Female Collegiate Gymnasts and Experiences in Sport Retirement Due to Injury

Coleen Harrington Barry
Western Michigan University

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Coleen Harrington Barry
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Retirement from competitive sport is an inevitable transition all athletes must face at some point in their athletic careers. When asked to think about retirement from competitive sport, many of us might conjure up images of our favorite athletes who made significant contributions over a period of time. Often times, the athletes we picture retiring are long-standing professional or Olympic level athletes who are increasing in age and can no longer perform at their peak. Truthfully, this picture of sport retirement is not the norm, but rather the exception. In reality, the majority of athletes do not proceed in competitive sport beyond the high school level. Amongst those athletes who go on to collegiate level sport, only 1% advance to a professional level of sport (Stankovich, Meeker, & Henderson, 2001). Therefore, the other 99% of college athletes face retirement prior to reaching the professional ranks. Many athletes retire from sport part-way through college, yet there is a notable lack of research on this population.

A small portion of sport retirement research addresses the experiences of college athletes who retire upon completion of eligibility or graduation. However, sport retirement studies on: collegiate athletes who have graduated, professional athletes, and Olympic athletes largely stem from the early to mid 1980s. The world of sport has gone through many changes since the 1980s, which are likely to impact
athletes' retirement experiences. In addition to research stemming from the 1980s, the majority of sport retirement research focuses on male athletes who competed at the professional or Olympic level. This is largely due to fact that there have been many more opportunities for men to participate in sport. Although there is a significant amount of research on male athletes who experience retirement at the highest levels of competition, it is not clear how applicable the results are to current day female athletes who face retirement part-way through college. At the highest levels of sport, there are still many more opportunities for males to participate than for females (Greendorfer, 1992). However, women have more opportunities in sport now than ever before and research is greatly needed to better understand their experiences.

There are many reasons for sport retirement, such as: burnout, de-selection (not being chosen for the team), declining ability, choice, and injury. Compared to all other retirement reasons, injury typically involves the least amount of time for the athlete to prepare for the transition and is often unpredictable. The research shows that retirement due to injury tends to be the most traumatic type of retirement experience for an athlete (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993). Each year, many collegiate athletes experience injuries that impede their athletic performance. Some of these injuries are so severe or resistant to rehabilitation, that the athlete is forced to retire from competitive sport. The experience of injury and transition to retirement can be physically and mentally challenging for the athlete. This sudden change in a collegiate athlete’s life is likely to be traumatic and may have a significant impact on her/his identity development and college experience. To date, there has been very
little research on athletes who undergo this type of abrupt athletic retirement, while in the midst of their college careers.

*The Need*

Psychology and sport literature include research on athletic retirement and injury (Baillie, 1993; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Ball, 2002; Coakley, 1983; Ford & Gordon, 1993; Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Grove, Lavalle, Gordon, & Harvey, 1998; Green & Weinberg, 2001; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). However, the research on sport retirement and injury largely focuses on male athletes at the professional and Olympic levels. In addition to limits based on gender, research on professional and Olympic athletes considers the retirement process in relation to variables well-suited to these particular populations, such as: selection of a new career and adjustment to a different level of income. Collegiate student athletes may have different types of experiences to consider. There is also some research that looks at students who retire at the end of their high school and college careers. Retirement at the end of high school or college is considered to be a more typical transition time, due to the high volume of athletes that retire then and the concurrent life transitions the athlete is experiencing at that point (Baillie, 1993). The small amount of research addressing the retirement of collegiate student athletes, primarily looks at retirement when the athletes are upon completion of their athletic eligibility or graduation (McPherson, 1980). Therefore, these studies do not address the impact of sport retirement on the students’ college experience. These studies also do not typically involve athletes who retire due to injury.
The current research has a large gap in it, lacking studies on collegiate athletes who retire part-way through their college careers. The current research, which focuses on professional athletes, Olympic athletes, and student athletes who have completed their college careers, may be helpful in understanding this type of experience. One objective of this study was to look at the phenomena that may affect female collegiate gymnasts retiring during their college careers. There are many phenomena to consider that differentiate collegiate athletes from professional and Olympic athletes.

Collegiate student athletes are in the late adolescent developmental period. Late adolescence is a developmental period in which one’s identity is still being discovered and defined (Dacey & Kenny, 1997). We know very little about how retirement may impact athletes who are in the midst of identity development. Collegiate athletes retiring part-way through college are at a pivotal time in identity development and at a much less typical point in their sport careers for retirement. The majority of the research on younger populations and retirement from sport consists of those who retire at the end of high school or college, when many athletes are expected to retire. In addition to collegiate athletes being in late adolescence, they are also concurrently living their college experience and participating in competitive sport. We have much to learn with regards to how sport retirement influences a student’s college experience. Collegiate athletes are often isolated from the rest of the university community, due to numerous hours spent training and practicing with their athletic teams. One positive aspect of this isolation is that a strong support network is often formed within the team and athletic community. However, when an athlete
faces retirement part-way through college, the loss of or change in this support network is one of the many phenomena that may impact her/him.

There are many reasons why retirement among collegiate athletes is less studied than other athletic retirements. Unlike a great deal of psychology research, studies on sport injury and retirement tend not to involve college student participants. University athletic departments, particularly those at Division I schools, are often very protective of their athletes (Etzel, Pinkney, & Hinkle, 1995; McPherson, 1980). This protectiveness is engrained in much of sport culture and exists at the Olympic and professional levels as well. University athletic programs try to promote a positive reputation and are often fearful of research on their athletes interfering with this mission. A positive reputation is particularly important, as many Division I university athletics programs have to consider economic revenue as a major component of their programs (Etzel, Pinkney, & Hinkle, 1995). Often, in collegiate athletic programs, the primary need is seen as having winning athletic teams (Yianakis, 1981, Blann 1985). The academic, personal, and career needs of collegiate athletes tend to become secondary to this primary need (Renick, 1974). Therefore, the majority of the efforts in these programs go towards helping athletes with what is seen as directly contributing to success while they are actively engaged in sport. In fact, often times the sporting organization does not maintain contact with athletes who retire, making it difficult to locate potential research participants.

When an athlete becomes injured, the athletic departments' trainers initially oversee the medical care, but there is often no internal system dedicated to addressing
athletes who are injured or facing retirement. The college or university is likely to assume that all athletes’ needs are being met through the multidisciplinary staff of the athletics department. However, athletic department staff is not likely to have job responsibilities that clearly include assisting athletes with injury and/or retirement concerns (Etzel, Pinkney, Hinkle, 1995). It can be confusing for the athlete when trying to determine who to turn to for assistance while coping with an injury and/or contemplating retirement. The responsibility for helping injured athletes and those facing retirement is often unclear to athletes, coaches, teammates, athletic department staff, and university officials (Etzel, Pinkney, Hinkle, 1995). The experience of injury and transitioning to retirement can be both physically and mentally challenging for the injured athlete. Many colleges and universities have counseling centers on campus that could be helpful to these athletes, but often there is not a well-established relationship between the counseling center and the athletics department. The lack of relationships between athletic departments and other offices on campus is often due to the closed system nature of intercollegiate athletics (Etzel, Pinkney, & Hinkle, 1995; Ferrante & Etzel, 1991). This is often the case, as athletic departments do not want their teams to be seen as those that have troubled athletes.

Much of the past research has focused on experiences of loss and difficulties athletes may have as a result of retirement. While this is an important part of a retiring athlete’s experience, this qualitative research study was designed to study the experiences of collegiate athletes going through retirement due to injury. One objective of this study was to gain new insights in the experiences of women retiring
due to injury in the world of sport. Another objective of this study was to discover important aspects of the experience that might be helpful to consider when designing effective interventions and treatments for this population.

History of the Issue

The research on athlete retirement did not become prevalent until the mid 1980’s. Prior to that time, the majority of the information available regarding athletic retirement, came from the media (McPherson, 1980). McPherson’s 1980 journal article describes how there were no empirical studies or anecdotal accounts pertaining to retired female athletes at that time. McPherson (1980) also reported that there were only a few studies of former elite amateur (e.g., Olympic) athletes at that time. Studies on collegiate athletes were not even mentioned by McPherson (1980). When researchers began conducting empirical studies, they tended to focus on male athletes at the highest levels of competition (professional and Olympic).

In Parham’s 1993 study, 50% of the NCAA Division I athletes surveyed sustained at least one injury while involved in competitive collegiate athletics. When an athlete is competing in a highly ranked collegiate sport program, even an injury that is not considered severe can impact her/his performance enough to no longer be competitive at that level (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993). In fact, if the injury is not considered to be severe, athletes may be encouraged to continue to train and compete despite pain and the possibility of further injury.
Significance of the Study

While the research on other athlete populations is helpful, there remains a gap in the literature regarding collegiate athletes who are injured and forced to retire from their sport part-way through college. In addition, research on female athletes is extremely limited. Female athletes are often understood through research that has only addressed males and is then generalized to all athletes. Due to the lack of research on female athletes, we do not know if this is appropriate or not. This study aimed to begin bridging the existing gap in the research, by interviewing former female gymnasts who retired part-way through their college career due to injury.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore, understand, and describe experiences that female gymnasts had when they retired from sport, part-way through college due to injury. This study was aimed at understanding how injury and retirement from sport were experienced, in the context of their college experience and identity development. In addition, this study examined athletes' perceived needs and their experiences of coping during the injury process and the transition to retirement.

An additional aim of this qualitative study addressing female collegiate gymnasts who retired part-way through college, was to highlight areas that needed further study in order to better understand this experience. This area of inquiry was seen as important, as a part of continued research on sport retirement, athletic injury, collegiate athletes, and female athletes. Ultimately, continued research in this area has the potential to benefit collegiate athletes, who face retirement as a result of injury, by giving them pertinent information. This information could also be helpful for
teammates and/or other friends who are trying to be supportive while an athlete is going through this experience. Continued research may also help athletes identify potential resources to use when facing this situation.
Athletics play a pivotal role in American society today and have for quite some time. As a culture we look up to athletes, see them as strong and determined individuals, are in awe of their discipline, and envy what they can do that we cannot. Sports have become an integral aspect of life for many youth, particularly in the United States. Many athletes’ involvement in sport begins at a very early age through play, organized recreational programs, and school athletics. In American society, many children want to be sports heroes by earning and holding onto athlete status. The cultural phenomenon of athletics in the United States can be wonderful for a successful athlete. However, when an athlete is injured or feels she/he must give up sport, athletic ideals can take on new meaning. Many athletes begin sports at such a young age that they do not remember a time when their life did not involve athletics. Experiencing injury and facing the transition to retirement can be a very daunting, difficult, and scary time for athletes.

In order to better understand athletes’ experiences of injury and retirement, it is essential to outline the unique socialization process that athletes go through while climbing up to the collegiate ranks. Coakley (2001) describes four norms that are embedded in high-performance sports today and make up what he calls sport ethic, in which an athlete: makes sacrifices for the game, strives for distinction, accepts risks
and plays through pain, and accepts no limits in the pursuit of possibilities.

Conformity to the sport ethic is necessary in order to remain in a high-performance sport (Coakley, 2001).

Athletic Retirement

There are many models outlining the potential experiences athletes may have in retirement from sport. A substantial number of retirement models were provisional when developed, with subsequent research demonstrating how inappropriate it was to apply them to the sport retirement process. Many of these provisional theories make the assumption that sport retirement is a crisis all athletes are forced to experience, inevitably harming psychosocial development and limiting future success in life. The present research literature clarifies how the crisis assumption is not always accurate, as there is considerable variation in athletes’ reactions to sport retirement. It is essential to keep in mind that some athletes may experience what is described in the models and research results and some may not.

A model frequently cited in the sport retirement literature is Kubler-Ross’s (1969) stages of dying. The original model was intended to outline the five stages experienced when a patient is dying from a terminal illness, but Wolff and Lester (1989) adapted and applied the model to the sport retirement process. The first stage, Denial, was defined by Kubler-Ross as a time when a person refuses to acknowledge news of their impending death. Wolff and Lester indicated that an injured athlete in this stage refuses to accept that the injury is career ending. The second stage, Anger, is when a person is angry about the self-perceived injustice of the situation. The
retiring athlete in this stage feels isolated, takes out her/his anger on family and friends, develops antisocial desires, and acts uncharacteristically. Bargaining is the third stage, when the dying patient tries to negotiate for a lengthened existence. An athlete in the Bargaining stage begs the coach to let her/him play one more season. In the fourth stage, Depression, the patient gives up and seems to want to hasten the end. In this stage, the retiring athlete begins to realize in this stage that she/he can no longer turn back. The final stage of Kubler-Ross’s model is Acceptance, when a patient comes to terms with the situation. An athlete in this stage realizes that she/he must face retirement and find a way to accept a new status (Wolff & Lester, 1989). Despite how often the Kubler-Ross model is cited in the literature, it is important to note that there is little empirical evidence to support it (Green & Weinberg, 2001).

A retirement model with a very different approach is Schlossberg’s (1981) transition model. A transition is defined as, any event that brings about change. The model posits that any life transition, such as competitive sport retirement, consists of 3 phases: pre-transition, transition, and post-transition. The athlete’s perception of the transition, the environment prior to and following the transition, and the individual’s characteristics in her/his roles, while adapting to the transition are all emphasized. Schlossberg’s 1981 model defines successful transitions as a matter of balancing assets and liabilities, which consist of three sets of interacting factors: the transition itself, the individual, and the transition environment. Much of the recent research literature is in alignment with the notion of sport retirement consisting of transitions.
A 2001 study, by Chow, showed support for Schlossberg’s (1981) model. Chow’s study was qualitative and involved female athlete participants. The participants were former and current elite female athletes in Hong Kong. Many athletes in Chow’s study reported that a competitive sport career provided a sense of personal status. Personal status was described as meaningful during the career. Athlete participants transitioning to retirement at the time of the study, described frequent reflection regarding sacrifices made to have an athletic career. The sacrifices that seemed most salient were those involving family and other interpersonal relationships. One relationship mentioned consistently by athletes, whether it was positive or not, was that with a coach. Athletes in Chow’s study who were among the highest ranked on their team reported stronger relationships with coaches and ongoing support from them during the retirement transition. However, athletes who were ranked lower on the team reported not having the support of the coaches beyond retirement. Many of the Hong Kong athletes in this study expressed feeling: a sense of loss, emptiness, and generally lost upon retirement. The sense of loss seemed most pronounced as teammate friendships faded and as athletes saw others competing while they watched from the sidelines in their new role. The results indicate that those who felt as though they did not have the opportunity to accomplish all they wanted to, athletically, seemed to feel a greater sense of loss.

Athletes in Chow’s (2001) study who found: a new job, activity, relationship, or academic direction to dedicate time and energy to, within three months of retirement, seemed to cope better with the transition. Athletes, who found something
else to dedicate themselves to, reported the decision to retire as less difficult than athletes who did not engage in this way. The athletes, who engaged in something else following retirement, noted that their sport careers prepared them to develop resilience, helping them in arenas outside of sport. More specifically, the athletes who became involved in other endeavors described learning, through sports, how to be more: assertive, positive, action oriented, and goal oriented. Most of the athletes that went on to dedicate themselves to something else, reported having continued involvement in sport through: coaching, sport related careers, and fitness. Despite some athletes in Chow’s study coping better than others, a common experience amongst them was feeling frustrated and disappointed about the lack of support from their sporting organization in the transition to retirement. In addition, almost all of the athletes in Chow’s study stated beliefs about how they would be better off in retirement if they had better academic qualifications. Athletes’ academics becoming secondary to athletics, as they progress in training, may also be a factor for athletes who retire part-way through college.

Another qualitative study, by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000), served as the basis for a conceptual retirement model. In Kerr & Dacyshyn’s study, the participants were seven former Canadian elite female gymnasts, ages 16 to 22, between 6 months and 5 years into retirement. These gymnasts had various reasons for retirement: one was forced due to injury, four chose to leave the sport due to it no longer being enjoyable or positive, and two felt satisfied with what they accomplished and felt like it was time to move on in life. Each retired gymnast was interviewed twice, either over the
phone or in person, to collect information regarding her retirement experiences. All seven of the participants reported missing some elements of involvement in sport. During the retirement process they all recalled feeling: disorientation, a loss of control, frustration, a sense of freedom from a rigid schedule, and relief from the stresses and demands of being an elite gymnast. Two of the seven gymnasts reported feeling anger and betrayal as well. This anger and betrayal was largely related to power imbalances in the gymnasts' relationships with their coaches, which led to coaches exerting “absolute control” over them (pp. 124).

The athletes in Kerr and Dacyshyn's (2000) study underwent a post-retirement period, in which they felt out of control due to not having a sense of direction in their lives. The retired gymnasts reported feeling uncertain about what to put their time and energy towards at that time. Many participants indicated that they were known as gymnasts for so long, that it was as though they needed to go through a process of finding themselves again without gymnastics. Along with this loss of identity, came a larger feeling of a void in their lives. The gymnasts identified missing the intensity, passion, competition, stimulation, fame, attention, relationships, satisfaction, and fulfillment that came with gymnastics.

Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) utilized three central themes that emerged from their qualitative data, to outline the phases of retirement from sport. The authors titled these three phases: Retirement, Nowhere Land, and New Beginnings. The Retirement phase is when the individual withdraws from the sport and still maintains an athletic identity. The athlete then feels uncertain, disoriented, and a loss of identity in the
Nowhere Land phase. During the Nowhere Land phase, many gymnasts found themselves questioning some of the tenets of elite sport they had come to accept as truth. Some gymnasts also began to realize, how much control their coaches had over their lives. The gymnasts who felt their coaches exerted absolute control, had more difficult transitions to retirement. The participants in this study who left the sport with: unresolved conflict, feelings of loss, bitterness, anger, or body image issues had longer and more difficult transitions to retirement. The final stage of retirement outlined in Kerr & Dacyshyn’s (2000) study is New Beginnings. In New Beginnings, the athlete experiences a time of reorientation. During this reorientation, the athlete looks back at her/his sport experiences through a different lens, allowing for new insight and understanding. New Beginnings involves adjusting to a new life, without one’s sport, and feeling satisfied with it. The athlete in New Beginnings also begins to get involved in new activities and gains a new definition of self. In this study 43% of the former gymnasts were on their way to the New Beginnings phase, while 57% were still in the Nowhere Land phase.

While groundbreaking, the Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) study has some limitations that are important to recognize. The sample consisted of a small number of participants, was sport-specific, and only researched one gender. In addition, there was a lot of variation in the amount of time since retirement. Finally, the study involved retrospective accounts of retirement experiences. The Kerr and Dacyshyn model, incorporates stages of transition for the athlete, as well as changes in identity
and view of the self. The implications regarding Kerr and Dacyshyn’s study and identity development will be discussed further, later in this manuscript.

Although there are many models and theories of sport retirement, one is cited more than any other in the literature. Coakley (1983) suggested viewing sport retirement as a time of rebirth in an athlete’s life. He strongly asserted that, “The dynamics of the retirement process are grounded in the social structural context in which retirement takes place. Factors such as gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, and social and emotional support networks shape the manner in which one makes the transition out of sport” (Coakley, 1983, p. 1). Coakley’s ideas are especially relevant to the areas in which more research is needed in the area of sport retirement.

Although Coakley’s ideas were published in 1983, the suggestion to shift the research by adopting this modern focus seems to be slow. In order to better understand how to move forward in the research, it is important to first look at some aspects of sport retirement and injury that have been examined thus far.

An athlete’s ability to adapt to the transition of retirement is impacted by many factors including: role change, source, timing, and duration (Schlossberg, 1981). Athletes undergo one role change when progressing from high school to college athletics. If that athlete then has to retire due to injury part-way through college, she/he experiences an additional role change from athlete to non-athlete. The athlete, who is forced to retire due to injury part-way through college, is facing an additional role change prior to her/his peers. In addition, many athletes who make it to the collegiate level of competition have been involved in their sport of choice for
many years. When facing retirement, athletes have to move on from something that has been an important part of their lives, often since early childhood. In many ways, the retirement process contradicts the mentality taught throughout the sport socialization process. Throughout their time in sport, athletes are taught that the way to succeed is to push oneself and work harder, especially when challenges arise (Coakley, 2001). However, when athletes face retirement, they have to first learn to stop pushing themselves long enough to realize that it’s time to retire (Coakley, 2001). Athletes are also socialized to define success through athletic accomplishment (Coakley, 2001; Eppright, Sanfacon, Beck, Bradley, 1997). Given this definition, retirement from sport threatens the athlete’s ability to continue to succeed. Many athletes may feel as though they have not yet reached their athletic peak or achieved their highest goals in the sport. The disappointment some athletes feel when unable to continue accomplishing athletic goals, makes letting go of an athletic dream even more difficult (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Along with letting go of an athletic dream, retiring athletes report feeling a loss of personal control (Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). The perception of a loss of control is heightened based on the amount of control the athlete had over the reason for retirement. The sense of a lack of control is not well investigated in the sport retirement literature, but in other realms of psychology it is associated with self-competence, interpretation of self and other information, helplessness, motivation, physiological changes, and self-confidence. Another loss that may be experienced in sport retirement is that of social identity and status.
When considering the role of social identity and status, it is important to note that the meaning of sport each individual creates, has both intrinsic (e.g., social aspects of sport) and extrinsic (e.g., privilege and status) aspects. The loss of social identity and status can be especially difficult for an athlete who becomes a public figure in her/his school, community, region, or nation. Public recognition may serve as an external source of self-worth and self-esteem for an athlete (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Wolff & Lester, 1989). When an athlete retires, the recognition that once contributed to her/his identity disappears very quickly and she/he often does not have other strong social roles to commit to. The lack of alternate social roles is often due to role restriction, which occurs when the majority of an athlete’s early development occurs in an athletic setting, making it difficult for her/him to interact with others outside of that community (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Therefore, when role restricted athletes retire, they must learn how to expand their social identities in order to adapt to other roles in life: friend, family member, student, and employee.

There are many challenges involved in transitioning from athlete to former-athlete. Athletics may provide structure in athletes’ lives that they have not had to create for themselves in a very long time, if ever. Yet, upon retirement, athletes are immediately faced with the loss of this structure. Despite retirement being an inevitable experience in every athlete’s life, most athletes are not taught to consciously prepare for it. Retirement from sport also means losing active membership in a group. Balogue (1999) indicated learning, through her work with
elite, female athletes, how important it is to have a group in which a sense of belonging is experienced. Upon retirement, athletes are trying to cope with a difficult transition experience, but are no longer members of the group that may have previously constituted their support network. An athletic team exemplifies a group that holds both occupational and personal meaning for its members. Therefore, we can also look at the transition from athlete to former-athlete as a career transition. In 1993, Baillie reviewed the literature addressing athletes' preparation for and adjustment to retirement from competitive sports. He concluded that difficulty in athletic retirement results from the “salience that sports involvement has across a significant proportion of the life span” (Baillie, 1993, p. 401). The intensity of involvement and the identity commitment allow sport retirement to closely parallel the transition involved in career transition (Baillie, 1993).

Baillie and Danish reviewed the literature in 1992, to better understand athletes’ career transitions. Career transition was defined by the authors as, “the process of adjustment to the event of retirement” (pp. 77). The authors defined retirement as, “a point of transition from an activity in which there has been a commitment of time and energy and role identification” (pp. 77). They described sport retirement more specifically as “the end of a chosen profession, the decline of a once-unparalleled physical skill, and the termination of a livelihood.” Baillie and Danish (1992) asserted that an individual’s sport history and development must be understood in order to more accurately predict how the athlete will experience sport retirement. Upon facing retirement, reflection on past social sacrifices and/or future
fears of failure may become factors in an athlete’s adjustment. As a result of their literature review, the authors concluded that the retirement experience is typically more difficult for those athletes whose self-esteem is based on sports excellence. To better understand athlete’s personal experiences of sport retirement, recent researchers are being encouraged to engage in more qualitative research methods to gain a more detailed account of the experience (Coakley, 2006).

One complicating factor of retirement from sport, as opposed to retirement from other careers, is that individuals typically experience it at a younger age. This creates an additional challenge for athletes, as retirement is neither socially sanctioned nor widely discussed amongst young people (McPherson, 1980). This is a factor of particular importance for collegiate athletes. While there are many factors that potentially influence serious problems in adjusting to retirement from sport, Coakley (1983) hypothesized that “the availability of resources for moving into roles, activities, and relationships unrelated to active sport participation” is key in determining the nature of the transition (pp 8-9). In his review and interpretation of the retirement from sport literature, Coakley (1983) hypothesized that retirement from sport is most likely to cause serious problems when the former athlete’s: athletic career greatly restricted the development of other credentials and attributes; relationships have been primarily based on sport; family has not supported involvement outside of sport; life allowed for little access to alternate activities and role models outside of sport; and lack of resources restricts transitions into careers, relationships outside of sport, and fulfilling leisure activities. When considering the
experiences of injured, collegiate, female athletes in sport retirement, there are various factors in the psychology and sport literature that may be important to examine. These factors may relate to both the experience an athlete has in early retirement from sport and in the adjustment to life beyond that experience.

Identity Development

The college experience occurs, most commonly, during the late adolescent developmental period. Therefore, one is still engaged in the process of identity development during this time. It is essential to have a basic understanding of identity development in order to understand how it may impact and/or interact with an adolescent’s experience of sport retirement. There are several prominent modern identity theorists who are cited frequently in the literature: Alfred Bandura, Abraham Maslow, and Erik Erikson (Dacey & Kenny, 1997). Bandura’s (1978) social learning theory is based on the idea that the environment causes behavior and behavior causes the environment. Bandura calls this reciprocal determinism. The pivotal concept in social learning theory is observational learning, or the impact that modeling has on personality development. Bandura (1959) asserts that adolescents do what they see adults do, rather than doing what adults verbally tell them to do.

Abraham Maslow (1968, 1971) believed that people have six basic instincts that appear in overlapping stages. The six needs he proposed, in order, were: physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, self-actualization, and aesthetic. Maslow asserted that a person is not concerned with the higher-level needs until the lower-level needs are met. According to Maslow’s (1968, 1971) hierarchy of
needs, belongingness and esteem needs are of the greatest importance during adolescence.

Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development proposes that humans progress through eight different stages in the lifespan. At each stage, there is a crisis that must be resolved before the person can move on. The eight stages and the corresponding crises are: Infancy (Trust vs. Mistrust), Early Childhood (Autonomy vs. Doubt), Play Age (Initiative vs. Guilt), School Age (Industry vs. Inferiority), Adolescence (Identity and Repudiation vs. Identity Confusion), Young Adult (Intimacy and Solidarity vs. Isolation), Adulthood (Generativity vs. Stagnation), and Maturity (Integrity vs. Despair). Erikson believed that if there is not resolution of a crisis, development is hindered. According to Erikson's (1968) theory, college students would be expected to be either in the Adolescence or Young Adulthood stage. Erikson described the primary task of adolescence as achieving a state of identity, or the general picture one has of oneself. Erikson also viewed a state of identity as a state towards which one strives. Erikson (1959) considered Adolescence to be a time in which one undergoes an identity crisis, causing us to make major decisions about our identity. During late adolescence, Erikson (1968) postulated that an individual experiences a period during which she/he experiments with different identities, without having to be accountable for the consequences of any particular one, or a moratorium of youth. The next stage, Young Adulthood, consists of developing intimacy by relating one's deepest hopes and fears with another person.
Erikson (1959) theorized that it is only through intimacy that we are able to understand and have confidence in ourselves.

There are also some well-known critics of the more traditional identity theories that are worth noting, and Lerner (1987) is one of them. Lerner's (1987) contextualism theory argues that previous theories of development are inadequate, as they do not describe the interaction between people's internal state and their environment. The contextual model calls attention to the role of the environment in an individual's development. The environment encompasses factors such as society, culture, family, and the historical period. Lerner asserted that the internal state of an individual and the external environment are each embedded in the other and are constantly affecting one another. Contextualism states that there are four factors in development: the physical setting, the social environment, the personal characteristics of the individual, and time. Lerner asserted that the way in which an individual progresses through developmental periods depends on these four factors. Therefore, contextualists believe that we cannot predict how a person will behave in a particular situation, but only how they will probably behave. Furthermore, Lerner's goodness of fit concept stated that a person experiences healthy development if her/his traits fit well with the psychosocial environment. Contextualism predicts that mental and/or physical illness is likely to ensue if the trait and environment fit is negative.

Contextualism is particularly modern in terms of its inclusion of diversity in the developmental process. The inclusion of diversity is a natural fit with contextualism, as the theory emphasizes individual differences. There is a great need for research to
consider diversity when understanding human experiences, making this aspect of contextualism highly notable. Contextualism has had a great impact in the field of psychology, particularly in looking at adolescent development (Dacey & Kenny, 1997).

The process of defining one’s personal identity, set of beliefs about the self, continues throughout the course of life. In order to develop a personal identity, each individual learns through interactions: ways in which she/he is similar and different from others; how one can act independently; and how one changes over time, but remains the same person. During adolescence an individual’s primary objective is to build a unique self that significant others and society will continue to support. First, an adolescent tries to discern who she/he is by establishing beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts about the self that describe her/his physical, social and psychological qualities (Dacey & Kenny, 1997; Wheaton, 2000).

The difference in developmental stages is one reason researchers indicate that it may not be appropriate to apply results of retirement studies done with older athletes, who competed at professional and Olympic levels, to collegiate athletes (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993). Current research suggests that the developmental period of adolescence is expanding in today’s society. Now that going to college has become more prevalent, it is often seen by teenagers as something they are expected to do. College used to be seen as a more independent experience and as a transition to adulthood. However, today many researchers are extending the term ‘adolescence’ to encompass the college years, rather than viewing adolescence as ending with the
teens. Therefore, rather than considering adolescence to be from 13 to 18 years old, it is now being extended to 22 years of age in order to allow for societal changes. This extension is important for research on college students as it calls for researchers to use an adolescent framework in data analyses.

Adolescence is known as a critical stage for identity development, in which individuals experiment with different roles and relationships; attempt to develop a sense of self within social, cultural, and familial contexts; and try to accept their gender, body, and overall appearance (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). This process begins in the early adolescent years and continues into late adolescence and even early adulthood (Erikson, 1959). Many adolescents begin to establish their own personal identity independent of their communities and their parents, upon attending college (Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996). However, study results showed that adolescents with strong athletic identities may not engage in role exploration as extensively as their peers do during adolescence (Murphy, et al., 1996).

A qualitative study by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) examined sport retirement experiences of elite gymnasts and found that the majority of transition difficulties reported by participants were related to a struggle to define themselves. The authors hypothesized, based on the results of this study and identity research, that female gymnasts may not experience the identity crisis of adolescence until they face retirement. Kerr and Dacyshyn posited that female gymnasts become more exclusively focused on their sport earlier in life than most athletes, as they have very little time to maximize their careers before puberty sets in. Kerr and Dacyshyn
concluded that “participation in elite gymnastics may have the effect of postponing identity formation.”

Serpe’s (1987) empirical study uses five identities associated with college life to examine the relationship between interactional commitment, affective commitment, and identity salience. Serpe “views the relationship between self and social structure as central to a developing understanding of social action.” (pp 44). Serpe’s approach draws heavily on Stryker’s (1981) identity theory, which posits that the structure of self is relatively stable over time. Identity theory also asserts that the stability of social relationships is responsible for the stable structure of self. This means that the self is believed to be constant if there is no movement within the social structure. Therefore, change in self comes about as a result of change in social structure or what identity theory terms, society. Identity theory emphasizes the relationships between self, society (social structure), and role performance. Identity theory tries to understand choice behavior or, “how and why individuals select amongst role performances given the various possible alternatives” (Serpe, 1987, p. 87). Identity theory states that choice behavior can be understood through identity salience. Identity salience, as outlined in identity theory, can be determined by examining both the number of relationships associated with an identity, as well as the potential affect that would result from the loss of relationships and activities associated with that identity (Stryker, 1987).

In terms of applying identity development models, the gender of the population may also be important to consider. Gilligan (1982) utilized three of her
qualitative research studies, along with her clinical experience as a psychologist, to write a book about psychological theory and female development. The three studies were: the college student study, the abortion decision study, and the rights and responsibilities study. The first study asked 25 college seniors to explore identity and moral development in interviews, by relating the view of the self, moral conflict, and life choices. These students were interviewed a second time, five years later. The second study involved interviews with a diverse group of 21 women, ages 15 to 33, during the first trimester of their pregnancies, when considering abortion. The women were interviewed a second time, at the end of the year following choice. The third study included 144 participants, eight males and eight females in each of nine different age groups from ages 6 to 60, and looked at self and morality.

In her book, Gilligan (1982) highlighted how some theorists, whose studies only included males, made statements suggesting that the results applied to our understanding of males and females. Gilligan also asserted that many of these same theories also indicate that relationships “play a rather subordinate role” in identity development, compared with “individuation and achievement” (p. 153-4). Gilligan pointed out that society rewards separation. She went on to explain that when males speak of separation, they describe how it “defines” and “empowers” their sense of self (p. 156). On the other hand, women emphasize how “attachment” builds and maintains community (p. 156). Gilligan’s identity development model looks at how identity and intimacy are “fused” for women (p. 156). The women in Gilligan’s studies defined their identities in “a context of relationship and judged by
responsibility and standard of care.” However, the men in Gilligan’s studies defined their identities by, “individual achievement,” as evidenced by “great ideas or distinctive activity” (p. 163). Gilligan indicated that in the transition from adolescence to adulthood, males first address identity, which they gain through power and separation at work. Males then address intimacy, which serves as the “critical experience that brings self back into connection with others” (p. 163). According to Gilligan, females gain their identity through relationships of intimacy and care by masking desire and using ambiguity to avoid conflict. Females then face a critical experience, which is about choice, in terms of understanding their “locus of responsibility and truth” (p. 164). Gilligan strongly asserts that research needs to “delineate in women’s own terms the experience of their adult life” (p. 173).

In Lytle, Bakken, and Ronmig’s (1997) study on adolescent female identity development, the Measures of Psychosocial Development (MPD) were administered to 332 females and 317 males in sixth, eighth, tenth, and twelfth grades. Lytle et.al.’s results did not support Erickson’s (1968) model of identity development, which is widely applied in the literature. Erikson’s (1968) model postulates that males and females form identity through patterns that are intrapersonal, or a sense of self as separate and unique. Lytle, et al., (1997) found that females form identity through patterns that are intrapersonal and interpersonal, or sense of self as connected to others. Lytle et al.’s, results are consistent with those of previous studies by Archer (1985) and Hopkins (1980). Archer (1992) posited that gender stereotypes may be perpetuated by society reinforcing “aggression and autonomy” for boys and
“nurturant, emotional, passive behavior” for girls (p. 45). Archer pointed out that society still views interpersonal characteristics as “weak” and primarily associated with females.

Athletic Identity

While adolescent athletes, like their non-athlete peers, must face developmental tasks, they often experience identity formation differently. An athlete is part of something larger, a subculture, a team, and a way of life that is different from that of many others in society. Therefore, athletes develop a particular type of identity, athletic identity, which is related to their role in sport. Athletic identity is the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993b). Athletic identity fluctuates in significance and depth as the athlete role becomes more central in an individual’s life. When an adolescent athlete faces early sport retirement, the foundation of her/his identity is threatened and she/he may experience difficulties. In order to better describe the foundation of athletic identity, a well known theory of development by Erik Erikson (1959) has been utilized.

Erik Erikson’s (1959) developmental theory outlines stages in psychosocial development that Nelson (1983) modified to conceptualize how an athlete’s social experience and identity development may differ from that of a non-athlete. Nelson (1983) stated that children with notable physical abilities are distinguished from other children at a very early age. In Erikson’s first stage, Basic Trust versus Mistrust, athletic children may interact more quickly and more intensely with their environment due to their high level of coordination. Then, in the second stage,
Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt, children use physical abilities to acquire a sense of independence and achievement. Nelson (1983) indicated that more coordinated children develop a stronger sense of trust in the environment and in themselves in the Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt stage, positively affecting self-esteem. Several factors of the Initiative versus Guilt stage may begin to distinguish more coordinated children from those who are less coordinated: begin to perform increasingly complex motions requiring better coordination, reinforcement for physical talents becomes more meaningful, speed becomes important in play, and significant relationships extend from family to peer groups. These factors can become influential in social hierarchies that begin to form. For instance, at approximately ten years of age, children whose physical abilities are better developed, become leaders while less developed children become more shy and withdrawn. The importance of gaining acceptance amongst peers only increases as the child enters middle childhood or the Industry versus Inferiority stage. Youth in this stage quickly learn to dedicate the most time and energy to activities that allow them to gain the most prestige amongst their peer group. During this time, adults often encourage the bigger and stronger children to participate in sports. Children, who heed adults' advice to participate in sports, begin to develop friendships with their teammates and become somewhat isolated from children not involved in sports. In college, individuals are in Erikson’s Identity versus Role Diffusion Stage. Erikson believes that the adolescent goes through an identity crisis, questioning who she/he is. The individual then begins to try to determine what she/he will be when an adult. It is likely that an athlete is in this
Identity versus Role Diffusion stage when facing early retirement. Therefore, it is important to know how these athletes may be different from their non-athlete peers.

In a review of the literature, Baillie and Danish (1992) found that identification with the label of athlete begins as soon as sports participation begins. In American society, the athlete label comes with hero and role model status, while also putting individuals into “well-defined, narrowly based roles” (pp. 78). The authors found that athletes are seen and treated differently by others, from the time they are children, likely impacting their identity development. The athlete becomes accustomed to gaining internal reinforcement and external validation through a self that is centered in physical competition (Baillie, 1993). In sport, athletes get a tremendous amount of feedback from the public concerning their performance. However, when an athlete retires it is typical for the status and prestige to decline and even be lost within a relatively short period of time. This process has the potential to be difficult when facing retirement, if the athlete’s self-definition is largely dependent on this type of public recognition (McPherson, 1980).

As an athlete grows and changes, so does the definition and intensity of her/his athletic identity (Brewer, et al., 1993b). Nelson (1983) indicated that when an athlete develops an athletic identity, she/he sees herself/himself competing in that sport forever. Therefore, when an athlete chooses to retire from sport, she/he often does not know what to focus on instead of athletics. Many researchers have noted that this phenomenon is impacted by identity foreclosure. Identity foreclosure occurs when an athlete comes to strongly and exclusively commit to her/his athletic role to
the exclusion of other roles, resulting from a lack of adequate exploratory behavior (Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996). This lack of role exploration can be due in part to the adolescent’s involvement in sport participation. When an adolescent is in high school, athletics commonly serves as the primary source of industry and is valued by peers, more than academic achievement. If that athlete continues on to college, she/he may be segregated in many ways from the rest of the college community due to: living in athlete housing, traveling for competitions, and spending a great amount of time training and socializing with teammates (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). The higher the level of sport the adolescent is involved in, the more structured her/his life is around that sport. However, a flawed assumption is often made about the level of the sport achieved, coinciding with the level of distress experienced in the transition to retirement. This assumption often does not take into consideration the age at which the athlete became involved in her/his respective sport. This is particularly important to take into account when referring to athletes involved in sports that require pre-pubescent bodies in order to perform at the highest levels, as women’s gymnastics and figure skating do. Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) study results indicated that the majority of female gymnasts retire between the ages of 15 and 19 years old. In addition to sports that require pre-pubescent bodies to perform, many other sports that have not required athletes to begin at an early age in the past, are now increasingly encouraging early training. Along with the portion of the life span that sport can impact, it is also critical to consider what the significance of involvement is for the individual at the time of the transition (Baillie, 1993).
Many student athletes begin participating in sports at a very young age. From the time an athlete begins training in sport, her/his life is full of structure created and enforced by others. Having a tremendous amount of structure becomes the norm in an athlete’s life. An athlete’s time is very scheduled and involves a high level of accountability to one’s self, teammates, coaches, and parents. Structure and accountability only increase as the athlete moves up in level of competition. It is often difficult for an athlete to adjust when this structure is no longer there upon retirement. The collegiate athlete is immediately part of a subgroup of peers made up of teammates and other athletes. Collegiate athletes are also within a sort of family at college that consists of other athletes, coaches, trainers, and athletic department staff. During the transition to retirement, an athlete may feel as though others used to take care of everything and as though she/he is unable to handle things independently. This can be an especially difficult experience during adolescence, as an individual in this developmental period is trying to differentiate themselves from others in order to achieve a higher level of independence (Dacey & Kenny, 1997). An athlete who has trained in a sport for a substantial period of time is apt to feel a sense of control around athletics, but may not feel that way about alternate activities and roles. During the experience of early retirement, an athlete is likely to feel a loss of control (Baillie & Danish, 1992).

