

Lavallee D & Robinson HK (2007) In pursuit of an identity: A qualitative exploration of retirement from women's artistic gymnastics, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 8 (1), pp. 119-141.

This is the peer reviewed version of this article

- NOTICE: this is the author's version of a work that was accepted for publication in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*. Changes resulting from the publishing process, such as peer review, editing, corrections, structural formatting, and other quality control mechanisms may not be reflected in this document. Changes may have been made to this work since it was submitted for publication. A definitive version was subsequently published in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, [VOL 8, ISSUE 1, (2007)] DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2006.05.003>

Lavallee, D., & Robinson, H. (2007). In pursuit of an identity: A qualitative exploration of retirement from women's artistic gymnastics. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 8, 119-141.

Abstract

This study examined among a sample of elite athletes the contention that the pursuit of performance excellence can hinder the formation of self-identity and that this, in turn, can lead to adaptation difficulties when an individual retires from sport. As these problems are known to be pronounced in women's artistic gymnastics due to the young ages at which participants begin and end their competitive careers, the experiences of five former female gymnasts were studied. Respondents participated in retrospective, semi-structured interviews yielding transcripts that were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Results revealed that participants had been encouraged to dedicate their lives to gymnastics and were, as a result, left feeling lost and helpless when they retired. After prematurely adopting an identity based solely on their role as a gymnast, many of the participants knew little about who they were and what they wanted to do with their lives, and were consequently forced to distance themselves from their past in order to establish a new identity apart from gymnastics. For those who felt worthless at the time of their retirement as a result of their maladaptive perfectionism and lack of power within the coach-gymnast relationship, this process was particularly challenging and has lasted, in some cases, for the duration of their retirement. The participants' accounts did, however, suggest that distress could be avoided by engaging in pre-retirement planning from a very young age and subsequently maintaining control of the transition out of gymnastics by reducing participation gradually and finding a meaningful replacement.

In pursuit of an identity: A qualitative exploration of retirement from women's artistic gymnastics

As the standard of high-level performance in sport has increased throughout the years, so too has its demands. Talented young athletes have, therefore, been required to sacrifice increasing amounts of their time and energy in the name of sporting success (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). In order to excel in sports such as women's artistic gymnastics, athletes have to put in countless hours of practice from an extremely young age, and are often encouraged to do what ever it takes to win, regardless of the consequences (Krane, Greenleaf, & Snow, 1997). During the past fifteen years, however, psychological researchers have started to reveal how this relentless pursuit of performance excellence can potentially jeopardize individuals' chances of achieving what Miller and Kerr (2002) describe as "personal excellence" (2002, p.141). Studies have, for instance, provided numerous examples of how the exceptional demands of high-level sport can prevent athletes from engaging in a wide range of developmental tasks across their lifespan, including those that are needed to form a mature and well-rounded identity (e.g., Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997).

In order to negotiate optimal levels of health and well-being throughout their lives, individuals must know themselves well-enough to make the right choices and must, therefore, formulate a consistent and reliable core sense of self (Josselson, 1987). According to Erikson's (1968) depiction of the life-cycle, an important part of this identity forming process occurs during adolescence when individuals are given the opportunity to experiment with different possibilities and roles. Due to the exceptional demands of high-level sport, however, adolescent athletes tend to bypass this time-consuming process and immerse themselves, instead, in a strongly athletic and foreclosed sense of self (Brewer, Van Raalte, Linder, 1993).

After committing themselves to the sporting role not just physically, but also mentally and socially (Wylleman, De Knop, Menkehorst, Theeboom & Annerel, 1993), athletes are often left with little time to engage in the levels self-exploration needed to make responsible and effective life choices outside the sport milieu (Marcia, 1980). As a result, those who do immerse themselves in the athlete role have been found to experience difficulties with adult decision-making, exhibiting, for example, signs of dependence (Petitpas & Champagne, 1988), risk-

taking behavior (Brewer et al., 1993), inferior career maturity (Murphy, Petitpas & Brewer, 1996), and poor moral development (Petitpas & Champagne, 1988). However, in addition to being disadvantaged in this way, these athletes have also been reported to find the termination of their athletic career extremely distressing (Brewer, 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

Working in both applied and research settings, psychologists have witnessed athletes struggle during their retirement, not only with the loss of their athlete role, but also with the challenge of piecing together a new identity in the real world (Miller & Kerr, 2002). The extant literature has consistently suggested that athletes experience career termination as a transition that can, in some cases, be very long and extremely distressing (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). Adjustment difficulties during this period have been known to range from low self-confidence, increased anxiety, and disordered eating (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Brewer, 1993; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000), to clinical depression, substance abuse, and even attempted suicide (Ogilvie, 1987).

