports, therefore enhancing and promoting positive psychology and flourishing in retired male professional football players.

Conclusions

Greater conceptual clarity has been achieved to demonstrate how flourishing is conceptualized in retired professional athletes. In support of existing literature, the findings from the current study indicate that retired male professional football players understand flourishing based on several different characteristics. This included engagement, meaning and purpose, accomplishment, identity, optimism, financial stability, positive emotion, and body image.

While some of the findings from the current study are consistent with previous research, it can be concluded that this study supports the assertion of Hone et al. (2014) that to accurately measure flourishing within a specific group, investigation between lay and academic conceptualization of flourishing must align. In addition, four additional factors that influence flourishing have been identified. Therefore, when measuring flourishing in retired athletes, it may be beneficial to include psychometric measures and or interview questions that examine body image, social support, financial security, and retirement preparation to enhance and align the understanding of the real world and the academic concepts of flourishing. Furthermore, it is also unclear if the factors identified within this study are only influencers of flourishing or if they may be components of flourishing. Therefore, future research to determine if these factors are influencers or potentially components of flourishing would benefit the literature.

Sporting organizations, coaches, sporting clubs, and psychologists may utilize these findings to create an environment that will facilitate and encourage flourishing for athletes in the years beyond the professional sporting realm.

While flourishing considers a range of factors and qualities that an individual might possess, it is evident from the current study that there are additional variables that athletes believe they must acquire in order to be flourishing. Therefore, to obtain a comprehensive

assessment of flourishing in retired athletes, it may be useful to include the additional factors such as body image, financial security, and social support, to supplement a more traditional flourishing measure. This may potentially determine the level of impact and importance each of these newly identified constructs have on flourishing. In addition, researchers and practitioners can potentially utilize the knowledge gained from this study to identify how athletes explain and define flourishing, thus contributing to the theory of flourishing in the context of elite athletes.

Chapter 4: The End of a Professional Sport Career: A Positive Transition

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 provided evidence that there are four main areas that need to work simultaneously together for an athlete to experience levels of flourishing in life after sport. This Chapter highlights that to ensure a positive transition and the opportunity to flourish in life after sport, the process needs to be “athlete-centered” with organisational support.

The aim of this chapter was to investigate the positive experience of transition and life after sport in a group of retired professional athletes.

Please see Appendix A for the semi-structured interview guide for this study.

Chapter 4 is presented in its published format (Knights et al., 2019): Knights, S., Sherry, E., Ruddock-Hudson, M., & O’Halloran, P. (2019). The End of a Professional Sport Career: Ensuring a Positive Transition. *Journal of Sport Management*, 33(6), 518-529

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore the experience of transition and life after sport in a group of retired professional athletes. Forty-five retired athletes from three national football league's took part in semi-structured 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: professional athlete, retirement, transition, flourishing

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). Additionally, 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. While 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 paper, however, is specifically on the transition process and retirement experience. For a review of work investigating flourishing in athlete retirement, please refer to [Authors, 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. While 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 in order 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:

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

Research Context

The following section provides an outline and explanation of the three football codes examined within the current 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 to 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 (RLPA); however, unlike the AFLPA, it does not have a specific alumni group. The RLPA represents players contracted to play for a club in the Australian Rugby League Commission, National Rugby League 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 (A-League, n.d.). 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 to \$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 (PFA), which like the RLPA, focuses predominately on supporting current players and building a better game, but does not have a specific group for alumni members (A-League, 2018).

While 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 non-event which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (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 non-normative 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 non-events, which are events that an athlete expects or hopes for but do not happen (Gordon & Lavalley, 2011). Non-normative 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. Additionally, 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 post-retirement.

Previous research has also acknowledged a strong inverse relationship between voluntary transition and level of difficulty adapting to life post sport (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 the current 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) pre-retirement 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 remain in any one phase for the same amount of time. While 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 non-sport 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 non-athletes—have to find another or new occupation. In contrast, retirement in non-sporting

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 non-sporting retirement. When comparing an athletic retirement to 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 post-retirement (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 & Marshm, 2004). Moreover, when comparing the difference between a sporting retirement and a non-sporting retirement, the non-sporting 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 non-sporting 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 non-sporting literature, the positive impact of retirement planning and preparation on retirement adjustment in individuals has been extensively reported (e.g., Donaldson, Earl, & Muratore, 2010). While 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 the current 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. Additionally, 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, Lavalley, & Gordon, 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 to 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, 2004; 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 post-athletic career than athletes who are less connected to this identity.

When elite athletes transition out of sport into retirement, many need to re-evaluate their reference points in social, professional, and physical domains (Kim & Moen, 2001). 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 non-sporting 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 post-sport 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. Additionally, 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.

Method

Participants

In order 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 the current study. In total, 46 retired athletes participated in the study. Fifty-three percent 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 to 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 post-sport 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, while 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. Additionally, 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 semi-structured 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 minutes and had an average length of approximately 50 minutes.

Data Analysis

To ensure familiarity with the interview data, the principal investigator repeatedly read the transcripts and analyzed them via thematic analysis utilizing NVivo10. Both inductive and deductive analysis processes (Braun & Clark, 2006) were used when coding and analyzing data. Themes identified in the current study both 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, 2000) 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, and (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, the current 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.

Figure 1.

