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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore elite Korean tennis players' career transition experiences, focusing on psychological components (i.e., self-identity, life skills development, and coping strategies) and socio-cultural influences through the process. A longitudinal qualitative method was employed, and Korean tennis players ($N = 5$; two males and three females; mean age 29.8 ± 5.54 years) who were considering retirement participated in the current study. Data were analyzed by interpretative phenomenological analysis and resulted in three super-ordinate themes: (a) sense of self and process of identity shift, (b) available resources during the career transition process, and (c) decision-making processes and consequences of decisions. These results provided practical implications for supporting athletes' career transitions (e.g., developing a balanced self-identity and life skill during their athletic careers, providing proactive intervention) and future research directions (e.g., examining athletes' retirement decision-making process, the need of cross-cultural research).

A Longitudinal Qualitative Exploration of Elite Korean Tennis Players'

Career Transition Experiences

Studies in athletes' career transitions have increased gradually in the past three decades (e.g., Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). Findings from previous studies have indicated that athletic identity (e.g., Lally, 2007), life skills development (e.g., Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000), and coping strategies (e. g. Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004) are closely related to the quality of athletes' career transitions. Researchers (e.g., Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007) have revealed that athletes with strong athletic identities experienced a higher degree of career transition difficulties and identity crisis during the career transition process, in terms of their narrowly focused lifestyles and identity development. For example, previous literature (e.g., Lally, 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008) has indicated that athletes with a higher degree of athletic identity experienced more negative emotions, including feelings of loss, isolation and fear of an uncertain future, and also took longer to adjust to post-sport life than those who had a more balanced identity. Investigators (e.g., Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007) have also discovered that the balance in athletes' lifestyles, such as the balance between inside sport and outside sport activities, tends to be associated with individual development, including identity and life skills development and influences the quality of adjustment to post-sport life, in terms of developing a balanced self and social identity and acquiring higher educational achievement. Regarding coping strategies, researchers (e.g., Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignières, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) revealed that athletes' social support networks and coping resources influence the quality of career transitions.

Through the development of the research area, the concept of transitions in sport has changed from a singular event to a process which occurs to athletes over time, and researchers

have tried to focus on athletes' life span development (e.g., Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Wylleman et al., 2004). Since athletes' career transition has been considered as a process, researchers (e.g., Lavallee & Robinson, 2007) have suggested the need to examine the process through longitudinal assessments, in terms of examining athletes' changes in psychological and emotional responses (i.e., identity re-formation, coping strategy used). However, in the study area, only a few studies (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2009; Stephan et al., 2003) have been conducted with longitudinal designs because it is not easy to predict the actual timing of athletes' retirement, and even for the longitudinal studies, most of the data were collected after the actual retirement of athletes (e.g., Stephan et al., 2003). In addition, although researchers (e.g., Cecić Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004) have discussed the importance of athletes' retirement decision-making process in the final stages of their sport careers, the overall process of athletes' career transitions, including both the final stages of athletic careers and post-sport adjustment, have not been examined much in the study area.

Another issue often discussed in the career transition research field recently is the influence of socio-cultural issues and environmental sport contexts in athletes' career transitions, and researchers (e.g., Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côte 2009) have emphasized the need to examine socio-cultural and environmental-based variables (e.g., sport systems). Stambulova and Alfermann (2009) stated that the majority of career transition studies have been conducted in the Western nations (i.e., North America, Europe, and Australia), and studies on athletes' career transition are rare in Asian countries. In the cross-cultural psychology literature, Si and Lee (2007) highlighted that examining cultural similarity and differences could help test the generality and validity of existing knowledge and theories in other cultural contexts and practical implications, such as providing suitable and appropriate support in applied work. In addition, although aforementioned psychological influences (i.e., athletic

identity, athletes' life skills development, and coping strategies) have been considered as factors related to the quality of athletes' career transitions, not much evidence has been provided from Korean athletes. Therefore, examining Korean athletes' career transition experiences might be helpful in expanding knowledge of different cultural backgrounds and testing the generality and validity of existing knowledge and theories in other cultural contexts.

To understand Korean tennis players' career transition experiences, it might be helpful to explain Korean sport contexts, in terms of unique Korean semi-professional sport systems. In Korea, there are two different types of elite level tennis players, professional and semi-professional. The professional athletes play international tennis tournaments, such as those on the ATP (Association Tennis Professionals) or WTA (Women's Tennis Association) tours. Two major companies support these players, and only a few Korean athletes (usually fewer than 10 players at the same time) have a chance to become a professional tennis player. Semi-professionals mainly play the domestic league and compete in just a few international tournaments each year. They belong to certain teams (companies) and play for their teams. Some of the semi-professional teams hire athletes as regular employees. In that case, athletes can work at the company after they terminate their sport career, which means they have secure jobs after their retirement from sport. The semi-professional system in the Korean tennis context is more similar to the professional contexts of most other countries than their semi-professional systems, because during their sporting lifetime semi-professional athletes in Korea only play sport for their team but are not involved in office work. Other semi-professional teams have a short-term contract with players, and athletes are not considered employees of the company. Players who have a short-term contract with semi-professional tennis teams and professional players need to find a post-sport career when they retire from their sport. Since researchers (e.g., Lotysz & Short, 2004) revealed that finding a post-sport career is one of the main sources of athletes' career transition

difficulties, unique Korean sport contexts might influence athletes' career transition experiences.

The purpose of the current study was to explore elite Korean tennis players' career transition experiences by focusing on psychological factors (e.g., self-identity, psychological status) and socio-cultural influences, including the pre-retirement period and post-sport life adjustment over a period of time (i.e., 2 to 3 months before retirement and within 1 month, 6 months, and 12 months after retirement).

Method

A qualitative longitudinal research design was employed to explore participants' career transition processes in depth. According to Patton (2002), qualitative inquiry generally helps researchers produce rich and detailed information from a small number of participants and collect information about certain cases or situations rather than generalized findings. The participants in the present study were selected purposively based on Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) sampling strategies. Smith et al. (2009) suggested that researchers need to select participants with represent perspective on particular phenomena who are fairly homogeneous. In order to select information-rich cases who can offer an insight into a particular experience, the participants for the current study were selected on the basis of two criteria. First, participants had to be either professional or semi-professional tennis players in Korea, and second, they should be considering retiring from their sport.

Participants

The participants in the present study were full-time Korean elite-level athletes, including one female professional tennis player and two male and two female semi-professional tennis players. The players were aged between 24 and 36 ($Mage = 29.8$, $SD = 5.54$), had been playing tennis for an average of 20 years ($SD = 5$), and had spent an average of 10.6 years ($SD = 3.78$) as professional or semi-professional athletes. Participants' profiles are presented in the Table 1, and

pseudonyms have been used to protect confidentiality (see Table 1). The participants postponed their retirement for 1 to 3 years, since they had first considered their retirement. Two of them retired from their sport 3 months after their first interviews, and the other three participants postponed their retirement for a year and retired 3 months after their third interviews.

Interview Guide

The interview guides were developed based on previous literature on athletes' retirement from sport (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) and Patton's (2002) guidelines of question options. The interview guide for the first interview contained several main discussion topics, including demographic questions, individuals' sport careers, athletic identity, reasons for retirement, psychological and emotional experiences, and coping strategies. Later interview guides were based on participants' responses to help researchers to follow the athletes' stories, but major topics (e.g., identity, psychological experiences, and coping strategies) were common to all interviews.