Drawing from these accounts it would appear that career termination distress is a widespread phenomenon, and in accordance with this suggestion, large proportions of retiring athletes have been reported to experience at least some degree of difficulty in response to their withdrawal from sport. Working with a sample of former Olympic-calibre Canadian athletes, for example, Werthner and Orlick reported that 78% of their participants had encountered difficult transitions, with 32% finding the experience incredibly difficult, or even traumatic. On the other hand, however, similar empirical studies in this area have identified very few manifestations of psychological distress (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Kleiber & Brock, 1992).

While some athletes find the challenges of their retirement overwhelming and consequently experience a crisis, others experience a positive transition with very few problems (Baillie, 1993). As suggested by McPherson (1984), however, these discrepancies are merely a reflection of the idiosyncratic nature of career termination, which is characterized, in just the same way as any transition, by a complex interaction of personal and situational factors. In accordance with this phenomenological perspective researchers and theorists concerned with athletic retirement have, therefore, started to explore these factors in depth. As a result of these studies, an

important individual determinant of adjustment to career termination is the degree to which an athlete's self-identity is immersed in sport (Lavallee, in press).

In addition to potentially hampering athletes' identity development, an over-emphasis on performance excellence in sport, itself, is also a major cause of career termination distress. As a result, a number of psychologists have attempted to redress the balance by encouraging athletes to take part in life skills programs that are designed to tackle issues concerning their emotional, social, personal, and psychological development (Carr & Bauman, 1996). Miller and Kerr (2002) have also suggested that life skills could be incorporated into the way that sport is conceptualized, to produce a new athlete-centered philosophy in which performance excellence is facilitated by personal excellence, rather than achieved at its expense (2002, p.146).

Advocates of this position have argued that such an approach would be particularly beneficial in sports such women's artistic gymnastics, where the challenges associated with career termination are pronounced due to the relatively young age of the athletes involved (Klint & Weiss, 1986). Through the conduction of retrospective interviews with retired female gymnasts, researchers have consistently shown how the difficulties associated with leaving gymnastics can be largely attributed to its failure to embrace an athlete-centered approach (e.g., Krane et al., 1997; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Problematic transitions have, for example, been found to be associated with gymnasts' failure to develop an identity outside of their sport, their premature internalisation of the sport ethic, and their lack of power and control within the coach-gymnast relationship (Klint & Weiss, 1986; Krane et al., 1997; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000).

In addition to facing pronounced challenges when they retire, elite female gymnasts also tend to negotiate these difficulties during a stage of life that is, in itself, already incredibly demanding (Krane et al., 1997). Due to the nature of their sport female gymnasts have to "maximise their career into the years before puberty" (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000, p.127) and, consequently, many of them retire during adolescence. As a result, there is a very real possibility that their departure from sport will interfere with, and subsequently intensify, the identity crisis that takes place during this stage (Erikson, 1968). This, in turn, can lead to a particularly difficult, and in some cases traumatic, retirement transition (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000).

After conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with seven former gymnasts, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) were able to reveal that their participants' retirement transitions had, in fact, involved "a pursuit, or in some cases a struggle for, identity" (2000, p.130). Before they could move on to optimistic "new beginnings" these individuals had to firstly navigate their way through a virtual "nowhere land", characterized by a preoccupation with weight gain, a sense of void, a loss of identity, and a lack of perceived control. In order to pass through this phase they had to spend a certain amount of "time in retrospection, analyzing and deconstructing their sport experiences" (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000, p.123). For some of the participants this process was relatively easy, for others, however, it amounted to an incredibly long and traumatic struggle.

The main aims of the current study were to explore the issues raised by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) in greater depth, and also extend the temporal boundaries of their exploration so that the long-term ramifications of participating in, and subsequently retiring from, elite-level gymnastics could be investigated. By paying close attention to issues surrounding the participants' identity formation and career termination it was anticipated that the current exploration would confirm whether women's artistic gymnastics does pursue performance excellence at the expense of personal development. It was also expected that the participants' accounts will enhance the understanding of how the organizational structure of gymnastics could be altered to encourage a more athlete-centered approach, incorporating both personal development and sporting success.

Method

Design

As the aim of the current study was to explore the experience of retiring from gymnastics from the participants' own viewpoint, a phenomenological approach was deemed most appropriate. The participants' data was, therefore, collected through the use of semi-structured qualitative interviews and subsequently subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis, which aims "to explore in detail the participant view of the topic under investigation" (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999, p.218).

Pilot Study

Prior to the main study, a semi-structured qualitative interview was carried out by the second author with a 23 year old female who had retired from elite-level artistic gymnastics in England seven years previously. The interview lasted for 60 minutes, and highlighted ways in which the provisional interview guide could be improved by making slight changes to the order and wording of certain questions. Regarding some questions, for example, the researchers became aware that alternative questions would be needed depending on whether the participant had experienced a challenging retirement or not. In addition to this, however, the interview also indicated the range of standardized trigger questions that would be needed to stimulate an appropriate depth of discourse during the main study.