Athlete Preparation for a Positive Retirement

	PLANNED RETIREMENT	UNPLANNED RETIREMENT
PREPARED FOR LIFE AFTER SPORT	PP: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ACCEPTS RETIREMENT - STRONG IDENTITY BEYOND ATHLETIC REALM (EVEN DURING CAREER) - HAS GOALS AND DIRECTION OUTSIDE THE SPORTING ARENA - OPTIMISTIC ABOUT FUTURE - SENSE OF AUTONOMY 	UP: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - IDENTITY BEYOND SPORTING REALM - STRUGGLES WITH RETIREMENT ACCEPTANCE - TENDS TO HAVE GOALS AND DIRECTION OUTSIDE THE SPORTING ARENA - OPTIMISTIC ABOUT FUTURE - FEELINGS OF ANGER, DISAPPOINTMENT AND REGRET ABOUT CAREER END - LACK OF AUTONOMY
UNPREPARED FOR LIFE AFTER	PU: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ACCEPTS RETIREMENT - HIGH ATHLETIC IDENTITY - EXPERIENCE PSYCHOLOGICAL RAMIFICATIONS - LACKS DIRECTION AND PURPOSE - ANXIOUS ABOUT FUTURE - EXPERIENCE PSYCHOLOGICAL RAMIFICATIONS (E.G. ANXIETY, DEPRESSION) - SENSE OF AUTONOMY 	UU: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - STRUGGLES WITH RETIREMENT ACCEPTANCE - HIGH ATHLETIC IDENTITY - EXPERIENCE PSYCHOLOGICAL RAMIFICATIONS (E.G. ANXIETY, DEPRESSION) - LACKS DIRECTION AND PURPOSE - HOLDS ONTO PAST - FEELINGS OF ANGER, DISAPPOINTMENT AND REGRET ABOUT CAREER END - ANXIOUS ABOUT FUTURE - LACK OF AUTONOMY

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 (PP)

This particular quadrant includes athletes who have both planned for their retirement along with being prepared for life after sport. From the current 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 they could finish their career with a sense of pride and on their "own terms." Additionally, 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.”

Furthermore, A1 also discussed how he started thinking about and preparing for retirement from professional sport roughly four years before he had actually retired: “I was thinking about retirement probably for the last four years.” Additionally, 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 (PU)

Athletes who fit within this quadrant (PU), had planned for their retirement; however, they were unprepared for life after sport. Similar to athletes in the PP 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. Additionally, 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 the current 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 the current 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.

While 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.

While 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 while 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 (UP)

The 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 to those who had not—experienced a slightly more positive transition. However, while these athletes did not experience as many of 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 PP 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 (UU)

The final quadrant is UU. 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.

Additionally, 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.”

While the findings of the current 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 the current study was that an athlete could still experience a somewhat positive transition if they had only planned or prepared. While 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 to 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. While 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

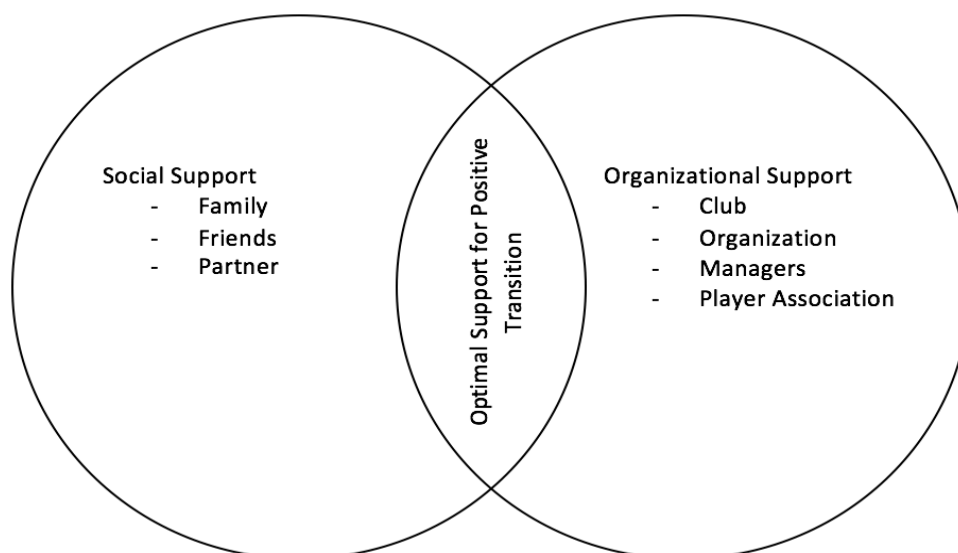
sporting organizations to, again, become more proactive in assisting players in planning for life after sport during their careers. For instance, development managers could work with athletes to understand what they would be doing if they were not playing professional sport and guide them to achieve 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 & Lavalley, 2016).

Figure 2.

Athlete Transition: Social and Organizational Support



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 the current 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.

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, while the remaining 31 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). Additionally, 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.

While 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, while 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 the current 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 to a traditional career retirement—is very different due to the age at retirement, athlete identity, and education (Webb et al., 1998). Unlike non-sporting careers, 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 post-retirement. Finally, it would also help to evaluate the support programs currently in place to assist with the transition process in order to identify ways of promoting flourishing in life post-sport.

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 impress 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.

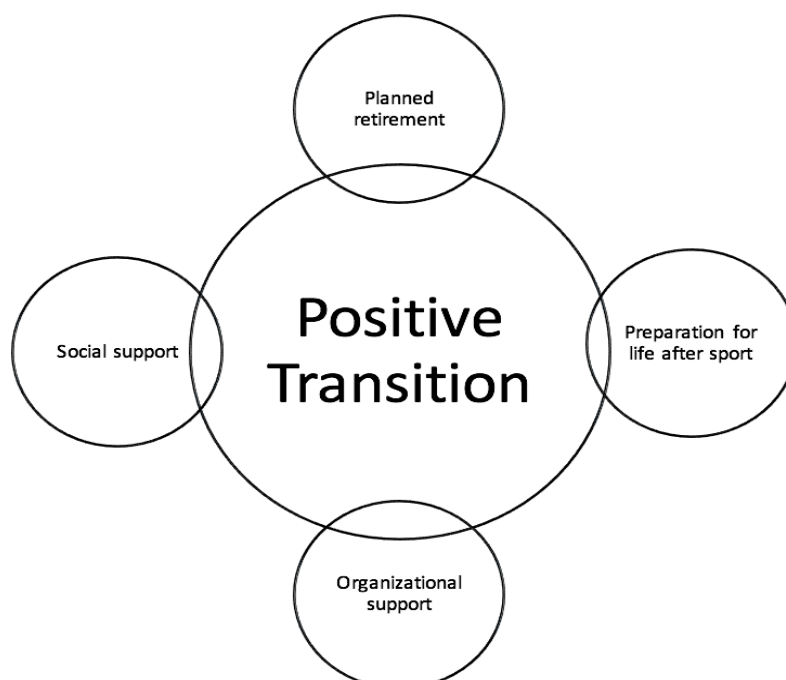
They’ll say lots of things just to keep everyone happy because they know what the mums and dads of the aspiring players want to hear. That’s the way the world works now.