Procedure

To identify potential participants, in the current study, we utilized purposive sampling. The sampling begins by speaking to a person who knows key informants well and connecting potential participants through referral from various informants (e.g., Clare, 2002; Smith et al., 2009). To select information-rich participants for the current study, we contacted two Korean national tennis team coaches and obtained contact details of athletes who intended to terminate their sport careers. The first author contacted the six potential participants via phone, and five of them agreed to participate in the current study but the sixth decided not to participate because she was not sure whether she was going to retire or not.

All participants were informed about the study, including the purpose, ethical considerations, and the benefits and risks of taking part. Individuals signed consent agreement

forms before their first interview. Before the first interview with each participant, we scheduled four interviews with them, including between 2 and 3 months before their retirement, within 1 month, between 5 and 6, and between 11 and 12 months after retirement. However, some changes had to be made with regard to the timing of several participants' retirement (see Table 2). Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or over the telephone owing to geographical limitations. Each participant had at least one face-to-face interview (see Table 2). Although face-to-face interviews were preferred, some previous findings (e.g., Bermack, 1989; Herzog & Rodgers, 1988) indicated no difference in self-disclosure between face-to-face and telephone interviews. The location, date, and time of the interviews were scheduled according to participants' preference.

A total of 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five participants over a period of 20 months. Christina and Meredith, who retired as they had initially planned, participated in four interviews, which were conducted between 2 and 3 months before their retirement, within 1 month, between 5 and 6 months, and between 11 and 12 months after their retirement. The other three participants (i.e., Alex, George, and Isobel) also had their first interviews between 2 and 3 months before their intended retirement, but a few weeks after the interviews, they decided to postpone their retirement from tennis for a year. The second set of interviews with these three athletes was conducted as scheduled, which was 3 months after the first interview, and the interviews were focused on their decisions to postpone their retirement. The third interviews with the continuing participants took place a year after the first interview, which was again between 2 and 3 months before their retirement. All three athletes who postponed their retirement terminated their sport careers 3 months after the third interviews. All three of them had their fourth interviews within 1 month after retirement, and the final interviews were conducted between 5 and 6 months after their sport career ended.

The time for the first interview with the respondents, which was between 2 and 3 months before their intended retirement from sport, was chosen for the purpose of examining athletes' reactions to their retirement decisions and their attitudes toward retirement in the final stages of their sport careers. More specifically, the purpose of the first interview was identifying participants' reasons for retirement and their psychological experiences of the pre-retirement process, including any change in terms of identity, psychological status and emotional response, and the coping strategies used.

The second round of data collection was conducted within a month of the participants' retirement. Through the second interview, we intended to reveal how athletes perceived or dealt with their sport careers termination soon after they retired, including any identity shift, emotional and psychological experiences, and their use of coping skills.

The third interview was scheduled to take place between 5 and 6 months after participants' sport career ended. In the third interview, we aimed to look at the athletes' life changes and their adjustment to post-sport life, focusing on psychological factors, such as identity shift, emotional and psychological responses, changes in social networks, and coping strategies. The period of time between 5 and 6 months after their actual retirement was chosen on the basis of previous research findings indicating that athletes took 6 months or longer to adjust to their post-sport lives (e.g., Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stephan et al., 2003). Additionally, the transtheoretical model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984) indicates that when individuals experience life changes, it takes a minimum of 6 months to reach the maintenance stage, which refers to the adaption of new life routines or changes as results of life changes or events. In addition, three participants who postponed their retirement had five interviews each, but they had three interviews before their actual retirement, and their last interview was between 5 and 6 months after retirement.

The last interview with two respondents who retired after their first interviews (i.e.,

Christina and Meredith) was held a year after their retirement. In the final interview, we tried to expand the views expressed in their third interviews, including degree of adjustment and perception of new life experiences.

Analysis

The total time for the interviews was 1,653 minutes, and they ranged between 35 and 98 minutes, with an average of 72 minutes. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The total time taken to transcribe the interviews was 80 hours and 28 minutes, and the words totaled 136,333 (in the English version). The original transcribed versions (Korean) were translated into English, and the copies of the original (Korean) and English manuscripts were sent to another expert to check the credibility of the translation work.

To gain an understanding of athletes' career transition experiences, data were analyzed by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Smith, Jarman, and Osborn (1999) outlined IPA, which is based on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. IPA researchers focus on the detailed examination of individuals' experiences at a particular moment or during a significant event (Smith et al., 2009).

The process of the analysis for the current study included five different steps based on Smith et al.'s (2009) suggestions. In line with the principles of IPA, each individual's response was analyzed as a single case, and they were put together in the final stage of the analysis after comparison across cases. To conduct IPA, researchers are required to immerse themselves in the original data, so the first step of the analysis was reading and re-reading the data while listening to the audio-recording to gain an in-depth understanding of the original data. In the second step, we aimed to explore participants' semantic content and language use in the transcripts. In the second stage, we tried to understand participants' emotional responses, use of language through descriptive notes (describing the context of what participants said), linguistic exploratory notes

(specific use of language), and interpreting original data with conceptual coding (explaining interrogative data to conceptual level; Smith et al., 2009). The interpretation (e.g., making sense of findings and offering explanations) in the present data analysis was based on the literature (e.g., Erikson, 1950; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). In the third step, we developed emergent themes by reducing the details of the data, including finding interrelationships, connections and patterns between the initial notes, which were from previous stages. In the fourth step, which was the last step for the single case analysis, we aimed to produce super-ordinate themes, which refer to the most representative aspects of the participants' accounts based on the research questions via charting and mapping of the emergent themes. The final step of the analysis was searching for patterns across cases, including finding the most potent themes and connections or differences across the cases.

Research Credibility

To establish research credibility, we used three kinds of triangulation, *member checking*, *theory triangulation*, and *analyst triangulation* (Patten, 2002). Every time participants had an interview, they had an opportunity to review their own responses as they received a copy of their transcripts and results. All five participants confirmed that they checked the documents each time. For the interpretation, which is an essential part of IPA, we used theory triangulation, which means using various theoretical frameworks (e.g., Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1995; Erikson, 1950; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) to analyze the same data. Finally, during the data analysis, three authors had regular meetings to involve ensuring findings were based on the original data. In addition, one of the researchers audited the data trial after the analysis, in order to ensure that the analysis process had been undertaken properly and the interpretation, and results were credible and based on the original data.

Results

Data analysis resulted in the following three super-ordinate themes: (a) sense of self, others, and the process of identity shift; (b) available resources during the career transition process; and (c) decision-making during the process and consequences of decisions (see Table 3). Each of the super-ordinate themes is presented with sub-themes, which refer to participants' career transition experiences within the contexts.

Sense of Self, Others, and the Process of Identity Shift

Across the interviews the participants discussed their sense of self, and how their sense of self as an athlete influenced and was influenced by the career transition process. During the career transition process, participants showed identity confusion and identity reformation. These changes in participants' sense of self tended to be influenced by changes in their goals, lifestyles, and social networks during the career transition process.

The sub-themes for the athletes' identity issues were: (a) reciprocal interaction between athletic identity and career transitions, (b) identity confusion and reformation, and (c) interdependent interactions between athletes' sense of self and other people's attitudes.

Reciprocal interaction between athletic identity and career transitions. Athletes' sporting experiences influenced on development of their athletic identity, and athletes' sense of self influenced on their decisions in the career transition process. The respondents talked about their lifestyles as athletes, which they perceived as different from non-athletic lifestyles, such as living in a team dormitory and frequent travelling for competitions. Meredith said, "I just played tennis hard…all of my off-court life also focused on tennis. Tennis was in the center of my whole life…I had to travelling to abroad 7 to 8 months in a year, and [I was] always alone". Participants showed a strong athletic identity before their actual retirement, which was a result of their athletic experiences. Some of them tended to have identity foreclosure, which refers state of identity that

individuals make commitments to roles without engaging in exploratory behavior (Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Oflofsky, 1993), during their athletic career. Isobel said below during her retirement decision-making process, "I'm thinking I'm a 100% pure athlete…tennis is important…if I can't play tennis well, whole my life became negative. I know it's not good, but I can't control it".