Beginning in youth sports, participants are often taught that in order to excel, win, and be successful; one must dedicate everything to that one and only endeavor. Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) outlined this belief in their model as a factor leading to
restricted development. Taylor & Ogilvie’s (1994) model positions athletic identity as the most influential factor in determining the experience of athletic retirement. This model describes the degree to which athletes define their self-worth in terms of sport participation and achievement. If the sole focus is on athletic success, long-term personal and social development is likely to be ignored. When an athlete reaches a state of identity foreclosure and delves into sport in such a way that other activities are no longer embarked upon, her/his self-identity stems exclusively from sport involvement. The nature of the athlete’s developmental experiences from the start of athletic participation up until the day of retirement influences the ways in which she/he will experience the transition to a life outside of competitive sport. Athletes are taught early on to focus on athletic performance, making it the number one priority ahead of academics and other social activities. Athletic performance then becomes the primary basis for the athlete’s self-esteem (Wolff & Lester, 1989). Chow’s (2001) study exemplifies underdeveloped social roles and behaviors as the younger athletes facing retirement had more difficulty resolving relationship problems within the sport and within families. The younger athletes in Chow’s study also had more difficulties applying conflict resolution and planning skills in careers outside of competitive sport than older athletes. Developmental tasks, such as conflict resolution and career planning skills, are likely to play a role in transition to sport retirement when the athlete is an adolescent.

An athlete with a strong athletic identity facing retirement is apt to experience a variety of difficulties, especially if she/he is also in a state of identity foreclosure.
(Grove, Lavalle, & Gordon, 1997). Grove et al. (1997) studied retired Australian athletes and found that strong athletic identities at the time of retirement positively correlated with: venting of emotions, mental disengagement, behavioral disengagement, reliance on denial, increased seeking of instrumental social support, suppression of competing activities, and seeking emotional social support. Many of the behavioral reactions found in this study might be related to the significant feelings of loss, lack of direction, and little sense of self that an athlete may experience in the transition to retirement.

Hale, James and Stambulova (1999) predicted that an individual with a strong athletic identity would be more likely to interpret an event, such as an injury, in terms of the consequences on her/his athletic performance than someone with low athletic identity. The study included 1160 participants of which 470 were females and 670 were male. The athletes were United Kingdom National Team members, United States Division I intercollegiate team members, and Russian collegiate physical education students. The athletes represented 37 different Olympic and intercollegiate sports. The participants completed the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale or AIMS (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993b) and a demographic questionnaire inquiring about primary sport participation, level of experience, sex, and age. The results of Hale et al.’s (1999) study illustrated why the idea of looking at athletic identity as a unidimensional concept is unfounded. The authors inferred that the AIMS is more likely to measure three factors, as previously hypothesized by Brewer, Boin, Petipas, Van Raalte, & Mahar (1993a). The first factor measured by the AIMS, social identity,
is the “extent to which the individual views him/herself as occupying the role of the ‘athlete’.” The second factor, exclusivity, is the “extent to which an individual’s self-worth is determined solely by performance in the athlete role.” The third factor, negative affectivity, is the “extent to which an individual experiences negative affect in response to undesirable outcomes in the sport domain.” (Brewer, et al., 1993b, p. 3). Hale, et al. (1999) recommended that future research modify the AIMS in order to better assess athletic identity using a multidimensional framework.

Abbott, Weimann, Bailey, & Laguna (1999) conducted a research study to examine sport-role identity salience and how it influences the actions and decisions that are made by an individual when there are alternatives available, or choice behavior. (Serpe, 1987). A questionnaire was completed by 159 Division I collegiate baseball players in order to determine sport salience. The participants ranked six role identities (peer, kinship, sport, religious, academic, romantic) in order of importance. Choice behavior was measured using a 10-item Likert index. The results of this study showed that more of an athlete’s choice behavior is related to sport identity when the individual views sport identity as very important. The data also showed that choice behavior was directly related to the salience-level of an athlete’s sport identity. Therefore, the authors hypothesized that “retirement from sport may cause distress in athletes with a dominant or salient sport identity” (pp. 378). The distress experienced upon retirement is likely to result from one of two scenarios. If the athlete discards her/his athletic identity upon retirement, it is likely that she/he will experience a strong sense of loss. If the athlete continues to see her/his athletic identity as very
important after retirement, the athletic identity will then erroneously influence choice behavior. Abbott, et. al. (1999) hypothesized that once the athletic identity is gone, for an athlete who rates this identity as very important, she/he struggles to make decisions as the dominant identity is no longer present to direct choice behavior. Therefore, the athlete transitioning to retirement struggles with questions of what to do and how to behave. Baillie and Danish (1992) came to similar conclusions as Abbott et al. (1999) in their review of the sport psychology literature. Baillie and Danish (1992) asserted, “When the foundation of self-esteem is based on sports excellence, the end of the athlete role becomes more difficult.”

The College Experience

The college experience can be an exciting, yet difficult task for many adolescents. The adolescent athlete also has additional challenges to overcome in her/his sport while engaging in the college experience. One must consider that the college experience involves many transitions: adjusting to a new place, new friends, increased academic challenge, selecting a career path, and an increased responsibility for the self, which is gained in newfound independence (Parham, 1993). It is possible that sport retirement, due to injury, requires an additional and unexpected transition within the athlete’s college experience. We do not yet know how the co-occurrence of two life transitions, adjustment to sport retirement and possible re-adjustment in one’s college experience, may impact a person. The research involving collegiate student athletes is still limited and relatively new (Kornspan & Etzel, 2001). Therefore, many
aspects related to the sport retirement experience in college remain largely unexplored.

Nelson (1983) utilized Erikson’s framework to outline some of the differences between the high school and college athlete experience. According to Nelson, the high school athlete is taught the value of hard work, persistence, self-improvement, and preparation. When in high school, a successful athlete often has the support of the community behind her/him and earns higher grades than her/his non-athlete peers. When high school athletes transition to college they often find that the college environment, outside of the athletics department, is less supportive of their athletic endeavors than their high school communities. College students who do not participate in school sports, often see collegiate athletes as an over-privileged group, while faculty and administrators may see them as a problem group. In addition, there is often a decline in athletes’ academics, as compared with non-athlete peers, during the college years. The collegiate athlete is under greater pressure to perform, as the level of athletics is higher than in high school. Due to competing at a higher level, there are also greater time commitments and physical demands on the athlete. The collegiate athlete’s performance is often publicized widely, advertising highs and lows in her/his career. Many athletes learn how to handle this publicity effectively. However, for some athletes the publicity may be overwhelming when she/he is performing well, yet feels pressure to continue to perform at a high level and when she/he isn’t performing well and experiences social embarrassment when others are
informed. The public aspect of athletics is important to consider, particularly when talking about adolescent athletes and how this may impact interaction with peers.

The peer culture and environment are extremely important in adolescence (Dacey & Kenny, 1997). Therefore, we know that social well-being is an important aspect of college students’ lives. In 1994, Fagan conducted a study on college students’ well-being. The study gathered data on the feelings college students experienced and considered to be somewhat bothersome. The sample consisted of 240 undergraduate students attending a small, southwestern, liberal arts university. The General Well-Being Schedule (Dupery, 1978) was utilized to measure students’ mental and physical health. In addition, the students completed a 10 page pre-tested questionnaire consisting primarily of forced-choice questions. One third of Fagan’s college sample reported feeling: sad; discouraged; hopeless, or wondering if anything was worthwhile. Over half of the students in the study also scored in the depressed range on a scale ranging from very depressed to very cheerful. The results of this study found 13 variables to be the most influential in the prediction of high social well-being in college students: emotionally healthy, socially self-confident, attend college to learn what interests her/him, vocationally oriented student, collegiate oriented student, see obtaining recognition from colleagues as important, view college students as vocationally oriented, concerned more with feelings of others, high writing ability, high artistic ability, desire to be a positive moral influence, parents married, and Protestant. When in the process of sport retirement, many of these well-being variables are not likely to fit for some collegiate athletes for several reasons:
lowered self-concept, maintaining self-focus that was taught and seen as beneficial in athletics, difficulty recognizing talents outside of sport, and lack of emphasis on vocational interests and academics due to dedication to sport. Seven variables were found to best predict individual's low social well-being: feel that it is important to be financially well-off, attend college because cannot find a job, attend college because parents force her/him to, not religious, see smart people as those who stick to own affairs, college senior, and parents divorced. Some of the low social well-being variables apply to adolescent athletes as they may: anticipate sports as a way to become wealthy, choose to attend college to further an athletic career, and attend college primarily due to receiving an athletic scholarship (Fagan, 1994). Therefore, it is possible that some adolescent athletes may experience a lower social well-being while transitioning to retirement.

Injury

The United States Department of Health and Human Services reported that from 2004 to 2005, 30.7% of injury episodes, for those ages 15-24, occurred during sports and exercise activities (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Sport retirement research shows that 14-32% of athletes retire due to injury (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993). However, the great majority of the research on the percentage of athletes who retire due to injury does not include athletes who retire while in college. Therefore, it is possible that the percentage is even higher than current estimates reflect. We do know that up to 750,000 sport injuries are reported to occur each year within collegiate and secondary level athletics (Bergandi, 1985). While injury is a risk
that all athletes take merely by participating in sport, very few ever prepare themselves for what may ensue if it actually occurs (Baillie & Danish, 1992; McPherson, 1980). In fact, many athletes experience high levels of denial even after experiencing injury and continue to exercise and train through significant pain, rather than facing the psychological issues around it. Parham (1993) found that 50% of Division I athletes sustained sports related injuries during college. Parham’s results indicated that an athlete who sustains a sport-related injury is apt to experience: distress, pressure from coaches to return too soon, feelings of letting the team down, a sense of worry about returning to pre-injury form, stress due to abrupt and unexpected occurrence, stress due to feelings of being disabled, possible triggering of troubling or painful times in the past, and gaining an understanding of how important sport is to her/him. Unfortunately, the experiences and feelings that Parham described, can continue over a lengthy period of time, as it is not always clear right away whether an injury is career ending or not.

Ball (2002) “explores the role that psychological factors play in injuries.” Ball indicated that when the uncertainty of an injury being career ending or not continues over time, the athlete may experience a decrease in self-esteem and self-worth, as well as an increase in anxiety and depression symptoms. If the individual has a strong athletic identity, she/he may experience feelings of shock and disorientation when injury occurs, and may endure these for a significant period of time. The results of four studies by Brewer, et al. (1993b), showed that an athlete’s state of identity foreclosure was related to depressed mood after sustaining a sport injury. This
indicates that the athlete’s judgment of the situation impacted her/his reaction to the event. It is important to recognize that the judgment may alter when an athlete finds out that the injury is definitely career ending. The actual injury is only one of the many sources of stress an athlete may feel during this time.

Russell (2000) noted that there are four categories of stress for the athlete who experiences injury: physical well-being, emotional well-being, social well-being, and self-concept. Unfortunately, the psychological well-being of injured scholastic athletes is often neglected due to a principle focus on the nature of the injury itself. However, the greatest stressors some athletes report following an injury are psychological in nature: feel as though hopes and dreams are shattered, difficulty watching others perform when she/he cannot, fear of re-injury, and lack of social support. Psychological stressors are more common for an athlete with a strong athletic identity as she/he tends to derive prominent beliefs about self-worth through involvement and achievement in sport. Russell highlighted three basic needs people must meet to gain a sense of self-worth: a need to feel competent, a need to experience achievement, and a need to feel accepted. When an athlete with a strong athletic identity is injured, the primary resource she/he uses to gain self-worth is threatened. The threat of losing the opportunity to participate in sport can be an extremely difficult experience as it limits athletes with a strong athletic identity from fulfilling needs perceived to be most significant. While reactions to athletic injury are varied, some athletes may experience feelings of grief during this time.
Evans and Hardy (1995) outlined a three stage grief process that can be applied to athletes facing injury. The first stage of the grief process consists of stress reactions and attempts to recover one’s lost identity and self-esteem. Feelings of anger and anxiety often accompany stage one of the grief process. Stage two is when an athlete begins to feel a loss of team identity. As the athlete gains more awareness of the losses that can result from athletic injury, she/he is likely to experience: despondency, depression, apathy, withdrawal, despair, guilt, and an inability to concentrate. The negative emotions experienced, upon awareness of losses, are apt to impact other areas of the athlete’s life functioning. The final stage is one of recovery, in which symptoms lessen and the athlete is able to focus on healing rather than the feelings of grief or the injury itself.

In a critical review of the literature on athletic injury, Walker, Thatcher, and Lavallee (2007), concluded that much of the previous research has focused on psychological factors, in terms of how they predispose athletes to injury. The authors reviewed grief and cognitive appraisal models that researchers often used as frameworks for understanding athletes’ responses to injury. Walker, et al., (2007) asserted that the research has not adequately addressed the psychological consequences of injury. However, Walker, et al (2007) indicated that the most well developed model found in the literature is the integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process (Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, Shaffer, & Morrey, 1998).
Wiese-Bjornstal, et al.’s (1998) integrated model of psychological response to the sport injury and rehabilitation process, addresses the stress response in the post-injury phase. The authors considered the injury as the stressor and the athlete’s evaluation of the stress, or cognitive appraisal, determining the extent of the stress. Weise-Bjornstal, et al. (1998) indicated that these appraisals influence the athlete’s coping. The model indicates that situational factors and personal factors influence an athlete’s cognitive appraisals. Situational factors include, the sport (i.e., level of competition), social (i.e., team influences and social support), and environmental issues (i.e., rehabilitation environment). Personal factors include, the injury (i.e., severity) and individual differences (i.e., psychological). The model stipulates that cognitive appraisals affect emotions, which affect behaviors.

Young and White (1995) concluded that female and male athletes utilize similar techniques to help displace the centrality of pain in their sport lives. Their study included questionnaires and follow-up interviews with elite female athletes. The authors concluded that athletes use a technique they term, “hidden pain,” in which they deny pain and suppress both the physical and emotional impact it has on the body (p. 51). The authors also concluded that athletes use a second technique they term, “disrespected pain,” in which an athlete experiences an increased pain tolerance by developing, an irreverence to everyday pain (p. 52). Young and White (1995) also asserted that in the world of sport, pain and injury are unwelcome, sanctions are sometimes imposed on athletes for declaring them, and some athletes feel obliged to show or fake courage in the face of physical risk. The authors asserted that athletes
often cope with their injury privately, as injuries are commonly seen as unacceptable in sport. In addition, findings suggested that many athletes experience self-resentment when they become injured and begin to realize that they are not, physically invulnerable, as their previous public image may have suggested.

Kleiber and Brock (1992) suggested that future research address a narrative approach in looking at the difficulties athletes may experience when facing a career-ending injury. The authors suggested that athletes may experience the injury as a disrupted life narrative, in that they are unable to tell the story of their imagined future, as the injury experience precludes that. Kleiber and Brock (1992) suggested that the extent to which athletes see themselves as 'authors' of their own life stories, may influence their experience of the existential trauma of injury.

Female Athletes

Throughout United States history, athletics has primarily been defined as a masculine activity, primarily due to social biases (Czisma, Witting, & Schurr, 1988). Coakley (2001) emphasized the importance of recognizing that many prominent sports in America highlight attributes, defined by our culture as masculine, such as virility, power, and toughness. Coakley (2001) explained that in the United States, as in many other cultures where male privilege is evident, there is a gender logic system that classifies all people by putting them in either a male or female sex category. The categories are defined in biological terms and are used to emphasize differences. This system of binary sex classification is preserved in sport, despite its known inconsistency with research indicating multifaceted differences in anatomy,
hormones, chromosomes, and secondary sex characteristics (Coakley, 2001; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Coakley (2001) pointed out that sport reinforces and perpetuates this gender logic, which can impact women’s experiences of sport in that, female athletes are often defined as inferior to male athletes; their femininity, sexual orientation, and attractiveness may be questioned if they seem to overly conform to the traits of masculinity emphasized in sport, especially once they reach adolescence when women are more likely to be sexualized in our culture.

Young and White’s (1995) research addressed female athletes and their experiences of injury. The authors first considered women’s experiences in the context of their gender. Young and White highlighted the paradox that exists for women in sport, in that elite female athletes are represented in sport as physically empowered yet also continue to be sexualized, particularly in media coverage and advertising. The authors concluded that if there is any difference between the way female and male athletes seem to understand pain and injury, it is only a matter of degree. Young and White indicated that female athletes seem to be contributing to an existing male-defined sports process, which emphasizes health-compromising aspects of masculinity, rather than transforming the meaning of sport. Similarly, Charlesworth and Young (2003) asserted that female athletes adopt a masculinist model of sport participation that idealizes a ‘no pain, no gain’ approach.

In the past generation there has been a marked increase in female participation in sport. Coakley (2001) cited five reasons for an increase in female participation: new opportunities, government equal rights legislation, the global women’s rights
movement, an expanding health and fitness movement, and increased media coverage of women in sports. However, Coakley also identified some reasons that gender equity still does not exist in most sport programs: budget cutbacks and the privatization of sports programs, resistance to government regulations, backlash among those who resent changes favoring strong women, under-representation of women in decision-making positions in sports, continued emphasis on cosmetic fitness, trivialization of women's sports, homophobia and the threat of being labeled a lesbian. The reasons that most sports programs lack gender equity, likely impact the trend in research to concentrate on male athletes to the exclusion of female athletes. Despite the marked increase in female participation in sport, the research on athletes has historically neglected to include females. Therefore, much of the research based on males has been applied to female athletes, without knowing if the research is generalizable to female athletes or not. Some of the recent literature highlights the need to increase our knowledge of female athletes’ experiences (Balogue, 1999; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000).

The Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport (2007), addressed developing physically active girls in a research report. The report indicates that girls are participating in sports in record numbers, at all levels. The report notes that adult role models, the sport climate, parental support, and enjoyment are particularly important for girls to become and stay involved in sport. The report also points out that girls tend to feel: less motivated, lower levels of self worth, less competent in sport, and more social physique anxiety than their male counterparts.
The report also indicates that gender norms influence the extent to which girls participate in sport. In particular, gendering ensures that: girls and boys experience their bodies differently, girls' popularity does not depend directly on their physical ability, femininity is seen in opposition to physical competence, traditional physical activity highlights masculinity, the media continues to sexualize female athletes, and overweight girls face inordinate social discrimination. The Tucker Center report suggests: addressing body image, nutrition, and physical activity in health in physical education classes; advocating for critical media literacy; supplementing the team model with an emphasis on lifetime sports; and requiring coaches to complete standards-based educational requirements.

Balogue (1999) reflected on her work with elite athletes and asserted that as female participation in competitive athletics continues to increase, we must learn about and include their specific needs and concerns. She identified one important component that we need to better understand in working with female athletes, relatedness. Balogue described how the athlete-coach relationship is a fundamental relationship for some female athletes. She described how important a sense of belonging is for some female athletes as well. Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) findings support Balogue’s (1999) claim. The comments from participants’ in Kerr and Dacyshyn’s study, illustrated how important relationships are in female identity development. Kerr and Dacyshyn hypothesized that if a female athlete’s social network largely consisted of those in her sport, retirement might bring a substantial loss of interpersonal relationships and encumber her identity formation. The coach-
athlete relationship was found by Kerr and Dacyshyn to have a great effect on female gymnasts’ transition to retirement. This may be due, in part, to the great power differential between young female gymnasts and their coaches. Gymnasts who felt a lack of power and control in their sport careers tended to negatively assess personal control throughout the transition to retirement. There are many unexplored areas of female athletes’ experiences of sport and the work of Balogue (1999) and Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) highlight many reasons that more research is necessary.

*Academic and Career Impact*

Individuals often see the college experience as a time for exploration and career choice, but the research shows that many college athletes do not engage in pre-retirement career planning (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987). Often times, athletes’ lack of career planning is due to having a dream of continuing on in their sport. However, it is important to recognize that much of the career-planning research is based on male athletes and does not take female athletes into consideration. The male-based career-planning research tells us that many more athletes think they’ll go on to a higher level of competition than actually do. Kennedy and Dimick (1987) found that 48% of male baseball and football players in their study expected to go on to play professional sports. However, we know that only 1% of all collegiate athletes ever advance to a professional level (Stankovich, 2001). Female athletes’ sport career expectations are largely unexplored in the literature at this time. The underlying assumption preventing this research is that female athletes do not view professional sports as a career option, due to limited opportunities and insufficient compensation. However,
there is a lack of empirical evidence to substantiate this claim. It is likely that this assumption is becoming outdated and increasingly inaccurate as opportunities for female involvement in professional sports grow. Currently, the data on male athletes is utilized in the literature to understand career planning for all athletes.

Many athletes do not engage in any career planning before attending college and continue to avoid doing so for at least their first two years there. Blann (1985) investigated intercollegiate athletic competition and educational and career plans through a study involving four New England colleges. The sample was obtained from two NCAA, Division I institutions that offered scholarships and two Division III institutions that did not offer scholarships. The study included a total of 568 participants, 265 female and 303 male athletes. Task 2 or the Developing Purchase section of the Revised Student Development Task Inventory (SDTI-2) (Winston, Miller, & Prince, 1979) was utilized, along with a demographic questionnaire. Blann found first and second year male athletes to be preoccupied with athletic training and therefore, may not have been giving adequate attention to their educational and career plans. However, third and fourth year male athletes did nearly as well as their male non-athlete counterparts with regards to educational and career planning. Blann hypothesized that either the males who are most inattentive to career and education plans drop or fail out, or they become more attentive or more realistic about the limitations involved in becoming a professional athlete. Blann did not find any differences between female athletes’ and female non-athletes’ educational and career plans. In order to compare results, Blann divided the athletes into high level (Division
I athletes on scholarship) and low-level (Division III athletes not on scholarship) athletes. The percent of athletes that planned to achieve professional status in sports was found to vary by gender and sport level. Four percent of high-level female athletes, 0% of low-level female athletes, 28% of high-level male athletes, and 10% of low-level male athletes planned to achieve professional status in sports. It is important to keep in mind that this study was conducted in 1985 and it is possible that the percentages have changed since then as opportunities for women in sport and media coverage of both women's and men's sports has increased. Blann's (1985) study suggests that for male athletes, "participation in intercollegiate athletics at a high level of competition may detrimentally affect students’ ability to formulate mature educational and career plans" (p. 118). Blann suggested that student affairs administrators consult with athletic directors and coaches to help athletes use academic and career planning services.

One well established program, developed to help athletes with career concerns is the Career Assistance Program for Athletes (CAPA). The program is offered by the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and the Olympic Athlete Career Center (OACC). This particular program encourages athletes to be open about their experiences and to know that they are not alone in the difficulties associated with athletic retirement (Baillie, 1993).

Coping Mechanisms

The reactions to sport retirement can vary widely, much of which are dependent on the coping skills and resources an athlete has to assist in the transition
process. Social support is one coping skill that many people use when they are experiencing a life transition. When thinking about social support and college athletes, we may envision teammates, roommates, friends, coaches, and professors. However, a study by Kenny (1990), exemplifies how important it can be to consider college students' parental relationships. Kenny (1990) conducted research that examined college seniors' perceptions of parental relationships. Her study included 159 Participants, 102 female and 57 male college seniors attending a large, coeducational, academically selective, urban university. Eighty-four percent of the sample had parents who were married (never divorced or widowed). The questionnaire was mailed to 45 seniors who had participated, as 1st year students, in similar research and had given permission to be contacted. Twenty-nine of the participants were those who had participated in the previous research, while the remainder of the participants responded after being randomly selected from the student directory. A 55-item parental attachment questionnaire was designed to assess parental availability, understanding, acceptance, respect for individuality, facilitation of independence, interest in interaction with parents, affect toward parents during visits, student help-seeking behavior in situations of stress, and satisfaction with help obtained from parents. The questionnaire was scored utilizing a Likert scale. A Dating and Assertion questionnaire and a Career Planning Scale were also administered. The results of Kenny's (1990) study showed that women described themselves as more likely than men to seek parental help in situations of stress and were more likely to discuss problems with a college friend. On the other hand, men
were more likely to try to work problems out on their own. The results of this study showed that substantial relationships between children and parents continue through the college years. The results also illustrated that the support offered from parents is associated with competent functioning. These results are supported by life-span views of attachment, as well as social support theory. The limitations of this study relate to the economically and educationally privileged participants, a sample under-representative of the national divorce rate, and a small sample size. Kenny (1990) suggested that universities and colleges offer seminars for students and parents during orientation or parent weekends to provide opportunities to discuss parent-child relationships. Kenny noted that it is important for parents to learn how they can be supportive to their college-aged children. It is possible that collegiate athletes experiencing injury and retirement may look to parental support. This is particularly likely, given that the athlete may be experiencing a loss of her/his primary support network at school as a result of injury and retirement.

In 1993, Ogilvie and Taylor highlighted the importance of social support, pre-retirement planning, and coping skills in the transition to sport retirement. There was a lack of empirical studies, addressing coping in relation to sport retirement, until Grove, Lavalle, and Gordon (1997) decided to conduct a study on the subject matter. At that time, Grove et al. administered a retrospective version of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale or AIMS, a modified version of the Cope Inventory, and a questionnaire that assessed the degree of adjustment required as a result of sport retirement. The questionnaire assessed the degrees of occupational, financial,
emotional, and social adjustment required as a result of sport retirement. The questionnaire also asked participant to rate the extent to which they planned for their post-athletic careers and the amount of anxiety experienced when enduring career exploration and decision-making following retirement.

The participants in Grove et al.'s (1997) study consisted of 48 former elite-level athletes from Australian national and/or state teams. The participants: began their sports at a mean age of 9.42 years old, competed at their highest level of competition at a mean age of 20.4 years old, retired at a mean age of 25.21 years old, and had been in retirement for an average of 3.44 years at the time of the study. The study found that the most frequently used coping strategies during the transition were: acceptance, positive reinterpretation and growth, active coping, planning, mental disengagement, and seeking social support for emotional reasons. The coping strategies used least were: turning to religion, alcohol and/or drug use, and denial. The athletes’ athletic identity at the time of retirement, was found to have a significant positive relationship to the coping process, emotional and social adjustment, pre-retirement planning, and anxiety about career decision making. Upon retirement, athletes with strong athletic identities were found to be more likely than those with low athletic identities to: seek social support, seek emotional support, vent emotions, mentally disengage, behaviorally disengage, suppress low priority activities to try to cope with the primary stressor, and experience an increased reliance on denial. Grove, et al. (1997) suggested that athletic identity be assessed within pre-
retirement programs in order to identify athletes at risk for sport retirement difficulties.

Assistance Programs

Many researchers have suggested that there is a great need for programs to assist athletes in injury and the transition to retirement (Baillie, 1993; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Grove et al., 1997; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Mills, 1993; Ogilvie and Taylor, 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Werthner & Orlick, 1982). Etzel, Pinkney, and Hinkle (1995) asserted that in order to offer effective programs, we must first consider how best to assess the needs of collegiate athletes. Etzel, et al., proposed that a modified version of the Delphi method (Linstone & Turoff, 1975) would be an effective needs assessment approach to use with the collegiate athlete population. The proposed modified Delphi method would utilize the college or university’s own retired athletes who have completed their eligibility. The retired athletes would become the experts in this model and utilize their personal experiences in order to assess the resources deemed essential. Etzel et al., predicted that retired student athletes would be more subjective in conducting a needs assessment as they no longer have to answer to coaching staff and are not currently being pressured by teammates to conform. One of the benefits of the modified Delphi Method is that it offers institution specific recommendations. It would also be possible to develop subgroups of athlete experts who may have different experiences (e.g., female athletes, racial minority athletes, etc). Despite requiring more information on student-athlete needs, there have been some suggestions for assistance programs in the literature.
Much of the existing research on sport retirement has focused on helping athletes post-retirement. However, Mills (1993) suggested that pre- and post-retirement counseling be offered to athletes in order to utilize a preventative approach focused on self-acceptance. Sport-specific self-acceptance is defined as valuing and feeling good about one’s self regardless of one’s shortcomings and failures as an athlete (Waite, Gansneder, & Rotella, 1990). Mills asserted that athletes whose identity is tied to their feelings of self-worth may experience great difficulty valuing themselves unconditionally. Mills suggested that counselors help athletes explore their self-acceptance both prior to and following retirement. He proposed that self-acceptance will help the athlete on the field in terms of sport performance, off the field, and in adjusting to sport retirement. Mills gave several examples of things a counselor can suggest that athletes ask themselves in order to work on self-acceptance: How do I feel about myself after winning or losing?; What is my main source of motivation (extrinsic and intrinsic)?; Do I have to win or always do my best to feel good about myself?; Without using any words that directly characterize yourself as an athlete, describe yourself in as much detail as possible; and How would you feel about yourself as a person if you could no longer be an athlete?. Mills advised that counselors keep in mind eight intervention guidelines when helping athletes adjust to retirement: provide empathy and support; demonstrate genuine interest, concern, and caring; determine the nature and complexity of the problem; help to understand the immediate problem in a clear and concise way; help to break the problem into manageable parts; help develop a plan to tackle a manageable part of
the problem; determine the internal and external strengths and resources; and marshal strengths and resources.

Baillie and Danish (1992) also placed emphasis on pre-retirement interventions and suggested that the focus at this stage be on specific issues related to the functional adjustment of the athlete. Baillie and Danish (1992) advised that post-retirement programs provide support for the emotional adjustment of the athlete, considering that she/he is more likely to be receptive to assistance of this nature, at that time. Baillie (1993) advocated for assisting athletes before, during, and after retirement using a Life Developmental Intervention (LDI) approach. The LDI approach is: holistic, process-oriented, has a long-term focus, and views the transition to sport retirement within the athlete’s developmental context. Baillie (1993) explains that the objective in pre-retirement, is for counselors to assist athletes in: developing new career paths, recognizing the opportunities that come with retirement, sharing feelings they may experience (e.g. loss, disappointment, and concern for the future); and normalizing the difficult experience. Baillie (1993) emphasized the importance of counselors attending to athlete’s emotional process in post-retirement. Emotions experienced in post-retirement may include: grief reactions, disorientation, loneliness, and depression. Baillie proposed that the counselor’s tasks in the post-retirement phase are to focus on emotional concerns and the necessity of support. Baillie (1993) suggested that counseling with athletes before, during, and after retirement can be accomplished in individual counseling, group counseling, traditional grief therapy, or cognitive reframing.
One of the challenges in helping athletes, whether it’s before, during, or after sport retirement is accessing the population. Athletic trainers may be some of the first people that athletes confide in when experiencing difficulty while injured and/or facing sport retirement. Athletic trainers may have more interaction with athletes than even coaches or teammates, when athletes are injured. However, in a national survey, athletic trainers reported referring only 8% of their clients to psychological counseling (Larson, Starkey, Zaichkowsky, 1996). In addition to athletic trainers, coaches, teammates, and other athletic department staff need more information and encouragement to refer athletes who may be at risk for difficulty adjusting to the retirement transition.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore, understand, and describe experiences that female gymnasts had when they retired from sport, part-way through college due to injury. This study was aimed at understanding how injury and retirement from sport were experienced, in the context of their college experience and identity development. In addition, this study examined athletes' perceived needs and their experiences of coping during the injury process and the transition to retirement.

Research Design

The primary purpose of this research was to investigate the process that female gymnasts experience when they retire from sport, due to injury, part-way through college. The researcher selected a qualitative research model for this study. Qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena through the meanings people allocate to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Through qualitative research, "The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Qualitative methodology also subscribes to the idea that there are multiple realities, as things are defined differently by each individual (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Qualitative methodology draws from the naturalistic paradigm, which asserts that reality is a construction in the minds of individuals. The naturalistic paradigm is
based on five axioms or assumptions. The first axiom asserts that realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic. The second axiom describes how the knower and the known are inseparable and therefore, interact to influence one another. The third axiom states that only time- and context-bound working hypotheses are possible. The fourth axiom explains that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects, as all entities are in a state of mutual and simultaneous shaping. The fifth and final axiom of the naturalistic paradigm asserts that inquiry is value-bound. Values are considered to be an important aspect of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The qualitative research model was chosen for this study for several reasons. This study was aimed at understanding, in-depth, the sport retirement experiences of injured, female, collegiate athletes. There was a need for the topic to be explored, as variables could not easily be identified and theories, specific to female athletes and retirement part-way through college, were lacking. In addition, a more detailed view was needed in terms of the sport retirement experience occurring part-way through college and in terms of female athletes' experiences. A phenomenological approach was utilized to analyze the qualitative data obtained. The phenomenological perspective focuses on a concept or phenomena and seeks to understand the meaning that individuals attribute when they experience it. In a phenomenological study, the researcher brackets her/his experience prior to data collection by setting aside all prejudgments in order to enter into the interview with an unbiased presence (Creswell, 1998). Moustakas (1994) uses the term *epoche* to describe this bracketing process. Phenomenological researchers search for the essence or central underlying
meaning of the experience being studied. There is a focus on what is called the
intentionality of consciousness or the idea that the reality of an object is related to an
individual’s consciousness of it. Individuals’ experiences are thought to involve
outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and
meaning. Phenomenological data analysis involves analyzing statements and themes,
as well as looking for all possible meanings (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Chapter III describes the rationale and methods for this qualitative study.
First, the appropriateness of qualitative methods and a phenomenological approach
for the proposed study are discussed. Then, the researcher’s bracketed experiences of
the phenomena explored are described. Next, the questions the study explored are
provided. Finally, the procedures employed (Appendix Q) including: recruitment of
participants, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis are addressed. In
addition, the rigor of data analysis and limitations of this study are presented.

Researcher’s Narrative

Qualitative research is based on the idea that “knowledge is laced with
personal biases and values” (Creswell, 1998, p. 19). In the process of qualitative
research, it is essential for the researcher to bracket any preconceptions to ensure that
these do not interfere with the study (Creswell, 1998). The idea to conduct a study on
female athletes who retire part-way through college, due to injury, stemmed from
longtime interests of mine in sport psychology, as well as some of my own personal
experience. I did not experience a career ending injury in athletics or retire from sport
part-way through college. However, I did go through a difficult period of transition
after choosing, yet also feeling forced to retire from my primary sport of gymnastics. During the transition to retirement, I questioned who I was, how others saw me, and struggled with the notion that I was no longer a competitive athlete. I dedicated 13 years of my life to gymnastics and during my transition to retirement felt that I did not know who I was without it.

My passion for gymnastics began at the age of five, when I started my training. By age 10, I was asked to become the youngest member of my prestigious gym’s competitive team. However, my family was just about to move to a different area of the country, so I was never able to take advantage of that opportunity. Determined to improve, I began training throughout the year and continued to do so until the age of 18. I gave up many other activities and much of my free time to continue rigorous training regimens. At one point, my parents were driving me 45 minutes each direction to a gym. Although there were some closer gyms, I selected that one because the coaches were former Olympic gymnasts from Russia. In addition to the tremendous dedication and structure required to stay in the sport, I also encountered an issue with my physical height. I had always been the shortest one in my class all of the way through middle school. At the beginning of my sophomore year in high school I stood at a petite five feet, zero inches tall. However, when I turned 16 years old my doctor expressed concern, as I had not yet begun puberty.

I was told, by my doctor, that gymnastics training had stunted my growth. The repetitive high impact, consistent in training, put tremendous strain on my joints and compressed my growth plates, preventing normal growth and development. At that
point, I had to decide whether to continue my off-season training and receive hormone injections or to take a break from gymnastics and let my body attempt to initiate the normal maturation process. If I opted to receive hormone injections, I ran the risk of never growing to my natural height and having joint problems in the future. After much discussion with my mom, a registered nurse, I decided to take a temporary break from gymnastics. After about a month and a half of no training, my body began to go through puberty.

When I began puberty, I was relieved but also very aware of the potential negative impact this change could have on my gymnastics performance. The results were far more dramatic that I ever imagined. Between my sophomore and senior year of high school, I grew seven inches taller to reach my present height of 5'7". My gymnastics performance was greatly affected, as my center of gravity was dramatically and continuously altered; making it more and more difficult to do tricks that previously came easy to me. I spent a lot of my time during those years trying to re-perfect skills I had mastered earlier in my career. Most of my time during the latter part of my gymnastics career was spent trying to prove that I still had what it took to be competitive in the sport. It seemed like each time I began feeling like myself again in the sport, I started growing more and had to make additional adjustments.

When I applied to colleges in the beginning of my senior year of high school, I was adamant about only applying to schools with gymnastics teams, as I had not yet made up my mind about whether or not I would continue in the sport. My final decision to retire from gymnastics was primarily based on two considerations. The
first consideration was my disappointment regarding the lack of performance advancement I had made since my growth spurt. For the first time in my life, I felt as though there was something permanent, that I could not alter, in the way of my gymnastics success. The second area of consideration involved my curiosity about what life would be like if it didn’t revolve around athletic training. Despite these valid reasons, my decision to retire from gymnastics was a heart wrenching one that I later questioned.

I began questioning my decision to retire when I arrived at college and quickly realized that no one I met there viewed me as an athlete. I began to wonder if my decision was the right one for me. I knew I couldn’t take back the decision, but I often wished I could see how things would have been had I chosen to stick with the sport. I remember feeling intensely frustrated because my college friends did not understand my passion for gymnastics or the role it had played in my life. At that time it seemed that if people didn’t know me as a gymnast, then they didn’t really know me at all. I also terribly missed doing gymnastics. When you retire from a sport like gymnastics there are very few gyms that will allow you to come in and work out on their equipment. Gyms require you to join a class or a team to be covered by their insurance. However, the great majority of gyms do not have programs for adults. Therefore, there is very little opportunity to engage in gymnastics at all after you retire. For me, quitting gymnastics was like going cold turkey from the source of a natural high.
In college, I felt drawn to the gymnastics meets on campus and yet, whenever I watched the competitions I experienced sinking feelings of regret and disappointment in myself. During this transition period in my life, I continued to think of myself as an athlete and felt saddened that people in my new environment would never see me in that role or ever be able to really know that side of me. I would go to the collegiate gymnastics meets excited just to be near gymnastics and often times I would leave feeling empty and questioning if I had pushed myself hard enough. I just wanted some confirmation that I did the right thing and that my life was better because of the choice I made. I did not express the majority of these feelings to those around me because I knew they did not understand why it was so significant to me. Most importantly, I felt gymnastics defined who I was.

As a competitive gymnast I felt: strong, talented, creative, capable, powerful, extraordinary, larger than life, graceful, and beautiful. When I was suddenly no longer considered a gymnast, it seemed to me that I had lost all of those qualities. I experienced retirement from gymnastics as a tremendous loss. Over time I learned how to put this loss into perspective and to find parts of myself, that I once associated with gymnastics, in other ways. I realize now that gymnastics did not encapsulate my identity, but rather enhanced the qualities that were already within me. Facing the loss of gymnastics in my life gave me wonderful opportunities to get to know others and myself in ways I had never experienced before. After the transition to retirement, I had the chance to discover and develop my other strengths.
The purpose of the present study was to explore, understand, and describe how retirement from sport, part-way through college, due to injury, was experienced by female gymnasts. This study was aimed at; understanding and describing how injury and retirement from sport was experienced by female athletes, in the context of their college experience and identity development; what their perceived needs were during the processes; and how they coped. The main research questions of the study are outlined below.

Research Questions

1. What role does sport play in female gymnasts’ lives? In what ways is sport a part of female gymnasts’ identity?

2. How does sport retirement, due to injury, impact a woman’s college experience?

3. How do women describe their experience of retiring from sport, due to injury, part-way through college? What is the transition out of sport and into retirement like for these women and what meanings do they make of the experience?

4. How does sport retirement part-way through college, due to injury, impact a woman’s identity development?

5. What coping methods do women utilize during the transition to sport retirement? Which coping methods and approaches are experienced as helpful and which are experienced as ineffective or detrimental?
6. What do women experience as helpful from friends, family, teammates, coaches, athletic departments, collegiate faculty and staff, and health care professionals during the transition to retirement? Who else was helpful during this time?

7. What was not helpful or challenging during the transition to retirement? What needs and concerns did women have during this experience that went unmet or unaddressed?

8. How do women describe their relationship with sport and their athletic identity after the transition to retirement? What do women feel is important for others to know about this type of sport retirement experience?

**Participant Recruitment**

The researcher recruited participants using several means. The researcher obtained e-mail addresses, of coaching and sports medicine staff at colleges and universities with NCAA Division I programs, from the athletic department websites. The researcher e-mailed the coaching and sports medicine staff (Appendix A) identified through these websites and asked if they knew of former female gymnasts who were members of NCAA Division I teams. The coaching and sports medicine staff was then asked to forward, via e-mail, the invitation to participate in the study (Appendix B) to the former athletes they knew who were likely to fit the participant requirements. The coaching and sports medicine staff was also asked to forward the e-mail they received (Appendix A), including the invitation to participate in the study.
(Appendix B), to anyone else who may have contact with former gymnasts who may fit the participant requirements. The invitation (Appendix B) requested that potential participants contact the researcher via e-mail or telephone, if they were interested in participating in the study. A follow-up letter (Appendix C) was e-mailed to the coaching and sports medicine staff two weeks after the initial e-mail was sent. Nine female former collegiate gymnasts, who retired due to injury and were willing to participate in the study were identified.