Participants

Five participants were recruited following an explanatory letter and leaflet stating the criteria for suitable volunteers, which were sent to various gymnastics clubs in England. On requesting details or being identified as suitable candidates, volunteers were given a standardized sheet of recruitment information and asked to initiate correspondence with the researchers if they wished to take part. All volunteers were asked to briefly summarize their retirement experiences and interviews were subsequently arranged with volunteers who were predicted to stimulate the greatest amount of theoretical return in light of the themes generated in the previous interviews. This adheres to the cumulative guidelines of theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) where data collection is driven by the initial stages of analysis and purposefully conducted until all significant themes “are well-developed in terms of properties and dimensions” (1998, p.215). Data collection was, therefore, discontinued after the fifth interview, when the researchers felt confident that theoretical saturation had been reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Due to the small sample required in the study, recruitment specifications ensured that the sample was as homogeneous as possible. All participants were 22-25 year old ($M=23.8$; $SD=1.1$) former female gymnasts who retired 4-9 years previously ($M=7.0$; $SD=2.1$). As the study was primarily concerned with the effects of excessive athletic involvement from an early age, it was specified that all respondents should have competed to at an elite standard (two representing their region within England, one competing nationally, and two competing internationally; 25.8 mean hours trained per week). In addition to this however, due to Hale,

James, Stambulova, and Collins (1999) contention that there is an association between race/ethnicity and athletic identity, it was also decided that all of the participants should be British.

Instruments

In addition to the underlying principles of qualitative inquiry, the aims of the current study were also underpinned by the findings reported by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000). It was, therefore, decided that the conceptualizations introduced by these authors should be used to inform the interview boundaries within which the participants could “express their own understandings in their own terms” (Patton, 1990, p.290). This was achieved by combining the principles of general interview guides and standardized open-ended approaches to qualitative interviewing, and devising an interview guide based not only on a predetermined schedule of eight open-ended questions, but also six standardized trigger questions. While the predetermined schedule ensured that the same information was gathered from each participant as efficiently as possible, the trigger questions ensured that each interview was sensitive to individual differences (Patton, 1990).

In line with previous qualitative explorations concerned with recovery from sports injury (e.g., Bianco, Malo, & Orlick, 1999) the predetermined schedule of questions followed the temporal path of the participants’ experience, starting with the period before their decision to retire and moving towards the present day. Following Bianco and colleagues, the interview also commenced with the warm up question, “How did you get into gymnastics?” which was designed to ease the participants into the interview and create a frame of reference for the following questions.

Subsequent questions focussed on Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) proposal that retirement difficulties are not only associated with an internalization of the sport ethic, but also a lack of control concerning the gymnast’s relationship with their coach and their decision to retire. Other questions also paid close attention to the participants’ experiences and sense of direction directly after retiring. The final questions aimed to summarize the participants’ post-retirement experiences and identify the factors that determined whether their transition was smooth or challenging. Most importantly, however, they were also used to establish whether the

participants' experiences were still affecting them or whether their retirement had truly come to an end.

In addition to being based on previous research, the open-ended questions utilized in the predetermined schedule were worded according to the advice of Patton (1990) and Kvale (1996). This was also true, however, of the six standardized trigger questions. Following the advice of these authors, four of the trigger questions were designed to specify not only how the participants were thinking, feeling, and behaving throughout their experiences, but also how they saw themselves at key points in their discussion. The other two trigger questions were just as important however, as they provided the researcher with the opportunity to probe deeper into the participants' experiences and interpret their statements, giving the participants a chance to agree, disagree or elaborate further (Kvale, 1996)

Procedure

Before arranging their first interview, volunteers were given an information sheet indicating the areas they would be required to expand on and how their data would be recorded and analysed. They were then, prior to their first interview, given a consent form to read and sign if they wished to continue. Within the consent form they were informed that their confidentiality would be protected except on their disclosure of any harmful or illegal activities. They were also informed that they could stop the interview and remove their data at any time without reason. Participants were made aware that a copy of their transcript would be posted to them and that on receiving it they would have one week to request the removal of their data.

For each participant a convenient and suitable time and location for the first interview was arranged with the researchers. This location was quiet and only the interviewer (the second author) and the participant were present. On arrival each participant was given a demographic data sheet to complete. With the participants' permission, an audio tape was then turned on and a semi-structured interview lasting from 90-120 minutes was conducted. The audio tape was subsequently turned off and each participant was given a standardized debrief to read and sign. Arrangements regarding the time of a second telephone interview, scheduled to take place approximately one month later, were then made.

During the one month interval, the interview was transcribed and posted to the participant before the initial stages of analysis were conducted. The telephone interview then provided an opportunity for the participant to give the interviewer feedback regarding the plausibility of the data derived from their first interview and the researcher's initial conceptualisations. Any disagreements were discussed and amendments were made, when necessary, before the researchers embarked on the latter stages of analysis.