Respondents also described about how athletic experiences and coaches influenced their social network. Most of the participants had small social networks, within their tennis circle, and they were aware of their lack of social experiences. Christina said, "[My] friends [are] almost all athletes". Meredith also talked about her coach's influence on her social life and the difficulties that she had because of a lack of social experiences:

…my coach banned me to meet my friend and hang around with them, because of that,

I think my personality seems to be changed…just this small tennis world I have lived.

When I moved to other world, I experienced really uncomfortable feeling.

In the above, Meredith did not simply discuss her coach's influence on her self-development and social life but also interpreted how she felt when she had to be with not-athletic social groups because of a lack of her social experiences. Three out of five respondents in the present study talked about how their coaches encouraged them to focus on their athletic roles and careers than to have other interests outside sport during athletic time. Meredith said, "…I gave up friends and family…I never cared family well because of tennis…only tennis was in the center of my life…whole my life…indirectly my coach did [encouraged me to do that]".

According to Erikson (1968), individuals' self-identity has a strong social aspect and their identity development is embedded in the social environment. Respondents in the present study distinguished the sport world and the non-sport world as two different worlds. Alex said 3 months before his retirement:

…from now I have to step into another world. It's a totally different world, I need to

adapt to that…I just play tennis for over 20 years…and now there is the world I never

have experienced in front of me after retire. Somehow, I'm afraid…I really am afraid

of it…

Above quote revealed that athletes perceived sport and non-sport worlds as two different worlds,

in terms of differences in lifestyles, values, and focuses between the two contexts. In addition,

while Alex was talking about his perception of two different worlds, he also revealed a fear of

entering the new world, because the outside sport world is a different world for him from the

sport world in which he used to live. When actual retirement happened to athletes, and they

started to live post-sport lives, they seemed to get over the fears over time that they had before

their retirement. Isobel said, "I am now out here, real world…I feel like I am bit more grown, and

I can see how things are going".

The results revealed that sense of athletic self, which is athletic identity, influenced athletes'

decisions throughout the process, including the timing of their actual retirement, pre-retirement

planning, and post-sport career choice. A strong athletic identity caused a high degree of

attachment to sport during their retirement decision-making process, and attachment to sport

caused difficulties in making decisions and postponement of actual retirement timing. Isobel

talked about her postponement decision at the second interview, "I like my sport...I have been

doing this for 10 years. It wasn't easy for me to make the retirement decision… thinking of

quitting, it wasn't realistic for me, and I still have attachment to my sport". The results also

indicated that athletes' strong athletic identity caused difficulties in making decisions. When

Meredith had to face her retirement decision, she expressed strong feeling of existential concerns

about meaninglessness in her life because of loss of sporting goals, roles, and athletic self, which

had been part of her life for 20 years. She said after her retirement decision, which was 3 months

before her retirement:

> My life disappears. I played tennis, I did well, but all those thing are useless…when I
>
> terminate my sport life, it seems the end of all those things too, there is no
>
> meaning…I just play tennis, only I injured my body and hurt my feelings...

Meredith also expressed her negative emotions through the early stages of career transition

process, in terms of difficulties in letting her sport go and facing a new life. She said, "During the

retirement process, I had really hard time. I had something is similar to depression. I had even

thought something I shouldn't think of. "Why should I live?"…my future was unclear".

Although four out of five respondents finally became office workers, four participants

intended to become a coach in the early stages of their retirement process, and these thoughts

tended to be related to their strong athletic identity and fears of entering a new life. Meredith,

who became a coach, confided how she felt when she thought about having a career outside her

sport and admitted that fear of facing a new life was one of the reasons why she decided to

remain involved with tennis. She said:

> …I have never tried anything other than tennis…I feel afraid, because I never have
>
> done anything by myself…nowadays, I have to do all the things by myself and am
>
> afraid of it. So when I was in the decision-making process, I had a fear to face
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> [something] other than tennis.

Identity confusion and reformation. Athletes experienced identity reformation during the

career transition process, and identity confusion occurred as a result of loss of sporting social

sub-groups and roles. The participants showed a strong athletic identity in the early stages of their

career transition process. Meredith, for example, talked about her focus 3 months before her

retirement, "Even now [after retirement decision was made], I'm just thinking of tennis. 100%. I

mean every day of my life". Some of the other participants in the present study showed a

decrease in athletic identity in the early stages of their career transition process, such as the decision-making process or latter stages of their sport career. Christina talked about her sense of self after she made her retirement decision, "I feel less like a competitor more likely an amateur who plays tennis for fun".

During participants' identity shifts, participants discussed confusion over their identity. Isobel mentioned her status as "staying in the middle" right after her retirement, and Meredith, who became a coach after her retirement, explained how she felt about her sense of self within 1 month of her actual retirement, "I ended my player's career, and I'm a coach. Now I'm not a player Meredith, but a Lexie's coach. I mean, it's not me". Meredith's comment revealed her confusion as a result of her sport career end, and she did not feel comfortable with her new position or new self, which Erikson (1950) highlighted as a sign of identity crisis or confusion, and the result could be described as "feelings of disoriented and confused", which is related to loss of self and absence of future directions. Athletes' identity confusion resulted from loss of self and also from loss of athletic social groups. Christina reported a loss of contact with friends and experienced difficulties in building new social networks. She seemed to experience identity confusion. She said:

> I never really felt lonely, but now I feel lonely when I'm alone…I feel I have no one around me. I just think "Who am I? What am I doing here?" Yes. I sometimes feel like this when I feel lonely…

Again, the above example indicates the effect of social networks and one's social identity on the sense of self. When she lost her former social networks Christina suddenly started asking herself "Who am I?" and also asking the question "Where do I belong?"

Although respondents showed identity confusion in the initial stages of identity reformation, over time they showed acceptance of new ways of being and a new sense of self. Participants

built a new identity based on changes in roles, values, focuses, and lifestyles, and identity

reformation was found to be salient after they engaged with new roles and new careers. Meredith

said 5 months after her retirement, "…my life also has changed. I became more autonomy. …I'm

thinking I'm a coach much more than the last interview. I feel comfortable with this". The results

indicated that participants' identity reformation occurred both naturally over time and as a result

of a conscious focus. Alex showed a conscious focus on building a new identity. He said 5

months after retirement:

> I think I see myself as an office worker rather than a tennis man. That makes me feel
>
> better. It makes me feel easier to adjust to current life rather than thinking of
>
> sport…everything is focusing on this [new career] now…I should let my sport go
>
> soon as possible, then it helps me to adjust to my current life better…

Interdependent interactions between athletes' sense of self and other people's attitudes.

Participants' perceived sense of self interacted with other people's perceptions and attitudes

toward their retirement. In other words, through the career transition process, the participants'

sense of self tended to correspond with other people's views and attitudes about them, and

participants seemed to accept others' changes in attitudes toward their retirement. Christina said 3

months before her retirement, "…all my surroundings know that I'm going to retire, so they often

ask me 'When are you going to stop?' …it's not too bad [to hear this]. I just think that it's time to

leave".

Interactions between sense of self and other people's attitude were also found during

participants' identity reformation, and the interactions between athletes' and other people's

attitudes were interdependence. Isobel talked about how her interactions between others had

changed after her retirement; "…they [other people] see me as a bank-teller…and the topic for

conversation is now different…now I see them as my customers so I ask them to join my bank as

customers".