The researcher also contacted individuals of the collegiate athletic community, friends, and acquaintances for word-of-mouth referrals (Appendix D). The researcher collected names, telephone numbers, addresses and/or e-mail addresses of potential participants meeting the research criteria from world-of-mouth referrals. The researcher utilized a snowball sampling method, by asking recruited participants if they knew of any other women who may fit the criteria of the study.

The researcher identified potential participants and e-mailed the invitation for participation (Appendix B) to them. The researcher also contacted each woman via telephone (Appendix E). In the preliminary telephone contact (Appendix E), the researcher informed the potential participant about the study, reviewed the criteria for participating in this study, and assessed whether or not potential participants were interested in participating and wanted additional information. The researcher explained the study in detail and ensured that each potential participant understood what was required of her in the research process. During the initial phone contact (Appendix E), the researcher did not ask participants for specific information and did
not collect any data. At the conclusion of the initial telephone contact, the researcher asked the potential participants whether or not they met the criteria for participating in the study. If potential participants felt they met the criteria, the researcher asked if they would like to receive more information about the study. Women who expressed continued interest in participating in the research, were mailed the informed consent form (Appendix F) a demographic questionnaire (Appendix G), and the (AIMS) Athletic Identity Measurement Scale. Potential participants, who properly signed the informed consent form (Appendix F), completed the demographic questionnaire (Appendix G), returned both documents to the researcher, and met the selection criteria, was considered for acceptance into the study. If potential participants did not meet the criteria for the study, or if more potential participants expressed an interest than could be accepted into the study, those participants who were not accepted were informed according to the script in Appendix K. The researcher contacted participants who met the selection criteria, informed them that they had been accepted for the study, and scheduled an appointment for the first phone interview (Appendix H). The researcher e-mailed a confirmation letter (Appendix I) and a pre-interview guide (Appendix J) to participants in order to encourage reflection on topic areas that would be covered during the interview. The researcher emphasized confidentiality of information shared by the participant, assurance of anonymity, and the voluntary nature of participation in the initial phone contact and the informed consent form. Any questions that arose for participants regarding privacy and confidentiality were also addressed throughout the study.
The initial interview (Appendices L), via telephone, lasted approximately 1 to 1½ hours. Following the initial interview, a second interview (Appendix M & N) focused on verification and clarification of their stories, and their input on commonalities across participants. Participants were informed (Appendix M) that they would be required to spend some time, approximately 45 minutes, reflecting on their individual story and composite of stories. The final brief phone call (Appendices O & P) provided an opportunity for participants to give any final feedback on the overall summary of the research findings. The total time commitment required of each participant was in the range of 2 to 2½ hours.

Criterion Selection

Qualitative research tends to focus on in-depth inquiry with small samples. Samples are selected through what is called purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is utilized to gain rich information that leads to insight and in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002). One of the strategies that was utilized in this research is criterion sampling. Criterion sampling requires that all participants meet predetermined criteria, namely that they have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Participants included in this study needed to: be female; indicate that gymnastics was their primary sport; have attended a four year college or university; have retired from gymnastics part-way through their college career, due to injury; indicate that the transition to sport retirement was a significant and challenging life experience for them; have retired while a member of a NCAA Division I gymnastics
team; have retired no less than 1 and no more than 15 years ago; have had the ability
to articulate their thoughts; be willing to describe and share their experiences about
retiring due to injury; and be willing to talk about the consequences and impact of
sport retirement on their life.

Previous research on athletes, injury, and retirement has focused on males
who retire from collegiate sport upon graduation, from Olympic sport, and from
professional sport. This study focused on female, collegiate athletes, who retired due
to injury while only part-way through their college careers. The researcher was
interested in gaining a better understanding of how these women experienced sport
retirement in relation to their college experience, identity development, and gender.

The actual sample consisted of nine subjects. This relatively small sample size
is consistent with other qualitative studies that utilize a phenomenological method
(Creswell, 1998). Demographic information (Appendix G) was collected from the
participants, including: current age, age she began competing in gymnastics, age at
the time of retirement, number of years competing in gymnastics, type of injury that
forced retirement, size of college or university, location of college or university,
academic year in college that retirement occurred (1st year, sophomore year, junior
year, senior year), scholarship status prior to retirement, and scholarship status post-
retirement. The retirement experience discussed in this study must be from a NCAA
Division I gymnastics program, which the participant considered to be, her primary
sport at the time of retirement. This resulted in a self-selected sample comprised of
female retired gymnasts who had extensive personal life experience with sport
retirement part-way through college, due to injury, and who were willing to share their personal experiences for research purposes.

Participant Demographics

The participants were nine former female collegiate gymnasts that competed at the NCAA Division I level. The women competed in NCAA gymnastics programs in many different areas of the United States, four in the South, three in the Northeast, one in the Midwest, and one in the West. Six of the women went to large schools (15,001-30,000 students), two to medium schools (5,001-15,000 students), and one to a very large school (more than 30,000 students) (Table 1). The women began the sport of gymnastics between the ages of one and nine years old, with a mean age of 5.2 years old. The number of years the participants competed in gymnastics ranged from nine to 16 years, with a mean of 13.2 years. At the time of the first interview, the women had been retired from gymnastics for between 1 and 7.3 years, with a mean of 2.4 years. At the time of the first interview, the women ranged in age from 21 to 25 years old, with a mean age of 22.6 years old.

On the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), a low score indicates a less strong athletic identity, while a high score indicates a stronger athletic identity. The lowest and highest possible AIMS score are 10 and 70, respectively. The women's scores ranged from 51 to 65, with a mean of 57.4. Seven women began college on a full athletic scholarship, five were able to keep their scholarship in retirement, and two lost their scholarships completely. Two of the women did not
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age Began Sport</th>
<th># Yrs Competed</th>
<th>AIMS Score</th>
<th># Yrs Retired</th>
<th>School Size</th>
<th>School Location</th>
<th>Scholarship Before</th>
<th>Scholarship After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>6 yrs old</td>
<td>16 yrs</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>1.4 yrs</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>2 yrs old</td>
<td>14 yrs</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1.9 yrs</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>9 yrs old</td>
<td>12 yrs</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1.3 yrs</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna</td>
<td>1 yrs old</td>
<td>16 yrs</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>1.3 yrs</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>6 yrs old</td>
<td>15 yrs</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1.0 yrs</td>
<td>Very Large</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige</td>
<td>3 yrs old</td>
<td>14 yrs</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>3.0 yrs</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>6 yrs old</td>
<td>11 yrs</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>3.6 yrs</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>5 yrs old</td>
<td>12 yrs</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1.2 yrs</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>9 yrs old</td>
<td>9 yrs</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>7.3 yrs</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
have a scholarship to begin with. Each participant injured one or more body parts, which directly contributed to their retirement. Four women had knee injuries, two had shoulder injuries, two had back injuries, two had foot injuries, and one had an elbow injury (Table 2).

The women all retired in different academic years of college. It is important to note that the year of retirement is not necessarily the same as the year of injury. Three women retired senior year, three junior year, two sophomore year, and one in the first year (Table 3).

Data Generation

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured phone interviews with each participant. Interviews are thought to be most useful when the researcher is trying to better understand participants' experiences of a phenomenon and the meanings they attribute to it (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). In this study, the researcher conducted interviews with female athletes who retired from sport, due to injury, part-way through college. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher aimed to better understand, how female athletes experienced retirement from sport, in the context of their college experience and identity development; what their perceived needs were during the processes; and how they coped.

There are three assumptions that guide the semi-structured interview. The assumptions stipulate that: the questions involve terminology familiar to the
Table 2

Injuries that Contributed to Retirement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body Part Injured</th>
<th># of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knee</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoulder</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elbow</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foot</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please Note: Two of the nine participants reported having two concurrent body part injuries that contributed to their retirement.

Table 3

Academic Year of Retirement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th># of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please Note: Year of retirement is not necessarily the same as year of injury.
interviewees, the interviewer tries to look at the phenomenon from the participant’s perspective, and the researcher has the freedom to utilize unscheduled probes or additional questions that are developed within the interview process and are asked when necessary or useful (Berg, 2001). In the present study, the researcher utilized language from the world of sport, when appropriate, that was familiar to the interviewees. While many possible probes were developed prior to the interviews, the researcher used probes that arose from the content and process of each individual interview.

Along with the qualitative, phenomenological, semi-structured interview approach, a feminist perspective also guided the data collection. Phenomenology and the feminist perspective both consider lived experiences to be of central importance and are both committed to openness and description (Garko, 1999; Valle & Halling, 1989). The feminist perspective strives to study and better understand women’s everyday experiences (Stanley & Wise, 1993). The feminist perspective was appropriate for the present research, as the goal of this research was to better understand female gymnast’s experiences of sport retirement. The feminist perspective aims to tell women’s stories in their own voices (Mies, 1991). The present research was particularly concerned with this, as the priority in sport research has been to understand male athletes’ experiences. Research based on male athletes’ experiences has been utilized to understand all athletes, male and female. The present study aimed to reveal women’s experiences of sport retirement in their own voices. Riger (1992) states, “Giving voice to women’s perspective means identifying the
ways in which women create meaning and experience life from their particular position in the social hierarchy” (pp. 734). Phenomenology and feminist research try to prevent a person’s experience from being concealed or misinterpreted and view consciousness as intentional or as always being directed toward some object (Garko, 1999; Kelly, Burton, & Regan, 1994). The researcher bracketed her experiences and natural attitude prior to the interviews, as phenomenology and the feminist perspective suggests, in order to be as open and receptive as possible upon entering the interview (Moustakas, 1994). Feminists also believe that bracketing allows the researcher to see what is there, rather than what one has been taught is there (DuBois, 1983). In addition, the feminist perspective views research as occurring through a dialogue, of reciprocal influence, between the researcher and the research participant (Garko, 1999; Shields & Dervin, 1993). The present researcher conducted the interviews from this perspective. Therefore, the interviews with the participants were similar to a conversation or discussion. Utilizing the feminist perspective, the retired female gymnasts in the present study were viewed as the experts as well as co-researchers. In order to facilitate the interview process, the participants were given a pre-interview guide (Appendix J) to help them reflect on general topics and subtopics that the interview would likely include. Within the second interview, participants were also given a chance to clarify information shared in the first interview (Appendix N).

In addition to taping interviews with participants, the researcher kept a reflection journal in which interactions between the researcher and participant were
recorded, as well as the researcher’s experiences in the research process. An interview protocol was also utilized, that outlined open-ended questions and possible probes to gain in-depth information regarding the participants’ lived experiences (Appendix L).

Data Management and Analysis

The data analysis began during the interview process. This writer kept observational notes throughout the first interview, which gave ideas for questioning in the second interview. The interviews conducted with participants were then transcribed verbatim. All identifying information was removed or generalized and names were replaced with pseudonyms, in order to protect confidentiality. The researcher followed the data analysis model suggested by Giorgi (1985). The text was read several times in its entirety while listening to the taped interviews, in order to ensure accuracy, acquire a better understanding of the language of the participants, and to gain a general sense of the whole. The researcher identified common themes, as well as similarities and differences among participants’ experiences. The text was then broken down into manageable meaning units. Giorgi (1985) explains that meaning units are identified within each participant’s description, by maintaining a focus on the phenomenon being studied. As suggested, the researcher reread the text and identified any changes in meaning participants described, which appeared to be psychologically sensitive. In order to further protect confidentiality, the signed informed consent forms and interview transcripts were stored separately within a locked file cabinet.
The Qualitative Solutions in Research computer program (QSR NVivo 7, QSR International, 2006) was used to construct, refine, and relate analytical categories. QSR NVivo 7 is designed to be used in substantial analyses of rich qualitative data, as is necessary in phenomenology. QSR NVivo 7 assisted in the coding and retrieving of data. QSR NVivo 7 also has a multiple level ‘undo’ function that allowed the researcher to retrace steps taken, when necessary.

The Rigor of Data Analysis

Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that rigor in qualitative research is dependent on establishing trustworthiness by persuading the audience that the findings are worth paying attention to. Lincoln and Guba recommend that researchers ask themselves questions regarding four topics: ‘truth value’, ‘applicability’, ‘consistency’, and ‘neutrality’. The qualitative researcher can then meet trustworthiness criteria by establishing: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility can be established by utilizing: activities that increase the probability of producing credible findings, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checks. Transferability is established by the researcher providing rich information, derived from purposeful sampling, which allows others to make appropriate transferability judgments. Dependability and confirmability can both be achieved through an inquiry audit, in which the process of the inquiry, as well as the data, findings, interpretations, and recommendations are all examined by an auditor.
A letter (Appendix M) and a summary of the participant’s personal narrative, based on the information shared in the first interview, were e-mailed to her in order to verify the accurate recounting of her experiences. The researcher asked participants to review the summary. During the second interview, the researcher asked participants questions (Appendix N) about how well the summary captured their experience. The participants were also asked if there were any aspects of their experience that were missing. In the second interview, the researcher shared with participants some of the collective themes across multiple participants in order to discuss how well the collective themes fit each participant’s experience. An auditor with a background in athletics, counseling psychology, and working with athletes, was utilized in this study. The auditor reviewed the transcripts and coding procedures, to confirm the categorization of identified themes, and gave feedback accordingly. The auditor also reviewed Chapter IV, to assure that the results portrayed these themes accurately, and gave feedback to the researcher. In addition, participants were e-mailed a summary of the results (Appendix O) prior to a final phone call (Appendix P), in which they were given another opportunity to give feedback.

Limitations

The applicability of the present study is limited, as results directly apply only to the small group of participants studied. However, the depth of the data obtained in interviews with participants may contribute to the beginnings of a better understanding of this relatively unexplored phenomenon. In addition to the small
sample size of the present study, some of the data gathered was retrospective in nature. Whenever data depends on retrospective recollection, there is some potential for limitations in the information given. The chance for error may have been lessened somewhat, due to the information being obtained through in-depth interviews. Another factor that may influence the qualitative data is participants’ hesitancy to make personal experiences public in the data-collection process. However, the researcher tried to ease concerns prior to and during the interview process, particularly regarding confidentiality. The researcher also recognized that the athletic culture, which encourages individuals to be tough and focus on strengths rather than weaknesses, may have influenced some participants’ responses in discussing the difficult experiences of injury and sport retirement.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

The purpose of this exploratory study was to explore, understand and describe how female gymnasts experienced injury and retirement from sport, part-way through college, due to injury, in the context of their college experience and identity development. The researcher conducted two phone interviews with nine former Division I, female gymnasts who met the criteria for this study. The researcher used a phenomenological approach to analyze the qualitative data. The gymnasts’ personal stories allowed the researcher to gain knowledge of the experience of collegiate sport injury and retirement and to examine some of the needs these athletes experienced. This chapter outlines the common themes that emerged. The quotes and examples selected are those that seem to best illustrate and clarify each theme. The researcher replaced participants’ names with pseudonyms, in order to protect confidentiality.

The first section in this chapter addresses the roles that gymnastics played in the women’s lives. The second section concentrates on the women’s injury experiences and their transitions to retirement. The third section focuses on how sport injury and retirement influenced their college experience and identity. The fourth section describes what was beneficial and what was challenging in the coping
process. The fifth section explains what the women’s perceived needs were, advice they have for other athletes facing a similar situation, and their experiences of participating in this study. The final section summarizes the women’s experiences with retirement due to injury.

The Role of Gymnastics

This section outlines several themes describing the roles gymnastics played in the participant’s lives. These various roles affected the women’s experiences of sport injury and early sport retirement. The themes include what it was like to be a collegiate athlete, what contributed to their enjoyment of the sport, the discipline and strictness involved in gymnastics training, and gymnastics as a personal identity.

Being a Collegiate Athlete

All nine participants indicated that being a collegiate athlete was an important role of gymnastics. Some women described what it was like to strive for and become a collegiate athlete, some indicated differences between club and college gymnastics, and some highlighted the importance of the financial aspect of a college scholarship. All the women trained in club gymnastics, higher-level programs separate from their high schools, prior to college. Three women trained at the elite level, competing in competitions such as the national and world championships. These three women had the Olympics in mind as their goal, and later decided on college gymnastics. The other six women trained with the goal of earning a full college scholarship. Seven
participants began college on a full scholarship and five of these women indicated that this financial role of gymnastics was a strong one for them. Three participants indicated that they never truly felt like collegiate athletes, due to spending so much time sidelined and rehabilitating.

Amy grew up in a foreign country where she trained elite and no gymnastics scholarships were available. She only learned of and pursued a scholarship after a friend earned one in the United States. The financial factor was not a significant role of gymnastics for her. She loved team oriented college gymnastics and the excitement of the crowds at the meets. At the same time, she felt less connected to her college head coach and this negatively affected her performance. Amy’s injury occurred shortly after beginning her college gymnastics career. Therefore, she rarely competed in college and felt unable to prove to her coaches that they made, “a good pick” in recruiting her.

Similarly, Kim stated that the most difficult aspect of her early retirement experience was not getting the chance to prove herself as a collegiate athlete.

Because, I mean, that’s what I had worked for my entire life. I put all of my time and all of my effort into getting that. I just wanted to make something of myself and to prove to myself and to everyone else that I really could be a college athlete and a college gymnast and be good at it, you know? And then, I just couldn’t, they just wouldn’t let me.

As a young girl, Kim dreamed of going to the Olympics. When she realized that was unlikely, she made it her goal to earn a full-ride college scholarship. As a collegiate athlete, she loved the team atmosphere and recalled feeling like part of an “awesome” group that people looked up to. However, she noticed that there was more favoritism
amongst her college coaches than she was accustomed to in club gymnastics. Kim spent the majority of her college gymnastics career undergoing surgery and doing physical therapy.

Karen also spent most of her college gymnastics career undergoing surgeries and doing physical therapy. When younger, she lived away from home to train at a well-known, elite facility. As Karen grew older and continued to do club gymnastics, it became more physically painful and at times, she felt like “a grandmother of the sport.” One example of her feeling “old and obsolete,” was when a younger club teammate took only one day to master a skill that Karen had been working on for the past year. Karen did not intend to compete at the college varsity level until a recruiter made her an offer. She knew she still enjoyed the sport and was looking forward to less intense college training. She expressed that being a collegiate athlete, “set you apart from the average student.” Karen liked how college gymnastics emphasized the importance of the team. However, her injury and rehabilitation kept her separated from teammates, as well as peers outside athletics.

Nina liked the idea that college gymnastics was more about doing well for the team. However, Nina did not feel like she was “part of” her college team. When she was not competing, she tried to tell herself that she was “important.” However, she wanted to compete more and felt like she was always trying to “fit into a big clique.” As a collegiate athlete, she felt “set above” and “separated” from the rest of the student body. Nina and her club coach had worked together on her goal of achieving a college scholarship. She went from being a gymnast in the top ranks of her club team
to being a college walk-on, not on scholarship, who knew she was not “top of the barrel.” It was “more of a disappointment” for Nina’s parents than it was for her when she did not receive a scholarship, as she realized how rare of an occurrence it was.

Megan did not plan to pursue a college scholarship until late in her club career, not knowing if her skill level was high enough. She did earn a scholarship, but the financial aspect did not play a large role for her. She transitioned from a supportive club environment to a college team where favoritism by coaches was more common and she felt less respected initially. She explained that collegiate gymnastics, “affected more of the whole of my life” because it was intertwined with her social life and academics. Megan was more inclined to socialize with other athletes, as they spent most of their time in the same environment. She recalled having to tell her college professors she was an athlete and she might have to miss class. Megan expressed how grateful she was for the many professional and career resources that were available to her as a collegiate athlete.

Joanna also recognized a closer connection between school and gymnastics in college. She found it much easier to make friends in college because her gymnastics and academic environments were both through her school. In club gymnastics, she often felt like an outsider at school because she was gone so much of the time for gymnastics. Joanna also found that her club and college coaches had very different outlooks.

I came from a gym where the coaches just didn’t care about you. You coached each other more than they coached you. So, it was hard to go to an atmosphere
where the coaches actually cared about you. It was just weird to take in all of that.

At the same time, Joanna felt like her college coaches showed favoritism and she was not at the top of their list, due to being injured. Earning a college scholarship played a very important role for Joanna. She knew a scholarship was her ticket to get into a good school and to have it paid for. Earning a full scholarship meant the difference between Joanna going to a four-year school and going to a community college.

Linda also stated that the most important thing was earning a full scholarship to the college of her choice. Linda trained at the elite level prior to college, but she decided when she was young that she would rather pursue college gymnastics than the Olympics. She did not want to move away from her family to train. When she wanted to quit, her dad reminded her of her dream to earn a scholarship and she used that as motivation to keep going. To some extent, college gymnastics felt more like an obligation to Joanna than club did because they paid her to do it. However, she enjoyed being a collegiate athlete and primarily socialized with others in that group. She described being a collegiate athlete as, “amazing,” “like a high,” and like being “a celebrity.”

It was cool. I mean, except that we had to get up at six o'clock in the morning to go lifting and everything like that, but you felt good about yourself. At least, I mean, I felt good the rest of the day from working out. We had (college) sweatshirts and stuff like that. It was cool being an athlete. You were recognized. Especially when we had competitions, people would come and congratulate us after the meet.

Paige had a similar experience of feeling known on campus. People knew her name, she was part of an elite team, and she felt like a “big man” on campus. The
experience was, very “empowering” for her and gave her more confidence. In college, gymnastics finally felt like something she was doing for herself. Paige’s original goal was to be an elite gymnast, be on the national team, and go to the Olympics. As a teenager, she decided that was too much and she would rather “just go to college.” Her club training was “really intense” and came with “a lot of pressure.” Prior to college, Paige’s two primary reasons for staying in the sport were, to please her parents and to earn a college scholarship. She described earning a college scholarship as, “every parent’s bragging dream.”

Sarah also felt “well-known,” “respected”, and “very proud” as a collegiate athlete. The positive, accepting atmosphere of her college team was a welcomed change from her negative, critical club team. After hearing from older girls in her club, how fun collegiate gymnastics was, she made it her goal to be on a college team. She was also determined to earn a scholarship, as she was aware of the great expense involved in gymnastics and how much time she had put into it.

Participants described their experiences of what it meant to pursue and be in collegiate athletics. Many of the women spent the majority of their collegiate careers having surgeries, doing physical therapy, and trying to come back. The injury and rehabilitation process led many participants to feel like they were not a part of the team and for some, not student-athletes. On the other hand, some of the women felt part of an accomplished group, as student-athletes. The gymnasts who experienced injury earlier on in college found it painful not to have opportunities to prove themselves. Some participants found it very difficult to deal with favoritism amongst
college coaches, especially when injured. All the participants experienced college training as less intense and more team oriented than they experienced club training. Many of the women expressed how rewarding it was, in collegiate athletics, to have special privileges and to gain recognition. For some, earning a full scholarship was a dream they felt determined to actualize and fortunate to achieve. The drive for a few was mainly financial. For the others, the drive was more about pride, for them and their parents, as well as a sense of accomplishment.

**Enjoyment**

All the participants clearly indicated that they enjoyed gymnastics, at some point in their careers. Several common ways of experiencing enjoyment emerged from the women’s stories: having fun doing the actual sport, feeling like part of a family or group, and gaining a sense of accomplishment.

Having fun was the most important thing to Kim in her gymnastics career. In club, she was closer to her teammates than to girls at her school. As a collegiate athlete, she felt like part of a family and almost exclusively socialized with other gymnasts. Kim “felt proud to be a gymnast” and to have “stuck with it” longer than most people do. She described herself as a “tomboy” who loves competition and playing sports. When she was younger, she looked forward to gymnastics so much that she preferred going to the gym over going to school.

Amy felt similarly about liking gymnastics more than school. She knew if she worked hard at it, gymnastics came “easily,” while school did not. In gymnastics,
Amy knew “what was right and what was wrong.” Amy was always closer with her gymnastics friends because they understood her life. She felt like part of a family in college because it was so team oriented. She felt a new level of appreciation for the sport after her first college injury and come back. From then on, she never wanted to leave the gym, and kept practicing “until everybody left.” Amy noted that she had fun in the sport, but that it was sometimes difficult too.

Linda described having a “love-hate relationship” with gymnastics, in that she had her “good days” and her “bad days.” She stated that gymnastics was, “all I knew.” Earning a full-scholarship was a great accomplishment for her. She recalled how rewarding it was to sign autographs for young gymnast fans that attended her college meets and looked up to her. Linda explained how great it was to go into college “already established into a family.” She and her teammates did everything together and felt like part of a collegiate athlete “clique.”

For Sarah, gymnastics became a way to socialize and meet new people in college.” She particularly liked her team’s mentality of, “let’s play gymnastics” versus “we need to win.” Sarah really enjoyed gymnastics when she was young, “absolutely hated it” in high school, and then enjoyed it again in college.

So, in college, gymnastics played more of a role of giving me support in helping me decide what I was going to do for the rest of my life. It was also a place where I could go, release a lot of energy, and relieve stress from whatever was going on. I think of the girls as a family and of my coach as a father.

She described the “positive atmosphere” of her college team as the best part of her collegiate athlete experience.
Joanna explained how her club teammates were her “second family.” She saw them more than she saw her own family. Joanna described how her actual family still continued praising her for all her accomplishments in gymnastics and for where it had taken her in life. In college, Joanna liked how team oriented gymnastics was and how she and her teammates felt like they had to “stick by each other.” The most important thing to her in gymnastics was, “the love of the sport.” She quit for a little while when she was younger because she was not enjoying it anymore. From then on, Joanna knew she loved it “if I still wanted to go there every day,” even during difficult times with coaches, injuries, or skills.

Paige described how in collegiate gymnastics she spent all her time with teammates and they developed into a “close knit family.” Having a team she could rely on was, a “very healthy experience” for her. For the first time in a very long time, nobody was “making” her go to practice and she “wanted to be there.” Paige knew her parents were proud of her for earning a scholarship, but college gymnastics made her feel “really proud” of herself, the team, and her school.

When you do well, it feels like such an accomplishment because you dedicated so much of your life and your time and your body and everything to it, and you want to get something good out of it. You want to feel accomplished that you did something. I think we work so hard as gymnasts, that when the accomplishments do come; it’s really the highlight of our lives because you dedicate your whole life to it.

Nina stated that a sense of accomplishment was the “whole point” of her doing gymnastics. She explained that there was, “never a day you didn’t have a goal of what you wanted to get done.” She felt more of a “genuine” sense of family with
her club team. While her college coaches considered her “part of their family,” she was not always a “big fan” of her teammates. Nina described gymnastics as something she “enjoyed,” “took pride in,” but became less fun near the end of high school. She expressed this in statements such as, “I should have been having fun” and “there were always times when it wasn’t fun.”

Karen’s enjoyment of gymnastics became less frequent as she grew older. She explained how gymnastics was fun for her because she was good at it.

I know, even now, I like to talk about myself in terms of what I enjoy doing, which is oftentimes what I can do vaguely competently. Back then, gymnastics was something I could do better than a lot of people, at least a lot of my non-gymnastics peers, we can put it that way.

When she was younger, the most important aspect of the sport was her “actual performance.” This changed in her early teens, when her focus fluctuated between “the love of the sport” and the “social” aspects. Karen’s elite club teammates were “like a family,” especially because she lived away from home to train. In college, her coaches separated her to rehabilitate her injury, taking away any chance to bond with her teammates. Therefore, she felt “awkward” when she was around her teammates.

The fact that she could say she was on the gymnastics team, made her feel like part of a group on some level. In addition, earning a college scholarship made her feel accomplished, in that it allowed her to be “recognized” for athletics and academics.

Megan felt most recognized for gymnastics when she briefly competed for her high school team. During that time, she got “a lot of press” and was “really well known in the state.” Her family cut out newspaper articles and hung them up in their
home, making her feel “very supported.” Club gymnastics also gave her “family support.” She was one of the older girls in her club and felt like she had a “position of respect” there. She had a supportive club coach and enjoyed “doing skills” and “feeling good” about herself. She described her high school years as the “peak” of her happiness in gymnastics. In college, the coaches and the “atmosphere of the team” were different and “the girls didn’t get along as well.”

Many of the participants described complicated relationships with the sport of gymnastics, in that they had fun but also found it to be very difficult and trying at times. Many of the women liked being able to do skills that most people cannot do. As gymnasts, they all felt like part of a family or group at some point. Most participants expressed that the level of social chemistry with their team contributed to how enjoyable the experience was for them. The sense of accomplishment derived from the sport was the primary reason many of the women continued to participate in it. Some of the women also talked about enjoying gymnastics more than academics. Additionally, participating in gymnastics contributed to some participants feeling respected or empowered.

Sense of Discipline

All nine participants described gymnastics engendering a sense of discipline in their lives. This role was present throughout the women’s gymnastics careers to some degree, but they experienced club gymnastics as stricter than college. Gymnastics played a primary role in the women’s lives, taking precedence over
everything else. Being a serious gymnast required making social, time, and physical sacrifices. Some participants also experienced rigid training expectations and critical coaching styles.

Megan learned to be a “perfectionist” through being a gymnast. The long hours and demanding training gave her “direction,” and taught her how to “budget” her time and to be “focused and diligent.” She explained that when she makes mistakes, she wants to “fix” anything in her power, no matter what it takes. This mentality is actually what led to Megan’s injury as she pushed herself trying to correct a mistake. She did not socialize much in high school because she spent the majority of her time in the gym. She spent the rest of her time trying to stay at the top of her class academically. While she knows she made sacrifices, she talked about these just being the “norm” in gymnastics.

I can’t think of how many times I was in pain, or just mental pain, and what I had to go through for gymnastics.

At the time, Karen did not consider life changes she made and things she went through for gymnastics, sacrifices. When she was training elite, gymnastics came before everything. She moved away from home at a young age to train at an elite facility. Over time, gymnastics became more and more physically painful for her. Karen’s club team was often skeptical and thought people were “faking injuries so they wouldn’t have to do something.” She recalled not having opportunities to have non-gymnast friends or to date. Karen expressed that she cannot relate to most people’s childhood experiences, due to how different hers were.
When Kim was young, gymnastics “always came first.” Similar to Karen, Kim did not mind sacrificing other things because everything else seemed “superficial” and “not as significant.” Kim described herself as a “perfectionist.” In high school she, “didn’t have a life like the other kids.” After dealing with “degrading” coaches and initially wanting to quit, she switched to a gym that was a two-hour drive, each way. Kim liked going to practice better than going to school. Her parents even considered home schooling her so she could be in the gym more and reach her fullest potential.

Paige also left school early every day to train for club gymnastics. She described how her strict training schedule made her feel special and as though she was missing-out on things. Paige recalled not being able to go to sleepovers, participate in other sports, or “relate” to the kids at school. Paige’s club coaches were very strict.

They (club coaches) always thought you were faking, that you were just trying to get out of doing something. So, they would just keep pushing you and pushing you, no matter how much pain you were in or how much it hurt. Because, you know, they didn’t really tolerate it.

In Joanna’s club, gymnasts were, “not really allowed to be injured.” She did not realize how much she missed-out on in childhood until she started meeting new people in college. Even in college, she had meets every weekend. Although her training schedule was challenging, she felt like she always knew “what was coming next.”
Nina likened her club training in high school to “a full time job.” Gymnastics took a lot of time, money, energy, and sacrifices on her and her parents’ parts. She did not have time to get involved in school activities or go out at night with friends. Nina even put gymnastics ahead of academics when choosing a college. Gymnastics taught her discipline, teamwork, dedication, responsibility, mental toughness, and how to push herself physically. Nina described herself as “Type A” and indicated that she had to be that way to work out four hours a day and get her schoolwork done. Nina also described becoming more self-critical while she was in the sport.

I feel like gymnasts are really hard on themselves. Even though I loved it, a lot of times it didn’t make you feel very good.

Nina was “never comfortable” with her body, struggled to stay “fit” enough, and felt like an “outcast” on her college team because the other girls were “all so tiny.”

Sarah’s club coaches thought gymnasts should be “really tiny,” were “really strict about diet,” and “openly criticized” many of the girls’ bodies. Her club coaches used “negativity” to “motivate” them. This outlook “beat down” Sarah’s “self-esteem,” particularly in high school.

I think it’s a hard sport to feel successful at all the time though. Going into the gym every day, you’re told what you’re doing wrong every second, pretty much, because you’re trying to get better.

Sarah’s coaches also did not believe girls’ injuries unless they had “proof.”

Linda’s club coaches criticized her body, creating a “fear of gaining weight,” which continued to be a struggle for her. She had several eating disorders throughout her career, yet she talked about how gymnastics kept her “in shape,” “active,” and
“healthy.” Linda described sustaining many injuries and putting her “body through so much,” that the x-ray technicians in her doctor’s office knew her by name. Linda explained that she tried to, “shape everything” in her life around the goal of earning a college scholarship. She thought about gymnastics all day at school, had only gymnast friends, and did not “have much of a social life growing up.” Linda left school early every day to train in another state where there was a gym “better suited” to her skill level. Gymnastics became more like a “job” for her with all the “intense assignments” and “obligations.”

Amy described how gymnastics was her “whole life” and more important than anything else before she went to college.

Yeah, so many hours and so much time spent on practicing and competing and I mean basically, if you look at it, it was 75% of my life, and it seemed like there was nothing else. I didn’t have time to do anything else.

Amy described not having time for friends outside gymnastics. She also talked about how she had to stay “healthy” for the sport. Amy recalled gymnastics being so “strict” that she “cried some days.” She gave one example when her head coach in college told her she was “a waste of money” when the team did poorly in a meet and he realized she had not completed her preparatory assignments. She indicated that her college head coach “scared” her and caused her to “hate” going to practice.

Participants explained that they experienced discipline largely through enforcement of norms in the sport. These norms were taught to many of the participants in club gymnastics and became engrained in them over time. These women then expected themselves to conform to the engrained norms in college. The
women described these discipline norms. All of the participants dedicated almost all their time to gymnastics and put the sport ahead of everything else in their lives. Some of the participants travelled far distances or lived away from home to train. Some even left school early every day to get in enough practice hours at the gym. Most led limited social lives, which did not include many people outside of gymnastics. The women expressed regularly straining their bodies through rigorous training. Many indicated that coaches taught them to continue training and ignore injuries or quietly deal with them on their own. These women explained that many coaches did not believe them when injured and some coaches did not stand for injuries at all. Some participants indicated that coaches openly criticized gymnasts’ body shape and weight, leading to the pursuit of an unrealistic body image. The women expressed that as gymnasts they saw the above-mentioned forms of discipline as the norm. It was not until the participants retired, had a chance to reflect, led lives outside of gymnastics, and compared their life stories to others’, that their tremendous dedication and sacrifice was truly recognized. Many participants explained how the discipline they experienced also taught them positive life skills such as, time management, self-motivation, and goal setting.

Identity

All of the participants indicated that gymnastics was the primary component of their identity, especially prior to college. Each woman described how gymnastics was her life and everyone knew her as, the gymnast. The participants all felt unique
as gymnasts. Many people were amazed by and envious of the skills they were able to do and their goals of making it to the Olympics or earning a college scholarship.

Being a gymnast was a way for the women to stand out as individuals, but also made it difficult to relate to non-gymnast peers.

Megan described gymnastics as the “biggest part” of her identity, second only to her name. In fact, that is how she introduced herself to others.

If I did well in the meet that weekend, I was happy all week. If I didn’t do well, I thought about it all week. That’s how I defined myself.

Karen, Kim, and Joanna all had mixed feelings about being unique as a gymnast. Gymnastics was a way for Karen to represent herself to others. Like Megan, Karen’s introductions included the fact that she was on the gymnastics team.

It was just something unique I had going for myself, so it became defining. Other people found it special, so therefore I was like; oh, other people think this is really neat, I’ll start talking about it more. So, it’s always there when I meet people.

However, Karen described feeling as though she has to justify why she cannot relate to her friends’ childhoods. She indicated thinking her friends should be able to understand what she was doing while they were “off doing their normal childhood things.” Similarly, Kim recalled her non-gymnast friends not understanding why she had to “practice every day” or “couldn’t come out.” Yet, she also received some positive feedback from others for being a gymnast.

You did the cool sport that everybody wanted to watch in the Olympics and it’s like, yeah I can do some of those skills. So, you felt proud to be a gymnast because it was that rare sport that everybody talked about, but not everyone can do.
Joanna clearly displayed her mixed feelings about what it was like to feel unique as a gymnast.

There was no one in my school that was at the level of gymnastics that I was, so sometimes I felt like an outsider, and sometimes I felt like, wow, I really am special, in a way. Then, in college, I think as a college athlete you generally feel special to begin with, just because they kind of put you as a first priority over other students. Even though, that kind of makes you feel guilty in a sense, it still kind of makes you feel special in another.

Amy, Linda, and Nina all emphasized that others looked at them as unique because not many other people did gymnastics. People considered Amy unique because gymnastics was not a popular sport in the country where she grew up. Linda’s high school did not have a gymnastics team. Gymnastics made her different from her peers who were involved in high school sports. Linda recognized that most people had tried gymnastics when they were very young, but that very few continued with it through high school. In Nina’s high school, there were only a handful of gymnasts. She explained that even her good friends knew her as “the gymnast” and then stated, “That’s who I was.”

Paige and Sarah described their gymnast identities being limiting and challenging in various ways. Paige had friends she saw every day in the gym. However, outside of the gym she was “pretty lonely” and felt “on her own” because nobody was in the same “group” as her. Paige described how her gymnast identity overshadowed everything else about her.

I think my whole identity was, me as a gymnast. Everybody referred to me as, oh Paige the gymnast, the girl that goes to gymnastics every day. I was always the gymnast and nothing else.
Sarah expressed a similar feeling of being stuck within her gymnast identity.

In high school, it was my identity. It was who I was. I was pretty much the smart gymnast in high school and that’s what people knew me as. I felt trapped, like I couldn’t quit because that would be a separation of who I was.

The participants all talked about gymnastics being the primary component of their identities, prior to retirement. All of the women highlighted how they were seen primarily as gymnasts, by themselves and by others, particularly during club training. Some participants explained that others saw them as unique because they did a difficult sport that most only see in the Olympics. At the same time, some of the women had difficulty finding things in common with non-gymnast peers who could not relate to their lifestyle. For some participants, this made it difficult to make friends and fit in at school. Very few peers in their high schools, if any, did gymnastics at their level. In addition, some of the women left school early every day to train and had restricted social lives, allowing others to recognize that gymnastics was their top priority. The women explained that it felt good to be special, yet difficult and sometimes lonely to be so unique.

Injury Experience

The participants all experienced injury that led to their early retirement from gymnastics. The women’s injury experiences consisted of much more than just the physical consequences. This section outlines the following themes: sport ethic or the
norms in sport culture, feeling alone, experiencing loss, and coming to terms with the idea that it was time to retire.

**Sport Ethic**

Athletes are often encouraged to accept the values and norms of the sport culture. Sport ethic comes with an expectation that athletes will conform to these norms in extreme ways, without questioning them. The participants described club coaches modeling and developing adherence to the sport ethic and some college coaches reinforcing it. Each participant explained ways in which she internalized aspects of the sport ethic, later expecting herself to live up to it, even if college coaches did not. Three common contributing factors emerged in the women’s injury experiences: the expectation to just deal with the pain and continue training, denial and convincing themselves they were okay, and experiencing multiple injuries and expecting to recover as quickly as they had in the past.

Joanna, Linda, Paige, Sarah and Karen all expected themselves to just deal with the pain. Joanna, Linda, and Sarah wanted or felt like they needed to “tough it out.” If Sarah did not think a body part was “broken,” she kept training and learned to “wake up every morning” and “take medicine” or just “live with the pain.” Paige’s club coaches told her “we all play with pain, it’s no big deal, suck it up and go.” When Paige injured herself in college, she continued training so that her coach and teammates would not think she was “a wuss” or “a baby.”

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Amy, Joanna, Kim, Paige, Nina, and Sarah all minimized their injuries by telling themselves that they were fine, they were just overreacting, it was not a serious injury, or they were not hurt at all. Amy, Karen, Megan, and Linda indicated that they not only kept training, but also continued to push themselves while they were hurt.

Amy described her experience of sport ethic.

I think all gymnasts are like that. Sometimes you get injured and you’re thinking, oh, it’s just a little thing, there’s really nothing wrong, I must just be overreacting. Then, you keep trying, and you’re like, no I’m going to get hurt. Sometimes, at least when I got injured, my head coach would go around and tell people that I was faking it or something. I don’t know why, but then it makes you feel like, am I really hurt or what’s going on? Then, you did feel guilty. You’re like, I’m not doing everything I can. Then, when you do try to do everything you can, it doesn’t work, it still hurts.

Megan, Linda, and Kim continued training despite medical test results or doctors’ advice they received. Megan kept training after a specialist told her she “should quit,” because she “wanted to be able to finish” the year. Linda delayed having a surgery that an MRI showed she needed, and proceeded to do “a lot more damage” to her body. After surgery, Linda struggled with her skills, but still kept trying to convince herself she could come back. She “didn’t want to deal with it” and thought she would “wake up and everything would be fine.”