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.

While the findings regarding social support were consistent with previous research (e.g., Bianco & Eklund, 2001), the current 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).

Figure 3.

The Positive Transition Model from Professional Sport



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 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. What did remain a problem, however, 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. While 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 the current 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. While 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 semi-professional 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.

Secondly, this study also identified that while 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. Lastly, 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 post-retirement).

Limitations and Future Research

The current 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 to 20 years ago. Firstly, this could have led to retrospective bias and, secondly, 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. While 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 in order 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.

Chapter 5: General Discussion

5.1 Thesis Overview

There were two core aims of this thesis, the first was to examine how flourishing is conceptualised and experienced in a sample of retired male professional athletes. The second aim was to explore factors that promoted a positive transition into retirement and to identify if these factors fostered flourishing in life after an athletic career. To achieve these aims, three research objectives were developed.

These research objectives were addressed in three different papers applying appropriate methodologies to explore the experiences and personal understanding of flourishing in retired professional athletes. The aims and findings of study are summarised in Table 5.1.

First, a systematic review (Chapter 2) was conducted to scope the field of research and then inform the direction of the overarching research project and design. The systematic review examined and identified factors that contribute to a successful end of career transition. Three main findings emerged from the review. Firstly, whilst there had been an abundance of research that had examined the effects of transition out of a sport career, there appeared to be no literature which had explicitly examined flourishing within a sample of retired athletes. The second finding from the review was that no study had specifically examined flourishing as a whole conceptualisation, but rather, only measured up to three constructs of flourishing. Lastly, the review highlighted the need for future research to examine flourishing from a qualitative approach to capture a richer understanding of retired professional athletes experience of flourishing post retirement.

To gain a richer understanding of flourishing in retired professional athletes, further research was conducted.

The second study, (Chapter 3) was designed to explore how flourishing was conceptualised by retired male professional athletes from three different football leagues in Australia. A key finding from this particular paper was that three additional factors were considered in the retired athlete's conceptualisation of flourishing, these included : body image, financial security and social support. However, it remains unclear if these additional factors need to be considered as components of flourishing or factors that influence flourishing. Additionally, results indicated that the level of preparedness for retirement, strongly influenced the athletes experience of flourishing post-retirement.

The third study (Chapter 4) explored the experience of transition and life after sport in a group of retired professional male athletes. Forty-six participants from three main football codes within Australia participated in a semi-structured interview which was designed to examine what factors contribute to a positive transition out of professional sport and, what factors lead to flourishing post-retirement from professional sport. A major finding from Chapter 4, identified four key areas that are required to enhance the transition process for an athlete. The four key areas included: social support, organisational support, planning for retirement and being prepared for life after sport. It is important to note that findings from this study identified that social support was reported to be provided by partners, family and friends. However, organisational support was considered as a separate support network, thus why it was deemed relevant as an individual factor to promote a positive transition.

The comprehensive examination of a) flourishing and, b) positive transition and retirement from sport provided an evidence base for designing and evaluating a targeted intervention to improve flourishing and retirement for retired professional athletes.

This thesis highlights a number of key findings: Firstly, results identified that there are additional factors that need to be taken into consideration when conceptualising flourishing in a group of retired professional athletes. However, it is unclear if the factors

identified within this thesis are simply factors that influence flourishing or, if they need to be considered as constructs in the measurement of flourishing. Another major finding from this thesis was the development of the positive transition model from professional sport, which identified four core areas that influenced a positive transition: 1) planned retirement, 2) preparation for life after sport, 3) organisational support and 4) social support. It is evident that this thesis has made several contributions and addressed core gaps within the a) flourishing literature and, b) retirement from sport literature. The following section will further address and discuss the key contributions as a result of this research.

5.2 Key Contributions from this Thesis

5.2.1. Transition: Similarities and Differences Between Research Findings and Current Literature

When findings from the individual studies are viewed as a collective, a number of key contributions and common themes are evident. To the authors' knowledge, no qualitative study has been conducted, which has specifically examined flourishing and positive transition from professional sport. This is a potentially useful and novel contribution to the literature. Findings from this research established additional factors which athletes used to conceptualise their understanding of flourishing, such as, the level of preparedness, body image, social support and financial well-being. The identification of these factors may assist in developing a more comprehensive conceptualisation of flourishing, thus distinguishing which psychometric tool is best suited to measure flourishing for this specific cohort. Moreover, organisational support was considered to play a critical role in the athlete flourishing and positive transition, which is consistent with previous research (e.g., Surujlal, 2016). However, findings from this research revealed that social support is received from two different sources, the first being friends and family and, the other being organisational

support from the sport club or association. This is an important finding as each source of support plays an equal and critical role impacting the athletes' experience of a positive transition. Both sources of support need to be highly regarded for the athlete to have the optimal opportunity to experience a positive transition. If one of the support streams is perceived to be lacking, then this may influence the athletes' ability to experience a positive transition. It was also identified that there are four factors that influence a positive transition out of professional sport: planning of retirement, social support (e.g., friends, family), organisational support (e.g., coaching staff, club) preparation for life after sport. It was suggested that there are four combinations of how an athlete can prepare for their transition, thus effecting their experience overall. The ideal combination for a positive transition is if the athlete has planned for their retirement and has prepared for life after sport (PP) (please refer to Figure 4.1, page 90) (Knights et al., 2019). In the PP combination, an athlete accepts their retirement, has a strong sense of autonomy, has a strong identity beyond the sporting realm, has goals and is optimistic about their future. However, if an athlete has an unplanned retirement and is prepared for life after sport (UP) or, is planned for retirement and unprepared for life after sport (PU) they may still experience a positive transition. Nonetheless there may be some ramifications, such as struggling to accept their retirement, psychological ramifications (e.g., depression, anxiety) and have a lack of direction and purpose (Knights et al., 2019). Alternatively, an athlete with a combination of being unplanned for their retirement and being unprepared for life after sport (UU) is most likely to experience a difficult and negative transition. It is within the UU combination where an athlete struggles with acceptance of their retirement, has feelings of anger, experiences psychological ramifications and carries feelings of anger, disappointment and regret about their career end.