Another aspect of interactions between perceived self and other people was found in comparison with others. Through the career transition process, all participants compared themselves with others (e.g., active athletes, other former athletes, other coaches, and non-athletes) to evaluate or explain their current situation, status, and feelings. Meredith compared herself with other former players or coaches when explaining her concerns of loss of privilege. She said, "I'm a coach now. It's the same. No differences from other coaches…good sport career can be advantage for me, but I don't really feel any differences from others". Meredith's comparison had a negative outcome (e.g., loss of privilege). In contrast, all four respondents, who were guaranteed secure post-sport careers by their tennis team companies, showed positive outcomes (e.g., enhancing self-satisfaction) by comparing their current situation with other athletes who did not have secure post-sport careers. Alex said below within 1 month of his actual retirement:

I am in a better position than players from other teams. Other players, when they retire, they have to find second career themselves, in contrast, I have certain thing that I can do after sport career, so I think I am in much better position than others.

To summarize, results indicated that athletic experiences influenced athletes' sense of self, and athletic identity and their career transition had reciprocal interactions. The results of retirement and the process of post-sport life adjustment were that participants experienced identity confusion, but they showed identity reformation between 6 and 11 months after their retirement. Overall, the main finding in identity issues in the present study is that athletic identity influences and is influenced by athletes' career transition.

Available Resources during the Career Transition Process

The participants in the present study perceived that their degree of preparation for post-

sport life, social support networks, and coping skills influenced their career transitions. These results revealed how individuals' available resources influenced their decisions, as well as the quality of adjustment to post-sport life. Respondents perceived social support as a beneficial resource during the career transition process and used various types of coping strategies (e.g., active coping, acceptance) for many different issues (e.g., need to develop new career skills, building new social networks). Four out of five participants showed maladaptive behavior patterns as results of stress reactions, and these tended to be related to their lack of coping skills. In addition, respondents perceived their coach to be one of the support networks during their career transition.

The sub-themes for available resources were: (a) positive transition outcomes of early preparation, (b) influences of social support, (c) usage of problem-focused coping and emotional-focused coping strategies, (d) maladaptive behavior patterns, and (e) coaches' roles and influences.

Positive transition outcomes of early preparation. The earlier that athletes were able to prepare for post-sport life, the more likely they were to experience positive psychological status, emotional responses, and transition outcomes. Respondents spent between 1 and 3 years making a firm retirement decision, since they first consider retirement, they discussed both psychological and vocational preparations, and three of them gained vocational skills during the final stages of their sport careers. The results indicated that pre-retirement planning or preparation for post-sport life is related to post-sport career issues. Respondents showed various negative emotional responses and low degrees of confidence or motivation with regard to their new careers (e.g., fear of facing a new career) during the career transition processes rather than other areas of life adjustment (e.g., financial). The participants attributed their negative emotional reactions to new career adjustment to their lack of life skills and experiences outside sport. Christina, who did not

have pre-retirement plans and did not develop vocational skills during her athletic career, had anxieties 3 months before her retirement. She said, "I'm afraid that I have to live by myself out there…I wonder [if] I could handle all these". In contrast, Isobel, who postponed her retirement and tried to develop vocational skills in the final stages of her athletic career, said, "I learned computing skills…it is still better than start work knowing nothing". Christina's and Isobel's comments show that how a degree of athletes' vocational preparation for post-sport lives influenced on their psychological readiness for actual retirement.

Regarding to post-sport career adjustment, most of the participants attributed adjustment difficulties in their new careers to a lack of preparation or vocational skills. George said 5 months after his retirement:

> …I know I have to work here [bank office], but I have no knowledge. I have only been playing tennis and don't know about rules for banking, language they use here, and things about loans…I am really in difficult situation…

In addition, the results indicated that participants' degree of preparation influenced work ability, and work ability might have related to their psychological status regarding a new career, such as feelings of achievement or motivation. George, who experienced a high degree of work stress and expressed a low degree of motivation in his new career, said 5 months after his retirement, "Always worry comes first than anything else so I have neither achievement nor progress".

Transferable skills, which are skills acquired in one area that can also be used in other areas (Murphy, 1995), are another aspect of athletes' life skills. Most of the participants were aware of the beneficial influence of their transferable skills from the preparation process and talked about the merits of the skills during the post-sport career adjustment. Isobel said 5 months after her retirement:

> …athletes…we have been living as a team for a while, we are polite, we know how to

care for others, and know what to do, what we shouldn't do…also I can play tennis…I

think it is really beneficial to me [in building new social network]. In addition, my

physical strength…I never had been ill or something. It [transferable skills] helps me

many different ways.

In contrast, George considered transferable skills as positive resources before his retirement, "I

think it [transferable skills] could be beneficial thing for me at the work, such as team spirit and

building relationship". However, he changed his perception of his transferable skills and did not

accept the beneficial influences of transferable skills after actual retirement. For instance:

I went to play [tennis] with them [colleagues] yesterday...I can build new social

network through that activity….but I think all others [things learn from his sport] are

negative to me… I mean, like a mental thing…it is different sport and study, it is

annoying…

George assumed that playing tennis with others was a positive part of his skills, but he

perceived that all other habits he had gained from sport were not helpful for dealing with his

current career because of the differences between his sport and office work.

Influences of social support. Athletes needed various types of social support (e.g.,

information, emotion) throughout their career transition process, and the support networks helped

athletes to reduce career transition difficulties and encouraged them to deal with different career

transition issues (e.g., lack of career skills, adjustment to new lifestyles). Throughout the entire

transition process, participants in the current study searched for various types of social support,

including information, and emotional, instrumental, and esteem support from close others, such

as families, friends, coaches, and teammates. Athletes reported that information and emotion

support were beneficial throughout the entire career transition process, and esteem support tended

to be beneficial before retirement. Isobel talked about how she searched for information support

from former teammates who had been through the same process and used the information to prepare for her post-sport career 3 months before her retirement. She said, "I ask things to a former teammate [retired player] and get information, such as what I have to study, what should I need to prepare…she helps me a lot for preparing work".

Cohen and Wills (1985) discussed two functions of social support in two different models, the main effect model and stress-buffering model. In the main effect model, social support is considered as a social resource that has a positive influence on individuals' cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. The stress buffering model suggests that social support can function as a stress buffer so support is not important if an individual is not experiencing stress. The results from the present study indicated that respondents' perception of the impact of social support was multi-functional. Four out of five participants perceived that they had a high level of social support networks, and they reported how social support functioned to reduce their career transition stresses. Alex said:

> …[the] manager from [the] human resource department told me that they are aware of
> my contribution [by sport], so they [people in the office] are ready to support me to
> start a new career. That is really great. I know nothing about the work and have to
> deal with it, but when I am told that they let me have time to learn some work, that
> makes me feel much better…

Social support in Alex's case above is more likely to be "stress buffering" because having support from his company helped him to reduce the worries and concerns about his new career which had been a source of stress since he decided to retire. Other respondents described emotional support, which has a similar function to that of a "main effect". Christina said:

> …if I was alone I couldn't have done all those [career transition], but he [boyfriend]
> was with me…when I talk to him about some problems from work he always listens

to me carefully, these are all really good for me…

Participants often discussed the importance of co-workers' support after they started their new career, and how supportive networks helped them perform better in their new career. Isobel, who perceived satisfactory support from co-workers, showed less difficulty in adjusting to her new career than the other four participants. She said:

…my manager asked a veteran, who just before gets her childbirth break, to help me for a month. She taught me about a month…so that was grateful thing for me…every time I work, I was guided [by veteran co-worker], so it was really good for me.