The decision to conduct telephone interviews was informed by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) proposal that credibility should be used in qualitative studies to establish what is commonly known as 'internal validity' in quantitative studies. These researchers have proposed that credibility can be established through member checks, whereby participants are shown transcripts and conceptualisations so that they can indicate their agreement or disagreement with the way they have been represented. It was, therefore, decided that telephone interviews would be used in the current study to check and subsequently improve the validity of data collection and the initial stages of analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis procedures described by Smith et al. (1999) were employed in data analysis. The following six steps were conducted by the second author in an attempt to reveal the underlying meaning of the participants' accounts "through a process of interpretative engagement with the texts" (Smith, 1995, p.123):

1. Each transcript was read and reread a number of times while the left margin was used to write down preliminary comments, associations and summaries concerning the data.
2. Using the preliminary notes, transcript 1 was reread and emergent themes within the text were noted in the right margin.
3. Using the emergent themes from transcript 1 as a basis, the preliminary notes and text from transcript 2 were reread. Whilst looking for and noting down instances of the themes already found in transcript 1, new themes were identified and noted in the right margin. This cumulative process was continued for all five interviews
4. Emergent themes within each transcript and references to where instances of it could be found were transferred to a separate master list for each interview.

5. Connections between the themes within master list 1 were looked for, with reference to actual quotes in the transcript, to enable the clustering of themes into domains. During this stage certain themes were dropped due to not being supported by rich evidence in the transcript or not fitting with the structure of domains.

6. Using the domains identified in master list 1 as a basis, themes from master list 2 were added into old domains and used to make new domains if necessary. With reference to the primary source material this cumulative process was continued for all five interviews to produce a master list for the group. During this stage themes and domains that were not supported by rich evidence or did not fit with the structure of domains were dropped.

Some of the themes identified followed questions in the interview schedule while others resulted from areas introduced by participants. In order to reveal the meaning within the text, theme and domain titles were as precise as possible and remained very close to the topic of the participants' talk. To ensure inter-rater reliability, the first author checked emergent theme and domain titles against the primary source material. This stimulated relevant discussion and the titles were adjusted accordingly.

Results

The results of the data analysis yielded 28 themes that were subsequently grouped into the following five domains: the path to perfection; balance of power in the coach-gymnast relationship; giving it their all; searching for an identity; and losing, maintaining, and regaining control of retirement. Table 1 indicates the frequency of participants who contributed to each theme and also provides an illustration of the themes contained within each domain. Due to space limitations, we have focused on the themes with the highest frequency within each domain when discussing the results.

The path to perfection

This domain provided a context for the rest of the study by illustrating how competitive gymnasts are driven by the need to progress and are, therefore, encouraged to internalise the perfectionism that characterises the world of gymnastics. It also demonstrated however, that those who develop maladaptive perfectionism due to their strong ego-orientation, are at risk of

feeling worthless when they lose control of their career and must ultimately face the challenge of coming to terms with their overly critical self-evaluation when they eventually retire.

Driven by the need to progress. Throughout their accounts all five participants continuously referred to the fact that competitive gymnasts are driven by the need to progress. For example, whilst talking about her socialization into gymnastics one participant recounted:

“I remember learning to do a sort of free cartwheel type move off the vault and it just being really like, Wow, I can do something and I’m landing on my feet....I remember it being a really good feeling learning new moves...(and I) suddenly realized, I guess, that that was the point to doing gymnastics”.

Constant external pressure to progress/get things right. In addition to being innate, however, their drive to progress also appeared to be reinforced by the gymnastic environment which imposed on them a constant external pressure to strive for perfection. One participant explained:

“...once you’ve got to that point you’ve got to keep...up your level of achievement...otherwise anything else compared to it is not as good....So it’s not about maintaining a level of gymnastics its about always, always improving on that and just doing more and more, otherwise you’re failing...”.

Another, on the other hand, talked about how the pressure to perform had been overwhelming while she was suffering with her bad legs: “...the only competition I did every year was the British Championships and I did it because I had to try and prove to the National coaches that I could be in the squad...(and) I used to mess up every year.”

Maladaptive vs. adaptive perfectionism. In response to this ego-oriented climate all of the participants quickly internalized these pressures and became perfectionists themselves: “...you want to get it right, it’s a discipline, its something that you get marked at for hitting bang on every time....You want to be able to compete something as perfect as you can get it...”. Four of the participants accepted the ego-oriented climate and consequently developed a maladaptive, neurotic form of perfectionism: “I used to beat myself up....I’d do floor routines and if I wasn’t making my second tumble... I’d start again, it wasn’t perfect, it wasn’t good enough...(and) I’d be in tears at this point with frustration...”. After rejecting the ego-oriented climate, however, one participant developed a very different attitude towards gymnastics. She still had very high

standards but unlike the others, she acknowledged her limitations and was, therefore, far less critical of herself:

“...if it wasn’t in my control I just left it....I wouldn’t get stressed out about it. If I couldn’t do it I couldn’t do it and that wasn’t my problem...if it was great then it was great and if it wasn’t then... oh well.”