When summarising the findings, there were consistencies found between previous retirement and transition sport literature and the current research, such as, the influence of organisational support, and the importance of planning and preparing have been (e.g., Lavalley, 2019; Park et al., 2012). However, this research identified and contributed to the retirement and transition literature by developing the positive transition model from professional sport. This model highlighted that for an athlete to experience an optimal retirement and transition, that their social support, organisational support, their preparation for life after sport and planning over their retirement all influence a positive transition from professional sport. Therefore, findings from the current research have assisted in identifying factors that influence and promote a positive transition, thus, potentially influencing and enhancing an athlete's ability to flourish in life after sport.

5.2.2. Flourishing: Similarities and Differences Between Research Findings and Current Literature

When analysing previous flourishing literature with the current research, there were several similarities and differences. The first is the conceptualisation of flourishing. By using a coherent framework, underpinned by theoretical traditions of flourishing, additional factors that may influence flourishing in retired male athletes were identified. The variables identified by retired athletes were congruent with the current conceptualisations of flourishing in previous research. For instance, as part of their conceptualisation of flourishing partaking in social engagement (found in Diener, Wirtz, Tov, Kim-Prieto, Choi, Oishi & Biswas-Diener, 2010; Huppert & So, 2009; Seligman, 2011 models of flourishing), having a sense of satisfaction with their life after sport (found in Keyes, 2002 model of flourishing), having the ability to be resilient (found in Huppert & So's, 2009 model of flourishing) and demonstrate qualities of personal growth (found in Keyes, 2002 model of flourishing) have

Table 5.1

Summary of Findings for Each Study

Chapter	Aim(s) of Study	Key Findings
2: Systematic review (Study 1)	Determine what constructs of flourishing had been measured in transition and retirement in athletes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No research had explicitly focused on flourishing/positive outcomes among retired elite athletes. • There is no one instrument that solely measures flourishing in athlete transition and life after sport. • Majority of studies included in this review focused specifically on planned retirement, as opposed to unplanned retirement
3: Qualitative study (Study 2)	Determine the way in which retired professional athletes conceptualise and experience flourishing post-retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There were a number of consistencies between the four most commonly used operation definitions and constructs of flourishing and retired athletes • The nature of the athlete's retirement, the level of preparedness, body image, social support and, financial well-being were considered to be factors of athletes flourishing in life after sport which had not been identified in previous flourishing literature. • Organisational support was considered to play a critical role in the athlete flourishing in life after sport. • Flourishing in life after sport needs to be investigated as a multidimensional concept within a global and sport-specific context.

4:
Qualitative
study
(Study 3)

To examine what a positive
transition and retirement looked
like to a retired professional
athlete.

- Retired athletes were satisfied with the social support from friends and family during retirement but reported a lack of organisational support from their respective club, coaches and staff.
- There are four contributing factors to a positive transition: planning of retirement, social support (e.g., friends, family), organisational support (e.g., coaching staff, club) preparation for life after sport.
- Optimal support (friends, family and organisational support) is critical for a positive transition.
- There were four different combinations in which an athlete prepared for their retirement.

all been highlighted. However, findings from the current research identified that athletes considered financial security, being physically fit, having successful relationships with a partner and strong social support as factors that influence flourishing. These variables have not been identified in current literature (e.g., Diener et al., 2010; Ferguson, Epp, Wuttunee, Dunn, McHugh & Humbert, 2019; Huppert & So, 2009; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011). As a result, a major contribution to the research has been addressing potential limitations within previous research where ambiguous and inconsistent definitions of flourishing may have been utilised (e.g., Hone, Jarden, Schofield & Duncan, 2014; VanderWeele, 2017). This may suggest that although the occupation of an athlete differs to that of a non-athlete, the factors that influence flourishing are still consistent in both samples. This research established an evidence-based practice which appears to have been limited by a paucity of studies (Ferguson et al., 2019; Hone et al., 2014).

Another similarity between the current research and previous literature was the language utilised by retired athletes when describing flourishing (Diener et al., 2010; Huppert & So, 2009; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011). Language such as engagement, meaning and purpose, optimism, life satisfaction, and happiness was consistent with the four most commonly used conceptualisations of flourishing (Diener et al., 2010; Huppert & So, 2009; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011). Moreover, athletes described flourishing as obtaining positive emotions, having a sense of purpose, and being engaged with community, rather than just a singular experience, (Huppert & So, 2009).

Whilst there were numerous similarities within the current research that aligned with previous research, there were also several new findings that emerged. One of the main contributions made by this research was the comprehensive

understanding of flourishing. The current research identified four critical factors that athletes reported to be necessary to enhance the flourishing process which are unique to the body or research. These included: (1) body image and health, (2) financial security, (3) social support/organisational support and, (4) preparedness and planning. The subsequent sections will discuss these contributions further

5.3 New Findings

5.3.1 Body Image and Health

Retired athletes identified that body image and health were factors which influenced their ability to flourish in life after sport. As discussed in Chapter 4 (Study 3), many of the retired athletes struggled with their body image and the changes their bodies went through once they had finished playing professional sport. Athletes also discussed finding it difficult to maintain their physique once they stopped playing at the professional level. A considerable number of athletes also reported that fitness was a particularly important factor that influenced their ability to flourish post-retirement. Several athletes shared that having a pain-free body allowed them to do what they wanted to do physically, and therefore was a key influencing factor to be considered when examining flourishing. Whilst body image hasn't been identified within the four core models of flourishing, it has however, received a lot of attention in the sporting literature and the role it plays on current performing athletes (e.g., Kerr, Berman & Souza, 2006) and retired athletes (e.g., Papathomas, Petrie & Plateau, 2018). Furthermore, research has identified multiple difficulties experienced by retired athletes with their body which are negatively related to global self-esteem, physical self-worth, perceived physical condition, sports competence, and bodily attractiveness (Stephan, Torregrosa & Sanchez, 2007). It has also been suggested that

an athlete's feelings of self-worth and well-being are partially constructed by their perceived physical competencies (Laure & Meline, 2018; Saint-Phard, Van Dorsten, Marx, & York, 1999). Consequently, changes in the physical domain can add to the potential distress during an athlete's retirement/transition phase. As body image largely influences an athlete's self-worth and overall well-being (Stephan et al., 2007). Therefore, when conceptualising and/or measuring flourishing amongst professional athletes, it may be beneficial to consider body image as an influencing factor which may hinder or aid in their likeliness of flourishing post-retirement,