The women described multiple injuries as the norm, both in their personal experiences and in the sport of gymnastics. Kim and Nina had high expectations for their healing process, due to recovering from past injuries quickly. When Kim was much younger, she had surgery and it only took her six months to recover from it. Therefore, when Kim’s career ending injury occurred, she thought, “I’ll have surgery,
I’ll do my therapy, I’ll be back in no time.” Nina assumed she would get through her injury because she had recovered from more severe injuries in the past. Megan, Joanna, and Karen had undetected and untreated injuries that worsened over time.

Many of the participants’ coaches taught them, from a young age, that it was unacceptable to be injured. Many of the women learned to keep quiet about their injuries. Then in college, many of the participants did not speak up about their injuries, did not get treatment right away, and did not change or stop their training right away. By the time many of the women faced injury in college, they had come to expect themselves to be able to just deal with pain and continue training. Many participants also feared responses from coaches and teammates if they were truthful about their injuries. Some participants did not think their coaches or teammates would believe them, wanted to appear tough, and did not want their team to see them as weak. In order to keep training, many of the women minimized their injuries and convinced themselves and others they were okay. This strong denial led some of the women to do even more damage to their bodies and exacerbate the injury. Many of the women experienced multiple injuries in their gymnastics careers and therefore, expected to recover as well and as quickly as they had in the past.

Alone in Injury

The participants felt alone, in many different ways, during their injury experiences. They described being alone in terms of: fear, guilt, isolating themselves,
loneliness, others not believing them, the sideline experience, the unknown factors involved, and wanting confirmation and approval.

Five women experienced fear during their injury experience. The injury itself was “scary” for Amy because she did not fully understand the medical issues, had to have surgery, and her parents could not be there with her. Joanna was afraid to tell her coaches about her physical pain for fear that they would take gymnastics “away” from her. When Linda was injured, she was “afraid” that if she decided to retire, she would “regret” it for the rest of her life. Nina questioned what she was “going to do” if she did retire. Karen was afraid to admit her pain because she knew, from experience, how “miserable” it was to have to sit out and regain strength and skills.

Eight of the nine participants felt alone with a sense of guilt during the injury experience. Amy, Kim, Joanna, and Linda all had at least one college coach make them feel guilty for being injured. Joanna described the impact this had on her.

Oh yeah, I definitely felt guilt, not only for myself but there were also comments my coaches would make to me, which made me feel more guilty.

Like, oh you know we recruited you for (two events) and it just sucks that you can’t do them. So, you’d be sitting there while everybody else was doing (event) and you couldn’t do it, and it would just eat away at you a little bit.

Paige’s guilt “stemmed” from her club coaches pushing her in the past, no matter how much pain she had. Amy, Paige, and Karen questioned whether they could do more than they thought. Kim and Karen felt guilty about their injuries not healing according to the expected timeline. If it is determined that a collegiate athlete cannot continue due to health reasons they are medically disqualified, more commonly known as being put on medical. When Karen’s coaches told her they were putting her
on medical, her first thought was, “I haven't worked hard enough” in rehabilitating her injury. Kim, Megan, and Paige felt guilty about letting their team down. Kim could always feel the “tension” amongst her teammates, in terms of her not being able to do anything.

Five women isolated themselves when injured. Sarah “wanted to separate” herself, and did so briefly, because she was “disappointed” about getting hurt and experiencing it being “so hard” to come back. Kim did not like talking about her situation “too much,” described herself as “very independent,” and felt like she could cope on her own. Linda was “distant” with her teammates because she was “miserable” being hurt. Amy indicated tending to “block” people out when feeling alone.

I felt like if I kept complaining to people they would get sick of me. So, I didn’t complain. I just kind of, went into my own world. I isolated myself, and that was, basically it. I felt like I was by myself all the time.

Eight of the participants felt lonely during their injury experience. Amy and Kim missed their families, especially when they found out they needed surgery. Amy and Linda felt ignored by coaches. Amy, Linda, and Nina’s loneliness was due in part to not getting much support from their teammates. Megan was “dying to talk to people about it” outside the gym, but teammates “let” her “be” after she made it clear that she did not want to discuss it inside the gym. Joanna, Sarah, and Karen felt disconnected from their teams, due to coaches separating them for rehabilitation.

Six of the women felt like others did not believe them when they tried to communicate about their injuries. Karen’s teammates and coaches convinced her to
"buck up," because her injury "should" have been healed according to how much

time had gone by since her surgery. Linda's teammates and one of her coaches

thought she was "giving up" when she announced she was having surgery, since she

had not previously communicated how much pain she was experiencing. Amy's

coach thought she was "faking" and then convinced her teammates of this too.

Megan's coaches and trainers did not take her injury "seriously" and only allowed her
to have low-intensity treatments at first. Kim never felt believed by her coaches, as

they tried to force her to do the one event that her injury prevented her from doing.

On the other hand, when Joanna was trying to come back after her injury, her coaches
did not believe her self-reports of having "very tolerable" pain. Joanna explained that

her coaches thought she was "really stupid" in handling her injuries.

Seven participants felt alone in some way during their sideline experience.

Amy and Linda both had at least one coach who ignored them and was rude to them
when sidelined. Amy gave an example of her teammates "forgetting" about her when

they ordered t-shirts, unintentionally making her feel excluded from the group. When

sidelined, Linda missed having "a relationship" with her team like she had before.

Joanna and Kim felt "disconnected" and not "part of the team," respectively, when

coaches required them to do conditioning for hours at a time during practice. Paige

felt like she was "not really part of anything" and "left out" of pre-meet "rituals" with

teammates. Nina and Sarah felt like they were not "doing anything" and missed

"being part of the group," respectively.
Five of the participants talked about feeling alone, thinking about the unknown factors involved in their injury experience. Neither Amy nor Sarah knew the severity of her injury or the nature of her recovery, until she actually had surgery. After getting hurt once and coming back, Amy often thought about not knowing when her “last time” doing gymnastics would be. Sarah had many “ups and downs” with her injury and did not know if she would do gymnastics again. Megan and Linda kept thinking they would heal. Megan’s doctor told her she had a minor injury. Therefore, Megan continued training and did not telling anyone about her pain, only to find out later that she had an untreated injury. Megan and Nina began thinking about what they were going to do with their lives if they did not have gymnastics. Nina felt “nervous” about not having a plan for herself. Kim felt “confused” about what her “place on the team” and her “role as a student athlete” would be if she became a “medical athlete.” It was “very difficult” for Karen not to know why her injured body part still was not healed after she had surgery and time to recover. It was especially difficult because her team thought she should have been healed by then. It was not until later that she found out she had a “bad infection.”

Six women wanted a sense of confirmation and approval from others, when they were feeling alone in the injury process. Kim and Joanna wanted to know that everything would be “okay.” Kim recalled how good it felt when her parents let her know, “sports weren’t everything” to them and that her education was very important. Joanna described how difficult it was for her to know that her coaches thought she “had no life” outside of gymnastics and could not “let go.” Joanna wanted her
coaches' approval and did not understand why they would not let her stay connected to the team. Paige and Sarah wanted to know that it was okay to consider retirement. Paige said it put her "at ease" when people "understood" and told her she was doing "the right thing." Sarah was looking for "confirmation" that "it would be okay no matter what" she decided.

All the participants felt alone, in some way, during their injury experience. Many felt alone with their fear when facing surgery, wondering if they could come back from their injury, facing the possibility of gymnastics no longer being part of their lives, and not knowing what they would do if they retired. Almost all of the participants felt alone with a sense of guilt, which they experienced through self-blame and team imposed guilt. Many isolated themselves due to disappointment, feeling sad or depressed, not wanting others to see them as complainers, and not wanting or even knowing how to talk about it. Almost all of the women felt lonely, due to missing their families at home, a lack of team support, and feeling disconnected from the team. Many of the women's teams did not believe them, treating them as though they were faking, giving up, and not in-tune with their own bodies. When sidelined, many participants felt separated, excluded, and disconnected from the team. There also were some painful changes in the way teammates and coaches behaved towards them, making the women feel disconnected, excluded, and less valued. Many felt alone in facing the unknowns, including: severity of injury, healing timeline, possibility of making a comeback, and an uncertain life plan. Many sought approval and confirmation, wanting to hear that: it would be okay no matter
what, there were other things to focus on in life besides gymnastics, and it was okay to consider retiring.

Loss in Injury

All the participants recalled having feelings of loss during the injury experience. The women felt a sense of loss through their experiences of depression or sadness, frustration and anger, physical pain, and a desire to continue contributing to the team.

Eight of the women experienced loss through depression or sadness during their injury experience. Amy, Megan, and Linda described themselves as “depressed” during at least part of this time. Amy felt like people “forgot” about her in the beginning, but felt much worse after getting hurt again following a comeback. Amy described how that injury experience was “like being put in a dark room.”

It got so bad that I even put a blanket across the window in my room. I didn’t realize how much worse it made it. Until one day when my roommate was like, shouldn’t you take that down? and I was like, what?, I like the room being dark.

Amy “lost a lot of weight” because she was “too depressed to eat.” She eventually saw a family doctor who prescribed her antidepressants for one year. Megan described how she “closed down” emotionally when injured. She was in tremendous physical pain, “didn’t want to see anybody,” and felt disappointed in herself. When Linda was first injured, she “hated” her life, wanted to “quit” and “go home,” and called her mom crying every day. She described this time as a “black cloud” when she “took everything personally.” Linda felt depressed again when trying to come
back because she “wasn’t the same.” Paige felt “worthless” and “pointless.” Sarah was “a little bit depressed,” due to feeling “distant” from her team. She also felt like she was “trying so hard,” but was “failing.” Nina felt “upset” and “not happy.” She recalled how thinking about retirement was like “getting a divorce,” because she knew she needed to do it, but it still “broke” her “heart.” Nina also felt “a lack of fulfillment” in what she wanted to accomplish. Karen was sad because she was not able to do things with the team or to “bond” with them. Kim “cried a lot,” and tried not to let things build up inside.

Six participants experienced loss through frustration and anger when dealing with injury. Kim, Joanna, and Nina felt angry with themselves during that time. Kim blamed herself for continuing to train when hurt. Nina was frustrated that she “wasn’t getting anywhere” and was angry with her body for not being able to “pull it together.” Kim, Megan, and Joanna were frustrated with their coaches not understanding, listening to them, or believing them. Kim’s assistant coach “resented” her for being injured and unable to do anything. Kim felt like she “didn’t deserve” to be treated the way she was and stated, “It wasn’t like I was doing it intentionally to spite her.” Megan described how she went through “physical” and “mental anguish” during that time, particularly because her trainers and coaches did not believe her. Before the injury Megan was “so happy and bubbly” in the gym, but afterwards she was, “lash [ing out at anybody and everybody.” Joanna and Linda were frustrated that they did not have ongoing treatment with trainers. Joanna’s trainers stopped treating her when they no longer considered her injury “new.” Linda did not have a trainer
available to her when she went home for a school break. Linda described how it felt when she injured herself, “You run into a brick wall and there’s nothing you can do about it.” It was frustrating for Sarah to be “physically unable” to do things, go through “the process of rehab,” and “watch everybody else finish out a sport” she had been doing for so long.

All nine women experienced physical pain and loss of health, due to their injuries. Megan, Joanna, Sarah, Karen, Amy, and Linda all felt a sense of loss, as their physical pain prevented them from carrying on with, typical activities, daily routines, and body movements. Loss was also evident due to the negative impacts the physical pain had on relationships, respect, and mental and emotional functioning. In the beginning of her injury, Megan’s team did not take her pain seriously. The physical pain and her team’s reaction to it made her feel “antisocial” and “emotional.” Megan’s pain worsened, but she continued to train and as a result, had pain “all the time” and felt “depressed.”

It (the pain) affected the way I slept, it affected the way I studied, it affected what I could do in my day; it was terrible.

She had to “convince” her team that she was in pain and felt like they did not understand or respect what she was going through. When Megan was in physical pain, she just wanted to get the season “over with.” Megan’s pain escalated to the point where she “couldn’t even think straight.” Joanna’s relationship with her coaches changed when she became injured. Her coaches did not trust her to rate her own level of pain. Joanna’s athletic trainers did not continue providing treatment once they no
longer considered her injury new, which she experienced as “very hurtful.” When Joanna’s relationships with coaches and athletic trainers began to deteriorate, she tried to manage the pain on her own. Joanna altered her daily body movements and even made her own makeshift medical apparatus to keep her injured body part from going numb. It was extremely “frustrating” for Joanna to be “physically unable” to do things. Sarah had so much “bruising and swelling” that her doctors could not tell exactly what was wrong until they did surgery on her two injured body parts at once. Her injury compromised her mobility and made it very difficult for her to get around campus, both before and after surgery. Others did not understand, the “aftereffects” of Sarah’s injury because they did not see her in the early stages of recuperation, when she stayed in a hotel with her parents and was “just forced to lay there.” Even after a reasonable amount of recovery time, Karen’s injured body part was still “very swollen” and “painful,” preventing her from being physically able to do even minimal exercise. She had developed a bad infection and needed several more surgeries to “clean out some of the damage.” Karen’s injuries negatively affected her mobility and her mental functioning.

Before the first surgery that I had during college, I think I got a prescription for Vicodin or some sort of prescription pain medication. It doped the pain, but then I felt kind of out of it all the time, just for a few weeks. I took some pain medication after the first surgery, and then sometimes after the second surgery, and the third surgery. So, I was either in pain or kind of dopey for most of that year. A lot of the year I felt like, for whatever reason, be it pain or medication, I just wasn’t 100% mentally present.

When injured, Amy felt pain every time she moved in a particular way and felt “useless.” Her coach thought she was “pretending” and despite doing everything she
could, her body part still hurt and did not function properly. She had to have another surgery after an inserted medical device “didn’t take.” Amy did not have the full college athlete experience, as people on campus “didn’t even know” she was an athlete, due to her using a medical apparatus so much of the time. Amy lost independence, due to the difficulty in getting around campus and having to rely on others to help her. Linda could not carry anything and had to keep her injured body part secured, as she did not have full control of it. Her body part also had a deformed appearance during that time-period. Linda lost her body part’s “full range of motion,” which she will never regain. Linda also lost closeness in relationships with her assistant coach and teammates during that time, because they “didn’t understand” that she was not just making up the pain or the need for surgery. She felt “miserable,” as her pain eradicated her ability to do gymnastics. The pain and resulting surgery were such “awful” experiences that she “lost” some of her “passion” for the sport.

Linda, Amy, Paige, Nina, and Kim all described enduring the loss of physical health for so long, that they developed a high pain tolerance. Linda “pushed through” the pain as best she could, for a long time, but did not feel like her team respected her efforts. When Amy was first injured, it was “pretty painful,” but each time thereafter, she became more “used to the pain.” In club, Paige learned to “convince” herself she was “not in pain” and used that skill when injured in college. Despite her high pain tolerance, her injuries “limited” her “a lot” forcing her to give up the way she used to train. Paige lost a sense of physical comfort and strength in her everyday life, as her injury caused her to have lasting pain, making her feel like “an old lady.” Others
remarked on Nina being visibly in pain and having to use medical devices to get around. Nina described how she had to, “just do it,” and got used to her body hurting. However, Nina’s pain led to a loss of independence and the ability to work out, due to using a medical apparatus. The pain meant she “just couldn’t do everything,” leading her to feel “not happy” with herself. Kim trained in pain for “years” before she even had her injury looked at and also experienced re-injury. Kim felt like she lost the trust of her coaches. She told her coaches she physically could not do all-around because of the pain, but they continually tried to “force” her to do it and even threatened to take her scholarship away if she did not.

Eight participants specifically mentioned how much they felt a sense of loss, in that they wanted to contribute to the team while they were injured, but could no longer do that in the same way. The “most important thing” to Megan was to “help the team.” The “toughest” thing for Megan was watching everyone else contribute and having to say she could not do it. Amy felt “useless” when she was hurt, but enjoyed helping teammates “if they were in trouble.” She felt like she could help teammates “fix” the things that the coaches could not. As team captain, Joanna was there for her teammates when they needed “to vent” and to give them “coaching advice.” Kim “cheered” on and “encouraged” her teammates because she knew they frequently did not get “positive feedback” from the coaches. Paige wanted to be there to “help out,” and had a “negative” feeling when she could not. Paige felt like she was “part of the team” when she moved mats or springboards or talked to teammates before they competed. Nina tried to tell herself she was part of the team when she
moved mats, but wanted to contribute more by competing, feeling “useful,” and doing her “job.” Sarah and Karen wanted to contribute and to feel like part of the group, but neither knew how to do that while hurt.

All the participants experienced loss when injured. Almost all the participants felt loss through depression or sadness. They avoided others, felt disappointed in themselves, questioned their own value, and grieved the loss of their unfulfilled hopes and dreams. Most of the women also felt loss through frustration or anger, with themselves and with their team. All the women experienced loss, due to the physical pain they endured. Some of the participants’ felt like their teams lost trust and respect for them, largely due to not being believed or feeling that the severity of their injuries were not fully understood. When injured, the women experienced loss in terms of reduced, physical ability, physical comfort, trust in their own body, emotional closeness with the team, and mental and emotional functioning. Almost all of the women felt loss in that they wanted to contribute to the team, but could no longer do so in the way they had previously. Some of these women found ways to help their teams in, cheering on teammates, offering teammates advice, being there emotionally for teammates, and helping to move equipment at practices and meets. However, some participants still found it difficult to feel useful and had negative feelings when they could not help the team. A couple of the women wanted to contribute, but did not know how to do that while they were injured. After adjusting to retirement, some participants came to terms with the losses they experienced and some participants did not.
**Time to Retire**

During the injury process, there were times when the participants considered the possibility of retirement. Three commonalities emerged from the women’s stories about these times, feeling overwhelmed, poor communication with others, and people that helped them navigate the process.

Six women indicated feeling overwhelmed when injured. Amy and Linda both talked about not remembering that time well. It was “harder” for Amy when she got hurt for a second time in college because she “knew what was going to happen” and “how hard it was to come back.” Amy described how “everything was a blur,” it was “hard” for her “to take,” and it felt like “everything at once.” Linda stated that she did not even “remember that year” because “it was so bad.” Linda “didn’t know how” to “handle it.” Linda described that time as “surreal.” She explained how she “took everything personally,” because she was “going through so much emotionally.” Kim felt like her “whole dream was just crumbling.” She described the time just prior to retirement as the “most stressful period” of her “entire life.” Megan was overwhelmed with frustration, anger, and disappointment. She described having a “mental breakdown.” Megan gave an example of this, when told her teammates to “shut up” when they were cheering for her. She recalled thinking they were only doing it because they “pitied” her. Nina felt like “battling with the injury” only added to her “biggest problems” of “keeping” her “weight down,” and “getting better.” She was also feeling the strain of trying to balance academics and gymnastics. Joanna was
trying to cope with family problems in addition to her injury. When she found out how “bad” things “started to get” in her family, her “injuries started to get worse.”

Eight participants described having poor communication during their injury experience. Amy and Kim both had great difficulty with coaches. After Amy was injured, her head coach “pretended” she “wasn’t there the rest of the time.” Amy also had communication difficulties with her doctors, as she did not understand why she kept reinjuring herself if reconstructive surgery was supposed to make her body part “stronger than ever.” Kim’s assistant coach and teammates did not understand why she had to have surgery and seemed to think she was taking “the easy way out.” She felt like she was being “pushed out” because her coaches were “forcing” her to either do all-around, which she physically could not do, or go on medical. Kim recalled that her coaches “never really asked” her how she “was doing” and instead “always assumed” based on the amount of time since surgery. Megan, Linda, and Joanna had difficulties communicating with their teams, due to people not believing them or not understanding the impact of their injuries. Megan’s team initially did not believe her when she said, “Something’s wrong.” It was not until her symptoms became severe that her team took notice. Megan had difficulty communicating inside the gym and did not know how to tell her teammates that she needed to talk outside of the gym. Linda was not very vocal about her injury, as she was “taught and trained” in club and college gymnastics “not to say anything about being hurt.” Linda’s team “assumed” she was “fine,” when she chose to delay surgery. When she informed her team that she had to have the surgery, her assistant coach stopped speaking to her and
some teammates talked behind her back. Linda also distanced herself from people during that time, making communication difficult. Although Joanna knew her coaches "cared" about her, she felt like they "never really listened" to her or the way she felt about her injuries. At the same time, Joanna indicated that the communication problem was partly her "fault." Joanna described how her coaches asked her to be honest about her pain, but she always said, "no, I’m not hurt" even if she was. Joanna explained how she carried with her to college, what she learned in club about not speaking up when injured. She "didn’t know how to communicate." When Joanna was honest about her pain, she felt "punished" because her coaches did not allow her to do that event ever again. Joanna described an ongoing lack of communication with her trainers. Her teammates became very involved, trying to bridge the communication gaps between her, the coaches, and the trainers. Joanna indicated that her teammates had good intentions, but that hearing their frustrations allowed her to focus disproportionately on the negatives, which was not helpful. Paige, Karen, and Nina described very limited communication with their teams. Paige’s head coach was "very aloof" and they "didn’t have any sort of communication." She did not have a "line of communication" with anyone she thought might "understand" her experience. Karen had limited communication with her coaches. Her coaches did not thoroughly explain their decision to put her on medical, leaving her questioning herself. She had little communication with teammates, as her coaches separated her during rehabilitation. She also had limited communication with her parents, as they "weren’t
involved at all, in gymnastics.” Nina felt like her injury “wasn’t a big deal” to her teammates or her coaches.

Eight of the women had one or more people that helped them navigate the injury process. Kim and Megan both turned to their supportive boyfriends during this time. Kim’s family was hopeful and encouraging about her injury healing. Her parents and club coach also reminded her of the “big picture,” the fact that she was there for an education. Megan’s mom, her roommate, and her best friend all helped remind her that if things were “that bad,” then she “should be done.” This helped her to keep reassessing the situation and to make the decision that was right for her.

Joanna and Linda both turned to fellow gymnasts who had injury experiences. Joanna leaned on her best friend from club because they “could understand each other.” Linda had an injured teammate to “go through the whole thing with.” Linda also called her mom a lot, had friends to listen, and had support from her head coach. In addition, Linda began counseling when trying to come back and knew it probably would not happen. Nina and Amy’s athletic trainers helped them through the process. Nina’s trainer gave her “a different perspective” on injury and potential retirement and served as a “good resource” for her. Amy’s trainer encouraged her to “see a doctor” because she did not “seem like” herself. Amy described having a “support system” that helped her through injury. One of the most important people for her, was the team family doctor who listened and prescribed antidepressants. Amy also had family, friends, and a teammate on medical that helped her keep her “sanity,” “realize
what was going on," and to put her "priorities" in place. Amy described why it was so important for her to have this "support system."

I mean, I didn't really try to look for it (help) myself. I mean, other people were guiding me towards this help, but the help does work.

Paige and Sarah both had supportive coaches. Paige explained how her coaches and training staff "wanted you healthy" because you were an "asset to the team."

They went "out of their way" to make sure she was "feeling good" and her injuries were healing. Sarah turned to her assistant coach and teammates the most. Her assistant coach was helpful because she was "people oriented." Sarah's head coach was "understanding" and was there "guiding" her "through the process."

When the participants were struggling with injuries and considering the possibility of retirement, many of them felt overwhelmed. They felt stressed and as though their dreams were slipping away. They also struggled to balance injury and other aspects of their lives, and tried to block out this difficult time in their memories. Many of the women had difficulty communicating with important people in their lives, making the experience even more difficult. For some, communication was difficult with coaches, teammates, doctors, and athletic trainers. Struggles to communicate often involved, what events to practice and compete, when and if surgery occurred, judging the level of pain, and rehabilitation routines. However, most of the women also had at least one person they were able to turn to during their injury experience. These people were parents, other injured or retired gymnasts, athletic trainers, coaches, or doctors.
Transition to Retirement

After becoming injured, many of the gymnasts continued pushing themselves and trying to fight through. However, they all had to retire prior to the end of their college careers. The women’s transition to retirement was a process involving many different stages and emotions. This section outlines the following themes: feeling alone in retirement, feeling a sense of loss in retirement, and trying to move forward with their lives after gymnastics.

Alone in Retirement

In the transition to retirement, the participants felt alone in various ways. The women described feeling alone in terms of experiencing a sense of loneliness and isolation, being responsible for fitness on their own for the first time, having body image concerns, feeling depressed or sad, and having a sense of fear.

Eight participants experienced a sense of loneliness or isolation. Amy, Megan, and Sarah felt alone in the role of student assistant coach. Amy explained that as a student assistant coach, she was not “performing” as a gymnast or part of the “coaching staff,” which made her feel “in the middle.” Megan thought her role as student assistant coach would allow her to stay involved with the team and put something new on her resume. Once in the role, the coaches did not listen to anything Megan had to say. She felt “disrespected” by the coaches and as though they did not “appreciate,” that she was once an asset to the team. Sarah isolated herself at first,
because she was previously so “engrained” in the team that it was difficult for her to be around them, especially hearing them talk about gymnastics. As student assistant coach, Sarah felt like “an outsider,” especially when competition season began and she realized how many things she could not be part of with the team. Sarah felt like many people did not “truly understand,” because they were not going through the things she was. Joanna and Linda felt like their teams did not really understand what they were going through. Joanna’s coaches would not let her stay involved or help with the team because they thought she had “a problem with disconnecting” and “needed to be away from it.” She felt like her coaches were “getting rid of” her. An assistant coach told Joanna she was a “distraction” to the girls. Joanna also did not feel like her teammates really understood what it felt like to be in her situation and felt “isolated in the world” after retirement. Joanna saw this as partly her “own fault,” as she wanted to be by herself more so she “didn’t have to talk about it.” Linda pulled back too, in the sense that she did not go into the gym for a while because she “needed some space.” She talked about how it felt “really lonely” not to be at practice and how she was “used to being around all those people all the time.” Linda explained how many of the girls did not call or “go out of their way” to stay in touch with her. When Linda did hang out with her team, a lot of them just “couldn’t understand” what she was going through and she felt like an “outsider.” Paige, Karen, and Nina felt caught between the athlete and non-athlete worlds. All of Paige’s friends were gymnasts, so when she retired she “didn’t really have anybody to hang out with.” She felt “isolated” much of the time, especially when her team travelled
and she "just sat" in her room. She later got into an argument with a former teammate and "all of the sudden everyone just stopped talking" to her. She felt "shunned" and as though she had no way of "defending" herself because her team "spent all day together." Paige then felt "totally disassociated from gymnastics" and as though "nobody really understood." Paige experienced some difficult adjustment issues during that time. Karen "didn’t really have a group of friends” after retirement, which left her life feeling “very vacuous.” Karen’s parents did not “understand” her commitment to gymnastics or put any “value” on it. On some days, Karen felt like a "misfit" who was being “punished” and “shunned” and was “unfit to hang out with other people.” Nina explained how she felt caught between two worlds.

Yeah, especially because right after you do it (retire) you’re very separated from your team. So, you’re not with that team anymore and everybody else that you go to hang out with; they don’t really know what you’re going through. If they’re other athletes, maybe they’re still competing and if they’re not athletes, they just don’t get it. So, you are kind of stuck in your own little world.

Seven women felt alone in the struggle to cope with body image issues and the transition from competitive athletics to general fitness. Amy, Kim, and Nina all felt that they had to continue to work out and found general fitness to be “boring.” Amy explained feeling like she had to work out all the time because “that’s what you did before.” However, she did not feel as “motivated,” and described how you have to “make yourself do it.” Yet, Amy became a “workout fiend” doing daily, ninety minute, cardiovascular workouts, due to a fear that she would “get fat.” Kim designed her workouts to try to “make up for” four hours of practice time. Staying active did
help Kim “clear” her mind and was “relaxing” for her. She described body image as something that was still a “struggle” for her. Kim described viewing exercise as a “chore” and feeling “guilty” if she does not do it. Nina explained not wanting to go to the gym for a while because general fitness did “nothing” for her. She recalled saying to herself, “Sure, I can lift, but what am I lifting for now?” She expressed how it was “hard to find something that physically or mentally compares to gymnastics.” Nina explained the difficulty in not being able to continue participating in gymnastics recreationally, as people do in other sports. She also stated that it is not possible to work out four hours a day, as she did previously in gymnastics, because the “real world doesn’t work that way.” Joanna and Linda’s issues with body image began during their gymnastics careers and continued in retirement. Joanna “always had problems” with body image, which “escalated” when she retired. She thought about how hard she had to work in gymnastics to “stay fit” and did not want to “have to” keep doing it. Joanna had “a lot of problems getting back into an exercise program” because she felt so “scarred” as a result of her coaches “forcing” her to do cardiovascular machines for long periods of time when rehabilitating her injury. Joanna stated that she was just beginning to see exercise as something she did for herself. Linda described how body image was “engrained in your head” as a gymnast.

I had several eating disorders throughout my career. It’s a sport where, you kind of, not have to, but it’s very common. Still today, I struggle with eating correctly just because I’m so scared to gain weight because I was always criticized for it.
When she first retired, Linda ate whatever she wanted because she was not "wearing a leotard anymore." She wanted to be "a little rebellious" and "have a few cookies." Linda soon discovered that she still cared what she looked like. She began going to the gym twice a day, thinking about how she used to work out four hours a day as a gymnast. Later Linda “didn’t work out at all” because she did not feel like it. She explained that it was still difficult for her to find a “balance,” and how she goes through “phases” with working out. Sarah and Karen noted interaction between being a gymnast, retiring, and becoming a woman. Sarah stated that gymnastics “makes it even harder to become a woman” because you have to deal with the public vision of what a gymnast should look like. She felt as though she had to be moving and active all the time because she was used to having a body that was “really in shape.” After retiring, Sarah found it very difficult to transition into becoming a woman. Karen never had to do her “own exercise” prior to retiring. She discovered that there was no “thrill factor” to running on a treadmill and that exercise aggravated her injury. Karen gained ten pounds and was very upset about it. She explained, “When you stop working out, puberty happens.” It felt weird for Karen to go through puberty as a college student. She wished she could “step out of” her body and into someone else’s because she was so “uncomfortable” and it all felt “foreign.”

All nine participants felt alone with depression or sadness at some point in their transition to retirement. Amy and Megan both felt depressed when they were in the student assistant coach role. Amy was depressed as student assistant coach because she saw teammates “not working hard” and found herself wishing she was
“doing it for them.” The worst of Megan’s depression was during her injury. However, she felt sad and somewhat depressed as a student assistant coach too. She explained how her sadness was largely due to the disrespectful ways her coaches interacted with her in that role. In addition to being treated disrespectfully, Megan was sad because she “still had pangs of missing” gymnastics. Kim primarily felt sad due to missing the sport as well. She stated that during the transition to retirement, she “definitely felt sad” and “cried a lot.” Kim explained having a tendency to cry in order to “get over” things. Karen was “sad” throughout the rest of college because the gymnastics team was such a “prominent feature” on campus and she “wasn’t part of it anymore.” Karen, Nina, and Sarah were “sad” to be leaving something they had done for so long and that had been such a big part of their lives. Nina explained that when you retire due to injury, you are sad because you do not leave “on your terms.” Sarah described a lot of her “tears” and “emotion” stemming from knowing it was the “end of something really big” and not knowing what she was going to do next. Joanna and Paige isolated themselves, due to feeling depressed. When the coaches would not allow Joanna to stay connected to the team and she was dealing with family problems, she “went down into a state of depression.” She stated, “I dug myself into a hole.” Joanna went through a “not caring” and “dull” phase, when she “didn’t want to see any of the girls,” even her own roommate. She separated herself from “everything having to do with gymnastics,” because it was just “too hard” for her at the time. In retirement, Paige no longer had any friends that talked to her and she became “very depressed for a long time.”
I isolated a lot. I didn’t go out; I just stayed in my room and was very depressed.

Paige wanted to feel numb so that she did not have to “feel” or “think about” the “hopeless, painful” feelings she was having. Linda missed being part of the team and having close connections with teammates. She tried to ignore the “sadness” she felt, causing a “build up” of emotion which led to a “breakdown.”

Five participants experienced some fear in retirement. Megan indicated her fear growing in retirement, as she began to realize how much her physical pain would “continue to affect” her life in “huge” ways. She expressed concern about the “long-term implications” of her injury, particularly in terms of pregnancy and having children. Linda was initially afraid she would “regret” retiring for the rest of her life, even though she did not see it as “a choice.” Linda explained how her fear of gaining weight persisted in retirement, as coaches often “criticized” her for this when she was a gymnast. Paige, Nina, and Sarah felt scared not knowing who they were or what they were going to do in retirement. Paige was “very nervous” about “picking the wrong thing” to dedicate her energy to. She wanted to do something different, but she was “so afraid” to put herself “out there” or to do anything “new.”

You dedicate your whole life to gymnastics and all of a sudden it’s gone and it’s like, who am I, what am I doing here, where am I going? It’s almost like a midlife crisis. It’s scary, it really is, because you don’t know where you’re going or who you are, and it’s really scary.

Paige expressed that she felt “unsuccessful” after retiring and therefore, assumed she would “fail” at anything else she tried. She did not want to “put all that time and effort” into something else and have it “crash and burn” on her. Nina was worried that
there was not more to her “than just being a gymnast.” Nina was also “afraid” because she thought all her friends only knew her as “a gymnast” and she was not sure how retirement would affect her friendship, even though that was an unfounded fear. She was “worried” about what she was “going to do” in life. At first, Sarah did not know if she could “handle” just helping out and not “fully” being on the team. She found herself asking, “What am I going to do now?”

The participants all felt alone in some way in retirement. Most of the women felt lonely or isolated. They described feeling unsure of their new roles, feeling disrespected and like an outsider, not knowing how to talk about their difficult experiences, and being unsure of their social group. Most of the participants also felt alone in dealing with body image and the transition to general fitness. Some had difficulty dealing with changes their bodies went through upon retirement, the change in activity level, and late onset puberty. Some kept up a high level of exercise and either wanted to keep it up or made themselves do it. Others could not exercise as a result, of the severity of their injuries. While others did not want to exercise, did not know the purpose of it any more, or found general fitness too boring. All of the women felt depressed or sad in retirement. Some of the participants became student assistant coaches in retirement. The student assistant coach role was a struggle for some of the women who did it, while others just missed doing gymnastics. Participants either grieved the loss or avoided it because it was too difficult for them to face. In both of these scenarios, the women experienced depression or sadness. Some of the women also expressed feeling afraid during this time. There was fear
about the long-term impact of injury and retirement, weight gain, what else to focus on in life, and questioning whom they were going to be without gymnastics.

*Loss in Retirement*

All the participants experienced a sense of loss in the transition to retirement. The women experienced a general sense of loss about not having gymnastics in their lives, confusion regarding changes that came along with the loss, frustration and anger as they faced the pain of the loss, and being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the loss.

All nine participants missed having gymnastics in their lives during the transition to retirement. Amy, Joanna, Linda, Sarah, and Karen described a void in their lives, due to retirement. Amy missed the “sense of accomplishment” gymnastics “gave” her. She felt a tremendous loss, as gymnastics was “such a big part” of her life before. As a student assistant coach, Amy thought about how she “would do anything” to be able to do gymnastics again. When a student assistant coach, she also lost her friendship connection with the team and felt like she had “no clue who they were” anymore. When Joanna’s coaches put her on medical, she felt like “everything was taken away.”

I think I definitely felt a sense of loss. I know it's a sport, but it's kind of like losing your best friend. It's just everything you've known. You've loved it so much for so many years, and then with the blink of an eye it's gone. You don't really get to deal with it or handle it like a lot of other people do.

Joanna stated that when she lost gymnastics she was able to “see it every now and again,” but was unable to “have it.” Linda described how not having gymnastics in
her life felt like “a piece of you is missing.” She felt like she was “watching” her life, as though it was not “really happening” to her. Linda described missing “competition” and being “pushed and challenged.” She indicated it feeling “bittersweet” when attending meets in retirement. Linda felt like an “outsider” when hanging out with her teammates and missed being “announced” at the meets and “working out as a member of the team.” Sarah really missed being part of the group, especially once competition season began and she was a student assistant coach rather than a gymnast. Sarah also missed “being able to flip and do really cool skills.”

She felt like she had to let go of a “huge part of her life.”

I always associated gymnastics with the discipline and the schedule in my life and being able to have such academic success and everything else. It was hard for me to look at it as just stopping a sport, versus letting a part of my life go, because I had been doing it for so long.

Karen missed her familiar gymnastics body, as she went through puberty upon retirement. She reported missing-out on the social aspect of college while injured and consequently in retirement, feeling like everyone else had already “found their group.” Karen recalled not knowing how to “define” herself anymore without gymnastics. Kim and Paige emphasized that it was very difficult for them to have to lose the dream of being a collegiate gymnast. Kim explained that being a collegiate gymnast was “all” she “ever wanted.”

That was probably the hardest day of my life, when they told me I was not allowed to do gymnastics anymore.

When her coaches no longer let her be a student assistant coach, Kim was “not associated” with the gymnastics team anymore, which is exactly what she “didn’t
want.” She indicated learning to be “more careful” of whom she “trusts,” due to the way her coaches treated her. Kim talked about the ongoing sense of loss around not having gymnastics in her life in the same way and stated, “I miss it every day.” Paige did not go to college for “academic studies,” but rather to be a gymnast. She no longer had “anybody to hang out with” and was not sure who she was “without being a gymnast.” Paige “enjoyed” collegiate gymnastics so much, in terms of her “teammates” and “the whole experience as a student athlete,” making it that much more difficult for her to retire.

I’d had it with the whole scene around (college) and, it hurt every time I would see anything that reminded me of gymnastics or the whole college experience. I was just tired of it and I wanted to get out of there. I didn’t want to be reminded of it any more.

Paige eventually transferred to another college because the sense of loss was so unbearable for her. Megan and Nina both highlighted how much they missed the actual sport of gymnastics. Megan described how, as a student assistant coach, “being in the gym” and “going to compete,” really made her miss “doing the skills” and “feeling good” about herself. Megan also recalled how painful it was to lose the respect of her coaches in the transition to retirement. Nina recalled thinking about gymnastics practice often, when she first retired, especially during usual practice time. Nina was around athletes often, due to her major. It was difficult for her to see everyone “getting ready for practice” while she “would just be standing there.” She wanted to go to meets, but over time she felt she had to become “less involved” with
the team. As time went by, Nina noticed she could do less and less skills. She reflected on this loss and stated, “it’s something you never get back.”

Six women felt loss through a sense of confusion. Kim and Megan felt confused about what their roles were with their teams in retirement. Kim recalled not even knowing what it meant to be a “medical athlete.” In terms of possibly becoming a medical athlete, Kim did not know how “involved” she could be, what would “count” to qualify her for this status, or what she would “get” in return. Megan thought her team role, in retirement, was going to be as a “respected leader.” However, she soon realized her coaches only wanted her to be a “cheerleader” and she felt confused about how her role on the team could “change in a heartbeat.”

Megan recalled making many sacrifices, earning high scores, and acting as a leader of her team. As a gymnast “pushing through” her injury she felt “respected,” but in retirement she felt “disposable.” Megan gave an example of this confusing shift in treatment, when one of her coaches took her name off her locker, removed her personal gymnastics equipment from inside the locker, and threw it all away. When Karen first retired, she felt “conflicted” about whether she still wanted to make gymnastics her “life” even though she felt “discarded” from it. Karen questioned if she was “overreacting” to her feelings of loss when others made comments that minimized her situation. Joanna, Nina and Sarah felt confused about how to proceed in their lives after retiring. After doing gymnastics for so long, Joanna did not know what to do “without it.” Nina felt confused in the sense that she often asked herself,
"What do I do now?" Sarah was confused about who she was when she no longer had the gymnast "label."

Eight women felt frustration and anger in the transition to retirement. Amy, Megan and Kim felt frustration and anger related to the student assistant coach role. As a student assistant coach, Amy felt frustrated when her teammates were "slacking off" or not listening to her. Megan still feels "bitter" about the "disrespect" her coaches treated her with, as a retired athlete and as a student assistant coach. Kim was angry when her coaches told her she could be a student assistant coach until she graduated, but later retracted that offer. Kim was also angry with herself.

I was angry with myself for not being able to do gymnastics (during particular academic years). I felt like it was my fault. I felt like I did something that jeopardized my gymnastics career. I mean, I did. I continued doing gymnastics on my hurt (body part), but it wasn't intentional. So, for somebody else to have to tell me, well your (body part) is bad, you can't do it, made me feel like it was even more my fault. That was difficult.