Unbeknown to her at the time, this attitude protected her from a number of problems encountered by the other participants.

Taking vs. losing control of career. During the two years that she was suffering with her bad legs, one participant’s sense of self-worth plummeted dramatically. However, unlike three of the other participants, she was able to regain control of her career:

“...it got to the point where I just blew it at every competition so I really needed to get that belief back...(and) I was in control at that competition when I hadn’t (been) for a long time....So to get that sort of bit back inside me where I felt like...I like this. That was really the turning point”.

As a result, she retired from gymnastics feeling good about herself. Another, on the other hand, entered a spiral of declining self-worth that continued long after she gave up:

“I just felt like I was just getting worse and worse and I was just getting more and more scared of doing stuff... it was just like this kind of spiral of just feeling like it was all going hideously wrong...(and) I think that the sort of downward spiral I’d got into in gymnastics was one of the causes of me having low self-esteem after retiring.

Balance of power in the coach-gymnast relationship

This domain demonstrated how the balance of power within a gymnast’s relationship with her coach can have an enormous impact on her development, not only as a gymnast but also as a person.

Coach sees gymnast as a dispensable physical tool. The imbalance of power sometimes extended to the point where the gymnast was no longer seen as a person and was instead treated as though she were a dispensable tool:

“It wasn’t like a partnership where you kind of work together to produce something. It’s like...I suppose it’s a bit like, You are the physical machine for realizing my coaching and if you aren’t realizing it then it’s not worth me working with you”.

In less severe cases the coach merely acted as though they owned the gymnast, in more serious cases however, their sense of ownership appeared to escalate into a complete lack of concern for the gymnast’s well being. One participant recounted: “The day after (the competition) it was really painful, my ankle, and I came and said, I can’t train, it hurts too much, and the coach said, but you competed yesterday, it can’t be that bad”. Faced with a similar problem, another participant felt as though she had no other choice than to forfeit her health in order to keep the peace with her coach. Consequently, she spent two years training with an extremely painful back injury even though it was against her better judgement.

“I believed everything he said. I would do any move he said and when he told me that I was whinging you know, I told myself as well you know it didn’t hurt, I could keep going through all the pain and I think I’ve got a ridiculous pain threshold now”.

Fruitful coach-gymnast relationships are built on equality. In accordance with the last two themes, the most fruitful relationships described by the participants were those based on equality. Whilst talking about the “special” relationship she had with her coach one participant explained:

“My coach was just brilliant really. He listened to me and he understood me and he was just extremely patient. I don’t know how he was so patient at times... especially when I was having the trouble with my legs and everything”.

She then went on to say: “I just think some people are afraid to...not afraid to talk to their coach, but the coaches aren’t as open as my coach was with me...he allowed me to just talk to him generally as I felt...”. In agreement with this statement, many of the participants indicated that they had been a lot happier in relationships where they could develop and voice opinions of their own.

Important for coach to trust and believe in gymnast. The special relationship one participant had with her coach was strengthened by the fact that he always trusted and believed in her:

“...he always believed me as well which was important. Because I did have one doctor that suggested that (the leg problems were) all in my head...but he was never taken in by that, which he could've been....I think that in the end, my achievements are...down to the way that he handled the situation when I came back”.

In contrast to this gymnast's admiration, others felt nothing but resentment towards the coaches who had failed to trust or believe in them. One participant blamed her coach for the back injury that forced her to retire:

“I just wish he accepted that I had had a problem because I knew there was something wrong but I just assumed that it wasn't big enough to worry about.... which I regret now because I've got so many problems with my back”.

Another attributed her downward spiral to the fact that her coach had disregarded her as soon as she started having problems:

“There was a complete lack of belief in anything that I was going to do on his part which was translated into me as well...because he'd kind of decided at some point that he wasn't bothered with me any more it was kind of downhill from there”.

Giving it their all

This domain illustrated how talented young gymnasts are encouraged to dedicate their lives to their sport without a second thought for their future, and how this can leave them feeling lost and helpless when they are finally thrown back into the real world. As such, it also demonstrated the importance of pre-retirement planning, indicating how it can firstly, prevent gymnasts from having to reach breaking point before they finally give up, and secondly, allow them to negotiate a smooth transition into their next stage of life.

Living for gymnastics. As a result of their serious and dedicated nature, the participants soon found that their lives were completely taken over by gymnastics: “You don't have much time to do or think about anything else because you're either on your way to gym, or training, or tired from training. It's a bit all encompassing”. Due to this they had to make a number of sacrifices in other areas of their life:

“...all my friends were like, Oh, will you come out with us tonight, and I always had to say no because my day was pretty much get up, go to school, hurry home from school, do homework, eat dinner in the car on the way to gym, do gym get home and go to bed.”