5.3.2 Financial Security

Another factor which contributes unique findings to the body of research, was financial security post-retirement. Athletes considered financial security as owning their own house and having no financial debt. Participants also spoke about traveling overseas and taking holidays with their families or owning a luxury car. Findings from the current research identified that financial security was a strong indicator of flourishing in life after sport. Furthermore, athletes reported that an individual's financial situation had a large influence over their ability to flourish once they had retired from sport. This notion is supported by previous research, which identified that financial issues/restrictions and a lack of planning was a major concern for athletes when retiring from sport (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Marin-Urquiza, Ferreira & Van Biesen, 2018). Therefore, it may be important to consider an athlete's financial situation and perception of financial security when conceptualising and/or measuring flourishing within an athletic population.

5.3.3 Social Support

The finding of social support to promote a positive transition was consistent with previous research. Social support during retirement can potentially minimise the

negative ramifications of retirement (Gordon & Lavalley, 2011). Nevertheless, findings from the current research indicated the general lack of support that athletes felt they received from their respective team and/or sport organisation. This finding may be explained through differentiating between formal (i.e., organisations, institutions) and informal (i.e., family and friends) supports, where informal support is generally identified as being superior to the formal support (Camara, Bacigalupe & Padilla, 2017; Highet, Hickie, & Davenport, 2002). Consequently, if an athlete does not understand how different support is provided, they may feel that their formal support network (e.g., sporting club, coaches) are not providing the care they believe they should be receiving. Results from this thesis identified that the level of support and the perceived empathy or personal interaction received from sporting organisations, can ultimately influence the experience of the athletes' transition into retirement. As a result, social support can have a direct effect on an athlete's ability to flourish in life after sport. Therefore, when examining positive transition, it is important to acknowledge that athletes not only require support from friends and family, but their respective clubs and sporting organisations. Furthermore, education in relation to support providers and how support is perceived may be warranted.

5.3.4 Preparedness and Planning

Preparedness and planning for life after sport was another construct impacting the ability to flourish post retirement. Whilst sporting literature has identified that planning and preparing for sport retirement can reduce psychological ramifications (e.g., Lavalley, 2019; Park et al., 2012), this has not been applied in the context of athlete flourishing. This was specifically highlighted in Chapter 4 (Study 3). A core finding to emerge was the impact that planning and preparedness had on the athletes' experience of a positive transition, thus enabling them to flourish in life after sport.

Conversely, athletes who had little, or no planning discussed the difficulties they had adjusting to their new lifestyle. Whilst this particular finding is consistent with previous research (e.g., Alfermann, Stambulova & Zemaityte, 2004; Diener et al., 2010; Keyes, 2002) it offered important insights regarding the theoretical concept of transition (Alfermann et al., 2004; Diener et al., 2010; Keyes, 2002, 2003). For instance, it identified that both planning for retirement and preparation for life after sport are critical to a positive transition. This finding also suggests that planning and preparation are interrelated because for an athlete to experience an optimal and positive transition, both areas must be achieved. In addition, participants in this research discussed a lack of purpose, which is a key construct found in each of the four core models of flourishing (Diener et al., 2010; Huppert & So, 2009; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011)

5.4 Theoretical Implications

5.4.1 Application and adaptation of the four most commonly used conceptualisations of flourishing

Four conceptualisations and operational definitions of flourishing (Keyes, 2002; Huppert & So, 2009; Diener et al., 2010 and Seligman, 2011) underpinned the studies within this thesis. Several sets of core findings (Knights et al., 2016; 2019) align with the four conceptualisations at a global and sport specific context. Furthermore, theoretical justification for examining flourishing within different samples of individuals stemmed from the flourishing literature in sport (Ashfield, McKenna, & Backhouse, 2012; Ferguson, Epp, Wuttunee, Dunn, McHugh & Humbert, 2019; Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack & Sabiston, 2014; Hone et al., 2014; Kler & TriBe, 2012; Wagstaff, Fletcher & Hanton, 2012). Undeniably, context-specific

measures of flourishing are essential to capture the subtleties, complexities, and variation of cognitive and affective experiences (Mehrotra & Tripathi, 2013; Page & Vella-Broderick, 2009). In a similar way, this research suggests that global flourishing may provide a strong foundation for sport-specific flourishing.

The relevance and importance of understanding flourishing in retired professional athletes has been discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 (Study 1 and 2). Within these chapters, an analysis of the data suggested that there is a requirement for further exploration of sport-specific flourishing. For instance, additional factors such as body image, social support, and financial security were noted in the current sample of retired male athletes. However, it is unclear if these factors are simply influential to retired athletes in their ability to flourish in life after sport or, if these factors need to be considered as components of flourishing when examining retired athletes. Therefore, additional research is required to comprehensively explore these newly identified factors and the role they play in the flourishing process.

It is important to note that only suggestions have been made with respect to aligning these constructs with the current conceptualisations and operational definitions of flourishing. It has not been claimed that these constructs are, or should be specific dimensions of flourishing, as research of this nature was beyond the scope of this thesis.

Evidence of the benefits that perceived and received social support has on an athlete during their transition phase into their retirement (e.g., Grove, Lavalley & Gordon, 1997; Willard & Lavalley, 2016) strengthens the rationale for considering social support and organisational support within the conceptualisation and operational definitions of Keyes (2002), Huppert and So (2009), Diener et al., (2010) and Seligman (2011). The importance of social support, more specifically organisational

support for retired athletes was reported in Chapter 4 (Study 3). Research within the sport literature (Gordon & Lavalley, 2011), and within the non-sporting literature (e.g., Holahan & Moos, 1982; Oh, Ozkaya & LaRose, 2014; Wing & Jeffery, 1999) has found that social support can potentially minimise negative ramifications of critical life events such as retirement. In addition, research has found that social support has assisted people with weight loss and maintenance (Lemstra, Bird, Nwankwo, Rogers & Moraros, 2016), adjustments (Rahat & İlhan, 2016), people suffering from stigmatisation (Li, Liang, Yuan & Zeng, 2020) and, enhancing life satisfaction (Oh et al., 2014).