In contrast, George, who became a bank assistant after his sport career ended, expressed difficulties in dealing with his new career because of a lack of support from co-workers. He said:

…I have five co-workers, they sometimes teach me, but they are all busy so I feel really sorry to ask them questions…they don't even have enough time for their own work…I feel really sorry (sigh), I have a lot of thoughts and am exhausted.

George also talked about the gap between his perceived social support and his view of the support available, which refers different perceptions about the exchange of resources between provider and recipient (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997). He said that he was aware how well his significant others had supported him throughout the career transition process, but somehow the support had not brought positive outcomes because of a lack of understanding. For example, he described the esteem support he received, which had not helped him, 5 months after his retirement:

…people say "Even it is hard now, you can do it after time passed". But that is only people who can say that after they overcame it…how much they tell me, if I feel "This is not my thing to do"…I don't know how to overcome it…to be honest, I feel really tough (sigh).

Three out of five participants reported their support networks as being one of the most beneficial resources they had during the career transition process. Isobel said, "…I got more emotional support from my family…such as praying for me and supporting me. That is the biggest thing…that really helps me a lot".

Finally, all five respondents talked about a lack of organizational support for athletes' retirement and stated that national governing bodies should be obliged to support athletes' career transitions. George said, "…it's not possible tennis association to provide these players [retiring athletes] whole things for the future, but they [tennis association] should help them a bit. I believe they should do".

Usage of problem-focused coping and emotional-focused coping strategies. Problem-focused coping was effective with career-related issues (e.g., developing vocational skills), and emotional-focused coping was useful for interpersonal issues (e.g., conflict with coaches). Participants attributed work stress or difficulties arising in their new careers to a lack of vocational skill development and experience, and they attempted to develop career skills before they started their new careers or tried to find someone to help them to build their new career experiences through the career transition process. For example, some participants postponed their retirement so they could have time for preparation. George's comment below indicates how he perceived postponement of his retirement as a coping strategy for earning time for preparation. George said:

> I'm going to work at the bank office… so far, I really haven't paid any attention to do that, so if I go to office without knowing anything it'll be tough for me, but if I play tennis 1 more year, I can learn computing [skills] or do some sort of studies.

The outcomes of problem-focused coping in career issues were relatively successful, in terms of managing problems and self-development. For instance, Isobel said, "I could prepare some…like

my thoughts…I did some research. It helped me a lot. I think postponement was good for me".

Participants' interpersonal issues were related to conflicts with their coaches or teammates during their decision-making process, loss of social networks, and difficulties in building new social networks. As regards interpersonal issues, athletes employed more emotional-focused coping strategies, such as venting emotion and turning to religion, except for building new social networks. To build new social networks they used problem-focused coping strategies. For example, they perceived playing tennis as a transferable skill and tried to play tennis with co-workers at weekends. Isobel said, "I am getting to know the people because of tennis. When I go to tennis court they really like me, because I am a former player. They all treat me nicely. I can have good social networks because of tennis".

Apart from joining amateur tennis clubs to build a new social network, participants used venting emotion, non-expression, and turning to religion when dealing with conflicts with their coaches, teammates or co-workers, and acceptance and searching for emotional support for the loss of social networks. Meredith discussed using venting emotion with regard to her high degree of negative emotion owing to the loss of her former coach's support. Her coach became her co-worker since Meredith became a coach at the same team after her retirement, and they were still in conflict. Meredith said 11 months after her retirement:

> Nowadays, I cry a lot. If I feel bad I just cry. Am I having depression? I'm not crying because of work or things like that. I'm sometimes weeping to myself, and sometimes crying when I fight with my [former] coach.

Isobel talked about how she overcame conflict with her coach during the decision-making process, "I have my religion…so I just think of my God's will and just let it be".

Participants also discussed how they managed negative emotions (e.g., loneliness, loss of social support), which resulted from losing former social networks. The process of dealing with

these issues was seen as an account-making process perspective, which refers working through

the process, including, confiding activity, empathy, compassion, and understanding (Harvey,

Weber, & Orbuch, 1990). Christina said:

> I can talk to him [boyfriend] about things that make me unhappy, and then he gives
>
> me sympathy…it makes me feel that I have someone to talk to or ring about
>
> everything anytime I need. In contrast, when I talk to my family…my mom and dad
>
> try to be good, but they don't understand… so when after I spoke to him [boyfriend] I
>
> feel much happier.

Christina's remark indicated differences between the social support from her parents and that of

her boyfriend, shown in their reactions to her situation, and it seems she obtained a positive result

from her account-making, her boyfriend's support, in terms of confiding and receiving empathy.

    Maladaptive behavior patterns. Athletes who were not able to manage, or were not

prepared to, face post-retirement stress were more vulnerable to experiencing maladaptive

behavior patterns. Four out of five participants in the present study reported maladaptive

reactions to their sport career end. Respondents talked about overeating, smoking, excessive

shopping, and alcohol dependence as reactions to difficulties in their new careers or ways to

release their work stresses. George said 5 months after his retirement, "I smoke a lot more,

because I have too many thoughts and get stressed…I smoke a lot while I am in office. It's

because of stress, mental stress". The results indicated that difficulties in their new career or work

stress were the most significant stress sources during the athletes' career transition process, and

their maladaptive reactions occurred when they could not deal with work stresses. Isobel, who

experienced a relatively smoother transition than other participants, and did not show

maladaptive reactions, expressed a lower degree of work stress and had stronger support

networks within her new career context than the rest of the participants. She said 5 months after

her retirement, "…when I first started to work…people next to me help me a lot so, I haven't really had difficulties…now I am quite well adapted… I am just happy with what I have done and no complaints so far".

All four participants who reported maladaptive behavior patterns were aware of the negative influence of maladaptive behaviors, but they confided that they could not stop doing it, because they did not know how to deal with their work stresses. Meredith talked about her recent drinking 11 months after her retirement, "I work every day, I feel tired, but I don't really have ways to release my stress. So I like to drink with people…I do drink to release my stress". Three participants in the present study talked about lack of resources. Christina talked about overeating 5 months after her retirement, "I eat when I have stress". She also mentioned lack of resources 11 months after her retirement:

> I don't have a particular thing to release stress. I get most distressed, because I am still not very good at work, so I try to learn more…I don't try to find something else to release my stress, just try to lean more and try harder.

Coaches' roles and influences. Athletes perceived that their coaches were a source of social support, and coaches influenced athletes' decision-making. All the participants expected some kind of support (e.g., information, emotion, and esteem) from their coaches throughout the career transition process. Isobel mentioned her coach's support during her postponement period, which helped her prepare for her post-sport career. She said, "…my head coach let me prepare for my post-sport life…that was also good". In contrast, Meredith expressed unpleasant feelings about changes in the coach-athlete relationship and the loss of her coach's support throughout the career transition process even though she still considered her coach to be one of her close friends. She explained her feeling less than 1 month after her retirement:

> I still think my [former] coach is the best person who knows me…when I try to talk to

her she doesn't really listen to me…I guess, she is not my person any more… before [the retirement], she listened to me whatever it was, but not now.

Meredith was the only participant who described a major loss of influence in terms of her coach's attention and support, and she reported conflict with her coach as one of the major transition difficulties experienced throughout the career transition process, because of dependence on her coach during her athletic career. All other participants, however, seemed to be aware of potential changes in coach-athlete relationships. Christina said 3 months before her retirement, "…when I leave the team and rarely visit or contact him…I don't expect that much support [from my coach]".