Joanna, Paige, and Nina felt frustrated and angry with their teams. Joanna was angry that her coaches said she could not "volunteer coach" or even "be in the gym" with the girls. She explained how her coaches mistakenly thought she was "not accepting" being on medical. Joanna was angry that she did not get the ongoing medical "treatment," she was promised, to find the best solution to her injury. Similar to Kim, Joanna was frustrated and angry with herself. Paige began feeling "depressed" and "pissed off" about her lost connections with teammates. In the transition to retirement, Paige found herself asking, "What the hell am I doing here?" She also asked herself, "Who the hell are my friends?" Paige wondered how she could "let"
everything happen the way it did. She was angry that her injury and retirement went the way it did. Paige also felt angry with her mom for “making” her do gymnastics. Nina felt frustrated sometimes because her best friend, a former teammate, still wanted her to go to gymnastics parties. This frustration became a “slight source of tension” in their friendship. Nina also felt frustrated at times with people in her major who were “star-struck” by athletes. Sarah and Karen felt frustration and anger, due to others not understanding what it was like for them to retire. Even though Sarah’s teammates and coaches were supportive, she felt frustrated because they were all still “so involved” with the sport and were “not really going through” what she was. Karen felt frustrated by the nonchalant and “callous” comments people would make about her retiring. Karen explained that part of her felt “very bitter” about the way things “turned out” and about “the sport in general.”

Five participants described feeling overwhelmed in the transition to retirement. Paige and Karen were overwhelmed in terms of a tremendous sense of emptiness in their lives. Paige explained that she was “definitely overwhelmed” because she was used to being surrounded by “gymnasts and gymnastics and then it was just all gone.” Paige described experiencing a huge loss and then having to “establish yourself without gymnastics, without your team, without everybody supporting you.” For Karen, retirement was “horrible,” “life changing,” and left a huge “void” in her life. She described how it “threw” her “for a loop” and led her to feel “mentally unbalanced” in college. Kim felt “very overwhelmed” when she was injured and this feeling continued through the beginning of her transition to
retirement. Joanna explained “everything hit me at once” and “I dug myself into a hole.” She “didn’t really know how to handle everything.” Joanna was facing family problems, feeling depressed, isolating herself, and knowing everything had to change but not knowing how. Sarah found retirement “overwhelming” in that it made her think back on her injury experience and question herself and her decisions. Sarah viewed retirement as letting a part of her life go and found it overwhelming because she was not “confident” in her decision.

All the participants experienced loss in retirement. They all described missing their athletic abilities, close connections with their teams, having gymnastics as a big part of their lives, the structure gymnastics provided, and the feelings of success they used to feel in the sport. Some of the women experienced the loss as similar to losing a friend or getting divorced. Some also described how difficult it was to have to let go of their gymnastics dream. Many participants experienced confusion in retirement. The confusion came about in reference to their roles on the team in retirement, teams treating them with less respect, how to react to the loss and others inquiries about it, what to do next in life, and how to define themselves. In their experiences of loss, almost all of the women felt some frustration or anger. These participants were frustrated or angry, in terms of feeling disrespected in the student assistant coach role, self-blame, poor communication with their teams, negotiating social issues with former teammates, and a lack of understanding from others. Many of the participants found the transition to retirement to be overwhelming. They described an
overwhelming emptiness in their lives, suddenly losing everything, having to be truly independent for the first time, lacking direction, and questioning their own decisions.

**Trying to Move Forward**

Each of the participants described the process of trying to move forward in their lives after retiring from gymnastics. Many of the women explained how this process consisted of effective communication, poor communication, a sense of regret and questions, relief, sports involvement, and taking on the student assistant coach role.

Six women indicated that they had some effective communication in their transitions to retirement. Sarah’s team was supportive and encouraging and her coach made it clear that there was “always a spot on the team” for her. He even made a coaching position so she could help the team in that way. However, Sarah still initially isolated herself because she did not know if she was “needed.” Her coaches and teammates were able to “convince” her that they wanted her there, helping her to make a “turn around.” Sarah had mixed feelings in her transition to retirement, making ongoing effective communication very important. Sarah was glad to be involved, as student assistant coach, but was also grieving the loss of her gymnast role. Megan initially felt supported by her team following her retirement, but the communication changed the following year when she became student assistant coach. Amy’s assistant coach was there for her whenever she needed “somebody to talk to” and became “a friend.” The most helpful communication for her was the family doctor who would
just “listen.” Amy’s parents also indicated to her that they did not want her to get hurt anymore and their main concern was her education. Amy indicated having many “important” people in her life “taking care of her” and letting her know she would be “fine.” After Kim retired, her teammates made her feel like she was part of the team. Her teammates were “really nice about it” and kept her “updated” about what was going on in the gym. When Kim took on the student assistant coach role, her teammates became “friends” and gave her feedback about appreciating all her help. Joanna’s boyfriend came from a “communicating family” and “encouraged” her to “start talking” and to “let him know” how she felt. She indicated that this was necessary as she “didn’t know how to express” her feelings prior to that. Joanna explained how her boyfriend’s encouragement helped her begin to open up, which she continued to do later in counseling. In the very beginning of retirement, Linda called her mom often to talk about how lost she felt. Linda explained that her parents were “always there” for her. She decided to see a counselor to help her cope with the “transition to not being an athlete.” She recalled how much “better” everything was after she “finally opened up” to her teammates and coaches.

Eight of the participants indicated that they experienced poor communication, when trying to move forward with their lives in retirement. Amy, Kim, Megan, and Joanna emphasized poor communication with a coach. When Amy retired, her head coach “blamed” her for getting hurt. She quickly realized that he “only talked to you if you did gymnastics.” Over time, Amy learned to “avoid it” and taught other teammates how to do this if the head coach upset them. Kim indicated that no one
ever told her what her role on the team would be when she went on medical and therefore, she did not understand what she was “required to do.” She then began asking other “medical athletes” for advice. Kim gladly accepted the role of student assistant coach. Kim thought she was “doing a really good job” and knew her teammates liked that she “was there.” However, her assistant coach later said they “didn’t need” her. One of Megan’s coaches threw away her gymnastics belongings without talking to her first. She described how those types of actions and the lack of communication around them felt like “hits” to her. Megan’s coaches told her she was going to “have a role” as a student assistant coach where she could contribute to the team. However, once she was in this new role she felt “disrespected.” Joanna explained that she “didn’t know how to communicate” and her coaches did not want to communicate and were not “understanding” of her situation. Her coaches also made promises of ongoing medical treatment that never occurred. Joanna felt like her coaches just “threw” her “away” when she retired. However, Joanna “finally realized” it was not “worth it” to spend any more time “dwelling” on the situation with her coaches, because she wanted to “get on with” her life.

Linda, Paige, Sarah, and Karen explained not knowing how to talk to others about what they were going through. Linda thought people “couldn’t understand” what she was going through. She said she needed “space” and began “separating” herself from the team. At the same time, Linda missed her teammates and hoped they would “go out of their way to stay in touch” with her, yet she did not know how to communicate that to them. After some time had gone by, she sat down with a former
teammate whom she had not spoken to for a while, and had a “heart-to-heart” talk with her. Linda also began “hanging out” with her non-gymnast friends more. Paige “didn’t really have too many people to communicate with” once she retired and felt “shunned” by the whole team. She “shied away” from the team because she did not know how to handle the situation. She understood her teammates’ anger, but thought they would eventually come around. Instead, she and her former teammates never spoke again and those friendships “faded away.” Paige did not have communication with people who could understand her situation and decided to transfer to a different school. Sarah conveyed that it was very difficult for others to understand what she was going through. Sarah was enjoying her role as student assistant coach at first, but experienced difficulty in connecting with teammates because they no longer had the “commonality” of being gymnasts. Sarah struggled to get across to others what the loss really meant to her and why it was still a “big deal” after she retired. Sarah reminded herself that her teammates were some of her “closest friends,” and began to look at her student assistant coach role as a way to “contribute” to the team. Karen struggled to communicate to others how retirement affected her. She felt like many people did not understand how “life altering” it was to “all of the sudden” not be a gymnast on the team. Karen indicated that people did not ask her about the impact and she “wasn’t about to” tell them “unsolicited.”

Eight women had regrets or questions in their transition to retirement. Kim and Joanna both questioned what might have happened if they never told anyone they
were hurt. Kim described continuing to question aspects of her injury and retirement experience.

I definitely still have questions. I rethink the situation over in my head very often. What if I had surgery earlier? What if I never had surgery? Would the pain have been more bearable than it is now? What if I hadn’t told my college coach about it at all and just kind of dealt with it until (period of time). I always come up with new questions.

Joanna had “a million what ifs” in her head when she first retired. One of these internal questions was, “What if I didn’t say I was hurt?” She described continuing to wonder if she “could” have done gymnastics for another year. Kim and Joanna both questioned their coaches’ behavior. Kim questioned why her head coach, who she knew prior to college, no longer seemed to care about her “well-being” once she was on the team. Kim did not understand why her head coach insisted that she do all-around or retire. Joanna questioned why her coaches seemed to be “getting rid of” her and would not allow her to stay involved with the team.

Paige, Sarah, and Nina wondered if they should have just tried harder to push through their injuries. Paige questioned if she should have “stuck it out” or “tried harder to get back into it.” She doubted herself and wondered if she “just gave up.” Paige indicated that she still did not know if retiring was “the right choice.” Sarah asked herself whether she was just “giving up” or making an informed decision to end her career in gymnastics. During the transition to retirement, Sarah even questioned how she felt about the sport of gymnastics and wondered if she should have done it at all. Nina wondered if she would have tried harder to stay on the team for all four
years if she was on scholarship. She thought about what may have been different, if her coaches offered her options earlier and if she better utilized her resources.

Joanna, Amy, Kim, Linda, and Karen questioned if they could have done things differently. Joanna wondered what if she did not make an error in competition, which her coaches blamed on her injury. Amy questioned, “What if I wasn’t five pounds over my normal weight” or did “more strengthening?” She wondered if her body part would have “held.” Kim questioned if she did the “right” physical therapy or if she gave her injury “enough rest.” Kim and Linda wondered if they had their surgeries at the right time. Karen questioned if things would have turned out differently if she had been “more thorough” in trying to rehabilitate her injury.

Amy, Karen, Linda, and Kim experienced regret in the transition to retirement. Amy indicated her one regret was that her body “hurts all the time” now. Karen questioned her decision to continue gymnastics in college as it felt like “more trouble than it was worth.” Linda regretted, “not enjoying my college years as much as I should have.” Kim regretted her decision about “where to go to school, coaching-wise.” She regretted becoming as involved as she did in the drama and negativity of the discord with her coaches. Looking back, she realized she should have been venting her “frustrations to someone else,” other than her teammates.

Seven of the participants felt a sense of relief in the transition to retirement. Linda and Sarah were relieved that they did not have to work out all the time to stay in shape for gymnastics. Linda no longer felt a sense of “obligation” as she had when she was a gymnast. She no longer had to worry about “wearing a leotard.” Linda
could eat “whatever” she “wanted” and did not “have to work out” anymore. Sarah felt a sense of “relief to be done” with the sport. She then realized how accustomed she had become to having “not the perfect body, but having a body that’s really in shape.” Kim, Joanna, and Paige were relieved that they no longer had to worry about their bodies being in pain all the time. Kim loved not having to be so cautious anymore about “not hurting” herself, in order to keep her body intact for gymnastics. Joanna saw teammates continuing to struggle with “all this pain” and was so glad that she no longer had to “deal with” it herself. Paige was pleasantly surprised when she realized, “now my body doesn’t hurt and I don’t have to worry about these things.” Kim and Megan were relieved that they had time to pursue other interests and activities. Kim involved herself in a recreational sport, which became something she could “really enjoy.” Megan felt a sense of relief immediately after retiring because she “had everything planned out” and focused on how she was going to have “more time” for graduate school. Nina was relieved that she no longer felt pressure to fit into the athletic social scene. She found “non-athletic people” to be “so much more accepting.” She thought back on all the “cliques” in athletics and said to herself, “Thank God I just finally got it over with.”

Six of the women continued to be involved in sports during retirement. Kim and Paige both went on to coach children in gymnastics. Kim described how coaching children helped fulfill to her need to “always be involved” in gymnastics. Paige found coaching children to be “a great experience” for her. Megan and Kim decided to pursue other roles within the sport of gymnastics. Megan followed her ambition to
become a gymnastics judge for young girls. She wanted to “be around the atmosphere” that made her feel “so happy” when she was younger. She hoped to feel “fulfilled” in this new role. Kim was considering “pursuing a college coaching career” in the future. Paige, Nina, Sarah, and Karen participated in other sports. Paige “really wanted to get involved” and tried “a whole bunch” of other sports and activities. However, she was careful not to get “as deeply involved” with anything as she had with gymnastics. Nina decided to participate in a club sport at her college, that had been her “secondary sport” when she was younger. Sarah joined a sports team through her “work,” due to a need to continue to “be active.” Karen attempted another “varsity sport” in her search for a “substitute for gymnastics.” It turned out to be a “bad idea” because she “felt out of place over and over again” in the new sport.

Five of the women took on the role of student assistant coach in retirement. Amy, Kim, and Sarah felt helpful or useful, at least some of the time, as student assistant coaches. Amy felt she could contribute to gymnastics in “another way,” by “teaching” and “helping” others in the sport. She also became someone her teammates “could talk to.” Kim felt like she was able to “calm” her teammates “down” better than the other coaches. She felt useful in that she let the assistant coach “vent” to her, rather than taking it out on the girls. Kim felt helpful in that her teammates asked her for “corrections” so they could “fix” mistakes before their assistant coach observed them. Despite missing her role as a gymnast, Sarah felt like she was “part of the team in an important way” as student assistant coach. Amy, Megan, Sarah, and Linda found the role to be challenging. Amy felt like her
teammates did not always “take her seriously” and it was difficult to be “strict” because she did not want them to “hate” her. When they did not work hard she wanted to show them “how it’s supposed to be done” and yet she felt “in the middle” as someone who was not truly a gymnast or a coach. In addition, her teammates no longer wanted to be her “friends” while she was in the role of student assistant coach. Megan felt as though her coaches did not “appreciate” that she had been “an asset” to the team. When in the student assistant coach role, she felt “visibly disrespected” by her coaches, “alone,” and a return of her “depression.” Sarah described the transition from gymnast to student assistant coach as “awkward,” due to still feeling like a member of the team but also having to be “more assertive” and “critical” of her teammates. It was difficult for Sarah not to be “working out with the team” and not “being announced” at the meets. Sarah felt like she had to “step up as an adult” in her student assistant coach role. Sarah found the role challenging in that she “had to become” her coach’s “confidant,” while also being “friends with the people he was talking about.” Linda helped coach “a little bit” but it was not something she really wanted to do. Linda’s team wanted her to coach and she tried to for a while, but she “just couldn’t.” Amy, Kim, and Sarah felt that the student assistant coach role helped them to continue to feel connected as a part of their teams. Even after she retired, Amy felt connected, in that her teammates knew they could “learn” from her. When Kim’s coaches asked her to be student assistant coach, it made her feel like they still wanted her to “be involved.” Kim explained how her teammates “resented” her when she was hurt, but these relationships were positively affected by her new role.
It wasn’t until I became student assistant coach that they really became my friends.

Sarah felt connected in the sense that she was “still involved with the team.”

The participants described various factors that played a role in the process of trying to move forward in retirement. Some of these factors facilitated the process while others impeded it. A majority of the women stated having some good communication in this process. Some of the participants had good communication with teammates, coaches, doctors, parents, significant others, and counselors. These women noted that the most important aspects of this communication were to feel: supported, encouraged, like part of the team, that they had people to turn to, and that they could open up and express emotions. Almost all the participants experienced poor communication in their transition to retirement as well. Some of the women felt their communication with coaches was poor. This poor communication consisted of feeling, blamed for their injuries, that their team role was unclear, and as though their role as student assistant coach was undefined. Poor communication also negatively affected their sense of belonging. Several participants did not know how to effectively communicate to others, how retirement affected them.

Nearly all the women experienced regret in the transition to retirement. A couple participants regretted not hiding their injuries and questioned their coaches’ reactions. A few of the women regretted not trying harder to push through their injuries. Most of the women wish they had done something differently. Most women also experienced a sense of relief when they retired. A couple participants felt
relieved that they were no longer obligated to work out or to have the perfect body. Several women were relieved that they no longer had to experience the physical pain involved with gymnastics. A couple participants felt a sense of relief about having extra time to dedicate to other interests and activities. Many women continued to be involved in sports during retirement. A couple participants utilized their experience to coach children in gymnastics. A couple of women wanted to stay involved in gymnastics as judges and collegiate coaches, while some women chose to participate in sports other than gymnastics. Five participants took on the role of student assistant coach. A few women felt helpful or useful in this role, a few felt it was challenging or difficult, and a few felt it allowed them to remain connected to their team.

*Impact on College Experience*

The participants faced many things directly related to their injury and retirement. However, these injury and retirement experiences also had an impact on other aspects of their lives. All the women thought gymnastics was going to be a component of their college experience. Injury and retirement changed the structure of their college plans, for some more dramatically than for others. This section outlines the following themes related to the impact on college experience: feeling lost and shifting priorities.
Feeling Lost

In the transition to retirement, most of the participants described feeling lost in terms of their college experience. Some felt lost in the sense that they no longer had a clear purpose in life, while others struggled in terms of their social lives in college.

Seven participants felt as though they lacked a sense of purpose during their transition to retirement. Kim, Joanna, Linda, and Nina described not knowing what to do with themselves after retiring. After Kim’s role as student assistant coach ended, she spent a lot of her time being “lazy” or in the gym working out for “four hours” at a time. Joanna felt like all of the sudden, for the first time, she did not know what she was “going to do tomorrow.” Joanna explained that she experienced “instability” for a while, especially in terms of changing jobs whenever she felt “bored.” Linda described how lost she felt the first day after she retired.

It was really weird the first day that I didn't go into the gym. We trained every day at 2:30 and I had class until 2:15, so I would go right from class. As soon as my class ended, I didn't have to go to the gym. I didn't know what to do with myself! I called my mom and I said, “Mom, I don't know what normal students do.” Then, I think I went to the library for a week.

Linda described feeling like she had become so “robotic” and “programmed” that she was “completely lost” without that routine. Nina described a very similar feeling the first day she did not go to practice. She did not know “what to do” with herself and “started partying” with her non-gymnast friends. Linda, Paige, Nina and Karen indicated no longer having a good sense of direction and questioning what they were striving for in life. Linda described how, as an athlete, she was “constantly striving for something,” “competing,” and finding time to make herself “better.” Linda
sometimes felt “stuck” without that presence in her life. Paige recalled having “no sense of direction” and feeling as though she was “just here” and “not part of anything.” Nina indicated that it was “very hard” at first because she did not have many academic requirements to focus on in her major. Nina recalled how there was only “so much homework” she could do to try to keep herself busy. Karen worried about what she was going to do with “the rest of” her life. Amy felt lost in terms of the role she played on her team. She did not consider herself a student-athlete or “part of” the coaching staff.

Eight women found that injury and retirement affected them socially. Amy, Kim, Megan, Joanna, Linda, and Paige described a growing distance or separation from their friends and teammates. Amy began to “block” out teammates when she was injured. She also felt “very upset and mad” when her non-gymnast friends would tease her about her injury before she was ready to joke about it. Amy described how she later became “too focused” on school, to the point that it negatively affected her friendships. Many of Amy’s teammates did not want to be “friends anymore” because she was a student assistant coach. Kim thought her teammates “resented” her when she was injured because she was on scholarship, but did not have to do everything they were required to do. Megan was previously a “social butterfly,” but when injured she “cut everyone” out of her life with the exception of her boyfriend. As an athlete, Joanna “hung out” with athletes more than she did with “regular college students.” However, when she graduated she realized most of her friends were not athletes. Joanna explained that her social life “transitioned” after retirement, without her even
realizing she was “avoiding” athletes. Linda felt as though her injury and retirement hindered and even ruined friendships with many teammates. She started feeling like an “outsider” around her team and therefore, began spending more time with friends in another social group. Linda expressed that even though she is not “a partier,” she went out and was “more social” after she retired. All of Paige’s friends were gymnasts and when they stopped speaking, she felt like “it was just all gone.” Linda and Nina both learned who their true friends were through the experience of retirement. Linda explained how when she retired she “went through what a lot of people go through when they graduate,” in terms of learning who her real friends were and “having to separate.” Nina realized that her true friends were those who liked her for her personality and not because she was a gymnast. Nina and Karen’s friendships with other athletes were affected by their retirement experience. Nina’s retirement slightly strained her friendship with a teammate. At first, it was difficult for Nina and her friend not to be spending as much time together. It was challenging to negotiate different social groups, as Nina was not a “huge fan” of some of the people on the team. Nina was excited to spend time with non-athletes, as she found them to be “more accepting.” However, the friendship with her teammate did persevere. One of Karen’s childhood friends was in a “similar athletic predicament” as she was. Karen expressed that the issue of retirement “drove” them “apart.” Karen explained that after she retired, they kept having the “same conversation” in which she told him to “cut his losses” and “move on” with his life. Her friend ultimately chose to stick with his sport. Karen shared how injury and retirement took her “out of
any social scene in college. When doing physical therapy, she did not practice with
the team and spent almost all of her time in rehabilitation. Karen explained how this
led to her not having an opportunity to “bond” with teammates and not having time to
meet people outside of the team.

Some of the participants who felt lost explained that they lacked a clear sense
of purpose during their transition to retirement. These women described this lack of
purpose in many ways, not knowing what to do with their own time, not having a
good sense of direction without gymnastics, and not knowing what role to play on the
team. Most of the participants indicated that one aspect of feeling lost was the impact
that injury and retirement had on them socially. These women expressed that the
social impact consisted of, distancing or separation in friendships, discovering their
true friends, straining friendships with other athletes, and restricting social
opportunities.

*Shift in Priorities*

When injured and transitioning to retirement, the women all noticed their
priorities shifting. Some felt lost in the sense that they no longer had a clear purpose
in life. While others, struggled in terms of their social lives in college.

Seven participants indicated that injury and retirement affected their goals and
their focus in life. Amy and Megan explained how they began thinking about their
resumes. Amy recalled feeling “proud” of what she was accomplishing as student
assistant coach and knowing that she could put those responsibilities “in her resume.”
Megan began to think about how she could gain “leadership” experience to put on her resume.

Megan, Joanna, Linda, and Sarah expressed that they began considering plans for the future and the direction they wanted to take in their life. In her last season prior to retirement, Megan knew she could not do gymnastics much longer and by the time she retired, she had “a whole bunch of goals set.” Retirement made Joanna realize that after college she was going to be in the “real world” and needed to decide what she wanted to do. Linda began to consider “what else” she could do “better” herself and her life. She wanted to do something in which she would feel “pushed” and “challenged,” as she had in gymnastics. Sarah described going through a “transition” upon injury and developing a different “outlook” on her goals. She predominantly focused on “short-term” goals in gymnastics, but realized in retirement that she needed to look at her long-term goals. After her injury, Sarah focused more on her major and even found an internship in her field of study.

Megan and Karen began spending time on graduate school plans. It helped Megan tremendously to have “more time” to pursue graduate school. After retiring, Karen began discovering her other interests and “seriously considering” graduate school. Paige had “no goals and no direction,” as she had not previously thought about what she would do after she was no longer a competitive gymnast.

All nine women expressed that the transition to retirement affected their academics. Amy and Kim felt school was the one thing they still had going for them after retiring. Amy previously saw gymnastics as “more important” than school.
However, when injured she became “very depressed” and felt like the “only thing” she could do was homework. When facing retirement, Kim realized that gymnastics was not “the only reason” she was in college and she needed to focus on being there “for an education.” After Kim was no longer student assistant coach, she found herself procrastinating frequently. However, when she got a job and put herself “on a schedule” she became “more studious.”

Amy, Megan, and Paige utilized academics to take their minds off the experiences they were going through. Amy explained that she became “too focused” on school and “doing homework” became an easy way for her to “get away from people.” Megan went to the library “six days a week for four hours a night” at first, to get her “mind off” of “missing” gymnastics. Early on in retirement, Paige felt like she was “at a standstill” academically. However, she soon immersed herself in academics as a way to “focus” on “something besides gymnastics.”

Amy, Megan, and Sarah explained that they had more time to focus on academics in retirement. Amy’s grades “got a lot better” because she had more time and was no longer “coming home from practice exhausted.” Megan also had more time to focus on academics. When Sarah was injured, her schedule became more “flexible,” giving her more time to achieve a better academic “balance.”

Joanna and Linda both went through a phase where they did not care about academics. When Joanna’s routine of “going to school, going to practice, doing homework” ended, she went through a “not caring phase” and her grades dropped for a while. She felt “less motivated” to go to class because she was depressed and did
not “want to see anyone.” When Linda got hurt, she “didn’t really care about much,”
despite the fact that she was “always a really good student.”

Nina, Sarah, and Karen developed more focus and dedication to their
academic lives. Nina “focused” more on academics when she realized gymnastics
was “not paying” for her apartment or “putting food” on her table. Nina’s dedication
to her major, “replaced gymnastics” in terms of the time required. Sarah, “became a
lot more focused” on academics, rather than “completely focusing on gymnastics” as
she had in the past. Karen’s first semester in retirement, was “pretty rough.” She
“hadn’t really thought about” what classes she was taking or what she was “going to
major in.”

I guess the difference would be when I was a student athlete I wasn't as
focused on my studies, I guess. I mean, I did well in school my (academic
year), but academics just weren't part of my identity. My intention was to go
through four years of college, get a degree in something, and then go out and
work and make money. Who knows? I didn't think that far ahead. But, grad
school...oh my God, no way.

The women explained how injury and retirement affected their college
experience. Most of the women described feeling lost at some point in this process.
The majority of the participants expressed feeling lost in the sense that they lacked a
clear purpose. These women did not know what to do with themselves, no longer had
a good sense of direction, or questioned what they were striving for in life. Almost all
the women indicated that they felt lost socially. These participants experienced
distancing or separation from friends, learning who were and were not true friends, or
feeling an impact on friendships with other athletes. Most of the women indicated
that they experienced a shift in priorities. These participants’ noticed their goals changing as they began thinking about their resumes, what directions to take in their lives, the possibility of graduate school, or how they had not considered post-retirement plans. All of the participants felt that their academic priorities began to shift as well. Academics, was the one thing some had going for them after retiring, helped some take their minds off what they were going through, was something some of them had more time for, temporarily became something some of them cared less about, and for some became more of a focus in their lives.

Impact on Identity

All of the participants identified that being a gymnast was an identity for them. They described the impact that injury and retirement had on this identity. This section outlines the following themes related to the impact on identity: loss of the gymnast identity, developing a new sense of self, and the long-term impact of the loss of the gymnast identity.

Loss of Identity

The participants described losing their gymnast identity in terms of, a loss of pride, a change in their public image, and a loss of personal value and importance. All nine women experienced a loss of pride in the transition to retirement. Megan and Nina became concerned about how others viewed them. Megan stated that she found it “hard to say” that she did not do gymnastics all four years. She explained that she
did not want others to think she “quit,” “got cut,” or “wasn’t good enough.” Megan noted having to “explain” that she “got hurt” and “had to stop,” as this allowed her to “get approval” from others. Nina explained how difficult it was for her, early on in retirement.

Well, at first I was very worried about what other people would think. I was like, I don't know who I am without this, this is all I've ever done, I don't know how to not be a gymnast. That's what I was worried about. That's what I used to say to myself.

Joanna and Sarah no longer felt comfortable wearing team clothing. When Joanna retired, she experienced “a big loss of pride” and felt like “a poser” wearing her gymnastics “sweats.” Sarah thought about how she was not “technically” on the team anymore and wondered if she was “presenting” herself as someone she “was not” when she wore her gymnastics clothing. Sarah described her experience with this as, “a very big battle that a lot of people didn’t know about.” Kim, Joanna, Linda, Paige, Sarah, and Karen explained that the loss of pride they experienced stemmed from the fact that they could no longer identify themselves as gymnasts. Kim noted that it was “really hard” for her to say that she was “no longer a gymnast.” She “really enjoyed” being part of a “unique sport.” Joanna described feeling as though her identity as a gymnast was “taken away” from her and she was not “allowed” to have it anymore. Linda felt like “part of” her was “missing” when she was no longer a gymnast. She saw herself as someone who was “not on the team anymore” and did not want to go places with the other girls “as a team.” Paige expressed that once she was no longer a gymnast, she was “just a regular student” who “blended into the muck.” Sarah
explained how the “label” she had up to that point was that of “a gymnast.” Without that label, she did not know what identity to claim. When Karen retired, she realized she had never been “without” gymnastics. She began to see gymnastics as a “crutch” she had been using, and viewed herself as “pathetic.” Paige, Sarah, and Karen felt a loss of pride in that they saw their retirement from gymnastics as a failure. Paige felt “unsuccessful” ending her gymnastics career the way she did. It was “very hard” for Sarah to “have to” give up gymnastics, as she was “always aiming for success” and did not want to feel like she “failed.” When Karen retired, she saw herself as “a real failure who had been screwing around” for years. She recalled thinking at the time that “nothing” had come out of it.

Seven participants indicated that the loss of the public image, inherent in gymnastics, affected their identity. Megan, Paige, and Karen missed the recognition from others that they used to receive. Megan missed the “pride” she felt after performing gymnastics skills and people remarking on “how cool” it was that she had that ability. Paige recalled it being “hard to accept” being “just like everybody else” after she had been “somebody on campus.” After Paige retired, she recognized that her professors did not “know her name” or “notice” if she was in class or not. Karen found it difficult to “define” who she was when she no longer had her gymnast identity to introduce herself in her classes. Karen also missed the unique feeling of being “recognized” for academics and athletic ability, as she had in the student-athlete role. Joanna and Linda explained that they went from being gymnasts, to just being regular people. Joanna explained how this felt to her.
When you are a gymnast, you think everyone sees you as that, even though they may be people you don’t even know. You think that’s the way they see you and when you’re done it’s almost like, well, who am I now?, who do people see me as, now?, I’m just an ordinary person.

As a collegiate athlete, Linda felt a sense of “pride” because she was “representing” her school and people knew who she was. However, when she retired she felt like she was just a “plain Jane, normal student.” Megan, Linda, and Sarah missed having others look up to them. Megan did not realize how attention from young gymnast fans made her feel “looked up to,” until she retired. After retirement, Megan was surprised she felt “jealous” when her teammates heard from fans. Linda also missed being a college gymnast who the “little kids” at the meets, looked up to. Sarah wondered if the “little gymnasts” who “looked up to” her, knew that she had retired. Linda, Nina, and Sarah were concerned about how others would view them when they were no longer competitive gymnasts. When initially sidelined, Linda was “grateful” that she had a visible medical device, due to her concern that spectators might otherwise have incorrectly assumed she was “not good enough to be in the lineup.” When Nina first retired, she worried about “what other people would think.” Nina was “afraid” that being a gymnast was “all” that people knew her as and that this would change her relationships with others. Sarah explained that she did not realize how much she was “in the spotlight” until she began to worry, that retiring might “look bad” or “reflect poorly” on her.

All nine women lost a sense of their own value and importance in the world, once injured and facing retirement. This brought about reflection and change for the
women in retirement. Kim, Megan, Joanna, and Sarah found value through their careers. Kim reflected on how being “more important” in the world was one reason she chose her profession. Megan indicated that instead of “dazzling the crowd” in gymnastics, she now sees how she can do some good through her career. In their careers, Joanna felt “passionate” and Sarah knew she could “excel.” Linda and Paige no longer felt known by others, as they had as gymnasts. Linda realized that she was no longer “recognized.” Paige explained how gymnastics made her feel “important.” She noticed that people stopped asking her about her goals when she retired. Sarah and Karen both questioned who there were other than gymnasts. Sarah explained how she came to see herself differently.

I think it made me identify with myself a lot more on different terms other than with the sport. It made me separate that part of my life from who I am. It made me realize even more that gymnastics was part of who I was, and it contributed to who I am, but it’s not who I am completely, it doesn’t define me. I think that becoming injured and then having to step back and be on the sidelines, really separated me from that identification.

Karen began to think there “wasn’t a whole lot” to her, other than the fact that she used to be a gymnast. Amy took on the student assistant coach role to feel “valuable” in the sport. Nina searched for something else she was “good at” to “take the place of” gymnastics.

The women experienced a loss of pride, a change in their public image, and a loss of personal value and importance, upon losing their identity as a gymnast. Several were concerned how others would view them once they were no longer competing and did not officially feel like they were part of the team. Many explained
that they felt as though they were no longer allowed to identify as gymnasts and that they did not know who they were without that identity. Several felt unsuccessful ending their gymnastics careers due to injury. Most of the women also felt a loss around the public image they had as gymnasts, in others looking up to them or knowing they were athletes. Some of these women worried that retirement would negatively affect others’ views of them.

New Sense of Self

The participants described two processes they went through to begin developing a new sense of self, having to mature and learning more about themselves. Almost all of the women indicated feeling a need to prove themselves in order to develop a new sense of self.

All nine women expressed having to face a maturation process. Amy, Kim, Linda, and Paige felt like they were on their own in the process. Amy realized she was on her own, as she was far away from her parents and her coaches did not offer much personal “attention.” Kim described the moment when she knew she needed to face the situation on her own.

I definitely matured a lot throughout this experience because I didn’t have my mom and dad by my side helping me make my decisions. It was over the phone, and they said, Kim it’s your decision, this is your life, you need to make the decision.

Linda realized that she alone had to “take responsibility” for how poorly she had handled herself during her injury. Paige realized she had to “establish” herself as her “own person” without her team supporting her.
Amy, Megan, Joanna, Linda, Paige, Sarah, and Karen indicated that they had to grow up. Amy became “a stronger person” by letting go of something she loved. Megan felt like she became an even more “determined” person after her experience. Joanna began working on her communication skills and realizing she needed to “move on” with her life. Linda learned to communicate more effectively and “admit” when she was “wrong,” helping her resolve conflicts with her team. Paige realized she was not a “little girl” anymore and had to manage the situation herself. Sarah expressed that injury and retirement forced her to “learn” how to “deal with” her feelings. Karen was thankful about becoming more “balanced,” less “anxiety prone,” and more “mature” through her experience. Amy and Joanna realized they had to change their perspective to get through the experience. Amy began telling herself, “It could’ve been worse.” Joanna explained her changing perspective and discovering a new sense of self.

Not in the beginning, but a ways down the road, I had to grow up and realize, it’s over, it’s done, there’s nothing you can do about it and you need to move on with your life and get yourself together. Through that, I definitely took a look inside myself, and saw all these other qualities I had put on the back shelf because there was gymnastics and there was school and that’s all that mattered. Once that’s gone, you can start looking at other parts of your life that you hadn’t really noticed before.

Nina matured socially, in that she no longer overly focused on how she was going to “fit it” or what other people thought of her.

All the participants felt they had to learn more about themselves following retirement. Amy, Joanna, Linda, Paige, Nina, and Sarah began looking for personal strengths other than gymnastics. When Amy realized she was good at coaching, she
was relieved because it made her feel like, she could do “anything” else she wanted. Joanna tried out several different jobs, switched to a major she felt more successful at, and began putting her “heart and soul” into schoolwork for the first time. For Linda, having another extracurricular activity that became a “passion,” helped her to “move on.” Paige still struggled to figure out who she was, but had discovered strong personal qualities such as, being perseverant and dedicated. Nina found her “own little spot” in her major. Sarah put a lot of thought into what hobbies and academic subjects she wanted to explore. Sarah learned that she was good at helping people.

Kim, Linda, Paige, and Karen wanted to discover and define who they were. Kim felt like she only knew herself as “gymnast Kim.” Linda had more time to “find” herself and “figure out” who she was. Paige went through what she characterized as an experience similar to a “midlife crisis.” Despite struggling to find direction, Paige came to realize she was “intelligent” and had a lot “going” for her. Karen discovered that being a gymnast was not her only good quality. Over time, Karen enjoyed academics more and gained confidence in her intellectual abilities. Megan avoided telling people she had retired, as she did not want her identity to change. However, when Megan graduated, moved, and went to graduate school, she realized she “had to close that book” and “be somebody else.”

Eight of the women felt an internal desire to prove themselves. Amy, Megan, Nina, Sarah, and Karen tried to prove themselves through academics. Amy had previously struggled in school, but learned that she could do well if she “really tried.” Megan fully dedicated herself to her graduate school program, as a way to prove she
could be “successful” at something other than gymnastics. Nina found herself “striving for perfection” as she had in gymnastics, by refocusing her “drive” and applying it to academics. Sarah described her desire to prove herself.

I think instead of having the gymnastics as a way to prove yourself, I transitioned it over to academics and then my job. I felt really fortunate, in that I had another immediate focus I could turn to and excel at. I could say, hey, I got this good job right after college. That in itself really helped me transition, in terms of identity.

Karen recalled transferring her “seriousness” and “identity seeking” efforts from gymnastics to academics. Linda and Paige were looking for another area in life to prove themselves. Linda described herself as “competitive” and always wanting to have something to work towards, in order to be “successful” and “the best.” Paige explained how difficult it had been for her to find new ways to prove herself.

I think, with gymnastics, you always have goals for yourself. You’re always going for that next competition or that next big skill. Once that’s gone, you’re like okay, well now I need something to get me motivated, I want those goals, I want to have something to be proud of, but what is that going to be? That’s the scary, hard part, what is that going to be?, where can I focus all this energy?

Joanna wanted to prove to her coaches that gymnastics was not her “entire life” and that she could “handle” retirement. She wanted them to know that she could “let go.”

The participants described how developing a new sense of self involved having to mature and learning more about themselves. Almost all the women felt the need to prove themselves in developing a new sense of self. The women experienced having to do things on their own. Most of the women felt like retirement forced them to grow up, in terms of improving their social skills, facing adversity, and learning
how to cope with their emotions. The women went through a period in which they learned what else they wanted to dedicate their time to, as well as their own personal strengths. Several of the women went on a quest to discover and define who they were, other than gymnasts. Almost all of the women described finding ways to stay competitive and prove themselves, but in other areas of their life such as academics, graduate school pursuits, and employment.

**Long Term Impact**

The women explained how their injury and retirement experiences continued to affect them. They each explained the ways in which they went through personal change. Some participants also described how overcoming the adversity in their experiences, affected their identities.

All the participants indicated that their experiences changed them in some way. Kim, Megan, Linda, and Paige expressed that their physical pain altered their identities in the long term. Kim explained how her injured body part felt “worse” than it did before surgery. Kim’s pain continued to disrupt her sleep, limited her ability to exercise, and decreased her comfort level in daily activities. Megan explained how much her injury and physical pain continued to affect her life.

I’m better than I was *(at the time of retirement)*... I’m still not doing very well. I can’t sleep certain ways, stand for too long, or sit for too long. I was a *(job role)* this summer and I had to sit in a chair and my *(body part)* would just really, really hurt from the way I was sitting. I think if I had stopped at the beginning of my *(academic year)* instead of trying to go through, it probably would have been a lot better. They gave me this *(body part)* brace – it looks like *(a large object)*, that I wear when I drive.
In addition, Megan continued to need pain medication. Linda explained the effects of her injury, which caused her body to feel “older” than it should in terms of daily pain, permanently reduced her range of motion, and ensured that she will have to be more cautious physically as she ages. Paige reported being in “a lot” of pain and feeling like “an old lady” at times. Her injured body part felt worse than before surgery and the pain affected her more than when she was younger. Paige noted that her pain continued to affect daily activities and prohibited her from exercising.

Amy, Kim, Megan, Joanna, and Linda learned that they became stronger people through their experiences. Amy described how she no longer let things “upset” her “as easily” as she did before. Kim indicated that she became a “bigger” person, in that she could better “handle” difficult situations now. Megan expressed that this experience “molded” her into who she became. Joanna explained that “having to let go” of gymnastics, before she was “ready,” when she did not “see it coming,” made her a stronger person. Linda learned from her mistakes and found what she “wanted in life.”

Amy, Joanna, and Nina came to appreciate the value of life and learned not to take things for granted. Amy explained how if she wanted something, she would “work really hard for it.” Joanna learned to “embrace life for what it is and enjoy every moment.” Nina realized “life is too short to be unhappy.” Sarah explained that she learned how to show people, particularly her parents, who she was as a whole person and not just as an athlete. Although Karen moved on in her life, she reflected on how strange it was that most people in her life currently, never knew her as a
gymnast. Karen expressed feeling as though they do not know “a whole other side” to her. Kim, Joanna, Linda, and Paige continued to struggle with not having gymnast identities. Kim stated that it still felt like a “loss” not to have gymnastics in her life. Joanna describes how the loss of her gymnast identity continued to be difficult for her.

I knew who I was, when I was in the sport, but when everything was taken away and all my home stuff was happening, I was not really myself for (number of years) after I lost that. The past (number of months) I've been trying to get that back.

Linda explained that she still felt “stuck” sometimes when it does not seem like she is “competing” or “striving” for something. Linda separated herself from the world of gymnastics because it is “bittersweet” for her to look back at that chapter of her life. Paige describes still not having a “strong sense” of who she was without being a gymnast.