Another important consideration not found in one of the four conceptualisations and operational definitions of flourishing was the emphasis on body image. Research investigating retired athletes have highlighted that when athletes retire from professional sport, they experience physical changes, which can potentially have a negative impact on their body image and self-esteem (Stephan et al., 2007). While increased focus on body image has been identified as a ramification of retirement from sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008), it has not been identified as a factor that influences flourishing. Athletes build a career and identity on their physical skills and ability (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990); therefore, this finding is not unexpected. Consequently, when measuring flourishing in this specific cohort, body image and health could be a useful variable to consider in a measurement of athlete flourishing.

Akin to body image and social support, financial security is another factor to consider when applying one of the four conceptualisations and operational definition of flourishing to retired athletes. As identified in Chapter 3 (Study 2), most athletes referred to their financial stability as a construct that reflected flourishing in their lives

and others lives. Athletes associated flourishing post athletic career with their financial position; for example, owning their own home, having no debt and, being able to live their life without being “bound by financial restrictions”. The concept of financial security is supported by the human needs theory (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002), which is the most prominent theory to explain the curvilinear relationship between income and subjective well-being (SWB) (Howell, Kurai & Tam, 2013). Furthermore, it proposes that increased income and wealth can lead to increased well-being and decreased experiences of poverty because money is used to satisfy basic physiological needs (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Howell et al., 2013). However, given that an athletic career is relatively short-lived, particularly in high-contact sports (Richardson & McKenna, 2020), and that professional male athletes in general earn more than the average worker for their life-stage (Howell et al., 2013), it is not surprising that the athletes in this research assessed their level of flourishing based on their financial situation. Therefore, financial security may add value to the conceptualisation of flourishing when investigating post-athletic career. In accordance with Hone et al. (2014), in order to better conceptualise flourishing an understanding of how lay perceptions of flourishing align with academic conceptions is critical.

This research has progressed the relevancy of flourishing by identifying factors that have the potential to influence a cohort of retired professional athletes as well as informing future research in this area. Furthermore, this research has also identified and developed the positive transition model for professional sport, which enhance the probability of flourishing for retired professional athletes.

5.5 Translating Research into Practice

5.5.1. Improving and measuring athlete flourishing in life after sport

A key contribution of this research was the comprehensive understanding of factors that influence flourishing in retired male professional athletes.

Recommendations to psychologists and sport organisations indicate that additional constructs are necessary when examining flourishing. A practical outcome of the development of an athlete-specific operational definition of flourishing also offers benefits. For example, a measure derived from this operational definition could be used to monitor concepts during the athletes' career. For example, measuring and identifying the individuals main support during their career or, assessing how the athlete values and defines themselves through their body image or financial status. Early monitoring may also allow for the identification of areas that may be a risk for retired athlete that may potentially lead to languishing in life after sport. Such as an athlete not having a well-established support system or lacking in financial literacy. Therefore, risk can be mitigated through various interventions, such as education and mentoring. The implementation of these measurements may provide feedback on the athletes' ability to flourish or languish post-retirement and to identify areas that require improvement to enhance the individual's likelihood of flourishing. These steps have the potential to influence motivation for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013) by preparing for life after sport and engaging in personal development strategies.

5.6 Limitations and Strengths of the Research

While insights into flourishing have been provided by this research, there are some limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the data. Firstly, the research did not include female participants, nor did it examine athletes from

individual sports (e.g., swimming). This limits the generalisability of the findings. Nevertheless, the decision to only include male retired athletes from different football codes was purposeful to enable a comprehensive examination of flourishing within a well-defined population that was feasible within the confines of an unfunded Master's program. However, the inclusion of two of the football codes with an international competition broadens the applicability of some of the findings to athletes from different sports and institutions; For example, Olympic sports and international cricket, in which their sport involves international travel and extended periods of time away from their homes, friends and families.

Secondly, interpreting results from this research may be problematic for the transition process of community-level sport or semi-professional sport. However, findings may still have some relevance to these cohorts, as previous research has indicated that individuals involved in sport at the non-professional level still hold high levels of athletic identity (Chen, Sydnor & Magner, 2010). Body image has also been reported as a correlate, antecedent, and consequence of physical activity, sport and behaviour (Sabiston, Pila, Vani & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2019). Whereby multiple dimensions of one's body image may be associated in the engagement of physical activity and sport behaviour (Sabiston et al., 2019).

Lastly, another potential limitation of this thesis is that the participants recruited for Chapter 3 (Study 2) and Chapter 4 (Study 3) were the same group of individuals. This may also limit the generalisability of the findings. However, the choice to use the same group of participants was for continuity and to establish if there were any differences between experiences of flourishing and the ways in which athletes conceptualised flourishing. Therefore, findings from the current research may be applied with considerations.

A major strength of this thesis was the application of the four core conceptualisations of flourishing. This provided a consistent theoretical foundation and continuity to the thesis. Thus, allowing common findings and conclusions across the studies to be drawn. This research also addressed criticisms of previous research thus strengthening the robustness of understanding flourishing in sport contexts (Stander et al., 2017).

In addition, the methodological approach used across the three studies was a strength of this research. Chapter 2 (Study 1) was the first systematic review to investigate factors that contribute to a successful end of career transition among elite athletes. Chapter 3 (Study 2) was the first qualitative study that examined flourishing in retired professional athletes. Adding to the methodological strengths of this thesis was the consistency between the study designs and reporting e.g., PRISMA guidelines for the systematic review.

Furthermore, Chapter 4 (Study 3) was the first study to use a sample of retired professional athletes from the three main football codes within Australia to examine positive transition from professional sport, framed and guided by the flourishing literature. Chapter 4 (Study 3) also established the positive transition model from professional sport, which strengthens and compliments previous work within this area.