Participants also discussed their coaches' influence on the timing of their retirement. Three of them perceived a low degree of control over their retirement because of their coaches' involvement in decision-making and reported a gap between the coaches' views and their views on the timing of their retirement. Isobel, who postponed her retirement, expressed unpleasant feelings with regard to her retirement decision-making, "…when he [my coach] tried to stop me from leaving, I felt that he is just being selfish…he just considered his benefits and the team rather than care for my physical condition. I hated it…ones' retirement decision, coaches' impact is huge".

As mentioned earlier, Korean sport has a unique system which involves players being regular employees as semi-professional athletes for commercial companies, playing for the company team without doing office work, and becoming office workers in the same company after their sport career end. Four semi-professional players in the current study belonged to bank teams during their athletic career and took the office positions after their careers ended. Some of the participants perceived that taking a company-related post-sport career was associated with their coaches' decisional power, in terms of the coaches' role in the company, which was higher

than the players' position. Christina talked about her coach's potential influence in her new career. She said within 1 month after her retirement:

> When company sends me to the branch, I have somewhere I want to go, but if he [the coach] doesn't like me, he can send me to other city. If I have good relationships with my head coach, and he supports me, it's said [that] life in office gets easy.

Christina tried to keep a good coach-athlete relationship even after her sport career ended and expected some kind of support from her former coach. Later, 5 months after her retirement, she reported how she felt about her coach's support, "The first day of my office work he [the head coach] came with me [to the office] and introduced me to co-workers…it already supports me a lot".

In summary, the results showed that athletes who had made preparation for post-sport life, and had strong social support networks and coping skills to deal with post-sport life stress experienced smoother career transition than those who had fewer resources during the career transition process. In addition, all participants perceived that their coaches had an influence on their retirement process, and within the Korean semi-professional sports system coaches had roles in athletes' retirement process as employees in the company. Overall, findings on available resource issues in the current study indicated that athletes' available resources moderate the career transition process.

Decision-making during the Process and Consequences of Decisions

When the athletes faced career transition, they had to make many different decisions, such as whether to retire, the timing of their retirement, how to prepare for their post-sport careers, and selection of a post-sport career. Through the career transition process, athletes in the present study showed a low degree of readiness to face their post-sport life at the first interviews undertaken before their retirement; however, they gained confidence from new experiences outside sport

over time. In addition, participants in the present study also talked about changes in their lifestyles after their sport career ended, and they described both positive and negative influences of life changes.

The sub-themes for the decisions and life change issues were: (a) athletes' perceived control over the decision, (b) development of readiness for retirement, and (c) lifestyle changes.

Athletes' perceived control over the decision. Athletes perceived that they had freedom of choice, but they had to reach a compromise in their decisions with team coaching staff and consider situational demands (e.g., post-sport career choice). Although three out of five participants in the present study said that an injury put an end to their sport careers, they still reported that they chose to retire voluntarily. Meredith, who retired because of her back injury, discussed her decision: "…voluntarily. I decided it [retirement] by myself. I decided to retire…my team asked [me] to play one another year…so it [retirement] has been delayed".

Data indicated that participants' retirement decision-making was not simple and happened over time (between 1 and 3 years). As mentioned earlier, all participants reported their retirement as a self-choice, but the results showed that they perceived a low degree of control in other areas of transition decisions, such as setting actual retirement timing or making preparations in the final stages of their sport career. Participants discussed two factors influencing their timing of retirement, which were internal (e.g., attachment to sport) and external (e.g., team situation), and four participants said that their postponement of retirement was influenced by team situations, as their teams needed more players to compete next year. Only George reported that although he was influenced by his team situation, his retirement postponement was his choice because of his attachment to sport and a low degree of readiness to face a post-sport career. George said, "…my retirement isn't sudden for me, I have been considering it for the past 2 years already. I have had attachment to sport…I just couldn't decide because I wasn't ready". The findings indicated that

voluntariness of retirement decisions was multidimensional and complex and revealed that athletes experienced difficulties and negative emotional responses in making retirement decisions, even those decisions were made voluntarily.

Development of readiness for retirement. Athletes showed a low degree of readiness to face their post-sport lives early in the retirement process, but they developed confidence and competence from their experiences during the transition process. In the early stages of respondents' career transition process (i.e., before retirement and within 1 month of retirement), the participants talked about their low degree of readiness to face post-sport life and attributed it to a low amount of preparation and a lack of pre-retirement planning. In addition, participants' low degree of readiness to face their new lives tended to influence their actual departure from sport and caused negative emotions. Alex said that before he made his postponement decision:

> I had a fear…after playing tennis for over 20 years without any other experience, now I'm intending to work at office. I felt I know nothing about matters of that kind [new career]. I'm unlearned…I have to face a totally different work over there…the work, I never have tried. I have a lot of fear.

Alex spent another year in his tennis team, and made some preparation, such as learning computing skills and gaining information about his new career. He showed a higher confidence within a month of his retirement, "I am learning one by one, and I feel confidence…I have been only playing tennis, but now I am learning new things, and it makes me feel enjoyable". Although the process of building confidence about their new career was accompanied by setbacks, participants adapted to their new life over time, facing new experiences and learning new skills. Christina talked about it 11 months after her retirement, "I think I feel better as time goes by…when first I started my work I didn't know anything, but now I know how to deal with basic things…I think I have some kind of composure time goes by".

Lifestyle changes. Athletes' lifestyle changes occurred as a result of their sport career end, and changes in daily routines, new working environment, and new social networks were sources of transition difficulties. In the three post-retirement interviews, participants talked about changes in lifestyles more at 5 months after retirement than within 1 month or 11 months after retirement. This result seemed to relate to the timing of starting their new careers, or moving out from the team dormitory.

Respondents expressed both positive and negative reactions to their lifestyle changes. Isobel, who expressed positive emotions and higher control over her life after retirement than during her athletic career, said at 5 months after her retirement, "…I moved [out from the team dormitory] middle January. It [life] has completely changed (laugh). My lifestyle…first of all more freedom, I don't have to care about time, because I do not belong to the team anymore". She compared her current life to her player's time and felt she had more freedom and control over her life, because rigid rules and restrictions, which she experienced as an athlete no longer existed in her post-sport life. Christina also reported positive emotions about her sport career end. She said: "This work [new career] is fun and satisfies me…I think I had too much stress there [on the court] so I don't think I have much stress now. I feel much happier after I terminated my sport career".

On the other hand, some players had negative perceptions regarding the changes in their lifestyle. Most of the participants discussed the loss of physical activities and the negative influence of sedentary work environments. Alex said:

> I have prepared both mentally and physically, but the degree of stress I get from work
> is a lot. Sitting the whole day causes physical pain like neck, spine, and eyes… I think
> I need more time to adjust to current life, because it is a new life for me.

Another negative perception was related to their social life. During the career transition

process, participants showed concerns and worries about changes in their social networks and building new social networks outside sport because of their lack of social experiences. Christina reported difficulties in dealing with her new social groups. She said 5 months after her retirement:

> Even I spend most of my time with these people [colleagues in new career] I don't really have something to talk…when I was with my [former] teammates we always talking about sport, but people in here…this is more stressful for me than work. I sometimes think I'm an alien…I miss my former comrades.

Christina expressed difficulties in building new social networks and regretted the loss of former friends. She tended to get better in terms of building a new network 6 months after the above interview, but still she was not sure about it. She said 11 months after her retirement:

> They [colleagues] do support me, my colleagues are good people. But they all have different personalities, and it is not easy to be good with them all the time…even they are nice to me I still don't know what they really are thinking about me, so it is hard for me to be with them. I just [feel] tired, and it was a bit awkward for me.