Seven women described how overcoming adversity affected their identity. Amy, Kim, Joanna, Paige, and Sarah felt that if they could make it through this experience, they could make it through anything. Amy felt “tougher” and more “ready for the real world” after dealing with injury and retirement. Kim’s experience made her less “naïve,” in that she learned how she had to prove herself to others. Joanna developed more confidence that she would be okay if other bad things occurred in the future. Paige’s experience helped her see that she has a lot of “perseverance.” Sarah learned how to continue trying to achieve her life goals, despite facing hardship. Amy, Megan, Linda, and Sarah felt proud that they were able
to make it through so much adversity. Amy felt proud for “dealing with it” herself.
Megan was proud of herself for “getting through” all the pain, both physical and
emotional. Linda surprised herself with how well she was able to make it through
such a difficult time in her life. Sarah described how overcoming adversity felt for
her.

I think that gymnastics itself is very hard to overcome. You have little
challenges every day, then having the large one of retirement and getting over
the identity thing. I think that once you get through that you do feel a sense of
accomplishment, that you were able to make it through that and a lot of other
things seem insignificant or like less of an issue. It makes you feel more
confident in overcoming future obstacles.

All of the women explained that injury and retirement had some type of long-
term impact on their lives. The participants all indicated that their experience changed
their identity. Some of the women continued to have physical pain that altered their
lives. However, many of the participants felt that their experience made them
emotionally stronger. In fact, a few of the women expressed that they were now more
appreciative of the value of life. One participant felt she was better able to be her
whole self, and not just her athletic self in relationship with others. Some of the
women continued to have difficulty with the loss of their gymnast identities. One
woman indicated that it felt strange that many people in her life currently never knew
her as a gymnast. While feelings of loss remained for some, the majority of the
participants indicated that overcoming the adversity in their experience, positively
affected their identity. Many of the women felt as though they could make it through
anything in life since they made it through this. Some of the participants also felt proud of themselves for getting through such difficult experiences.

**Beneficial in Coping**

All of the women explained that some things were helpful to them as they tried to cope with their experiences of injury and retirement. This section outlines the following themes related to what was beneficial to participants in coping: support from others, staying busy, and justifying and accepting retirement.

**Support**

Eight women indicated that they had some type of support that helped them to cope with injury and retirement. These participants indicated that the support consisted of counseling or having someone to listen and team support. Many of these women also reported that it was helpful to them when others tried to understand their situation.

Eight participants explained that going to counseling or having someone to listen helped them to cope. Amy, Joanna, Linda, and Paige went to counseling. Amy described how counseling with a team doctor helped her cope.

I think the best thing that I got was that doctor to talk to. It was so relieving after that. Do you know what I mean? I wouldn’t stop talking after that. It was really nice to talk to somebody who didn’t know what you had gone through, who would just sit there and listen.
Joanna and Linda found counseling beneficial in that it helped them learn how to better express their feelings. Linda also liked that she did not feel “judged” in counseling. Paige found individual therapy very helpful, particularly the empathy her counselor showed.

Kim, Nina, Joanna, and Sarah had people in their lives that were good listeners. Kim’s parents and boyfriend were “very supportive.” Nina’s mom was willing to “talk it out” with her. Joanna’s boyfriend encouraged her to let him know how she was feeling. Sarah turned to her head coach who listened “no matter what,” met her “with a smile,” and was “sincere.” Sarah felt supported by her assistant coach who, “could sense emotions very well.” Kim, Megan, Nina, and Sarah turned to people who supported their decision. Kim’s club coach and her parents reminded her that she was in college for an education. Megan’s boyfriend, mom, and roommate helped her “put her priorities in place,” but left the decision completely up to her. Nina’s dad bluntly told her that she made “the right decision.” Sarah’s head coach gave his opinion, but she knew that he would support her in whatever she decided. Sarah indicated that it was very helpful to have coaches who consistently gave her the message that no matter what she decided, she would not “disappoint” them.

Six women experienced support from their teams. Amy, Linda, Paige, Nina, and Sarah found some of the team staff helpful. Amy described the support she received from her assistant coach.

She was very helpful in that, if I had problems I could go talk to her. Even when I was a gymnast, she knew how to coach me, she didn’t yell at me. She was more of a friend than a coach because she knew that’s how I would learn.
It was just very comforting to me because I knew if I was feeling really upset, I could go to her and know that somebody out there could help me.

Amy’s athletic trainer was “always there” for her and told her to see a doctor when her depression symptoms worsened. Linda’s head coach let her know he agreed with her decision to have surgery and was an advocate in helping her resolve conflict with the assistant coach. Paige found it helpful that her coaches and training staff all went out of their way to make sure she was in “top health,” while on the team. It was very helpful for Nina to hear from her athletic trainer that retiring was the “best decision” she “ever made.” Nina’s coaches both “accepted” her decision to retire and treated her like “part of their family.” Sarah found it helpful that her athletic trainer told her “straight out” that it was not in her “best interest” to continue. Sarah’s head coach and assistant coach supported her in whatever she “needed” to do and let her know that what she was doing was “okay.”

Paige, Megan, Linda, and Joanna found support from teammates to be helpful. Paige found it “easier” to cope when she had support from teammates, although it was only available to her in the beginning of retirement. Megan also felt the most support from teammates in the beginning of retirement and noticed that it waned somewhat when she became student assistant coach. Linda found it helpful to “joke” and “complain” with teammates. Joanna had mixed feelings about teammate support. Her teammates often “went to the coaches” to stand up for her, which was helpful in that it let her know they cared. However, Joanna felt that them getting involved in the “negativity,” between her and her coaches, was not what she needed from them.
Five participants felt that understanding from others was helpful to them. Joanna, Linda, Nina and Sarah connected with other gymnasts who understood their situation. Joanna’s best friend from club was the person she “turned to” the most because they always understood each other. Linda’s teammates who were also “frustrated” with gymnastics were the most understanding. One of Nina’s teammates, who was also injured, was understanding of being sidelined and trying to come back. Sarah found it helpful that she could go to her best friend, who knew her as a person and was a former gymnast. In addition to teammates, Linda’s mom was understanding and “always there” for her. Megan felt her boyfriend was the only one who understood, because he was the only one she “let in” during that time.

All the women described some things that were beneficial to them when trying to cope with injury and retirement. Almost all the women indicated that they had some kind of support in the coping process. For some women this consisted of going to counseling. These women indicated that counseling helped in terms of having someone to listen, not feeling judged, expressing emotions, or having a counselor empathize with them. Some participants turned to people in their lives who were good listeners. These women indicated that the good listeners talked things through with them, were sincere, addressed their emotions, helped them get their priorities in order, or let them know they would support them no matter what they decided. Many of the women had support from their teams. These participants explained that people on their teams helped by being advocates, showing concern, being accepting, giving advice, or laughing and complaining with them. Many
participants found it helpful to talk to people who were understanding of their situation. The women talked about other gymnasts, their mom, or their boyfriend being most understanding.

**Staying Busy**

Eight participants expressed how staying busy was beneficial to them when coping with injury and retirement. These women stayed busy by pursuing graduate school and working, spending time on schoolwork, or doing alternate activities.

Kim, Megan, and Linda focused on pursuing graduate school and put more time into their jobs. Kim got a job, which helped her to “manage” her time better so that she could plan for graduate school. Megan “picked up more hours” at work and prepared for graduate school. Megan explains why it was so important for her to stay busy.

We were always busy. We shuttled from practice, to home, to homework, to going to class, to coming back, to running errands. That was part of the lifestyle I’d been doing for years. To just drop off, and forget about that, and sit down and watch TV would have been a complete difference. Obviously, keeping yourself busy is an important way to cope, but it was also, just to maintain the same lifestyle that I was in. That was the lifestyle I’d grown up with, that’s the lifestyle that I love now.

Linda got a job to keep her “mind occupied” and became passionate about researching graduate schools. Amy, Kim, Megan, Nina, Sarah, and Karen dedicated more time to their schoolwork. The extra attention to schoolwork allowed Sarah to find an internship in her field and Karen to apply for graduate school. Kim, Megan, Joanna, Linda, Sarah, and Karen spent time enjoying alternate activities they did not
have time for as gymnasts. Whenever Kim, “got bored,” she exercised. Kim
developed a “new passion” for a recreational sport. Megan spent more time with non-
gymnast friends. Linda indicated that she “overcompensated” by “completely
shunning” gymnastics and “devoting” herself to another activity she enjoyed. Sarah’s
new “flexible” schedule helped her find time for her hobbies. Karen explored new
hobbies and found some that she greatly enjoyed.

Almost all of the participants felt that it was helpful to them to stay busy while
trying to cope with injury and retirement. A few of the women stayed busy by
focusing on the pursuit of graduate school and by working at a job. One participant
got a new job to fill her time. Many of the women immersed themselves in their
schoolwork. Many participants decided to spend their newly acquired free time
engaging in alternate activities.

**Justifying and Accepting Retirement**

Eight of the women expressed that justifying and accepting their retirement
was beneficial to them in coping. Almost all of these participants found it helpful to
realize the physical limitations their injuries imposed on them. All of the women who
found rationalizing and accepting retirement helpful, described various ways in which
they redefined the personal meaning of their sport experience.

Seven participants explained that knowing their own physical limitations,
brought about by injury, helped them justify and accept retirement. Amy, Kim,
Megan, Linda, and Sarah knew that it was no longer physically possible for them to
continue in gymnastics. When Amy injured herself for the last time, she knew there was “no way” she could do gymnastics any more. Amy described how this affected her.

I think, for me, it was easier to cope with retirement when I knew that I had pushed my body to the limit. Knowing there was nothing else I could have done. I mean sometimes you feel like, well maybe I could have pushed a little further, but it’s different when your body does hurt, your body does say stop, and other people are saying stop.

It helped Kim to realize that her body was “telling” her it was done and that she physically could not do the event her coaches were insisting she compete. Whenever Megan found herself questioning her retirement she thought back on the few days after her injury when she “couldn’t even think straight,” due to the excruciating pain she was in. Megan noticed that her friends had “respect” for the fact that she “tried to push through.” Linda got to the point where her body “wasn’t the same anymore” and retiring no longer felt like a choice, but rather something that “had to be done.”

Nina and Paige realized that it was not worth risking their own health to continue training with an injury. Nina realized that her injury was going to prohibit her from being able to improve her skills, which she needed to do in order to remain competitive in the sport. She explained how understanding her physical limitations helped her to cope better.

Yeah definitely (recognizing physical limitations was helpful), because then you feel like it’s not you wussing out or giving in. It’s like, okay, I’ve done everything I can, I pushed myself to the limit and for me to be healthy in the future I need to stop. It almost just takes some pressure off you for making that decision.
Paige’s pain escalated to the point where she was hurting all the time, both inside and outside of the gym. Paige began to realize that it was not healthy for her to “go through life” in constant pain.

Seven women explained that redefining the meaning of their sport experiences helped them to cope. Kim, Megan, Joanna, Linda, Paige, Nina, and Sarah developed new perspectives and utilized what they learned about themselves to help them redefine their sport experiences. When Kim realized she had a “very successful” gymnastics career and “reached” her goal of earning a collegiate gymnastics scholarship, she felt “accomplished.” Megan redefined her experience by focusing on what gymnastics was like for her in high school, as she was at the “peak” of her happiness in the sport then. Megan also realized that college gymnastics taught her good time management, diligence, and gave her opportunities to make professional connections. Joanna indicated that she looked back at her experience in gymnastics with more “respect,” “understanding,” and “acceptance” than before. Linda indicated that her perspective had changed drastically.

I feel like, from the time that all of this happened until now, so much has changed. I’ve changed so much as a person, that I’m able to look at things so much differently now. You look back, and gymnastics was your whole life and it was so important, it was the most important thing. And, I look back now and I’m like, wow, it was a sport, it has nothing to do with my life now at all.

Linda recognized that through her injury and retirement experience she “learned” from her “mistakes,” and what she “wanted in life.” Paige came to understand that it did not help her to “dwell” on what happened, as it only made her “more miserable.” Paige told herself that, “things happened the way they did for a reason” and that she
needed to “accept” it. Paige began to see how gymnastics taught her how to “be a leader.” Nina came to see that she learned a lot about her “mental toughness,” “discipline,” and how to “work with other people.” Nina realized she had been so “narrow-minded” before and that her retirement opened “doors” for her to do different things in her life. Sarah was better able to see how her experiences in gymnastics affected her life once she “stepped back.” Sarah realized she still enjoyed watching gymnastics as she “attributed” a lot of herself to the sport, despite retiring. Sarah also recognized that her retirement brought her family relationships “closer,” in that they came to know her as a whole person, not just an athlete. Sarah came to understand that her “hardships” in gymnastics taught her how to have “perseverance” in life.

Almost all of the participants expressed that finding ways to justify and accept their own retirement helped them in coping. Many of these women recognized their own physical limitations, facilitating the coping process. A couple of the participants decided that continuing in the sport was not worth the risk to their health, while others realized it was no longer physically possible. Almost all of the women found that redefining their sport experiences helped them to justify and accept retirement. In order to do this, these women developed new perspectives on their sport experiences and utilized what they learned about themselves to help themselves cope.
Challenging in Coping

All of the women described various things that were challenging or detrimental in coping. This section outlines the following themes related to challenges participants’ faced in the coping processes: lack of support and sensitivity from others and feeling as though they had lost their sense of purpose in life.

Lack of Support and Sensitivity

All the women indicated that a lack of support and sensitivity made coping more difficult. Some experienced lack of support and sensitivity through discord with a coach, whereas all the women experienced it via, worrying about disappointing others, holding in emotions, and struggling to manage others’ reactions to their injury and retirement.

Five participants indicated that it was more challenging for them to cope, due to discord with at least one coach. Amy and Linda felt mistreated and ignored by a coach, following injury. Amy’s head coach made her feel “useless” by yelling at her or not talking to her at all. When Linda first told her team she had to have surgery, the assistant coach was “furious” and was either “rude” to her or “ignored” her for a while. Kim felt misled by her coaches, in that they were not the “parents away from home” they had promised to be. Kim indicated that the assistant coach hated her and blamed her for “ruining” their season. Kim and Megan faced conflict with their coaches regarding their roles as student assistant coaches. The assistant coach for Kim’s team changed the corrections Kim gave to teammates and retracted the offer
for Kim to continue to be student assistant coach. Kim felt like the assistant coach did not “want” her around or “care about” her “as a person.” In the student assistant coach role, Megan’s coaches were not interested in listening to her thoughts and ideas, making her feel like she did not “understand what was going on.” Megan, Joanna, and Kim felt their coaches no longer valued their contributions to the team. Megan felt “disrespected,” as her coaches did not seem to value the sacrifices she made when she competed for the team with a serious injury. Joanna explained the impact the discord with her coaches had on her.

I would say that my relationship with my coaches definitely made it harder for me, as far as coping goes, afterwards. It’s nice to have the support of your coaches and to be able to go to a meet. I never had that and I still don’t have that. It makes me feel like, what am I doing going to these meets? They think I still can’t let go, which is ridiculous. I shouldn’t be thinking that way, but they make me think that way.

When injured, Kim’s coaches tried to “force” her to do things she physically could not do, in order for her to stay on the team, making her feel like she was being “pushed out.”

All nine women either felt like a disappointment or worried that they would disappoint others. Amy, Kim, Megan, Linda and Karen worried that they were disappointing their college coaches. As a student assistant coach, Amy worried she was not doing “exactly” what her coaches wanted her to. Kim and Megan felt like they were letting down their coaches. When Karen’s coaches told her she had to go on medical, she thought they were trying to tell her she had not “worked hard enough” to rehabilitate her injury. Kim, Megan, Linda, Joanna, Nina, Sarah, and
Paige all felt like they did not live up to someone’s expectations. Kim expressed how difficult it was for her to feel like she did not meet others’ expectations.

When I come home or when I see people that have known me since I was little and always knew me as the gymnast who went to (college) on a gymnastics scholarship, they ask, are you still doing gymnastics? I say no, I got hurt. I feel like I’m a disappointment or like I didn’t live up to what I was supposed to be. That part is really hard.

Megan and Linda experienced their teammates not acknowledging the severity of their injuries and seeming disappointed in them. After Megan’s doctor diagnosed her injury, her team was more understanding. Whereas, many people on Linda’s team did not understand that she needed to have surgery and that it was not a “choice.” Joanna did not want to see her teammates after retirement, due to feeling as though she “let them down.” Nina did not want to disappoint “anyone,” particularly her best friend and teammate. Nina also explained how difficult it was to tell her club coach.

I think it was hard, because we worked together for a lot of years towards something, and that something was going to college and getting a scholarship. I felt like I owed him something after all of those hours. I didn’t want to disappoint him, but like I said, it wasn’t his life. It was hard. I didn’t want to. I wanted to be amazing so he could say, that was my gymnast.

On the sidelines, Sarah felt like teammates “expected” her to “push through” and “get out there” with them. She felt “saddened” that she was letting people down. Sarah was the kind of person who “always wanted to make everybody else happy.” Sarah was also “very worried” about disappointing her parents and wondered what they would “brag” about her for, since she was no longer a gymnast. Paige felt like she let others down, as well as herself.
Paige, Kim, and Joanna expressed feeling as though they had let themselves down. Paige described feeling like a disappointment to others and herself.

In terms of disappointment, I absolutely felt like I was disappointing my parents who were always there for me saying, way to go, you’re great, and always pushing me to go further with gymnastics. And then, here I am, I’m like, no I’m done. I felt like I was disappointing them. Most of all, I felt like I was disappointing myself. Maybe I could have kept going or maybe I could have tried harder, you know? I disappointed myself.

Kim reported that letting down herself was the “big” concern for her. More than anything, Joanna felt like a disappointment to herself when she first retired.

All of the participants expressed that holding in their emotions did not help them when trying to cope. Amy and Megan felt that holding in their emotions led to symptoms of depression. When Amy was injured, she was afraid people would “get sick of” her “complaining,” so she kept her feelings to herself and her depression worsened. Megan described her experience of deciding whether to share her emotions with others or not.

At the beginning, I was vocal about my injury and no one really believed me. So, I mostly just talked to my boyfriend and my friends and I don’t think that I tried to hold in my emotion that much because I would talk to certain people. However, towards the middle and end of my injury, when I was in a lot of pain, I just didn’t really want to talk to anybody and that wasn’t really helpful at all. I think that maybe that’s what made me go crazy, made me feel depressed and angry.

Megan, Kim, Paige, and Karen felt their opportunities for communicating emotions were restricted. Megan did not feel believed in the beginning and turned to others outside her team. When Kim was injured, she could not open up to her teammates or her assistant coach, as they “resented” her for being hurt. In addition, it was difficult
for Kim to confide in the head coach, as he seemed to defer to the assistant coach.
Paige and Karen expressed that when injured and early in retirement they did not
have people in their lives with whom they felt they could communicate.

Joanna, Linda, Paige, and Nina wanted to avoid dealing with their emotions.
Joanna indicated that her strategy was to “avoid” using her support system by going
into her “shell,” as she “didn’t know how” to communicate her feelings. The more
Joanna kept her emotions to herself, the “worse” she felt. When Linda tried to avoid
her feelings, it “came back to haunt” her. Linda’s emotions “escalated” more quickly
than usual, yet she continued to hope she would wake up one day and be okay. Paige
did not want to have to “feel” or “think about” her emotions and described how this
became unhealthy for her.

I think holding in the emotions was definitely very unhealthy and it started to
eat me up inside. You start to dwell on all these things and it overtakes your
personality. It was really destructive and it would have been a lot easier if I
just got it all out in the first place.

Nina wanted to “fit in” like a “normal college student” and therefore, chose not to
“burden” anyone by harping on it. Sarah and Karen tended to hide their emotions
from others. Sarah explained that her years in club gymnastics did not “encourage”
her to be “open” about how she felt. Karen did not want to let others know how
“horrible” and “life changing” the experience was for her, if they did not already
“expect” that would be the case.

All nine women indicated that it was difficult to manage others’ reactions to
their injury and retirement, while trying to cope. Amy, Kim, Megan, and Linda
thought that people did not believe the severity of their injuries. Amy’s head coach
not believing her made her very “upset.” Kim explained how much it “hurt” her to
know that her assistant coach did not believe her and resented her for being injured.

It made me feel really little and like she didn’t even care about me as a person. It was as though, all I was, was this machine that was supposed to do
gymnastics and get her to (name of a big meet) for her job. That is how I took it. It was as though, she didn’t care about my well being or how I was doing physically, as long as I did well for her.

Megan’s teammates, coaches, and trainers did not believe the severity of her injury
until a doctor gave her a diagnosis. Megan’s team not believing her contributed to her
“mental pain.” Linda’s team had a difficult time understanding that she needed
surgery, as she initially continued to train, despite her injury. Amy and Linda had coaches who ignored them. The behavior of Amy’s head coach “caused” her to “hate going to practice” and “scared” her. One of Linda’s coaches was “furious” she was having surgery and “wouldn’t talk” to her or was “rude,” for months afterwards.
Linda then felt guilt about being on scholarship and letting her coach down. Megan and Linda’s teammates withdrew from them socially. Megan’s teammates tried to just, “let” her “be.” Megan indicated that she did not want people to approach her in the gym, because she was miserable, but was “dying” to talk outside of the gym.
Linda indicated that after her injury, “Things just weren’t the same,” in terms of her relationship with the team. Linda called the change in the relationship with her team, “the worst of it, emotionally.” Amy, Linda, and Paige experienced severed friendships with teammates. Amy’s teammates did not want to be her “friends” when
she became a student assistant coach in retirement. When Linda was injured, her teammates gave her “space,” because they “didn’t know how to react.” Linda’s friendships with these teammates then “drifted” apart. Paige felt that the effects of her teammate conflict were more severe than they would have been, as she no longer had the same opportunity for communication and interaction with the team.

Joanna, Nina, Sarah, and Karen found that people in their lives did not understand what they were going through. Joanna’s coaches thought she could not “let go” and did not understand her reasons for wanting to stay “connected” to the team. Joanna’s teammates became “angry” about the situation with her coaches. Her family members were going through their own tumultuous time, making it difficult to communicate with them. Some of Nina’s family and friends did not realize how difficult retiring was for her. Sarah’s family and friends had difficulty communicating to her that everything was “going to be okay” or that she was “making the right decision,” due to uncertainty around whether or not her injury would be career ending. It was sometimes difficult for Sarah to hear her team “sympathize” with her, as she knew they were still involved in gymnastics and could not fully understand her retirement experience. Sarah also found that repeating her story “over and over again” whenever she ran into someone she did not see often, made the process “very difficult.” When Karen told people her story and they responded with a cavalier response such as, “oh, I’m sorry,” she questioned if she was making “too big of a deal” of her situation. Karen also described that it was difficult for her family to understand her experiences, as they had not been involved at all in her gymnastics.
Joanna, Nina, and Sarah each indicated, respectively, that people outside of gymnastics had difficulty understanding their retirement experience and, why they were “still upset” about it, why they were not “over it,” or why it was such a “big deal.”

All the women expressed that a lack of support and sensitivity was detrimental to their coping processes. Many experienced this in that they had discord with at least one coach. Participants experienced discord in various ways: a couple felt ignored or mistreated, one felt misled, two had conflict about their student assistant coach roles, and a few felt their contributions to the team were no longer valued. All nine women thought they lacked support or sensitivity from others, in that they worried they were going to be a disappointment. Participants worried about different aspects of being a disappointment: many worried about disappointing college coaches, many felt they did not live up to others’ expectations, and several thought they were letting themselves down.

All the participants indicated that holding in their emotions, was one ineffective way they tried to cope. The women expressed that this experience led to, depression for a couple of them, some felt their opportunities for expressing emotions to others’ were restricted, some wanted to avoid dealing with their emotions, and a couple tried to hide their emotions from others. All the women indicated that they found it difficult to manage others’ reactions to their injury and retirement. The participants described their difficulty in managing others’ reactions in the following ways: some felt others’ did not believe the severity of their injuries and a couple had
coaches who ignored them. In addition, a couple participants had teams that withdrew socially and several experienced severed friendships. Lastly, some felt others did not understand what they were going through and a few felt that people outside of gymnastics did not understand why it took time for them to heal emotionally from the experience.

\textit{Losing Purpose}

All nine participants described feeling as though they had lost their sense of purpose in injury and retirement. All the women described how they primarily constructed their identity around being a gymnast and when that was gone, they felt they had lost their purpose. Some of the participants questioned their purpose when they struggled with the new experience of having more free time.

All nine women experienced identity foreclosure or not having an opportunity to explore who they were, other than a gymnast, prior to retirement. Amy realized her life revolved around gymnastics and school. Amy described what it was like for her to realize this.

\begin{quote}
It was really hard for me to find new passions, apart from school. That's what my counselor told me to do, to find something else that I enjoy doing. Gymnastics had taken so much time out of my life that it was hard. There weren't many things that I did apart from gymnastics. I mean, school I guess, but apart from that, not very much.
\end{quote}

The other eight participants had primarily defined themselves as gymnasts. Prior to retirement, Kim had “always focused on gymnastics more” than school. After retirement, Kim had to work to adjust her lifestyle to be “more of a non-gymnast
Kim.” Megan described how she “didn’t want” her identity to change and avoided redefining herself as someone other than a gymnast.

I think I pushed that off, probably until I went to (graduate school) and that’s when I had to realize that I had to close that book and be somebody else. I had a whole year to pretend that I was still a gymnast. The big change was when I moved away from my undergraduate institution, to a place where people didn’t know me, and had to readjust to being a different person.

Megan described how it was still difficult for her to tell people she retired due to injury, for fear they would “look down on” her. Joanna explained how she did not know “what else” she was “supposed to do” other than gymnastics. Joanna saw academics as her only other option. However, she initially saw “no point” in studying, as she did not “enjoy” it and thought she was not “good at” it. Linda felt like gymnastics was “all” she “knew” and made up her identity. After retiring, Linda needed time and opportunities to “find” herself. Paige described having “no sense of self” after retiring. Paige indicated that she had spent years trying to figure out “who” she was without gymnastics. When Nina retired, she realized how much she had “missed out on” while she was focusing on gymnastics. Early on in retirement, Nina was “nervous” about “who” she was going to be and “what” she was going to do. Prior to retirement, Sarah did not see gymnastics as “part of her life,” but instead saw it as “who” she was. Sarah found it difficult not to feel like she had “failed,” when she retired. Karen recalled thinking gymnastics was the only “mentionable, good quality” she had. After retiring, Karen found herself searching to find a “new thing” she could use to “define” herself.
Six participants found it challenging to manage too much free time in their lives. Kim, Joanna, Paige, and Nina described wasting a lot of time in the beginning of their transition to retirement, due to not knowing how to spend it. Kim and Joanna did not like having so much free time and found themselves watching a lot more television at first. Kim felt that having so much free time was a “shock” and made her feel “lost.” Joanna “didn’t know how to handle it” and really struggled not having the “structure” she was used to. Paige “had no idea” what to do with herself and spent a lot of her time “just sitting there” and trying to figure out what she was doing. Paige expressed how uncomfortable free time became for her.

I mean you have this whole chunk of time back in your life and you’re so used to constantly being on the go, on the go, and then you don’t have anything. You get anxious and restless and you’re like, I need to do something, I can’t just sit here and watch TV, this is so boring, I need to do something.

Initially following retirement, Nina did not know what to do during time she used to spend at practice, so she went to parties with her non-gymnast friends. Linda felt “completely lost” and decided to go to the library because she thought that was what “normal” students did. Linda explained that she had to learn “what else” was important in life.

All nine women experienced a loss of purpose. All the women described having foreclosed identities at the time. One participant indicated that her identity was built, on gymnastics and school, while the other eight participants defined themselves solely by being gymnasts. Many of the women expressed that they had
difficulty coping with having more free time than they were accustomed to. Some of these women indicated that they initially wasted their additional free time.

Perceived Needs

The women all expressed that some of their needs went unmet during their experiences with injury and retirement. This section outlines the following themes related to what participants needed, knowing they were not alone and having some structure in their lives.

Knowing Not Alone

All the participants wished they had known they were not alone during the experience. The women described what they needed, in various different ways. Many wanted more compromise from their coaches. Almost everyone thought counseling could have helped address their needs during the experience. Everyone could have used more encouragement and reassurance, obvious and available support resources, and open and honest communication. Some thought they would have felt less alone if others treated them with more respect.

Five of the women expressed that they needed more compromise, on the parts of their coaches. Kim felt her coaches were not even willing to consider a compromise. Kim described how the lack of compromise felt for her.

I asked, why are you forcing me to do (event) when I’m telling you that I can do everything else, but (that event)? I was like, you just don’t make me do (that event). I felt like I was being pushed out. It was like, well you can’t do (that event) so you don’t get your scholarship. That’s what he told me. He
said, you either compete (that event) and start practicing (that event) or I’m taking your scholarship away or you can take medical.

Amy, Kim, and Joanna indicated that they would have liked their coaches to be less rigid about which events they competed. Amy indicated that her head coach did not listen when she tried explain how she could not do the event she was recruited for. Kim did not understand why her coaches forced her to do all-around when she repeatedly told them her injury prevented her from doing one event in particular. Joanna’s coaches would not allow her to do the events they recruited her for. Joanna’s coaches also did not listen when she told them that the event they were making her do was the one that hurt her injured body part the most. Megan and Nina wished their coaches had compromised earlier on in the process. Megan indicated that her coaches did compromise in terms of their actions, but did not compromise in terms of their “attitude.” Megan explained that her coaches eventually allowed her to scale back her training, which was “great.” However, when Megan first injured herself, her coaches were not so willing to compromise and told her, “oh, come on, you’re fine, we need you, come on and go out there and you’ll be fine.” Nina wished her coaches “noticed” she was “miserable.” After she announced her decision to retire, her head coach offered her an opportunity to cut back. By then, Nina had made her decision and felt like there was “no going back.”

Seven participants specifically expressed a need for counseling. Amy, Megan, Joanna, Paige, Nina, and Karen indicated that it was or would have been best to have a counselor who understood the life of an athlete. Amy expressed that it was helpful
for her to know that the doctor she talked to had worked with other athletes. Megan explained why she thought the counselor having knowledge of athletics was important.

I think it (counseling) probably would have been better if it was in the athletics department, because I would've felt like they knew what I was going through. Often, I feel like if I seek advice from somebody else outside of athletics, they lump it in with everything else. Athletics is a lot different from being in a club or being president of a society or something like that. I think that if they had a background in athletics and knew the mind of an athlete - I think we’re probably more perfectionistic than everybody else and we’re very stubborn. We always want to get everything right. I think having that mentality in mind, would have really helped.

Joanna indicated needing a counselor who understood the “severity” of sport injury and retirement. In group therapy, Paige felt that no one understood what it was like to be a “high level college athlete.” Paige thought a group of “other athletes” who went through similar things would be best. Nina thought it would be best if the counselor understood how athletics could be “high stress.” Karen would have been more open with a counselor who “had some idea of how much commitment athletes put into their sports.”

Megan and Nina wished they went to counseling. Megan thought counseling was the “most important” thing she needed. Nina thought counseling would have been “helpful,” particularly during the time when she stopped opening up to others because she did not want to “burden” them. Joanna, Linda, and Karen thought they should have gone to counseling sooner. Joanna stated that going to counseling right away was a “huge thing” she would change about her experience. Amy, Megan, Paige, Nina, and Karen indicated that it was or would have been helpful if someone in
athletics suggested that they get counseling. All five of these women indicated that a
suggestion from someone in athletics did or would have made it easier to go. Amy
describes how a suggestion from her trainer was helpful to her.

Yeah, it was weird because I didn’t realize it, but when my athletic trainer told
me I needed help, it was like a light that said, okay you need help. Then, I
started realizing oh, I’ve been doing this, and this, and this, and kind of
scaring people, so I need to go talk to someone. I didn’t really like it at first
and then when I started talking to that guy it just helped a lot.

Nina recalled seeing posters advertising a group for “seniors that were retiring” and
thinking, “what about those of us that didn’t make it that far?” Amy and Paige felt it
was necessary to be able to talk about what they wanted in counseling. Amy
experienced one counselor as “too pushy.” Paige would have preferred if her
counselor addressed not only her present adjustment difficulties, but her struggles in
injury and retirement that “led up to” that.

All nine participants felt they needed encouragement and reassurance. Kim
and Paige needed extra encouragement and reassurance that they were making the
“right” decision. Kim recalled needing this early on, very soon after retiring. Paige
explained why she needed reassurance.

The reassurance that, I’m doing the right thing would have helped me not feel
so guilty or so disappointed in myself. Having reassurance from other people
would have helped those feelings.

Kim, Megan, Linda, and Sarah needed to know that it was going to be okay. Linda
wanted reassurance from her athletic trainer that everyone’s injuries and “ability to
work through” them are different. Sarah needed to know she was still an “important”
person and “the same” person as before. Amy, Joanna, Nina, and Karen wanted
others to recognize that they were struggling. Amy was looking for “sympathy.” Joanna wanted treatment from her athletic trainers, encouragement from teammates, and for her coaches to acknowledge when she seemed to be doing better. Nina wished her coaches, in particular, had encouraged her along the way. Karen could have used “a bit of verbal support” and less criticism from her parents.

All the women needed to know that they were not going through a completely solitary experience. Amy, Kim, and Nina needed to know that someone else had made it through something similar. Amy needed to know she was not “the only one,” in order to make the future “look a little bit brighter.” Kim “getting people to understand” was the “hardest” thing, but talking to other medical athletes helped. It helped Nina to see that other gymnasts who “had been hurt” or who had “quit,” were okay. Paige, Sarah, Karen, and Joanna needed to know that someone could relate to what they were going through. Paige wished she had a support group so she knew she was “not the only one” going through this type of experience. Sarah needed to know that retirement was a “normal thing” and that it was not “just” her. Karen needed to know that what she was going through was not “unique” or “weird” and there was nothing “wrong” with her. Amy, Megan, Nina Joanna, Linda, and Karen needed to know that someone was there for them. Amy felt relieved to know that her athletic trainer was always there for her. Megan thought it would have been “great” to have support from her coaches and Nina wished her coaches had asked her if she was “alright.” Joanna explained what she needed.
I did always feel alone, in the sense that nobody could really help me out. It would've been nice for someone to come up to me and say, I understand what you're going through and, if you need anything just let me know.

Linda needed teammates to reach out to her. Karen needed friends or a counselor to talk to. Karen also made a suggestion for athletic programs that she thought would help.

Maybe one thing in retrospect that I wish I had done, and this just occurred to me now, would be not only opening the lines of communication, which was something that a lot of people brought up, but maybe specifically talking to senior teammates who were facing the reality of retirement after that year, or alumni of the team. People who were perhaps still living in the area and involved with the team but no longer gymnasts, people who were making that transition from gymnastics to non-gymnastics life.

All nine participants needed more open and honest communication. Amy, Kim, Joanna, Linda, Paige, Nina, and Sarah needed more open and honest communication with coaches. Amy needed open communication with her head coach who “pretended” she was no longer there and more honesty with her doctor who told her she could have surgery and be “competing in two weeks.” Kim needed better communication with her coaches, as they had a tendency to “assume” how she was doing, without actually asking her. Joanna’s coaches wanted her to communicate openly and honestly, but she felt like they “punished” her whenever she reported having any pain at all. Linda learned how she could communicate more effectively, through counseling. Paige wished she had known how to communicate “better.” Nina thought coaches need to be “educated” about open communication.

Obviously, there’s so many girls on the team, so I guess you can’t, I don’t know, well you should be able to talk to all of them. Anyway, it would have been nice if, it’s fairly obvious when people are struggling in the gym and
instead of letting them struggle, maybe trying to find a way to work it out would have been nice.

Sarah explained that she needed “continual” communication with her family to emphasize that it was her choice to retire from gymnastics or not and that it did not define her. Megan needed her doctors to share stories of other athletes, with the same injury, who had “kept going” and “really hurt themselves.” Karen wished the lines of communication were more open with her coaches so that she could have “stayed more involved with the team,” to make the transition more “gradual.”

Four women felt they needed more respect to help them cope or transition better. Amy felt a lack of respect from her head coach and at times from her teammates when she was a student assistant coach. Kim felt her coaches did not show respect for her as a person. Megan felt “disrespected,” not “appreciated,” and discarded as a student assistant coach. Joanna felt like her coaches “threw” her “away” after she was retired, as though she was never part of their program.

All of the participants needed to know that they were not alone. Some needed more compromise from coaches. A couple of these women wanted their coaches to be more flexible about the event they did, a couple needed compromise earlier in the process, and one felt her coaches were not willing to compromise at all. Most of the women indicated needing counseling. Many of these participants wanted a counselor with knowledge of athletics or experience with athletes, a couple wished they went to counseling, a few wished they went to counseling sooner, and many felt it was or would be helpful for someone in athletics to suggest they go to counseling.

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Structure

All nine participants indicated that they needed some structure in their lives. Almost all the women indicated that one helpful way to have structure, was to be offered a continued place on the team. The women expressed that they needed help finding interests and activities to focus their time on.

Eight of the women wanted coaches to offer them a place on the team. Kim, Joanna, and Nina thought an offer to stay with the team did or could have showed more appreciation from coaches. Kim thought it would have been “terrible” not to get an offer. Joanna wanted her coaches to offer her a meaningful role, as opposed to one that any non-gymnast could do. Nina indicated that she would have felt more “valued” if her coaches had offered her a place on the team. Amy, Karen, Megan, Paige, and Sarah all needed an offer in order to stay connected to their teammates and the sport of gymnastics. As a student assistant coach, Amy felt like gymnastics was not “just” in her “past.” Karen was not offered a place on the team and described how “it really hurt” to have gymnastics “ripped out” of her life. Megan needed to be with her teammate friends. Paige wished her coaches made her an offer “just to be part of the team,” because she “definitely” would have taken it. Sarah could not imagine not receiving an offer and “being ostracized for something that you couldn’t really help.”

All nine participants needed help finding other ways to organize their time. Amy, Megan, Joanna, Paige, Nina, and Karen felt like they needed other interests to focus on in their lives. Amy overly focused on her schoolwork, to the detriment of other things in life. Megan made herself busy with her job, hobbies, social life, and
academics. Joanna hopped from one job to another, due to lack of interest in any of them. Nina did not know what to focus on at first, but eventually focused on her major. Karen tried finding an athletic replacement for gymnastics and struggled until making academics her focus. Kim, Megan, Linda and Sarah needed, respectively, a “schedule,” a “plan,” a “routine,” and a sense of “discipline.”

The women indicated needing structure in their lives after retirement. Almost all the women felt one possible way to have structure was to have a continued place on the team. A few felt this highlighted coaches’ appreciation for their contributions to the team and many felt it was one way to stay connected to their teammates and the sport of gymnastics. All the participants needed help finding other ways to organize their time. Many needed to engage in other interests and some needed to establish a sense of organization in their lives.

Advice for Others

The participants shared advice they had for other athletes facing injury and retirement. This section outlines the following themes related to advice for others, getting support and changing one’s perspective.

Getting Support

The women advised that others going through an injury and retirement experience get support. The participants stressed the importance of communication in
order to access support. The women also suggested that the athletes seek help from others when going through the injury and retirement processes.

The participants indicated that communication was the key in obtaining support. Nina and Joanna felt that effective communication with coaches was important. Nina explained how she could have communicated more effectively.

In terms of communication, I think a lot of people are scared to talk to their coaches about having thoughts of quitting, because you automatically feel like, oh my gosh, they're going to be mad or they're going to take me off the team if they feel like I'm not 100% committed. But, a lot of times I think people need to tell their coaches that because the coaches might hold the solution. If the athletes don't say anything, then nothing gets solved. I never said anything to my coaches and maybe if I had said that earlier, then my coach would have said, why don't we just do one event, earlier.

Joanna warned gymnasts not to try to “carry with them” what they had in club, as club and college are very different experiences. Joanna emphasized that communication becomes a little easier when gymnasts realize that college training is “supposed to be more fun” than club training. Karen, Megan, and Paige emphasized the athlete's responsibility for opening up to others. Karen asked other athletes to learn from what she did not do herself.

I guess the most important thing that I can think of, that's based on what I didn't do, is to talk to people about it and don't be embarrassed. If people don't ask, it doesn't necessarily mean that they don't want to hear.

To facilitate communication, Megan suggested athletes try to be as “open” as possible and “let people in” as much as they can. Paige encouraged athletes to communicate, in order to get their “negative feelings” out. Kim and Linda advised that communication be athletes' absolute top priority when going through injury and
retirement. Sarah expressed that it was important to know whom she could and needed to talk to, one main support person, family, and coaches. Amy suggested that communicating could help the athlete understand they are not the “only person in the world” it happened to and that “it can happen to anybody.”

The women suggested that athletes seek assistance from others during this time. Amy, Megan, Joanna, and Linda suggested that the most important step was to get counseling. Megan advised athletes to get counseling, as injury and retirement affect your “whole life.” Joanna suggested that athletes find a “support system,” rather than avoiding it. Megan, Joanna, Sarah, and Karen advised athletes to ask others for support. Megan told athletes to “seek out as much support as you can.” Joanna expressed why seeking support was so important.

I think getting support is definitely one of the most important things, because you can’t go through it alone. If you go through it alone, you’ll never come out with a good view on it at all.