5.7 Future Research Directions

There is an opportunity for researchers and practitioners to make significant contributions to enhancing the well-being and quality of life of retired professional athletes. This research has indicated that there are additional factors to consider when examining flourishing in retired athletes. However, the newly identified factors were

limited to the male population and one level of professionalism of sport and thus, future research is encouraged to investigate female athletes and other professional sports.

Investigating female athletes would provide a more comprehensive understanding of athlete flourishing in retirement. Moreover, it would highlight the discrepancies or similarities between male and female athletes. Research has found that men and woman deal with stress differently and have different coping mechanisms (Matud, 2004; Porter, Marco, Schwartz, Neale, Shiffman & Stone, 2000). Therefore, it would be of use to identify if there are any discrepancies between female and male athletes in their experience of flourishing in retirement.

Another recommendation that future research should examine is the impact of professionalism on one's ability to flourish in life after sport. This current research focused solely on male professional athletes who were engaged with their sport on a full-time basis. Including professional athletes who are not solely supported financially by their sport, such as Olympic athletes, may vary the conceptualisation of flourishing and therefore this factor may warrant further investigation.

A further recommendation to enhance the findings of the current research is to conduct a quantitative study. By conducting a quantitative study, it will identify if there are any statistical correlations between the additional variables discovered within this research. Secondly, it will allow a larger data set to generalise the results (Keyes, 2002). This type of research could potentially lead to the refinement of the current flourishing scale (Hone et al., 2014) and the development of a flourishing tool that can be universally utilised to accurately measure flourishing with retired athletes.

While there has been a large focus on what sporting organisations and other parties involved can do to foster a smooth transition from professional sport into

retirement, relatively few studies have examined the effects of transition between clubs on the athlete and how sporting organisations can facilitate athletes' adjustment during the trading process. Given that findings from Chapter 4 (Study 3) identified four core areas that could promote a positive transition (i.e., planning of retirement and social support), organisational support (e.g., coaching staff, club) and preparation for life after sport, it would be beneficial to examine if there are any other factors during an athlete's career that influence the nature of their transition. Player trade and contractual agreements are a normal and common occurrence in sport (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler & Spink, 2008), however, the effects that these experiences have on athletes has received little attention. More specifically, research examining an athlete's experience of transition and ability to flourish in life after sport has yet to be explored. Research in this area may provide more insight into athlete flourishing, thus providing a more in-depth and thorough measurement of athlete flourishing. Therefore, it is suggested that future research should examine 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.

Finally, it is recommended that further exploration of flourishing in sport and athlete management is warranted. Further research could examine current and future organisational structures that may assist and enhance athlete transition. The level of organisational support athletes receive and reasons for proactively seeking support and using the provided programs, are also factors that warrant investigation.

Future research focused on flourishing in retired athletes would complement findings from this thesis. Research of this nature could create a more comprehensive insight into the flourishing constructs and requirements of different sub-groups. As a

result, a more comprehensive understanding of athlete flourishing could be achieved, and the generalisability of findings confirmed.

5.8 Conclusion

It is inevitable that elite athletes will retire from their sport. Whether this is voluntary or involuntary, planned or unplanned, athletes will go through varying experiences which can have both long-term and/or short-term effects on their abilities to flourish in life after sport. It is also understood that for professional athletes during this transitional phase from the professional sporting sphere, face unique challenges, specific to them due to the lifestyle and nature of their sports. Therefore, understanding retired athletes' experiences and conceptualisation of flourishing is critical when wanting to promote, understand and accurately measure flourishing within this specific cohort of individuals. Whilst professional sports are increasingly encouraging and supporting athletes in personal development off-field to assist with their transition and life after sport experience, it is evident that there is still some work to do. While more research is still needed, this thesis has provided a strong foundation for understanding the way in which retired professional athletes conceptualise and experience flourishing and positive transition from the sporting arena. Ultimately, this will not only enhance the health and wellbeing of current and former athletes, but it will also improve the knowledge available to athlete health and welfare programmes, sporting organisations, coaches and sport psychologists. This thesis also identified that flourishing can be improved through relatively simple and effective methods. Furthermore, it has advanced knowledge of flourishing in retired professional athletes and identified important factors to promote a positive transition and retirement. This thesis strongly confirms the importance of sport career transition programmes and

education for both athletes' and high-performance staff in order to facilitate flourishing in life after sport.

Appendix A

Semi-Stricture Interview Questions

1. Can you please tell me the story of your football career and your retirement from the game?
 - a. Did you always have a “Plan B”?
 - b. How prepared were you for your retirement?
 - c. Was it planned or un-planned?
 - d. What was the reason for your retirement?
 - e. When you think about your retirement from football now, how does it make you feel? How did you feel at the time?
2. Since you retired from your football career, what have you been doing?
 - a. Education?
 - b. Interests? E.g. charities, volunteering
 - c. Career?
 - d. Family?
3. Thinking about when you retired from football, can you tell me how you felt at the time?
 - a. did you feel optimistic/excited/scared/nervous about your future?
 - b. Has this changed since then?
 - c. Has it come and gone in waves?
4. How happy were you during your playing career? Can you please describe how you felt when you were playing/training/preseason?
5. Tell me about your transition out of football, what was it like moving from elite sport to an ‘everyday’ life?
 - a. What do you miss?
 - b. What are you glad to see the end of?
 - c. When you think about that time, what feeling first comes up for you?
 - d. How did your family/friends etc. respond to your retirement?
6. Can you please explain to me in your own words what your understanding is of ‘doing well’ after retirement from sport? What does this look like to you?
 - a. Tell me the story of a person you know who has done really well post-retirement – you don’t need to name him, just tell me his story, how do you measure “doing well”? What parts of life affected his transition?
 - b. Now the opposite, can you please tell me the story of a person you know who has struggled post-retirement – you don’t need to name

him, just tell me his story, how is his experience different to that of your other example? What parts of life affected his transition?