At the time however, their sacrifices seemed irrelevant because the world of gymnastics was all that mattered to them. One participant stated: “I couldn’t see any other life without it...because I loved to train and towards the end I loved to compete and it was just...everything to me”.

Elite gymnasts are serious, dedicated, and single-minded. In light of the previous domains it is not surprising that in order to be an elite gymnast, the majority of participants felt as though they could never give up:

“...when you fall off the beam and you’ve got a big scrape down your leg, you just think to yourself, Right, I’ve got to get back up there and do it again, instead of going Oww... It hurts, I’ve finished now I want to go home....I think it’s something to do with the personality of people who are single-minded and focussed”.

One participant even suggested that it was her dedication that had allowed her to achieve a sense of equality with her coach:

“I think that he had a lot of respect for the fact that I was very determined and I was also very dedicated you know....I wasn’t like the others where as soon as something got difficult they would either not turn up the next day or quit, that didn’t happen... so um... yeah I think there was a kind of equality there. A lot of respect I think basically...”.

The taboo of giving up/holding on until breaking point. After being socialized into thinking they should never give up and spending the best part of their lives doing gymnastics, the majority the participants carried on training for longer than they should have. One, for example, forced herself to train five times a week even though she dreaded each session:

“I remember going along there in the car with my mum and just kind of hoping that there would be a traffic jam on the motorway so that I wouldn’t have to go to training because it was just, kind of, every time I went there, just making me feel worse and worse.”

Instead of planning their retirement most of the participants did in fact have to reach breaking point before they finally gave up:

“...it came to about the week before and we had to confirm that I was going to go up for the testing and I just came home...walked in the front door and burst into tears... (and) said, I don’t want to do it any more...and I was actually shocked myself by me saying that because I always thought I’d still be like sixty or seventy and still trying to do splits and you know yanking my leg up in the corner”.

It was almost as though they needed an excuse to justify the decision:

I don’t think I would have ever quit because I needed a reason to quit. I would never inside myself come out with, Right I’m going to give up now, because it wasn’t a choice you know, you were a gymnast you didn’t turn around and quit”.

Feeling lost post-retirement. When they did finally reach breaking point, however, several participants felt lost. After spending so much of their lives doing gymnastics they simply had no idea what to do with themselves:

“I didn’t have a set structure to my day um, especially in the period before I started working and studying again....I was just floating, you know like a three month holiday- which isn’t that much fun actually when you don’t see it as a holiday....I was very lost”.

Searching for an identity

This domain provided an insight into how gymnasts are encouraged to develop a strong and exclusive gymnastic identity and how this can cause problems, especially for those who lose control of their careers, when they finally retire and enter the real world without a sense of self. It also indicated, however, that these problems could be avoided by firstly developing into a whole person instead of a just a gymnast, or secondly engaging in pre-retirement planning.

Growing into a gymnast vs. a person who does gymnastics. Throughout their accounts four of the participants referred to the fact that they had literally grown into their gymnastic identity, which was consequently very strong and exclusive:

“...it is such an early age that you go into it, I mean when you’re four, you’re probably not....I mean you’re still learning who you are and then because for the next eight, nine years of my life I was...you know, you grow into it”.

They attributed this to the fact that they were continuously encouraged to think of themselves as gymnasts above all else:

“If you start gym when you’re five you get, “What are you? You’re a gymnast, this is how gymnasts walk, this is how gymnasts stand, this is how gymnasts behave”, and even though you do really want to be one its also getting indoctrinated in you all the time”.

In contrast to the other participants, however, one was always encouraged by her parents, to keep things in perspective and acknowledge that there was more to life than gymnastics:

“...my parents had always said, you know, this is going take up a tiny, tiny part of your life...if you’re not the world champion by 1994...so what? You’ve got another...sixty years ahead of you...what are you going t do with that life? You’re going be bored...if all you’ve done is gymnastics and you’ve got nothing else”.

As a result, this participant developed into a person who did gymnastics and was therefore, still a whole person when she retired: “I never said, I want to be a gymnast ever, there was always something else... like an illustrator but no, never a gymnast”.

Finding a sense of self in the real world. Not wanting to remain lost and unsure forever the other four participants soon began to realize that they had to change certain aspects of their life in order to develop a sense of self apart from gymnastics. One, for example, went to study at university and completely immersed herself in the life of a student:

I went to university and just started drinking a lot...and generally just like, being a student... and I think yeah, I did need that to try and find out what I was apart from gymnastics, what I would have been if I hadn’t done gymnastics, how my personality would have been, what I found funny, what I didn’t, what I enjoyed doing”.

However, because three of the these participants had failed to think about their retirement until it happened, they found it very difficult to make the appropriate changes. One participant stated: “...unless you go into a career in coaching or something involved with gymnastics, you sort of have to veer away from that person a little bit and find who you are afterwards... and that’s really difficult”. The other remaining participant, on the other hand, planned her retirement well in advance and was therefore able to make the necessary changes and go to dance school as soon as she retired.