To summarize, the results indicated that athletes had to face various decisions during their career transition process, and as a result their sport career end, they experienced lifestyle changes. Participants expressed both positive and negative emotional reactions to these changes, and they seemed to be adjusted to post-sport life and developing confidence over time. Overall, the main finding in the decision and life change area is that the career transition process is accompanied by various decisions and lifestyle changes.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to explore Korean elite tennis players' psychological experiences before and after their retirement from sport. The results indicated that (a) athletic

identity influences and is influenced by career transition, (b) athletes' available resources moderate the career transition process, and (c) the career transition process is accompanied by critical decisions and lifestyle changes.

Contributions to Career Transition Research

Several researchers (e.g., Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) have discussed the influence of athletic experience on individuals' identity formation, and others (e.g., Lavallee & Robinson, 2007) have found that athletes' identity is influenced by the termination of their sport careers. Reciprocal interactions between athletes' identity and their career transitions have not, however, been discussed much in the literature, and the present study is the first to provide evidence of circular influences between athletic identity and sport career termination.

The results indicated that athletes' identity, including their sense of self and social identity, was influenced by their athletic experience. When athletes confronted their retirement, the career transition process influenced their sense of self and social networks, and they experienced identity reformation. The findings are in line with Erikson's (1950) claim that individuals' identity develops over time, and identity formation is influenced by life values, lifestyles, and social groups. The results revealed that their sense of athletic self influenced athletes' decisions throughout their career transition process, including the timing of their retirement, pre-retirement planning, and post-sport career choices (e.g., postponement decisions, preparations). It has been reported in previous studies (e.g., Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007) that a strong athletic identity could lead to a high degree of attachment to sport during the career transition process. The current study revealed that a strong athletic identity might influence retirement decision-making, and athletes' attachment to sport might be a source of difficulty in making retirement-related decisions and result in the postponement of actual retirement. The results might indicate that athletes' strong athletic identity could lead to a delay in the career transition process, in terms

of difficulties in making decisions. In addition, participants who had strong athletic identities tended not to engage with post-sport life preparation until they had left their sport completely.

Erikson (1950) claimed that identity reformation involved broadening one's self-awareness and a conscious exploration of the self. The findings in the present study indicated that athletes' identity shifts occurred during the later stages of their sports careers, not just after their retirement, and they consciously put effort into changing their identity from an athletic self to a new self. The results paralleled Lally's (2007) findings, which revealed that student-athletes proactively decreased their athletic identity and consciously shifted their focus from their athletic roles to other roles when retirement was imminent. Lally (2007) described student-athletes' proactive shifts in identity as self-protection and assumed that having dual roles (i.e., student and athletes) allowed them to shift their focus (from sport to study) towards the end of their sport careers. The findings from the current study revealed a similar process of identity shift among elite athletes, who did not have student roles, but they tried to identify and engage with non-athletic roles in the latter stages of their sport careers (e.g., developing post-sport career related skills, broadening social networks outside sport). The participants in the current study experienced salient identity reformation and conscious changes in self-awareness, since they started to engage with new careers or roles compared with the earlier stages of their career transitions, which implies that identity reformation is closely related to behavioral changes, changes in lifestyles, roles, and focuses (Erikson, 1950).

During identity reformation, participants in the present study expressed identity confusion as a result of their sport career end, and they expressed uncomfortable feelings with their new positions or new selves, which Erikson (1950) highlighted as a sign of identity crisis or confusion. Some participants expressed feelings of not being anywhere within a month after their retirement, similarly to the sense of "staying in the middle" found in Kerr and Dacyshyn's (2000) study. The

longitudinal data in the current study revealed that most participants started to accept their new self as time passed, and they showed some degree of emotional adjustment to their new identity from 5 months after their retirement.

The present results indicated how retiring athletes used social comparison in self-evaluation, and that both positive and negative outcomes emerged from the comparisons. Munroe, Albinson, and Hall (1999) reported that non-selected college athletes used social comparison to reduce the perceived attraction of their sports, but the use of social comparison during the career transition process has not been widely discussed in the literature. In the general psychology literature, Festinger (1954) stated that individuals use comparisons with others to evaluate themselves, and Suls, Martin, and Wheeler (2002) emphasized that individuals' self-evaluation through social comparison is closely related to their self-concept, self-knowledge, and subjective well-being. The current findings indicated that it might be useful to provide information about potential positive and negative outcomes of social comparison to retiring athletes to help them to develop a positive self-concept during their career transition processes.

Folkman and Lazarus (1980) found that people use both problem-focused and emotional-focused coping strategies when they face internal or external conflicts. The results from the present study paralleled Folkman and Lazarus's (1980) findings, and provided evidence of the effectiveness of problem-focused coping in helping athletes to deal with issues during the transition process. The results also supported Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) findings that people tend to use problem-focused coping strategies when they are in work contexts, because vocational stress is often related to problem-managing or problem-solving. Participants tended to use problem-focused coping strategies for career-related issues and discussed its effectiveness. In addition, they used emotional-focused coping strategies for interpersonal issues, and the results indicated that their attempts helped them to deal with emotional changes. The benefits of

emotional-focused coping strategies for dealing with interpersonal issues were less apparent than those of problem-focused coping strategies in career-related issues. The current findings advanced knowledge of the effectiveness of available resources, in terms of providing evidence of effective coping strategies in situational-specific contexts during athletes' career transition processes.

Stambulova and Alfermann (2009) emphasized the need for cross-cultural studies in the understanding of athletes' development and career transition, and the findings from the present study indicated that cultural contexts and sport systems could influence athletes' career transition process. The present findings revealed how Korean sport contexts influenced on athletes' process of career transitions. The participants in the present study, even though they chose to retire voluntarily, experienced a low degree of control over their career transition process because of their coaches' involvement, and they attributed their coaches' power over their retirement decision to their post-sport careers, which were provided by their tennis teams. Four out of five participants chose to take office jobs that were provided by their former tennis teams, and they tended to try to keep good coach-athlete relationships. They also tried to follow their coaches' suggestions about the timing of their retirement, because they viewed their coaches as superior officers and coaches had influence on their office work (post-sport careers) since they had decided to take jobs offered by their tennis teams. In addition, all five participants discussed the lack of organizational support and occupational opportunities during the career transition process, and some of them mentioned other nations (i.e., Japan and the USA), which they perceived to offer better occupational opportunities to retired athletes than Korea.

Peterson (2009) emphasized athletes' potential loss of social networks and risk of experiencing isolation and loneliness during their career transition process in terms of athletes' narrow social networks and lack of social experiences during their sport career. Some of the

previous research findings (e.g., Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008) also indicated that loss of social networks is one of the consequences of career transitions. The present findings, however, revealed that building new social networks by athletes after retirement could be a source of transition difficulties, in terms of a lack of social experience and delays in social identity reformation. For example, Christina, who seemed to accept her new self-identity as a bank teller 5 months after her retirement, described difficulties in building new social networks and still discussed identity confusion 11 months after her retirement because of her social identity. The results indicated that considering athletes' changes in social contexts in terms of both losses and gains might assist athletes' career transitions.

Future Research Directions and Practical Implications

Although the current study was conducted via longitudinal methods, the data collection was commenced after athletes' retirement decision was made. If future researchers could collect data earlier in the process, such as before athletes make their retirement decision, it might help to explain the overall process of athletes' career transitions, including their career transition decision-making process.