7. It is impossible to be 'doing well' 100% of your life – can you think of the times in your life since you have retired from AFL football when you believe that you have succeeded or done well and explain why, what was going on in your life at these times
8. Now looking at it on the other hand, can you think of the times in your life since you have retired from AFL football when you believe that you have not felt as if you have been doing well and explain why, what was going on in your life at these times
9. Based on your understanding of doing well, what influences, and factors have promoted levels of flourishing in your life?
 - a. During your career
 - b. Post athletic career
10. Based on your understanding of doing well, what influences, and factors have hindered or negatively affected your levels of succeeding and thriving in your life?
 - a. During your career
 - b. Post athletic career
11. That concludes the formal questions, just to finish, are there anything that you would like to add to the interview in regard to your transition and retirement experience?
 - a. Do you wish you had more support from your sporting org?
 - b. Do you wish you did anything better during your career to prepare?
 - c. Any advice you would like to pass on to future athletes or current athletes about life after sport?

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENTS

Research procedures for the studies presented in Chapters 3 to 5 were approved by the La Trobe University Faculty Human Ethics Committee (references E15/64).

Documentation of this approval is provided below.



LA TROBE
UNIVERSITY

College Human Ethics Sub-Committee

RESEARCH OFFICE

MEMORANDUM

To: Dr. Emma Sherry, La Trobe Business School, College of ASSC
Dr Mandy Ruddock-Hudson, School of Psychology and Public Health, SHE
Sophie Knights, School of Psychology and Public Health, SHE

From: Human Ethics Officer, Human Ethics Sub-Committee

Subject: Review of Human Ethics Committee Application No. E15/64

Title: Investigating Flourishing in Elite End of Athletic Career Transition

Date: 17 August 2015

Thank you for your recent correspondence in relation to the research project referred to above. The project has been assessed as complying with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. I am pleased to advise that your project has been granted ethics approval and you may commence the study now.

The project has been approved from the date of this letter until 31 December 2015.

Please note that your application has been reviewed by the ASSC College Human Ethics Sub-Committee (CHESC), a sub-committee of the University Human Ethics Committee (UHEC). This decision will require ratification by the UHEC and it reserves the right to alter conditions of approval or withdraw approval at that time. You will be notified if the approval status of your project changes. The UHEC is a fully constituted ethics committee in accordance with the National Statement under Section 5.1.29.

The following standard conditions apply to your project:

- **Limit of Approval.** Approval is limited strictly to the research proposal as submitted in your application while taking into account any additional conditions advised by the CHESC.
- **Variation to Project.** Any subsequent variations or modifications you wish to make to

your project must be formally notified to the CHESC for approval in advance of these modifications being introduced into the project. This can be done using the appropriate form: *Modification to Project – Human Ethics*. If the CHESC considers that the proposed changes are significant, you may be required to submit a new application form for approval of the revised project.

- **Adverse Events.** If any unforeseen or adverse events occur, including adverse effects on participants, during the course of the project which may affect the ethical acceptability of the project, the Chief Investigator must immediately notify the CHESC Ethics Officer. An *Adverse Event Form – Human Ethics* is available at the Research Services website (see above address). Any complaints about the project received by the researchers must also be referred immediately to the UHEC Executive Officer.
- **Withdrawal of Project.** If you decide to discontinue your research before its planned completion, you must advise the CHESC and clarify the circumstances.
- **Monitoring.** All projects are subject to monitoring at any time by the University Human Ethics Committee.
- **Annual Progress Reports.** If your project continues for more than 12 months, you are required to submit a Progress Report annually, **on or just prior to 12 February**. The form is available on the Research Office website (see above address). Failure to submit a Progress Report will mean approval for this project will lapse.
- **Auditing.** An audit of the project may be conducted by members of the UHEC.
- **Final Report.** A Final Report (see above address) is required within six months of the completion of the project or by **30 June 2016**.

If you have any queries on the information above or require further clarification please email: chesc.assc@latrobe.edu.au or contact me by phone.

On behalf of the College Human Ethics Sub-Committee, best wishes with your research!

Kind regards,

Dr Senem Yekenkurul
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PUBLICATION STATEMENTS

Study 1

Statement from co-authors confirming the authorship contribution of the Masters candidate:

“As co-authors of the paper, Knights, S., Sherry, E., & Ruddock-Hudson, M. (2016). Investigating elite end-of-athletic-career transition: a systematic review. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 28(3), 291-308, we confirm that Sophie Knights has made the following contributions:

- Conception and design of the research
- Collection of data
- Analysis and interpretation of the findings
- Writing the paper, critical appraisal of content and response to reviewers”

Professor Emma Sherry

Date: 11/ 12/ 2020

Dr Mandy Ruddock- Hudson

Date: 07/ 12/ 2020

Study 2

Statement from co-authors confirming the authorship contribution of the Masters candidate:

“As co-authors of the paper, Knights, S., Sherry, E., Ruddock-Hudson, M., & O’Halloran, P. (2019). The End of a Professional Sport Career: Ensuring a Positive Transition. *Journal of Sport Management*, 33(6), 518-529, we confirm that Sophie Knights has made the following contributions:

- Conception and design of the research
- Collection of data
- Analysis and interpretation of the findings
- Writing the critical appraisal of content and response to reviewers”

Dr Mandy Ruddock- Hudson

Date: 07/ 12/ 2020

Professor Emma Sherry

Date: 11/ 12/ 2020

Dr Paul O’Halloran

Date: 12/ 12/ 2020

Study 3

Statement from co-authors confirming the authorship contribution of the Masters candidate:

“As co-authors of the paper, **Knights, S.**, Ruddock-Hudson, M., O'Halloran, P., Sherry, E. (under review). Experiences and Conceptualizations of Flourishing in retired Male Professional Football Players *The Sport Psychologist*, we confirm that Sophie Knights has made the following contributions:

- Conception and design of the research
- Collection of data
- Analysis and interpretation of the findings
- Writing the paper, critical appraisal of content and response to reviewers”

Dr Mandy Ruddock- Hudson

Date: 07/ 12/ 2020

Dr Paul O'Halloran

Date: 12/ 12/ 2020

Professor Emma Sherry

Date: 11/ 12/ 2020

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