Kim suggested that athletes “talk about it with anybody” in order to get support. Nina encouraged athletes to ask their athletics departments about resources and to use them. Paige suggested that athletes not be afraid to put themselves “out there” and try something “new” and “different” as a way of getting involved and finding support.

The participants advised that athletes going through injury and retirement get support. The women emphasized the role of effective communication in obtaining support. A couple of participants felt communication with coaches was most important, a few highlighted athletes’ responsibility to open up, a couple suggested that communication be the top priority, one felt identifying people to communicate
with was essential, and one encouraged communicating as a way to know you are not alone and it is not your fault. The participants also suggested that athletes seek assistance. Some women thought counseling was the most important way to do this, some advised asking others for support, one suggested talking with anyone who would listen, one encouraged athletes to talk to their athletics departments about resources, and one recommended athletes branch out and get involved in different activities to develop a new support system.

*Change in Perspective*

The participants suggested that a change in perspective was essential for injured and retiring athletes. All nine women advised that gymnasts consider that gymnastics is not everything, enjoy the sport while you can, and look at the positive aspects of your experiences.

The women proposed that gymnasts come to terms with the idea that gymnastics is not everything. Amy, Kim, and Megan advocated for athletes finding a new focus. Amy wanted athletes to know that even though your sport is your “passion,” you can always develop other passions. Kim spoke to gymnasts saying, “you might think,” gymnastics is everything, but there is “more to life.” Megan conveyed how her perspective shifted and encouraged athletes to consider other possibilities in their lives.

You’re going to laugh at this, about the fact that you were so worried about gymnastics. You’ve got all these other things in your life ahead of you. I think that’s probably one of the biggest things to convey to people, especially the people with injuries or people with any sort of problem like that. You’re not
going to go professional and be sixty and doing gymnastics. You have all of
these other things in your life that you’re going to be great at. I say that
probably once a week. Gymnastics really is not everything. That’s what’s
gotten me through it, is to realize that it’s an important part of your life for a
certain period of time and then you close the book, and you move on, and you
contribute in another way.

Amy and Megan suggested that athletes consider the possible long-term effects on
their health. Amy noted, “you need your body” for other things in life. Megan wished
she had known that the damage you do to your body in gymnastics does not always
“go away.” Joanna and Paige both encouraged gymnasts to realize during their
training, that there are other things out there. Paige explained what it felt like to
realize this.

Absolutely, gymnastics is not everything. We all believed that it was;
gymnastics, gymnastics, everything was always gymnastics. Once it’s over,
you’re like, wow there was so much other stuff I could have done or focused
on. Gymnastics really wasn’t everything. I wish somebody would have told
me that while I was doing it.

Linda, Nina, Sarah, and Karen advised that gymnasts recognize that retirement is not
the end of the world. Linda emphasized, “there’s a whole other life out there,” other
than being a gymnast and that it did eventually feel exciting to start a “new chapter.”
Sarah reminded athletes that injury and retirement are not “the end of your life,” but
rather the end of “a part” of your life. Karen wanted to tell athletes that there is
“hope” and that it is “possible to succeed” in other ways in life.

All the participants advised that athletes enjoy their sport experience while
they can. Amy, Megan, Joanna, Linda, and Sarah advised that athletes take the time
to have fun as a collegiate athlete and slow down enough to appreciate good times
they have in the sport. Amy encouraged collegiate athletes to “take in every
moment.” Joanna advocated that athletes “appreciate” and not take “for granted” their
sport experiences. Linda explained why enjoying your sport is important and how
athletes can change their own perception of the experience.

Enjoy the time that you have why you're doing it and although you complain a
lot, and sometimes it sucks, and you don't want to be there, just think about
why you're doing it and why you love it. Just look back and don't have any
regrets.

Sarah urged athletes to “stop” and notice when they are having “fun” in their sport.

Amy, Megan, Linda, Paige, and Karen urged gymnasts to remember that gymnastics
is not a sport you can do forever. Linda also advised that gymnasts be honest with
themselves and acknowledge that “at some point” you have to give up the sport, as it
is not something you can do “the rest of your life.”

All nine women suggested that it is important for athletes to look at the
positive aspects of their sport experiences. Linda, Paige, Nina, and Karen suggested
athletes focus on the positives, as one way of helping themselves get through difficult
times and moving on with their lives in retirement. Linda recalled how her experience
taught her to “take responsibility” for herself and helped her “mature.” Paige was
thankful to have realized her own personal “value,” outside of her identity as a
gymnast. Paige also reflected on good things her sport experiences taught her.

Even though there were a lot of negative things, I still can pick out a lot of
positive things that I learned from gymnastics. It taught me to be a strong
person, I learned how to persevere through bad times, and I learned how to be
a leader. I learned a lot of positive lessons about life, from being in the gym,
that I don’t think I could have learned anywhere else when I was growing up.
Nina learned that "life is too short to be unhappy" and despite loving athletics, no longer allowed it to "make or break" her day. Amy, Kim, Joanna, and Sarah indicated that their sport experiences helped to bring out positive qualities in themselves. Amy noted that her gymnastics experiences brought out the "hard worker" in her and made her "tougher." Kim learned to be "determined," to "stick to" her goals, and to be "responsible." Sarah’s experiences taught her to "persevere," to be "understanding," and to be "patient."

All of the participants advised that injured and retired athletes consider a change in perspective. All the women urged gymnasts to reflect on the idea that gymnastics is not everything. A few participants encouraged athletes to find a new focus in their lives, a couple stressed the need to consider long-term effects of the sport on your health, a couple highlighted the importance of realizing there are other things out there besides your sport, and some wanted to remind athletes that retirement is not the end of the world. All the participants suggested athletes enjoy their sport while they can. Many of the women suggested having fun as a collegiate athlete and appreciating the good times in sport, and many wanted to remind others to that it is not possible to do a sport like gymnastics forever. All nine women suggested that athletes step back and look at the positive aspects of their sport experiences. Some participants indicated that looking at the positives could help to get through the difficult times and move on in retirement, and some emphasized that their sport experiences brought out positive qualities in themselves.
Participation in the Study

All nine women talked about their experience of participating in this study. This section outlines the following themes related to the women's participation in the study, what they found to be helpful and ways in which they felt hopeful.

Helpful

All the participants expressed that participating in the study was helpful to them in some way. Six of the women noted that it helped them to read their own story, through a summary of their first interview that the researcher sent them. Amy, Kim, and Linda found that reading their story helped them to realize some things for themselves. It was very "emotional" for Amy to read her story, in that she came to understand how much she learned and wished she, "knew then" what she "knows now." Kim reflected on how "happy" she felt that this time in her life was "over." Nina, Sarah, and Karen were very interested to read their stories and found that they greatly enjoyed the experience. It helped Nina to "recapture" what she had said. Sarah felt that reading her story was "very rewarding."

Eight participants found that talking about the experience with the researcher was helpful to them. Amy and Kim equated talking to the researcher with going to therapy. Amy explained how "nice" it was for her to talk with the researcher.

It's like talking to a counselor. I mean, you don't know anything apart from what I told you before. So, whatever I say, it's not like you're going to judge me or anything.
Kim, Megan, Joanna, Linda, and Paige indicated that talking to the researcher helped them to process the experience. Kim found it helpful to tell her “whole story” to someone who would listen. Megan expressed how talking about it was beneficial.

I think it’s been great! I get a chance to talk about this stuff, that I never really got to talk about, you know? And now I feel a lot more open about it. This has been really helpful for me. If I had any deep seeded issues about this, being able to talk about it has been wonderful. I wish I was able to do this (number of years) ago.

Linda explained how talking about her experiences helped her to “open up” and “analyze the situation,” after she had “ignored” it for a long time. Talking about her experiences helped Linda to have “a little closure.” Sarah and Karen expressed that they were glad to be part of this study. Sarah indicated why she felt this way.

Well, thank you. I really appreciate you taking the time and it’s something that I really enjoy sharing with other people because I mean you were a gymnast, I feel like you understand. And, it’s something that not a lot of people hear about. So, being able to talk about it and kind of reflect on it is really helpful.

Karen liked that being part of the study gave her a “time and place” to share her experiences.

The women all found it helpful to participate in the study. Many women realized things and came to a better understanding of themselves through reading their own story. Some described how reading their story was enjoyable, helped them reflect, or was rewarding. Talking to the researcher about their experiences was reported by almost all the women as helpful. For some women, talking to the researcher was similar to therapy, gave them a chance to open up, helped in processing the experience, or gave them some closure.
Hopeful

Six of the women expressed that participation in this study allowed them to feel hopeful. Four participants felt more hopeful after hearing other gymnasts’ experiences. Megan, Paige, Sarah, and Karen felt it was nice to hear that they were not alone. Paige was “surprised” at how similar the participants’ “feelings and thoughts” were. Karen was excited to be able to “compare” and “contrast” the participants’ experiences. Joanna, Linda, Sarah, and Karen felt hopeful that sharing their own stories would help others in some way. Joanna shared how she hoped this study could help others.

I think what you’re doing is awesome and amazing! I think especially for coaches, they need more information on this, on how to handle this kind of situation, because I don’t think there’s very many people out there that know how to handle it.

Linda hoped the study would help other athletes. Sarah felt hopeful in that participating in the study allowed her to feel like she had “a say in it.” Sarah also shared her hopes for other athletes reading her story.

I think they might have hope or that it will at least give them some inspiration. Even though their career is over, a whole new part of life is still beginning. Maybe it will just help some people in that transition.

Many of the women felt more hopeful after participating in the study, due to hearing others experiences, hoping their stories would help others, or just knowing they were give the opportunity to have a voice in the situation.
Summary of Female Collegiate Gymnasts' Experiences with Retirement Due to Injury

A summary of the central themes that emerged from the women’s stories is presented in this section. The women described the roles gymnastics played in their lives. One important role of gymnastics for the women was that it allowed them to be a collegiate athlete. For some, there was great meaning in pursuing and achieving this goal. As collegiate athletes, some of the women felt part of an accomplished group and many found it rewarding to have special privileges and recognition. The women experienced college training as less intense and more team-oriented than club training. Earning a full college scholarship was important for financial reasons for some women and significant in terms of pride and a sense of achievement for others. Many found gymnastics to be fun but also trying at times. Some enjoyed it more than academics. As gymnasts, the women felt like part of a family or group. Team social experiences affected the level of enjoyment in the sport for many. The main reasons that many of the women continued in the sport were that it allowed them to gain a sense of accomplishment and to possess a unique talent. Some women felt respected or empowered as gymnasts. However, as collegiate athletes many spent the majority of their time in injury related tasks, not feeling part of their team, or feeling like they did not have the chance to prove themselves. Some had coaches whose favoritism negatively affected them, especially when injured.

The women experienced gymnastics as playing a role of developing a sense of discipline in their lives. The women made gymnastics their top priority, with some
leaving high school early each day and some traveling far distances or living away
from home to train. All the participants dedicated their time almost completely to
gymnastics. Most led limited social lives outside gymnastics and all regularly strained
their bodies for the sport. Many of the gymnasts experienced club coaches teaching
them to ignore injuries and continue training, not believing them when injured,
openly criticizing some for their body weight and shape, and teaching and enforcing
strict norms. Many of the women experienced these norms as so engrained that they
expected themselves to continue conforming to them in college. In addition, most of
the women experienced college coaches reinforcing at least some of these norms. The
final common role that gymnastics played in the women’s lives was that it served as
an identity for them. Prior to injury, the women saw themselves primarily as
gymnasts. They also experienced others primarily seeing them as gymnasts. They
women felt unique as gymnasts, with some experiencing gymnastics as a way to stand
out as talented individuals and some experiencing difficulty in relating to non-
gymnast peers.

In their collegiate injury experiences, many women tried to conform to the
sport ethic coaches had taught them. Many did this by convincing themselves they
were okay and living in denial, many expected to recover just as quickly as they had
from past injuries, and many expected themselves to deal with the pain and continue
training regardless of their injuries. The women experienced feeling alone during
their injury experiences. Almost all of the women felt alone in their guilt and with a
sense of loneliness. Many felt alone in their fears, isolated themselves, did not feel
believed, felt excluded and disconnected on the sidelines, felt their team's behavior towards them changed, struggled with unknowns, and wanted confirmation and approval.

The women experienced loss in their injury experiences. Almost all of the participants described the sense of loss they felt in terms of depression or sadness and feeling as though they could no longer contribute to their teams. Most felt frustration and anger with their loss. In addition, the women experienced a sense of loss connected with their physical injury and pain. The women also expressed reaching a point in their injury experience when they knew they had to consider the possibility of retirement. Almost all of the women experienced poor communication when they realized they had to consider the possibility of retirement, but had at least one person who helped them navigate the injury process. Many of the women expressed feeling overwhelmed during their injury experience.

The participants shared their experiences of transitioning to retirement. The women experienced feeling alone in the transition to retirement. They felt alone in terms of their experiences of depression or sadness, almost all felt a sense of loneliness or isolation, most struggled with body image or the transition to general fitness, and many felt a sense of fear. The women experienced loss in retirement as well. The women experienced missing gymnastics in their lives, almost all felt frustration or anger, many felt confusion, and many became overwhelmed. The women tried to move forward in various ways in retirement. Almost all of the women experienced poor communication and had regret, or questions about their retirement.
While the women experienced poor communication as more prevalent than effective communication during the transition to retirement, many had effective communication with at least one person in their life. Most experienced a sense of relief at some point in the retirement process. Many continued involvement in sports and became a student assistant coach for their gymnastics team.

The women described the injury and sport retirement process, in the context of their college experience. After injury and/or retirement, most of the women experienced feeling lost in their college experience and most lacked a sense of purpose. Almost all the women described how their injury and retirement experience affected them socially. The women experienced injury and retirement shifting their priorities and affecting their academics. Most of the women also experienced injury and retirement affecting their goals and their focus in life.

The women described how injury and retirement affected their identity. The women indicated experiencing loss of pride and loss of a sense of personal value and importance in the world. Most of the women also found it difficult to lose the public image that came with being a gymnast. While the loss of identity was challenging for some, it also brought about self-reflection. The women described the various ways they developed a new sense of self. The women experienced injury and retirement as forcing them to mature or grow up and to learn about themselves to find who they were, other than gymnasts. Almost all the women experienced wanting or needing to prove themselves at something else in life. The women experienced injury and retirement as having a long-term impact on their identity and shared how their
experience changed them. Most of the women shared that overcoming such adversity and knowing what they were capable of, had a positive long-term impact on their identity.

The women reflected on what was beneficial to their coping. Almost all of the participants experienced counseling or having someone to listen as beneficial when coping with injury and retirement. Many of the women had team support that was helpful. Many of the women found it helpful to have people in their lives who understood. Almost all of the participants thought it was beneficial to stay busy when trying to cope. Staying busy, for a few meant preparing for graduate school or working, for many it was focusing on academics, and for many it was getting involved in alternate activities. Almost all of the women experienced justifying and accepting their own retirement as beneficial. Most found that it was helpful if they recognized their own physical limitations, due to injury, that would not allow them to continue or remain competitive in the sport. Almost all felt that it was helpful for them to redefine their sport experiences by utilizing their new perspectives as well as what they learned about themselves.

The women also reflected on what challenges they faced in the coping process. The women experienced a lack of support and sensitivity from others, which presented challenges in trying to cope. The women experienced difficulty trying to manage some people's reactions to their injury and retirement. In fact, many had discord with a coach that made coping more difficult. The women stated that one reason coping was challenging, was due to feeling like a disappointment or worrying
about disappointing others. They recalled how holding their emotions inside was not helpful to them. The women felt a loss of purpose during their experience. All felt that identity foreclosure, or not having a chance to explore who they were other than gymnasts prior to retirement, made coping more challenging. Many also indicated that it was difficult to manage all the extra free time they suddenly had in retirement.

The women described what they needed during the injury and retirement processes. The participants stated needing to know that they were not alone. The women talked about this in terms of needing encouragement, reassurance, to know the experience did not have to be solitary, and open and honest communication. Most women expressed needing counseling when trying to cope with injury and retirement. Many indicated that they needed more compromise from coaches. Some expressed that it would have been helpful if their team had treated them with more respect during injury and retirement. The women thought it would have been helpful to have more structure in their lives after retiring. The participants explained that they could have used more help finding other ways to organize their time. Almost all of the women felt they needed a coach to offer them a continued place on the team.

The participants shared advice they would give to other athletes facing injury and retirement. The women strongly suggested that athletes get support. They agreed that communication was the key to getting support. They also agreed that it is important for athletes themselves to seek out assistance from others. The participants in this study suggested that athletes look at changing their perspective. They urged others to reflect on how gymnastics or your sport is not everything. The women
suggested that athletes enjoy their sport while they can and look at the positive aspects of their sport experience.

Finally, the participants gave feedback regarding their experience of participating in this study. The women found various aspects of participating in the study helpful to them. Almost all the women felt that actually talking about their experiences with the researcher was helpful. Many found it helpful to read their own story, in the summary of the first interview the researcher sent them. Many of the women also experienced participating in this study as making them feel hopeful. Some felt more hopeful after hearing that they were not the only ones who went through this type of experience. These women were surprised at how similar the other participants stories were to their own. Some women also felt hopeful that this study may be able to help others who experience retirement due to injury.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The goals of this study were to explore, understand, and describe how retirement from sport, part-way through college, due to injury, was experienced by female gymnasts. This study was aimed at understanding and describing how injury and retirement from sport was experienced by female athletes, in the context of their college experience and identity development, what their perceived needs were during the processes, and how they coped.

This chapter is structured by the core findings that emerged among female collegiate gymnasts who retired from gymnastics due to injury. This chapter consists of four sections. The first discusses and considers current findings in the context of previous findings in the research literature. The second discusses implications for counseling professionals who may work with female collegiate gymnasts who might face retirement due to injury. The third discusses the implications for collegiate athletics. The fourth reflects on this study's limitations. The fifth and final section discusses recommendations for future research with this population.
Current Findings in the Context of Psychology and Sport Research Literature

This section focuses on discussing this study's findings in the context of previous relevant research from psychology and sport literature, noting possible similarities and differences in the experiences of women in this study as well as possible new findings not noted in prior research.

Role of Gymnastics

The women in this study primarily experienced gymnastics as their life, rather than gymnastics playing one of many roles in their life. The women were defined early on, by others and themselves, as 'the gymnast.' These experiences seem consistent with previous findings reported of female gymnasts becoming exclusively focused in their sport, early on in life (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). These women's experiences also seem consistent with the findings that an athletic identity carves out a well-defined narrowly based role for athletes (Baillie & Danish, 1992). The women described experiencing a strong athletic identity that increased as their athlete role became more central in their lives, which also seems consistent with previous research (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993b).

Enjoying gymnastics more than academics was a common experience for some of the women. Participating in gymnastics was associated with many women feeling talented and accomplished. This experience seems consistent with identity development models in which an activity such as athletics, serves as the primary source of industry and helps adolescents gain social acceptance (Nelson, 1983;
Several women felt respected and empowered in gymnastics and found it rewarding to be a collegiate athlete. For some, pride and a sense of achievement came with earning an athletic scholarship. These experiences seem consistent with the assertions in the literatures about the athlete label coming with a hero and role model status (Baillie & Danish, 1992). The women in the present study emphasized the importance of feeling like part of a family or group as gymnasts, consistent with past research on female elite athletes (Balogue, 1999).

The women’s experiences seemed different from some of Nelson’s (1983) findings. Nelson (1983) reviewed previous research utilizing a developmental approach to examine athletes’ experiences with social approval and identity foreclosure. Nelson (1983) concluded that demands of time and intensity of sport increase in college, while the women in this study experienced collegiate training to be less intense than club training was. The women also did not feel an increase in pressure to perform athletically in college. The experiences of women in this study may have been different because the seriousness and the skill level in club gymnastics is often higher than in collegiate programs. There also may be differences between Nelson’s (1983) findings and this study, based on gender. The women in this study did not describe experiencing the general college environment as being less supportive of athletics, as Nelson (1983) suggested. This may be due in part to the women in the current study coming from club gymnastics as opposed to coming from high school teams that may receive more accolades from the community. The majority of the women in the present study also did not describe feeling that non-
athlete peers or faculty viewed their athlete role negatively, as Nelson (1983) described. While Nelson (1983) does not specify whether she is addressing male athletes, female athletes, or both in her research, the examples used in her write-up seem to indicate that she primarily focused on male athletes.

The women in this study appreciated how gymnastics in college was more team-oriented than club training was. However, after injury many of the women spent time rehabilitating their injury, experienced feeling a lack of connection to the team, or thought about missing opportunities to prove themselves. Some experienced coaches favoring others when they became injured. These experiences may be consistent with research indicating that athletes’ personal and career needs often become secondary to collegiate athletic programs’ primary need to have a winning team (Blann, 1985; Remick, 1974; Yianakis, 1981).

_Injury Experience_

Many of the women were taught by coaches, from a young age, that it was unacceptable to be injured. They learned to, keep quiet about their injuries, delay treatment, continue to train, and fear coaches’ and teammates’ reactions to the injury. They were afraid of coaches and teammates not believing them, wanted to appear tough, and did not want coaches or their team to see them as weak. Several women minimized injuries and used denial to convince themselves they were okay. Those who had experienced a pattern of multiple injuries expected themselves to recover more quickly and completely. These experiences are consistent with Coakley’s
assertions that athletes are taught to succeed by pushing themselves and it is difficult to stop this way of thinking. The experiences of the women in this study are also consistent with research showing how very few athletes prepare themselves for injury, and often experience a high level of denial and continue to train through pain (Baillie & Danish, 1992; McPherson, 1980).

The women in this study felt alone during the injury experience. Many felt alone in their fears of: surgery, not knowing if they could come back from injury, facing retirement, and not knowing what to do next. These experiences are consistent with athletic injury research (Parham, 1993) that showed, when an injury continues over a period of time, the athlete feels uncertainty about whether or not it will be career ending.

Almost all the women in this study felt alone in their experiences of self-blame and team imposed guilt. Many isolated themselves due to disappointment, feeling sad or depressed, not wanting others to see them as complainers, and not wanting to talk about it. Almost all of the women experienced loneliness during the injury experience. Several women experienced having teams that did not believe them. When sidelined, many women felt disconnected from the team in that they felt separated, excluded, and less valued. Several women searched for approval and confirmation that they were going to be okay. These experiences seem consistent with Parham’s (1993) findings of the likelihood of injured athletes experiencing distress, a sense of worry about returning to pre-injury form, and a feeling of letting the team down.
Almost all the women felt a sense of loss when injured, as evident in symptoms of depression or sadness, avoiding others, disappointment in themselves, questioning their own value, and grieving unfulfilled plans. These experiences appear consistent with those of Ball (2002), in that an athlete may experience a decrease in self-esteem and self-worth and an increase in depression symptoms. The experiences of women in the present study seem in accord with previous research on female gymnasts, in which disappointment about being unable to continue accomplishing athletic goals was found to make letting go of athletic dreams more difficult (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Most women in the present study experienced feeling frustration or anger, with themselves and their team, upon feeling this sense of loss. The women also experienced loss due to their actual physical injuries. Some women experienced their team no longer trusting and respecting them. The women felt loss in terms of physical ability, physical comfort, and trust in their own bodies. These experiences seem consistent with findings that athletes are accustomed to depersonalizing pain and having a public persona of invulnerability. Therefore, when athletes are injured they may experience it as bodily betrayal, resulting in self-resentment (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). The women also experienced loss of emotional closeness with the team and experienced a decline in mental and emotional functioning. Almost all the women wanted to contribute to the team and experienced negative feelings if they could not. In this respect, the women’s experiences appear to be in accordance with Russell’s (2000) assertion that when athletes are injured it threatens their primary resource for gaining self-worth, causing a need for achievement and to feel competent.
and accepted. Several women did find ways to support teammates emotionally or to feel useful, by doing tasks for the team. The women in this study reported experiencing loss of physical health in terms of emotional responses of fear, guilt, loneliness, depression or sadness, frustration and anger, and feeling overwhelmed. The women's experiences of social issues involved, isolating themselves, not being believed, feeling separated from the team, wanting confirmation and approval, and poor communication. The women in this study also experienced self-concept issues such as, convincing themselves they were okay, denial, expecting themselves to comply with sport ethic, anger and frustration directed at themselves, and wanting to contribute to the team. The experiences of the women in the current study seem consistent with Russell's (2000) findings of four categories of stress for injured athletes: physical well-being, emotional well-being, social well-being, and self-concept.

Many women experienced stress and felt overwhelmed by thoughts of their dreams slipping away. They struggled to find balance in their lives. Several women had difficulty communicating with people in their personal lives and some with their team. They experienced difficulties communicating about their shifting training focus, treatment of injury, and reporting pain levels. These findings show support for Russell's (2000) emphasis on the prevalence and importance of psychological factors in the injury process such as, athletes feeling their hopes and dreams are shattered and a commonly perceived lack of social support. Despite common communication
difficulties, most of the women had at least one person they could turn to, parents, injured or retired gymnasts, athletic trainers, coaches, or doctors.

The injury experiences of the women in the present study seem in accord with the first two stages of Evans and Hardy’s (1995) three-stage grief process. Stage one includes stress reactions, attempts to recover the lost identity and self-esteem, and anger and anxiety. In stage two, the athlete feels a loss of team identity, gains more awareness about the loss from the injury and experiences despondency, depression, apathy, withdrawal, despair, guilt, inability to concentrate, and negative emotions likely to impact other areas of their life.

Transition to Retirement

The women felt alone in various ways during the transition to retirement. Most experienced loneliness and felt isolated. The women experienced feeling disrespected or like an outsider, feeling unsure of their new role, not knowing how to talk about the experience, and being uncertain of their social group. Several women felt alone with body image and fitness concerns. These concerns are consistent with the importance of recognizing that female adolescents in particular, are trying to accept their gender and their body, as well as their overall appearance (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) also pointed out that female gymnasts have especially little time to maximize their athletic careers before puberty sets in. Some of the women in this study, experienced difficulty adjusting to puberty induced bodily changes upon retirement. Another common thread for some women was facing
difficulties in the student assistant coach role. In terms of the loss of gymnastics, the women’s responses were to either grieve or avoid processing the loss. The women felt alone in their experiences of depression or sadness, due to the way they were treated as a student assistant coach, having to let go of a sport they loved, or isolating themselves. Some of the women also felt alone when facing fears of weight gain, not knowing what else to focus on, not knowing who they were, and possible long-term effects. Nelson (1983) also concluded that when athletes retire, they do not know what to focus on. The experiences of women in the present study seem in accord with research indicating that identity foreclosure can lead to retirement difficulties (Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996).

The women experienced loss, in that they missed their athletic abilities, connections with the team, the sport of gymnastics, the structure, and feelings of success. Some women experienced the loss as similar to losing a friend or going through a divorce. Many felt confused about, their role on the team, the change in team relationships, how to react to the loss, how to respond to others' questions, what to do next, and how to define themselves. Almost all the women felt angry or frustrated in experiences of self-blame, disrespect as student assistant coach, poor communication with the team, social issues with the team, and a lack of understanding from others. The women’s anger and frustration focused most on team relationships and a perceived lack of support. These experiences of women in the present study appear consistent with Chow’s (2001) assertions that female gymnasts’ feelings of loss may increase as teammate friendships fade. These experiences also
seem in accord with Chow’s (2001) finding that female gymnasts experience frustration and disappointment about the lack of support from their sporting organizations. Many women in the present study felt overwhelmed in terms of the sense of emptiness in their lives, the sudden loss, new and unfamiliar independence, lack of direction, and self-doubt. These experiences are consistent with Chow’s (2001) conclusions that many female gymnasts feel a sense of loss, emptiness, and generally lost upon retirement. The present study’s observations also seem consistent with Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) findings, in terms of gymnasts transitioning to retirement experiencing: loss around involvement in sport, disorientation, loss of control, and frustration.

Almost all the women experienced poor communication in the transition to retirement. The most upsetting communication was with coaches, in feeling blamed for their injuries and their team role being unclear. The women experienced the most difficulty when they did not think there was any possibility of their coach seeing their point of view. These experiences of women in the present study seem similar to those of elite female gymnasts in Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) study. Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) concluded that elite gymnasts tend to experience difficult transitions, if they perceive their coach as someone who exerts absolute control over them. Poor communication, for women in the present study, also negatively affected their sense of belonging. We know from previous research that a sense of belonging is of particular importance to female athletes (Balogue, 1999). Several women in this study struggled to convey to others what retirement meant for them and how it was
affecting them. The majority of the women in this study also experienced a small amount of good communication in retirement. The most important aspects of the good communication were helping them to feel: supported, encouraged, part of the team, not alone, and able to open up.

Nearly all the women regretted not hiding their injuries and internally questioned the reactions their coaches had. A few regretted not trying harder to push through their injuries. At the same time, most women experienced relief when they retired in terms of, no longer having to work out or having the perfect body, not having physical pain, and having time to dedicate to other things in life. The experiences of women in the present study are consistent with Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) conclusions that female gymnasts experience freedom from their rigid schedule, as well as relief from the stresses and demands of being an elite gymnast. Many of the women in the present study stayed involved in sports, coaching gymnastics, judging, or participating in alternate sports. One common experience many of the women had was becoming student assistant coach for their team. In this role, a couple women had mixed feelings about their experiences. After first taking on the student assistant coach role, several women felt helpful or useful. However, only one woman continued to feel this way throughout her experience in the role. The remaining two women, along with a couple of other women, found the student assistant coach role to be challenging or difficult. Female gymnasts in this study appeared similar to participants in Chow’s (2001) research, in that most had continued involvement in sport in retirement.
Impact on College Experience

Some of the participants who felt lost explained that they lacked a clear sense of purpose during their transition to retirement. These women described this lack of purpose in many ways, not knowing what to do with their own time, not having a good sense of direction without gymnastics, and not knowing what role to play on the team. Most of the participants indicated that one aspect of feeling lost was the impact that injury and retirement had on them socially. These women expressed that the social impact consisted of, distancing or separation in friendships, discovering their true friends, experiencing strained friendships with other athletes, and restricting social opportunities.

The women explained how injury and retirement affected their college experience. Most felt lost, in that they lacked a clear purpose in life and therefore, did not know what to do with themselves. Almost all the women felt lost socially, in that retirement affected their friendships and they had to determine who their true friends were. Many women in this study indicated that their social lives were largely tied to athletics or their team, as their training often separated them from the general college environment. This experience is consistent with Pearson and Petitpas' (1990) assertion that collegiate athletes have unique social circumstances, in that they are often segregated from the rest of the college community due to specific housing areas, traveling for competitions, time spent training, and socializing primarily with other athletes. The importance of the social aspect of retirement for the women in this study is also consistent with research indicating the importance of social well-being in
college students' lives, due to the value of the peer culture environment in adolescence (Dacey & Kenny, 1997).

Most of the women in this study experienced a shift in priorities. Their career goals became more of a focus, they considered life goals and future education, or they realized they had never considered post-retirement plans. The women's academic priorities shifted in that, some saw academics as their only other strength, used it as a distraction, or realized they had more time for it. On the other hand, some women cared less about academics initially following retirement. These findings suggest that retirement for injured collegiate gymnasts involves a shift in focus in terms of education and future career and life goals. The women in this study who struggled more with the shift in priorities were those who had rarely considered a life without gymnastics.

The present study's findings appear in accord with Baillie's (1993) conclusion that difficulty in athletic retirement is based, on how important sports involvement has been to the athlete across a significant part of their life, and the intensity of involvement. The present study's results are also consistent with Balogue's (1999) assertion that the importance of belonging in a group holds both personal and occupational meaning for female elite athletes. Parham's (1993) research indicates that college students go through many transitions when entering college, including selecting a career path, feeling an increased responsibility for oneself through new independence, increased academic challenge, and adjusting to a new place and new friends. The women in this study seemed to experience these transition more
intensely when entering retirement, rather than when entering college. Blann (1985) found that many male athletes avoided career planning for the first two years of college, but that there were no differences between female athletes and their non-athlete counterparts. The experiences of the women in the present study do not seem consistent with Blann's (1985) observations. The majority of the women in this study were juniors or seniors when they retired, yet many had not engaged in thorough career planning prior to retirement. Retirement seemed to be the catalyst for many of the women to think about career planning or to take academics more seriously.

The experiences of women in the present study are more in line with Fagan's (1994) findings that indicated athletes show a lack of emphasis on vocational interests and academics when there is a high level of dedication to their sport. Kennedy and Dimick (1987) also observed that athletes often have a lack of pre-retirement career planning, but they asserted that this is largely due to the dream of continuing on to professional sport. The women in this study did not indicate plans to continue competing in gymnastics after college, yet none of them seemed to have considered the possibility of retirement prior to actually facing it.

Impact on Identity

The women experienced a loss of pride, a change in their public image, and a loss of personal value and importance, upon losing their identity as a gymnast. These experiences seem consistent with Mills' (1993) conclusion that if an athlete's self-worth is closely tied to their athletic identity, it is more difficult for them to value
themselves unconditionally. Several women in this study were concerned how others would view them once they were no longer competing and did not officially feel like they were part of the team. Many explained that they felt as though they were no longer allowed to identify as gymnasts and that they did not know who they were without that identity. Several felt unsuccessful ending their gymnastics careers due to injury.

Most of the women also felt a loss around the public image they had as gymnasts, in others looking up to them or knowing they were athletes. Some of these women worried that retirement would negatively affect others' views of them. The women described associating their gymnastics success with success in life. These experiences appear in agreement with research that suggests public recognition in sport may serve as an external source of self-worth or self-esteem (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Wolff & Lester, 1989). The experiences of women in the current study also seem in accord with McPherson's (1980) conclusion about the loss of public feedback. McPherson (1980) concluded that when athletes lose public feedback and the related prestige, in a relatively short period of time, there is potential for difficulty if the individual's self-definition is largely dependent on this public recognition.

The women in this study developed a new sense of self by confronting maturational tasks and learning more about themselves. The women felt a new sense of independence in the transition to retirement, yet also felt forced to grow up. They explored various other roles and activities and several began questioning who they really were. Almost all of the women sought out new opportunities as avenues to
prove themselves in life. Those who did not find other ways to direct their energy struggled in the transition to retirement. The women in this study did not seem to explore many different identities prior to retirement, as Erikson (1959) suggests occurs in adolescence. The women also did not begin to explore how to relate their deepest hopes and fears with another person or to seek a deeper understanding of themselves prior to retirement, as Erikson (1959) suggests occurs in young adulthood. Instead, the women in this study did not seem to engage in identity exploration, relating more deeply with others, or better understanding themselves until transitioning to retirement. These experiences seem to be in accord with Kerr & Dacyshyn’s (2000) conclusion that female participation in elite gymnastics may postpone identity formation. These findings are also consistent with researchers’ conclusions suggesting that athletes may lack alternate social roles, due to role restriction, and then have to learn how to expand their social identities (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Murphy, Petitpas, Brewer, 1996; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

The women in the present study experienced long-term effects from sport injury and retirement. Their identity was affected, in that some still had physical pain and some continued to struggle with the loss of being a gymnast. However, many felt emotionally stronger and several appreciated life more after making it through the experience. The majority of the women found that overcoming adversity gave them confidence and made some feel proud of themselves. These experiences seem consistent with Dacey and Kenny’s (1997) findings of identity being built on one’s interactions, learning how one can act independently, and realizing that one changes.
over time but remains the same person. The women in this study attempted to build a new unique self that society would continue to support and that would differentiate themselves from others, after the loss of their gymnast identity. These experiences are also consistent with Dacey and Kenny’s (1997) conclusions around tasks of adolescence.

*Beneficial in Coping*

Almost all the women in this study had support that helped them to cope. Some women went to counseling and some turned to good listeners already in their lives. The women appreciated that they, had someone to listen, did not feel judged, were able to express emotions, received empathy, had help prioritizing, or had their decision to retire validated. Many of the women had support from their teams, in terms of advocating for them with coaches, showing concern and support, giving advice, or laughing and complaining with them. These experiences seem consistent with previous retirement research with elite athletes; showing that one commonly used coping strategy for those with a strong athletic identity is seeking social support for emotional reasons (Grove, Lavalle, & Gordon, 1997). The women in this study indicated that understanding was helpful and that they received this most from their mom or their significant other. This finding is in line with Kenny’s (1990) conclusion that college women are likely to seek parental help and to discuss problems with a college friend in stressful situations.
Almost all the women found it helpful to stay busy while trying to cope. A few focused on graduate school and a job and many focused on schoolwork. Several spent free time in alternate activities. The women in this study, who found a new focus relatively quickly, seemed to experience less difficulty in the transition to retirement. This experience seems consistent with Coakley's (2001) conclusion that retirement is more likely to cause serious problems, if the athletic career greatly restricted development of the individual's other qualities or if there was very little room in their life for alternate activities or exposure to role models outside of sport.

Almost all the women in this study experienced that finding ways to justify and accept their retirement helped them cope. Many of the women did this by recognizing their own physical limitations, reflecting on health risks in continuing, or coming to the realization that the sport was no longer physically possible for them. Almost all the women found it helpful to redefining their sport experience by developing a new perspective and utilizing what they had learned about themselves. These findings are consistent with previous research assertions that acceptance, positive reinterpretation, and growth are some of the most commonly utilized coping skills amongst elite athletes facing retirement (Grove, Lavallee, and Gordon, 1997). The experiences of women in this study, with respect to moving beyond their injury, also seem consistent with stage three of Evans and Hardy's (1995) grief process. Stage three is recovery, when symptoms lessen and the athlete is able to focus on healing rather than on grief or the injury itself.
Challenging in Coping

The women in this study experienced a lack of support and sensitivity that was detrimental to their coping processes. Many had discord with at least one coach, in that they felt ignored or mistreated, misled, conflict around the student assistant coach role, or that their contributions were no longer valued. The women also worried that they were disappointing college coaches, did not live up to others' expectations, or were letting themselves down. The women in this study spoke about this part of their experience as something that was happening to them that they did not have a lot of choice in. These experiences show consistency with previous research in which, retiring athletes reported feeling a loss of personal control, dependent on how much control they had over the reason for retirement (Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000).

The women in this study all held in their emotions when trying to cope, but found this to be an ineffective strategy. The women experienced difficulty, finding opportunities to express emotions or avoiding dealing with them. These results are in line with McPherson’s (1980) assertion that retirement is not socially sanctioned or discussed among young people. The women’s avoidance of dealing with emotions is consistent with previous results showing that mental disengagement is one of the more common coping strategies for elite athletes facing retirement. These researchers also found that those with a strong athletic identity tend to rely more on denial in coping (Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997). It was difficult for the women in this study to manage others’ reactions in that, some did not feel believed or had coaches
who ignored them, some experienced teams withdrawing from them, and others had friendships severed. Many felt that people did not understand what they were going through or why it was so meaningful to them. These findings suggest that obtaining support from coaches and being able to get others to understand are common challenges for athletes coping with injury and retirement.

The women in this study experienced a loss of purpose, apparently due to having a foreclosed identity and defining themselves completely by gymnastics. Many had difficulty coping with free time and some initially wasted a lot of it. The current study’s findings suggest that a loss of purpose seemed to make coping difficult, in that the women did not seem to feel motivated without clear goals.

Perceived Needs

The women in this study experienced a need to know they were not alone. Some needed more compromise from coaches. In terms of counseling, most of the women felt they needed it, many would have preferred seeing someone with knowledge of athletics, and many thought it would have been easier to go to go if someone in their athletic program had suggested it. The majority of the women in this study were not referred to counseling by anyone in athletics. This finding is consistent with a previous research finding, indicating that only 8% of athletic trainers refer their clients to counseling (Larson, Starkey, Zaichkowsky, 1996). The experience of women in the present study also seems consistent with previous research suggesting there is often no internal system in collegiate athletics department for injured athletes.
or those facing retirement. Other researchers have noted that the absence of such an internal system increases the likelihood that the multidisciplinary staff will assume athletes’ needs are being met (Etzel, Pinkney, & Hinkle, 1995).

The women in this study also felt a perceived need for structure in their lives. Almost all the women saw having a continued place on the team as one way to create structure. Some felt appreciated by coaches when they extended an offer for the women to stay connected with the team. Many women appreciated the opportunity to stay connected to their team and to the sport of gymnastics. These experiences seem consistent with results from previous research that shows many athletes would like more opportunity to remain involved with their team (Werthner & Orlick, 1982). The women felt as though they needed help organizing their free time, in terms of finding opportunities to explore interests or having some order in their lives. These experiences seem consistent with research indicating that athletes come to rely on their teams as a support system, but lose this system when they retire (Balogue, 1999; Werthner & Orlick, 1982).

The experiences of women in the present study are consistent with past research that has highlighted the need for intervention programs. One intervention suggested by Etzel, et al. (1995), is specifically directed at collegiate athletics programs and might be helpful. Etzel et al. (1995) suggested first assessing the needs of collegiate athletes and then using each institution’s own retired athletes to assess what resources are essential. The benefit of this type of approach is that it has the potential to be specifically tailored to each individual institution. This intervention
also has the potential to address diversity within subgroups of each institution’s population.