Regarding postponement of retirement, either before or during the data collection, all five participants postponed their retirement for various reasons. Although Isobel and Alex discussed the benefits of postponing their retirement in terms of having extra time to prepare for their post-sport lives, the other three participants said spending another year in the team did not bring any benefits, because they could concentrate neither on sport nor on their retirement preparations. Athletes' retirement timing or postponement of retirement should be examined further in the future. Examining athletes' psychological processes or changes during the athlete retirement decision-making or postponement periods might provide directions for pre-retirement interventions for retiring athletes.

The current findings indicated that coaches played certain roles during athletes' retirement decision-making and influenced athletes' quality of career transitions. In addition, the present study revealed that coach-athlete relationships during athletes' retirement decision-making and career transition process could be sources of athletes' transition difficulties. However, coaches' roles and coach-athlete relationships in the quality of athletes' career transitions have not been widely examined in the study area. In order to understand coaches' influences on athletes' career transitions, future research is needed.

Even though the findings from the present study provided evidence of cultural influences on Korean athletes' career transition process, the study did not focus on comparing cultural similarities or differences with athletes from other cultural backgrounds. Examining athletes with various cultural backgrounds and looking at differences and similarities between cultural or environmental contexts might advance the knowledge on career transition studies and help practitioners to provide suitable and appropriate interventions to retiring athletes.

Several practical implications for assisting athletes' career transition process are presented, based on the current findings, as well as previous findings. As athletes' career transition has been considered as process rather than an event, the current findings revealed that athletes experienced changes in psychological status and emotional reactions throughout the process. The results indicated that providing proactive interventions during their sport careers might help athletes to deal with their career transitions from the earlier stages. For example, the current findings revealed that athletes expressed negative emotions during the early stages of career transition process (e.g., fear of uncertain future, meaninglessness), but most of their negative emotions were influenced by their perceptions of the changes (e.g., entry into new world) rather than the actual contexts (retirement). The results supported Wolff and Lester's (1989) suggestion that it might be helpful to support retiring athletes with cognitive-behavioral therapy, in terms of helping them to

reduce maladaptive cognitions (e.g., fear of facing new world) during the transition process.

Athletes' social support networks can be one of the most beneficial resources during their career transitions (e.g., Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994), and the present findings supported this idea. However, the current results indicated that there may be a gap between social support providers' and recipients' views on the available support. Rosenfeld and Richman (1997) observed that social support could be effective when provider and receiver have appropriate interactional exchanges, but otherwise social support may be unhelpful to those in need. George's experience might be interpreted as the result of the failure of interactional exchanges in social support between providers and himself (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997). The findings indicated that understanding athletes' demands could enhance the positive outcomes from social support, and so could consideration of the interactional exchanges between providers and receivers.

Regarding to transferable skills, although athletes' transferable skills may be beneficial, the benefits of skills are fruitless if athletes are neither aware of the advantage of the skills nor able to transfer them from one domain (sport) to another domain (non-sport). Educating athletes about the use of transferable skills and providing beneficial outcomes of athletes' transferable skills might be good ways to enhance the quality of their career transition, in terms of building their competence outside sport contexts and perceived readiness for retirement.

Some researchers (e.g., Munroe et al., 1999; Fleuriel & Vincent, 2009) have reported athletes' maladaptive reactions to their sport career end (e.g., smoking, alcohol dependence), and participants in the present study also showed maladaptive behavioral patterns (i.e., smoking, alcohol dependence, overeating, and shopping compulsion). Participants said that they were aware of the negative influences of the behaviors, but they could not resist engaging with the behaviors, because they perceived that there were no other ways to release their stress. The results indicated that athletes' maladaptive reactions might be related to their lack of resources

during the transition process, and their maladaptive behaviors could be prevented if they found other resources that they could use to release stress during the process.

Finally, as athletes' environment, such as sport systems (e.g., employment types) and socio-cultural influences (e.g., social norms), plays an important role in their quality of career transitions, considering sport systems and environmental influences on athletes' career transition process is essential to assist athletes to deal with their retirement.

Conclusion

The present study is the first study which had been conducted via longitudinal methods with Korean elite-level athletes. The longitudinal data provided insights into athletes' changes in psychological status and emotional reactions, as well as their usage of coping strategies. The findings indicated that athletes experienced changes in psychological status (e.g., identity shift, changes in confidence levels) and emotional reactions not just after retirement but also during the final stages of their sport careers. The results revealed reciprocal interactions between athletes' identities and their career transitions, and their available resources during the process moderated the quality of the process. Athletes confronted various decisions and changes in lifestyle during the process, and these were sources of transition difficulties. In addition, the findings provided evidences of socio-cultural (e.g., sport contexts) influences in athletes' career transition experiences. Several practical implications and future research directions were drawn from the findings.

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Table 1.
Details of Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Time spent in (semi-) professional tennis career	Reasons for retirement	Higher competitive level while playing	Post-sport career
Alex	Male	35	13 years	Chronic injury/ ageing	Semi-professional	Bank assistant
Christina	Female	24	6 years	Underperformance	Semi-professional	Bank teller
George	Male	36	15 years	Aging/new career	Semi-professional	Bank assistant
Isobel	Female	25	7 years	Chronic injury	Semi-professional	Bank teller
Meredith	Female	29	13 years	Chronic injury	Professional	Tennis coach

Table 2

Timetable for interviews

	The first interview	The second interview	The third interview	The fourth interview	The fifth interview
Interviews with participants who retired as planned	**1 to 3 months before retirement**	**Within a month of retirement**	**Within 5 to 6 months after retirement**	**Within 11 to 12 months after retirement**	
Meredith	Interview 1 Phone	Interview 2 Face-to-face	Interview 3 Phone	Interview 4 Phone	
Christina	Interview 1 Phone	Interview 2 Face-to-face	Interview 3 Phone	Interview 4 Phone	
Interviews with participants who postponed their retirement	**1 to 3 months before intended retirement**	**1 to 2 months after postponement decision**	**1 to 3 months before actual retirement**	**Within a month of retirement**	**Within 5 to 6 months after retirement**
Isobel	Interview 1 Phone	Interview 2 Face-to-face	Interview 3 Face-to-face	Interview 4 Phone	Interview 5 Phone
George	Interview 1 Phone	Interview 2 Face-to-face	Interview 3 Face-to-face	Interview 4 Phone	Interview 5 Phone
Alex	Interview 1 Phone	Interview 2 Face-to-face	Interview 3 Face-to-face	Interview 4 Phone	Interview 5 Phone

Table 3

Super-ordinate themes

Sense of self, others, and process of identity shift
  Sense of self
        Athletic identity
        Social identity
        Comparison
        Identity confusion
  Tendency of identity shift
        Decrease in athletic identity
        Changes in focus
        New interest
        New goals
        Changes in priority
        New self
  Sense of others
        Others' influence on sense of self
        Others' influence on identity shift

Available resources during the career transition process
  Perceived individual development and resources
        Lack of life skill development
        Lack of social experiences
        Lack of preparation
        Lack of organizational support
        Lack of support network
        Lack of coping skills
        Coaches' influence on individual development during athletic career
        Parents' influence on individual development during athletic career
        Transferable skills
        Perceived a high degree of social support
  Coping strategies
        Social support
        Problem-focused coping
        Emotional focused coping

Decision-making during the process and consequences of decisions
  Influential factors in career transition decision
        Reasons for retirement
        Personal influences
        Athletic identity
        Readiness for retirement
        Emotional influences
        Having secure post-sport career
        Generativity
  Perceived control
        Perceived control during athletic career
        Perceived control during the decision-making process
        Increased control over life after retirement
  Psychological experiences during the decision-making process
        Difficulties in making decision
        Ambiguous of voluntariness of the decision
  Psychological consequences of the decision
        Positive emotional responses
        Negative emotional responses