Putting a lid on gymnastics - completely shut vs. partially open. After losing control of their careers three of the participants were unable to face their overwhelming sense of loss and

disappointment, and as a result, they used their search for a new identity as an opportunity to put a lid on gymnastics and leave the negativity of their past behind: "...it just felt like a new start and I didn't want anything from that interfering with my dance...I guess it was because it was a bit painful". In order to do this they removed all traces of gymnastics from their lives:

"I think I just had to completely put...draw a line under it for a while and just distance myself from it completely. I didn't even tell anyone at my university that I used to do gymnastics, it was just kind of like I'd completely forgotten it".

For those who retired feeling positive about gymnastics however, the lid never completely closed and they were able to develop a new sense of self at the same time as remembering their past. One participant explained: "I won't ever shut it out completely, I couldn't because then I would lose everything. I think my way of dealing with it is to cling on to that now....I've made as much distance as I want".

Losing, maintaining, and regaining control of retirement

This domain demonstrated how competitive gymnasts can lose their sense of control when they retire and highlighted the importance of winding down slowly, and finding a worthwhile replacement for gymnastics.

Maintaining/losing extra-ordinary control over body. Whilst talking about the challenges of retiring, all of the participants referred to how, as gymnasts, they had developed an extra-ordinary sense of control over their body:

"...it was just the sort of...the coordination with your body...you had control. It's the control, that's what people don't get. It's sort of...it's just the ability to use your body in a way that you know most people can't".

Unsurprisingly, they found the loss of this control extremely unpleasant

"...it was just another thing that changed for me....I'd gone from being absolutely in control of everything you know, even to the point of if I had a pain in my leg I was in control, I went to the physiotherapist and it was dealt with....suddenly everything was just sort of out of my control".

As a result, they had all been desperate to maintain as much control as they could after retiring, and in some cases developed exercise addictions and disordered eating:

“...another thing I was really worried about when I gave up gym was that I was going to put on weight and get fat.... and now if I haven’t exercised for a few days I’ll look at myself and say, you look fat today...and I just think, I don’t want to eat today because I feel fat”.

The importance of finding a worthwhile replacement. Another coping mechanism that the participants used was to find a replacement for gymnastics and in one participant’s case the replacement was trampolining: “I got very bored and I knew I had to start another sport and because I was an active person I chose trampolining”. As pointed out by another, however, the replacement did not have to be a sport:

“I’m addicted to designing....I think the gymnastics gave me an addictive, workaholic personality and I think that I’ve just been very lucky in finding something that I’m good enough at to replace it.”

Unfortunately, not all of the participants were able find a replacement straight away. One, for example took several years to find something that lives up to gymnastics:

“I’ve only just started to feel like I’m getting back to being a complete person again (after starting) capoeira, which utilizes quite a lot of the same skills (as gymnastics). I think I just needed something like that to make me feel like I was whole again....I needed that kind of, quite hard physical sort of, sporting type activity which has the same sense of achievement”.

Another participant, on the other hand, has resigned herself to the fact that she might never find a suitable replacement:

“I still haven’t found something that will match up to that....there’s still something missing but I think you just come to terms with the fact that you won’t feel that sort of, something special again. I don’t have anything that I’m as passionate about as I was about gymnastics”.

Addiction to the feeling of gymnastic moves. Four of the participants’ comments suggested that in addition to coping with these issues regarding their body, they also had to tolerate cravings to perform gymnastic moves, which they had developed an addiction to throughout

their career. One remarked: “Big spaces do make me sort of think...that’s big enough for a round-off and a flick and a somersault...that would be perfect”.

The importance of winding down. The majority of participants talked about the importance of winding down from gymnastics as opposed to suddenly stopping. One stated: “It’s like going cold turkey if you quit completely...you know you want to sort of slowly come out of it as such because I mean it was too much of a life change”. This, however, did cause a conflict of interests for some participants who felt as though they were worthless when they retired:

“What would have been ideal would have been if I could have worked with...a different coach and then even if I’d still wanted to retire I would have then felt a bit better about retiring rather than feeling like I was a complete dead loss”.

In accordance with this suggestion, another participant explained how her last coach had respected her decision to retire, and allowed her to come back and train whenever she wanted. Looking back she acknowledged that the opportunity to “wind down” had not only enabled her to maintain control of her body, but had also prevented her from feeling extremely lost:

“Directly after I left I think I actually did go in and train (I went) into the gym like every other day, or every day or something for normal training just...because I had nothing else to do and I was like, no I’ve given up, I’m just playing now.

Discussion

This study focussed on the idiosyncratic experiences of a small, homogenous sample of former female gymnasts paying close attention to issues surrounding both their identity formation and career termination. Participants were recruited in order to firstly highlight the complex interaction of factors that influenced their ability to adapt to career termination, and secondly, reveal how their experiences during this transition subsequently influenced their ability to define themselves in a world without sport. In order to relate the results to past research, each domain will now be considered.