Other research recommends preparing athletes prior to retirement, as this is most effective (Baillie, 1992; Baillie, 1993; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Grove et al., 1997; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Mills, 1993; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Werthner & Orlick, 1982). Intervention programs such as Baillie and Danish’s (1992) Life Developmental Intervention (LDI) approach might be helpful. The LDI approach is holistic, process-oriented, has a long-term focus, and takes into account the athlete’s development. Baillie and Danish (1992) emphasize pre- and post-retirement intervention. In pre-retirement, they recommend focusing on specific issues related to the athlete’s functioning. In post-retirement, they recommend providing support for the athlete’s emotional adjustment, as they may be more open to this after retired. They also suggested normalizing retirement and helping the client see how it can be an opportunity to develop new career paths. In addition, other past research suggests helping athletes focus on self-acceptance (Mills, 1993).

Advice for Others

The women advised other athletes experiencing injury and retirement to obtain support through effective communication. The women highlighted various different aspects of the importance of communication: the importance of talking to coaches, the athlete having a responsibility to open up, identifying a support network, and knowing that one is not alone and that it is not your fault. The women
emphasized how important it is that athletes get help, through counseling, asking others for support, talking with people, talking to the athletics department about resources, or getting involved in other things to develop a new support system.

The women suggested considering a new perspective on the entire experience by recognizing that gymnastics is not everything, finding a new focus, considering the long-term effects on personal health, realizing there are other things out there, or realizing that retirement is not the end of the world. The women urged athletes to enjoy their sport, have fun as a collegiate athlete, and appreciate the good times. They encouraged athletes to look at the bigger picture and all the positives, in order to get through the difficult times and move on in retirement.

Participation in the Study

The women found it helpful to participate in the study, in that many came to a realization or gained a better understanding of themselves through talking about and reading their own story. Almost all the women found it helpful to talk to the researcher about their experiences, as they found the interviews to be like therapy, a chance to open up, an opportunity to process the experience, or a way to find some sense of closure. Many of the women also felt hopeful after participating in the study, in terms of hearing that others had similar experiences, knowing they might be helping others, or in knowing they were given the opportunity to having have a voice.

The experiences of the women in the current study seem in accord with previous research, showing that psychological stress is among the greatest stressors
for injured athletes, particularly if they have a strong athletic identity (Ball, 2002; Russell, 2000). Ball (2002) concluded that injured athletes, with a strong athletic identity, are likely to experience shock and disorientation that lasts for a significant amount of time.

**Implications for Counseling Professionals**

The present study focused on the experiences of a small sample of female collegiate gymnasts who retired from gymnastics, due to injury. This section outlines implications for counseling professionals who may work with female collegiate gymnasts facing injury and retirement.

Most of the women in this study experienced a need for counseling during the injury process and the transition to sport retirement. However, many of these women indicated that it would have been easier for them to go to counseling if someone in their athletics department had suggested it. The majority of the women in this study were not referred to counseling by anyone in their athletics department. The experiences of the women in the present study highlight the importance of college counseling centers and athletics departments developing strong working relationships with one another. An increase in education regarding the benefits of such a relationship, amongst college counseling center and athletics department professionals, may be beneficial in encouraging this sort of progress.

Many of the women in the present study indicated that they would have preferred seeing a counselor who had previous experience working with athletes or at
least some knowledge of the role athletics can play in an athlete’s life. The experiences of the women in this study suggest that it may be helpful for counseling professionals working with female collegiate athletes to understand the significant role athletics can play in identity. The salience of an athletic identity is influenced by the intensity of the sport involvement, the number of relationships connected to the identity, and the potential impact of losing that identity (Stryker, 1987). Female elite gymnasts typically begin training at a very young age and spend long hours in the gym, often influencing their identity development. This early and intense training can often lead to role restriction and identity foreclosure (Murphy, Petitpas, Brewer, 1996; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Early and intense training may also closely link the athlete’s self-worth and self-esteem to their sport (Mills, 1993; Russell, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Wolff & Lester, 1989).

The women in the present study described their experiences in terms of a sense of discipline and sport ethic in gymnastics. These experiences highlight the ways in which traits of masculinity are emphasized and encouraged in gymnastics, as in many other sports, despite society typically viewing it as a ‘feminine’ sport. The women in the present study experienced a sense of discipline in that they felt to achieve competitive excellence they needed to dedicate almost all of their time to gymnastics and put it ahead of everything else in their lives. The women in this study regularly strained their bodies through rigorous training. Many of the women had coaches who taught them to ignore their injuries and to deal with injuries independently. These women’s coaches did not believe them when they reported
injuries. Some of the women described their coaches as those who did not stand for injuries at all. Many of the women in the present study expected themselves to just deal with the pain and continue training, fearing responses from their coaches if they were to reveal injuries. Some worried they would not be believed, wanted to appear tough, and did not want the team to see them as weak. Many of the women in the current study minimized their injuries and convinced themselves and others that they were okay. Many of the women in this study, who had recovered from injuries in the past, expected themselves to heal just as quickly as they had before. Some of the women did more damage to their bodies when utilizing this type of denial.

The women's experiences in the present study emphasize the importance of counseling professionals considering gender when working with female gymnasts. Gymnastics is a unique sport that requires a very high level of physical strength, puts a tremendous amount of wear and tear on an athlete's body, and is very mentally challenging. It is advisable for counseling professionals to consider the impact that pervasive gender stereotypes may have on collegiate female gymnasts (Archer, 1992; Coakley, 2001; Czisma, Witting, & Schurr, 1988). It may be helpful to consider how these may contribute to the unique power differential that may exist between collegiate female gymnasts and their coaches. Gymnasts typically have a young starting age in the sport and often have male coaches who are likely to become parental figures to them. This may help counseling professionals understand why the coach-athlete relationship seems so important to female collegiate gymnasts. In addition, there is research to support the great importance of relatedness to female
athletes (Balogue, 1999). Counseling professionals should also be aware of their own biases and assumptions regarding sport, athletes, and gender. It is recommended, that counseling professionals educate themselves on female identity development models (Gilligan, 1982; Lytle, Bakken, & Ronmig, 1997).

When working with collegiate athletes, it seems important to be aware of the adolescent stages of identity development models, as collegiate athletes are in late adolescence. In addition, counseling professionals should be aware that elite female collegiate athletes may experience delayed identity formation, as the experiences of the women in this study suggest and previous research indicates (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). There are intervention approaches that consider the athlete’s development, such as LDI (Life Developmental Intervention) developed by Baillie and Danish (1992) that may be important for counseling professionals to be aware of.

It is recommended, that counseling professionals utilize models of sport injury and retirement to better understand the experiences athletes may have. Three models are particularly helpful in gaining an understanding of what sport injury and retirement may be like for the athlete: Schlossberg’s (1981) Transition Model, Wolff and Lester’s (1989) Sport Retirement Model, and Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) Conceptual Model. Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) Conceptual Model is specifically based on research with elite female gymnasts. In understanding what female collegiate gymnasts may experience in injury and retirement, it is also recommended that counseling professionals who are working with athletes experiencing injury and facing retirement, be aware of salient issues of sport experience, such as sport ethic,
structure, and a sense of discipline. Sport ethic becomes particularly important to consider when an athlete becomes injured, as they may still feel as though it is unacceptable for them to be hurt (Coakley, 2001). This is illustrated, by the experiences of female participants in this study who had difficulty acknowledging the seriousness of their injuries. This seems particularly true in gymnastics, as one of the norms in the sport is experiencing pain and injury. In fact, many gymnasts in this study recalled coaches explicitly teaching them, to cope independently with injury, very early on and throughout their gymnastics career. The women in this study also described a common experience in gymnastics, in which one discusses injury as little as possible.

In previous research and in the experiences of the women in the present study, elite female gymnasts felt, a sense of loss, emptiness, generally lost, disoriented, a loss of control, a loss of physical health, alone, fear, depression or sadness, and anger or frustration upon athletic injury (Chow, 2001; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). However, it may also be important to consider that an athlete’s receptivity to help may differ depending on what point she/he is at in the injury and retirement process. Baillie and Danish (1992) strongly suggest that when providing pre-retirement intervention, the focus be on specific factors related to athletes’ functioning, as athletes may be more open to help with emotional adjustment in post-retirement intervention.

The experiences of female participants in this study, along with findings of previous research indicate that in the transition to retirement, female gymnasts may be feeling very alone, lost and without focus, unsuccessful, and may have difficulty
with body image issues (Chow, 2001; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). It may be helpful and important for counseling professionals to explore the personal meaning of the loss for the individual gymnast, both in injury and in retirement. The women in the present study experienced various types of loss in injury. The loss they experienced in injury consisted of, almost all of the women experiencing depression or sadness; most feeling angry with themselves and their team; experiencing a loss of physical health and physical abilities; some losing their team’s respect and trust; feeling a negative change in their emotions and thinking patterns; and some feeling as though they no longer had ways of contributing to their team. The women in this study highlighted needs they had during injury and the transition to retirement such as, support, encouragement, a sense of belonging, identifying or building a support system, and identifying reasons to share emotions. The gymnasts in this study emphasized that counseling was or could have been most helpful to them in terms of: having someone to listen, not feeling judged, regaining a sense of control, having an opportunity to be open with emotions, empathy from the counselor, help prioritizing and organizing, and validation.

Current and previous research suggests that female collegiate gymnasts may need help in redefining what success means to them (Coakley, 2001). It may also be helpful for counseling professionals to validate the sense of new freedom and relief that often comes with retirement from elite gymnastics training. Given that collegiate athletes are often separated from the general college community (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990), gymnasts transitioning to retirement may be unsure whom to turn to for
support. Counseling can serve as a first step in the gymnast’s process of identifying and establishing a support system that will be available and effective in retirement.

In the transition to retirement, counseling professionals can also help female collegiate gymnasts form a new definition of self, beginning by encouraging role exploration that she may never have had the opportunity to do. She may also need to learn how to find a balance between relying on external feedback, as is common due to the public image involved in sport, and learning to rely on internal feedback. In the transition to retirement, counseling professionals can normalize some of the long-term effects that injury and retirement may have on a female collegiate gymnast, both positive and negative. The gymnasts in this study indicated that they preferred to have goals and upon retirement felt lost without goals. In counseling, it may be helpful to establish clear goals in session. Helpful long-term goals may involve finding a new focus in their lives, accepting retirement, redefining their sport experience, and concentrating on personal growth.

Implications for Collegiate Athletics

Collegiate athletics departments typically consist of multidisciplinary professionals with varied roles. However, the common thread tying all of these professionals together is student development. Coakley (2001) pointed out that collegiate athletic programs began increasing efforts dramatically in the late 1980s and early 1990s to instill and expand academic support services to try and increase retention rates. It is essential that collegiate athletic programs also recognize the great
importance of overall student development needs, including mental health. In order for student-athletes to be successful in athletics and/or in academics, it is imperative that mental health be a priority. In part, this means working to establish relationships with the college counseling center, especially at times of crisis and in instances of potential career ending sport injuries. In retrospect, female participants in this study noted how counseling would have been helpful to them. However, referrals for counseling were not routinely received and did not seem to be a regular part of the athletic departments’ procedures.

The female collegiate gymnasts in this study indicated that it would have been helpful for them to receive: concern, support, advice, and camaraderie from their team during the injury and retirement process. From coaches in particular, the gymnasts in this study indicated that it would have been helpful to have more open and effective communication, compromise, empathy, guidance in finding and utilizing resources, an invitation to remain part of the team, clarity about their new team role in retirement, and feedback indicating that their contributions were valuable when retired.

Coakley (2001) made suggestions for collegiate athletic departments. Coakley (2001) suggested assessing sports programs regularly, providing coaching education, providing developmental opportunities for all athletics staff, and emphasizing student development rather than sports development. Coakley (2001) highlighted the importance of putting internal systems in place within athletics departments to address needs of athletes. One internal system that could be developed and put in
place is a protocol for addressing injury and retirement within the department. One essential aspect of a protocol like this would be to designate the responsibilities of each type of professional in the process and to consider appropriate procedures to follow in addressing the needs of student athletes with serious, career ending injuries. One aspect of addressing these student athletes’ needs may be to provide them with referrals for counseling routinely.

One of the participants in this study made a suggestion for athletics departments to have an alumni network of athletes from that institution who experienced injury and/or retirement and to make this available to current athletes. This suggestion is in line with a recommendation made in the research. Etzel, Pinkney, and Kinkel (1995) suggested that colleges and universities utilize their own retired athletes, who have completed their eligibility, to conduct a needs assessment at their institution. The authors emphasized how the retired athletes can use their personal experiences in order to assess the resources deemed essential. The authors emphasized how this method would offer specific recommendations to institutions and would allow for the development of subgroups of athlete experts to address issues of diversity.

Limitations

The qualitative nature of this study involved in-depth interviews that allowed the researcher to capture descriptions of the women’s lived experiences in their own words. However, it is important to note the potential limitations of this research so
that others can appropriately determine its applicability. This study focused on the experiences of a very specific population, female collegiate gymnasts who retired from Division I gymnastics, due to injury. The small sample size serves as a limitation, as the experiences of these women are descriptive of this sample and are not necessarily representative of the entire population. Phone interviews allowed the sample to consist of women who competed for colleges in various different geographical areas of the United States. However, the sample was obtained by contacting athletic trainers at colleges with Division I gymnastics programs. Therefore, the gymnasts who took part in this study were those for whom the athletic trainer or athletic department had contact information.

It is important to recognize that there are possible limitations with the qualitative approach used. The focus was on identifying themes and common aspects of the participants' experiences and the emphasis was not on specifics and unique aspect of the women's stories. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, another potential limitation is researcher bias. The researcher utilized an auditor in order to confirm the categorization of identified themes and to assure that the results portrayed these themes accurately. In addition, much of the data gathered in this study was retrospective, which may be a limitation. However, the information was obtained through two in-depth interviews with each participant. The researcher also wrote individual narrative summaries for each participant following the first interview. The researcher sent this summary to the participants to ensure accuracy and elicit feedback. The researcher elicited feedback from each participant in a review of the
overall summary of themes across participants. Follow-up interviews gave participants an opportunity to reflect upon and discuss their experiences and to make any additions or changes.

It is possible that the participants in this study felt some hesitancy about making their personal experiences public, particularly due to the closed system nature of Division I collegiate athletics. However, the researcher attempted to ease any concerns by thoroughly explaining confidentiality and the steps that would be taken to protect it. It is important to recognize that the athletic culture, which encourages individuals to be tough and to focus on strengths rather than weakness, may influence some of the participants responses in discussing the difficulty experienced in injury and sport retirement.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research are discussed in this section. The current study and previous research provide direction for future research with female collegiate gymnasts who retire from gymnastics due to injury. The women’s experiences and perspectives in this study help us to understand the importance of continued research in the study of collegiate athletes who retire during their college careers. This study also highlights the importance of continued research in the study of female athletes in general. Future research would benefit from samples of athletes with a different reason for retirement, as existing literature emphasizes that athletes who retire due to injury may have different needs than those who retire for other
reasons. Future research would also benefit from athletes in other NCAA Division programs. The level of the program may not be as important in the injury and retirement process as the level of athletic identity. Therefore, if athletes from less competitive NCAA divisions are included in a sample, they could be prescreened in order to select those with high athletic identities. It may be beneficial for future research to study athletes who are currently in the process of injury and/or retirement. Future research of this nature could be further enhanced by including the perspectives of the athletes’ teammates, coaches, athletic trainers, and other athletics department professionals who were involved. It may also be helpful to look at similarities and differences between male and female athletes’ injury and retirement experiences.
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Appendix A

Letter to Athletic Coaching and Sports Medicine Staff

Name
Address

Dear ,

My name is Coleen Harrington Barry and I am a doctoral student in counseling psychology, with a professional interest in sport retirement. My dissertation research is designed to explore the experiences of female athletes who retired from their primary competitive sport part-way through their college careers, due to injury. As you may know, 14-32% of athletes retire due to injury and 50% of NCAA Division I athletes sustain injuries during their college career. There is a notable lack of research on female athletes’ experiences with sport retirement when it occurs part-way through college, due to injury. My dissertation research focuses on the athlete’s sport retirement experience and how she copes with it. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Patrick H. Munley in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University.

I would appreciate your support in this project by helping me identify potential participants. I am looking for potential female participants who meet the following criteria:

• her primary sport was gymnastics
• has been retired from her primary sport for at least 1 year, but no longer than 15 years
• retired from her primary sport part-way through her college career, due to injury
• retired when she was a member of an NCAA Division I collegiate sport team
• is willing to articulate her thoughts, feelings, and emotional reactions about her sport retirement experience
• has been retired long enough to have at least one competitive season (or the majority of one season) go by, during which she was retired from her sport
• found the transition to sport retirement to be a significant and challenging life experience

If you know of any female former athletes that you think may meet the study criteria, I respectfully ask you to pass along the attached invitation (Appendix B) so that they can contact me. If you know anyone else who may have contact with female former athletes who might fit the participant requirements, please pass along this e-mail to them as well. All identifying information about female competitive athletes who elect to participate in the study will be kept confidential. The Human Subjects Institutional Review Board of Western Michigan University has approved this protocol for the research study. We are planning to invite 8 to 10 female former female athletes to be
interviewed about their experiences with retirement from their primary sport, due to injury. Dr. Patrick H. Munley is the principal investigator and is supervising this project. If you have questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me via e-mail at coleen.h.barry@wmich.edu or via phone at (978) 632-5487. You may also contact Dr. Patrick H. Munley at (269) 387-5120 or the vice president for research at (269) 387-8298.

Respectfully,

Coleen Harrington Barry, M.A.
Western Michigan University
Appendix B

E-mail Message: Invitation for Participation

Hello. My name is Coleen Harrington Barry and I am a doctoral student in counseling psychology at Western Michigan University. This is an invitation for you to participate in a research study designed to explore the experiences of female athletes who retired from their primary competitive sport part-way through their college careers, due to injury. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Patrick H. Munley in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University. This study may be an opportunity for you to help add to our knowledge and understanding about female collegiate athletes’ experiences of sport retirement and provide information that may be helpful to other female athletes.

I invite you to add your voice to this study, if you are a female athlete who:

• considered her primary sport to be gymnastics
• has been retired from your primary sport for at least 1 year, but no longer than 15 years
• retired from your primary sport part-way through your college career, due to injury
• retired when a member of an NCAA Division I collegiate sport team
• is willing to articulate your thoughts, feelings, and emotional reactions about your sport retirement experience
• has been retired long enough to have at least one competitive season (or the majority of one season) go by, during which you were retired from your sport
• found the transition to sport retirement to be a significant and challenging life experience

Below is a brief description of the research study for your review and consideration. If you are interested in learning more about participating, please contact me, Coleen Harrington Barry, by e-mail at coleen.h.barry@wmich.edu or telephone me collect at 978-632-5487 to receive additional information.

Initially, I will contact individuals who express an interest in possibly participating in this study by phone, and review the details of the study, as well as the criteria for participating in this study. During this initial phone conversation you will not be asked for any specific information and no information will be recorded. Individuals, who after learning about the study express continued interest in participating in the research, will be mailed a packet, which will include the informed consent form describing the study in detail, and a demographic questionnaire.

If you are selected from among those who agree to participate, you will be invited to take part in two phone interviews. Individuals who are not selected will be
notified by phone. The phone interviews will be scheduled individually at a time convenient for you. All interviews will be tape-recorded. The first interview will last approximately 1 to 1½ hours and the second interview is expected to last approximately 45 minutes. Phone interviews will be scheduled about 3 months apart. Towards the conclusion of the study I will make a brief phone call to give you an opportunity for feedback on the overall summary of the research findings.

All information collected is confidential. Demographic information you provide will be used for selection purposes, and to describe the interview participants comprehensively. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and I will ensure that any information that could identify you will be excluded.

Again, if you are interested in learning more about participating, please contact me by e-mail (coleen.h.barry@wmich.edu) or telephone me collect at 978-632-5487 to receive additional information.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Warm Regards,

Coleen Harrington Barry, M.A.
Western Michigan University
(978) 632-5487
Appendix C

Follow-Up Letter to Coaching and Sports Medicine Staff

Hello. My name is Coleen Harrington Barry. I recently e-mailed you a description of my dissertation research focusing female athletes experiences of sport retirement due to injury, part-way through college. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Patrick H. Munley in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University.

I was wondering if you have identified any female former athletes that you think may meet the study criteria. If you are aware of any former or current students that may meet these criteria and have passed along the attached invitation (Appendix B), I want to thank you for your generous efforts. If you are still looking to identify former or current students who may meet the criteria, I am looking for potential female participants who:

- their primary sport was gymnastics
- have been retired from their primary sport for at least 1 year, but no longer than 15 years
- retired from their primary sport part-way through their college career, due to injury
- retired when they were a member of an NCAA Division I collegiate sport team
- are willing to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and emotional reactions about their sport retirement experience
- have been retired long enough to have at least one competitive season (or the majority of one season) go by, during which they were retired from their sport
- found the transition to sport retirement to be a significant and challenging experience

If you are aware of any former or current students that you think may meet the study criteria, I respectfully ask you to pass along the attached invitation (Appendix B) so that they can contact me. All identifying information about a former competitive athlete, her experiences, and her responses will be kept confidential. The Human Subjects Institutional Review Board of Western Michigan University has approved protocol for this research study. Dr. Patrick H. Munley is the principal investigator and is supervising this project. If you have questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me via e-mail at coleen.h.barry@wmich.edu or via phone at (978) 632-5487. You may also contact Dr. Patrick H. Munley at (269) 387-5120 or the vice president for research at (269) 387-8298.

Respectfully,

Coleen Harrington Barry, M.A
Western Michigan University
Appendix D

*Script for Word of Mouth Referrals*

“I am looking for female athletes who retired during college, due to injury, that may be interested in participating in my dissertation project. I was wondering if you could forward some information, that I can e-mail or give you hard copies of, to friends and family you think may be interested in learning more about the study?”
Appendix E

Preliminary Telephone Contact to Provide Information about the Study

“Hello. My name is Coleen Harrington Barry and I am from Western Michigan University. May I speak with (participant’s name)?”

“Hello (participant’s name). I am returning the message you left me regarding the study on female athletes who retired from sport part-way through college, due to injury. Or, I am contacting you with regard to your e-mail expressing interest in the study on female athletes who retired from sport part-way through college, due to injury. Are you interested in hearing more about the study? Is this a good time to talk?

First, I would like to give you a general idea about the nature of the study. Then I will go over the experiences and characteristics we are looking for among volunteers for the study. This will help you decide if it would be appropriate for me to send you additional information about possibly participating in this study.

The purpose of this study is to describe and understand the experiences that female athletes have when they retire from sport part-way through their college career, due to injury. The results from this study are intended to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the experience of injured female collegiate athletes who are forced to retire. It is hoped that this better understanding will be useful and of value to counselors, health professionals, and collegiate athletic programs in providing care and supports to injured female collegiate athletes facing sport retirement part-way through college. This study involves completing a demographic questionnaire and participating in two telephone interviews and a final brief phone call to give you an opportunity for feedback of the overall research findings. Both interviews will be tape-recorded. Your total time commitment will be between 2 and 2½ hours.

You will be asked to respond to open-ended questions during the interview and you will be sent a pre-interview guide to help prepare for the interviews. This study will provide you with an opportunity to reflect on your own thoughts, feelings, and experience as a female athlete who retired from sport part-way through college, due to injury. The difficult part for you may be possibly discussing some private, sensitive, or painful experiences you may have had. All data collected through demographic questionnaires and interviews will be kept confidential.

In terms of volunteers for this study, I am looking for women who:

- participated on an NCAA, Division I athletic team at a 4-year college or university
• have been retired from their primary sport for at least 1 year, but no longer than 15 years
• considered gymnastics to be their primary sport
• retired from their primary sport part-way through their college career
• retired when a member of an NCAA Division I collegiate sport team, due to injury
• are willing to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and emotional reactions about their sport retirement experience
• have been retired long enough to have at least one competitive season (or the majority of one season) go by, during which they were retired from their sport
• found the transition to sport retirement to be a significant and challenging life experience

If you believe you meet these criteria for participating in the study, and if you are interested in participating, would you like me to send you additional information concerning the study and to consider you as a possible participant?

If no, “I very much appreciate your time.”

If yes, “thank you for considering participating in this study. I would now like to send you additional information on the study. The additional information will include an informed consent form for this research study and a demographic questionnaire. Once you review the informed consent form, you will be asked to sign the consent form, complete the demographic questionnaire, and return both forms to me in the stamped envelope I will send you. Once you return the materials I will then be able to let you know if you are accepted into the study as a participant.”

Obtain preferred mailing information and send packet with informed consent form and demographic questionnaire. Potential participants will also be provided the investigator’s contact information in case any questions arise.
Appendix F

Informed Consent Form

Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology
Principal Investigator: Patrick H. Munley, Ph.D.
Student Investigator: Coleen Harrington Barry, M.A.

Title of Study:
Injured Collegiate Female Athletes and Sport Retirement:
Impact on identity development and college experience

I am contacting you because you expressed interest in participating in a research study about the experiences of injured female athletes who retire from sport part-way through college, due to injury.

There is a need to better understand athlete’s sport retirement experiences, particularly those of female athletes and athletes who retire part-way through college. The majority of sport retirement research focuses on male athletes who retire upon college graduation, from professional sport, or after Olympic sport involvement. We know that sport retirement can be a difficult experience for some athletes, particularly when it occurs as a result of injury. I am interested in hearing your stories and exploring your experiences involved in the process of your injury and sport retirement and also hearing about the experiences and implications that sport retirement may have had on your life. There is relatively little known about the experiences of female athletes or about athletes who retire from sport part-way through their college careers, and this study is an opportunity for you to add to our knowledge and understanding of collegiate female athletes. Your participation in this study may be beneficial to other collegiate and female athletes going through similar experiences, and I invite you to add your voice to this study.

The first phase of this project involves your participation in the completion of the enclosed demographic questionnaire and the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). The questionnaire and AIMS will take you a total of approximately 15 minutes to complete. Following receipt of the completed returned questionnaires and AIMS, the researcher will select which potential participants are most appropriate. If selected for the second phase, it will require your involvement in two phone interviews that are expected to last 1 to 1½ hours and 45 minutes, respectively. The interviews will be scheduled individually, at a time convenient for you, and about 3 months apart. Towards the conclusion of the study I will make a brief phone call to give you an opportunity for feedback on the overall summary of the research findings.

Your total time commitment will be between 2 and 2½ hours. All of the information collected from you will be confidential. No information specific to you will be reported.
Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and I will insure that any information that could identify you will be excluded.

The research materials will all be coded, and Coleen Harrington Barry will keep a separate master list with the names of participants and the corresponding pseudonym. Demographic information you provide will be used for selection purposes, and to describe the interview participants as a group. Once the data is collected and analyzed, the master list will be destroyed. A tape recorder will be used during our interviews. The use of a tape recorder is to ensure the correct transcription and analysis of the interview data, and in no way will your confidentiality be jeopardized. After the interviews are transcribed the tapes will then be destroyed. All of the information on tapes, notes, and forms will be placed in a locked and secure location at all times. Upon completion of this project, the principal investigator, Dr. Patrick Munley, will store a hard copy of the confidential transcripts, the informed consents, the researcher’s journal, the audit trail, and the computer copy of analysis in a locked filing cabinet in his office for 7 years. Or these materials will be archived appropriately at Western Michigan University.

The purpose of this research is to collect data, and results obtained from the analysis will be presented in a doctoral dissertation in Counseling Psychology at Western Michigan University. The dissertation will be published as such and, in addition, may be published in academic journals or popular press. Select direct quotes from multiple participants will be used in presenting the findings of this study. All quoted material will be completely anonymous and no personal identifying information will be linked to any data presented in the results. You will be given an opportunity to review the summary of your personal narrative and provide feedback in the interest of capturing an accurate portrayal of your experience.

I anticipate minimal risk to you while participating in this research. Expected risks include feelings of sadness, anger, stress, or discomfort in recalling or revealing information during our interviews. You have the option to end the interview process at any time if you are uncomfortable and choose not to continue. In the event that you experience strong emotional responses during the interview, I will make a referral to appropriate professionals in your area, at your request. You will be responsible for the cost of counseling if you choose to seek it.

One of the ways that you may benefit from the study is by having the opportunity to reflect on and share your personal experiences of retiring from collegiate sport due to injury. The information provided by you will be used to contribute to the research literature on female athletes who retire part-way through college due to injury, as well as increase the understanding of helping professionals concerning the experiences of injured athletes who retire part-way through college. Your participation will also hopefully benefit other female and collegiate athletes in similar situations.
You may refuse to participate or stop participating at any time during the study without any consequences. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact the student researcher, Coleen Harrington Barry at (978) 632-5487 or coleen.h.barry@wmich.edu, the principal investigator, Dr. Patrick H. Munley, at (269) 387-5120, or the vice president for research at (269) 387-8298.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

By providing your signature below, you are indicating that you agree to respond to the demographic questionnaire and participate in two phone interviews, and a final brief phone call. Please return this signed form to the researcher in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped, envelope. Please retain one copy of this consent document for your records.

__________________________________________
Name (Please Print)

__________________________________________  ___________
Signature                                      Date
Appendix G

Demographic Questionnaire

If you would like to be considered for participation in this research project including two phone interviews, and a brief, final phone call, concerning your experience as a female athlete who retired from sport part-way through your college career due to injury, please complete this demographic questionnaire, the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), sign the enclosed informed consent form, and return all three documents in the self-addressed, stamped envelope. Please keep a copy of the informed consent for your records. Review the informed consent form for additional steps that will be taken to ensure your confidentiality. Thank you again for your consideration.

PLEASE PRINT

Name: ________________________________

Mailing Address: ________________________________

Phone:

*Please list the best phone number(s) to reach you at:

(____) _______ - _________ Home Phone

(____) _______ - _________ Cell Phone

e-mail: ____________________________ @_________ (optional)

Demographic Information

Current Age: ______ years old

Birth date: ___ / ___ / ___ ___ (month/day/year)

Primary Sport: ________________________________

Age & year you began competing in primary sport: _____ (age) _____ (year)

Number of years you competed in primary sport: _______ years
Approximate Date of Sport Retirement: ___ / ___ ___ (month / year)
Type of injury that forced retirement: ________________________________
______________________________________________________________

Approximate # of undergraduate students at the University/College you played sport for: ________________
Location of University: ___________________________ , _____
                             City State
Year in college that retirement occurred: (check appropriate box below)
  □ 1st year □ Sophomore □ Junior □ Senior
Athletic scholarship status prior to retirement: (check appropriate box below)
  □ Full Scholarship □ Partial Scholarship □ No scholarship
Athletic scholarship status post-retirement: (check appropriate box below)
  □ Full Scholarship □ Partial Scholarship □ No scholarship
If scholarship money was reduced or taken away, when did this occur? (fill in date)
  ___ / ___ ___ ___ (month / year)
Was your sport retirement a challenging life experience for you?: (check appropriate box)
  □ Yes □ No
Do you feel that you are able and willing to discuss your thoughts, feelings and emotional reactions about your retirement from sport and the impact of this decision with the researcher during the interviews that will be conducted during the study? (check appropriate box)
  □ Yes □ No

*After completing this demographic questionnaire, please complete the enclosed AIMS questionnaire.*
Appendix H

Telephone Script for Participants Selected for the Study

Hello [Name], this is Coleen Harrington Barry. I am calling you with regard to the study on female athlete who retired from sport part-way through college, due to injury. Thank you for responding to the demographic questionnaire. Based on your responses, I would like to invite you to participate in this study. Are you still interested in participating?

If yes,
Then I would like to go ahead and set up a time that would be convenient for you for our first interview. The interview will last approximately 1 to 1½ hours. To help you prepare, I will be mailing you a list of topics that we will discuss during our interview. Do you have any questions? Thank you for participating.

If no,
Thank you for your time and participation so far.
Dear ___________________.

Thank you for your participation and response to the demographic questionnaire! I am writing you to confirm our appointment on (date) ____________________ at (time) ____________________, at (phone number) ___________. I am looking forward to talking to you so we can get started on our first interview.

I have enclosed a list of topics that we will discuss during our interview. Please take the time to read through and reflect on these topics, which will help you prepare for the interview.

If you have any questions or concerns about participating, please do not hesitate to call me at (978) 632-5484 or e-mail me at coleen.h.barry@wmich.edu.

Thank you again.

Sincerely,

Coleen Harrington Barry, M.A.
Appendix J

Pre-Interview Guide

I am interested in exploring your experiences in retiring from sport part-way through college due to injury. I would also like to know what you think about your experience and the implications it has had on your life.

Please use this guide as a way to prepare and think about the topics that we will discuss in the upcoming interview.

General Topics:

**History of Sport Involvement**
- How involvement in sport began
- Family’s & friends’ involvement in your sport experience
- Meaning of sport to you
- Athletic identity (How much or how little did being an athlete influence the way you saw/defined yourself? The way others saw/defined you?)

**Collegiate Sport & College Experience**
- Yours & others’ expectations
- Future plans prior to injury and retirement
- Team experience
- Relationship with coach(es)
- College experience prior to sport injury and retirement

**Injury Experience**
- The course of the injury
- The impact of the injury on you (emotional, physical, social, etc)
- Realizing you needed to retire from sport

**Transition to retirement**
- Transition experience from competitive athlete to non-athlete
- Your’s and others’ expectations of you during the transition
- Your support system in coping with the injury and transition to retirement
- Your needs during this time
- Impact on scholarship

**Impact of sport retirement on identity development**
- Sense of self
- The way others view you
- Goals & achievement
Retirement
What you do/don’t miss about sport
The best thing(s) about the retirement experience
The most significant and challenging thing(s) about the retirement experience
What’s important for others to understand about this type of retirement experience?
Appendix K

Telephone Script for Respondents to the Questionnaire Not Selected for Interviews

Hello (Name), this is Coleen Harrington Barry. You previously responded with interest in participating in a project about female athletes who retire from sport part-way through college, due to injury. I am calling to let you know that I appreciate your response although I will not be able to include you in the interviews. I selected a very small number of participants, and I am unfortunately unable to interview everyone who expressed interest in participation.

If a participant does not meet one of the selection criteria based on their questionnaire responses, and this is the reason they are not selected for interviews, they will be informed of the specific reason they were not selected. For example, if a potential participant indicates on their questionnaire that they have not been retired from sport for at least one year, the participant will be informed that: One of the criteria for participating in the study is that the person has been retired from sport for at least one year. You indicated that you have been retired for 10 months so I could not invite you to continue in the study. Thank you for your response and your interest in this project.
Appendix L

Phone Script and Interview Protocol

Hello, ___________, this is Coleen Harrington Barry. As arranged, I am calling to speak with you about your experience as a female athlete who retired from sport partway through college due to injury. The purpose of this study is to help describe and understand the experiences of female collegiate athletes who retire from sport during college due to injury.

Let me begin by telling you a little about myself. I was a gymnast for 13 years and retired from the sport in 1993, after my senior year of high school. During high school I had to take over a month off from my sport, due to health considerations. These health issues continued to impact me throughout the rest of high school and I subsequently retired from my sport. This experience affected several aspects of my life.

So, this is personally an important and meaningful project and I value your contribution to this study. By choosing to participate, you are providing a means for others to appreciate your and other female, collegiate, and injured athletes’ experiences in sport retirement. During this interview I will be asking a series of open-ended questions about your experiences in sport retirement and how the experience has impacted your life.

Before we begin do you have any questions that need to be clarified? [If yes, then clarify questions, if no, “Then shall we begin?”]

1. Could you please tell me what role gymnastics played in your life prior to your injury and retirement? How did your athlete role shape your college experience?

   Possible Probes:
   • Tell me about the most important aspects of your sport experience.
   • Describe how you felt when you were a gymnast. Can you share some examples and/or memories of when you remember feeling that way?
   • What did being a collegiate athlete mean for you?
2. Please describe your injury experience.
   - How did your injury impact you?
   - In what ways was your injury a difficult experience?
   - Describe the process in which you came to realize you would need to retire from gymnastics.

3. Tell me about your transition to retirement.
   Possible Probes:
   - Please describe your experience in making the transition to retirement.
   - Please share the ways in which the transition to retirement was significant and challenging for you.
   - What did sport retirement mean for you?

4. In what ways did the transition to sport retirement impact your college experience?
   Possible Probes:
   - How was your college life different as a student athlete and as a retired student athlete?
   - What was difficult about transitioning from being a student-athlete to being a retired student-athlete?

5. Please describe how your transition to sport retirement has affected the way you see yourself and the way others see you?
   Possible Probes:
   - How has this experience impacted your priorities and goals in life?
   - How would you characterize who you were and are before and after sport retirement?
   - Please share how this experience impacted your relationships with others.
• How did this impact your identity and your sense of who you were as a person?

6. How did you cope with the transition to sport retirement?
   Possible Probes:
   • What helped you to deal with the difficult times during the transition?
   • What healthy/unhealthy coping mechanisms did you utilize during that time?

7. What did you experience as helpful and supportive from others while transitioning to sport retirement? What did you experience as unhelpful or detrimental from others during this time?
   Possible Probes:
   • How did people try to help?
   • What did you need during that time?
   • In hindsight, what kinds of things may have helped you cope better with this experience?

8. What would you like to share with other female athletes who are going through the process of sport injury and the transition to retirement part-way through college?
   Possible Probes:
   • What did you wish you knew then that you know now?
   • How can other female athletes benefit from your story?

9. Is there anything else of importance that you would like to share that we have not touched upon during this discussion? To really understand your experience, what is the most important thing that you feel I should focus on?
   Possible Probes:
   • What else shaped your sport retirement experience?
General Probes:

At various times during the interviews, the following probes will be used when deemed appropriate and necessary to elicit a more detailed and rich description of the women’s experiences:

Tell me more about that experience.

Describe how that made you feel about yourself?

What was it like for you to experience that?

How did your thoughts and feelings about that change over time?

Explain how that impacted you.

What happened exactly?

Can you give me an example of that?

What were the reactions of others?

Can you say more about that?
Appendix M

Cover Letter to Participants Prior to Follow-Up Interviews

Dear ________,

Attached is a summary of your personal narrative based on the information you shared with me during our first phone interview. It is important to me to make sure that I clearly understand what you told me during the first interview. Please take the time to review this summary. During our second interview, I would like to ask you some questions about how well this written information captures your experience and see if there are any aspects of your experience that are missing. When we talk, I will also share with you some of the collective themes across multiple participants and discuss with you how well the collective themes fit your experience.

I will be e-mailing or calling you within the next couple of weeks to schedule a time that is convenient for you. I look forward to speaking with you again soon.

Sincerely,

Coleen Harrington Barry
Appendix N

Script for Second Interview

“Hello, ____________, this is Coleen Harrington Barry calling to ask you some follow-up questions regarding your experiences as a female athlete who retired from sport part-way through college, due to injury. By now you should have received the personal narrative that I sent to you? I hope you have had a chance to review it? [If “yes”, continue; if “no”, ask participant to read the narrative first before proceeding with interview] “First I would like to ask you about the summary of the narrative that you reviewed, later I would like to share with you some themes that came up for other participants and see if those themes fit with your experience.”

How well does the summary of your personal narrative that you reviewed capture your experiences as a female athlete who retired from sport part-way through college, due to injury? Are there any important aspects of your experience in making your decision that are left out? If so, please tell me about these experiences. Follow up with interview probes as appropriate.

Now I would like to share with you some things that other participants shared. One theme was [state theme]. Do you relate to this theme? [repeat for all themes].
Appendix O

Cover Letter to Participants Prior to Final Phone Call

Date

Dear (Name),

Hello! Thank you for participating in two phone interviews about your experience as a female athlete who retired from sport part-way through college, due to injury. I am in the last stage of this study. Attached is a draft of an overall summary of the research findings. I am writing you to allow you an opportunity to review the material and give your feedback on the overall summary of the research findings. I will make a brief final phone call that will last approximately 10-15 minutes.

I will be e-mailing or calling you within the next couple of weeks to schedule a time that is convenient for you. Again, please know that your contribution to this study has been valuable thus far. Thank you for your time. Please e-mail me at colleen.h.barry@wmich.edu, or call me at (978) 632-5487 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Coleen Harrington Barry
Appendix P

Script for Final Phone Call

Hello ____________, this is Coleen Harrington Barry. Thank you again for participating in the two phone interviews. I am making a final call to you to receive your feedback on the draft of the research findings. Have you had a chance to review the final summary? Are there any final comments or suggestions you would like to make?

[If yes, then follow-up on feedback]

[If no, then thank them for their participation]

I would like to express my appreciation again for your willing participation in this study.
Appendix Q

HSIRB (Human Subjects Review Board) Approval

Date: April 9, 2007

To: Patrick Munley, Principal Investigator
   Coleen Harrington Barry, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 07-04-03

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “Injured Collegiate Female Athletes and Sport Retirement” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: April 9, 2008