Throughout their accounts all five participants emphasized how they had been driven by the need to progress and attributed this drive to the gymnastic environment, which had imposed on them a constant external pressure to strive for perfection. Drawing from the work of Hughes and Coakley (1990), it would appear that from the moment they were identified as having the

potential to excel at gymnastics at the extremely young age of four or five, these participants were encouraged to internalize the sport ethic and accept the sporting ideal that elite athletes continuously strive for perfection. In accordance with this contention all of the current participants internalized the pressure to be perfect to such a degree that they became perfectionists themselves. The nature of their perfectionism, however, appeared to depend on their goal orientation. Four of the participants' accounts suggested that they were overly concerned with normative comparison and, as a result, they were subsequently identified as having a strong ego orientation (Nicholls, 1989). These participants exhibited signs of what Hamacheck (1978) has described as maladaptive perfectionism because they were unable to endure their own mistakes.

In much the same way as the gymnast featured in Krane et al.'s (1997) case study, their self-worth became dependent on their ability to do things right and, as a result, they continually felt inadequate and 'under threat' within the gymnastic environment. Krane and her colleagues attributed these findings to the fact that their gymnast had socialized from a very young age, in a motivational climate that emphasized normative feedback, outcome-focused goals, and interpersonal competence above all else. Informed by the work of Nicholls (1989) these researchers proposed that this environment had caused her to develop an ego-involved goal orientation which ultimately progressed into neurotic perfectionism.

Additional weight for this argument has recently been provided by Dunn, Caugrove-Dunn, and Syrotuik (2002), who conducted an investigation into the relationship between goal orientations and perfectionism. In support of Krane et al.'s (1997) explanations, these researchers found that there was a positive association between a strong ego orientation and the maladaptive aspects of perfectionism. Task orientation, on the other hand, was found to be negatively correlated with these neurotic features.

Only one of the current participants was identified as having a predominantly task orientation but, in accordance with Dunn et al.'s (2002) findings, she was also the only one to exhibit signs of adaptive perfectionism. According to Hamacheck (1978), adaptive perfectionists have exceptionally high standards, but are also able to appreciate their limitations. Unlike the other participants therefore, this particular participant's sense of self-worth did not become dependent

on her performance and, as a result, she was not prone to feelings worthlessness. In addition to this, however, she also bypassed a number of the problems that the other participants faced during career termination.

For the duration of their retirement transitions, the four maladaptive perfectionists had to come to terms with their tendency to be overly critical of themselves, not only in relation to their deteriorating gymnastic ability, but also with regards to their new educational, vocational, and sporting pursuits. In light of these revelations, therefore, it is currently proposed that future research should concentrate on maladaptive perfectionism, as another potential contributor to career termination adaptability.

Drawing from the accounts of the current participants, it would appear that an imbalance of power within the coach-gymnast relationship is particularly common. When the nature of women's artistic gymnastics is taken into account, however, this finding is not that surprising. Gymnastic moves are potentially dangerous and coaches must, therefore, be able to command complete compliance from their very young athletes in order to not only convince them to attempt the moves in the first place, but also persuade them put in the effort needed to perform them safely.

Unfortunately, however, the current participants' stories appeared to suggest that many of their coaches had taken this position of power to the extreme. Three of the participants, for example, recounted numerous occasions in which they had been shouted at, humiliated, and ignored by their coaches, and in concurrence with this finding, the majority of Kerr and Dacyshyn's (2000) sample also emphasized how they had had to endure excessive pressure from their coaches'. As opposed to just being cruel, however, the coaches appeared to be acting in this way because they had become so committed to making their gymnasts top performers. Instead of seeing them as a developing people, they perhaps had come to view them as a means by which to demonstrate their coaching ability.

Whilst talking about their relationships with various coaches all of the participants referred to at least one instance when they had felt as though they were a "dispensable tool" instead of a person. These instances, however, did vary in their severity, ranging from a sense of ownership on the part of the coach, to a complete lack of regard for the gymnast's well-being. As a result,

only some of the participants' accounts provided evidence to suggest that Krane et al. (1997) were right to contend that most of the coaches within women's gymnastics "are willing to do whatever it takes to win, regardless of the long-term impact it may have on the(ir) athletes" (1997, p. 54).

Many of the participants' coaches failed to acknowledge their gymnasts' personal needs because they were too concerned with performance and success. Paradoxically, however, the participants' accounts suggested that their most fruitful coach-gymnast relationships, in terms of both personal friendship, and sporting success were, in fact, based on equality and mutual respect. Whilst many of the participants suggested that they would have been a lot happier if their coach had been sympathetic to their personal needs, others recounted how their performance had increased dramatically when they finally found a coach who allowed them to communicate openly, and, therefore, take a lot more control over their career.

These findings are supportive of the suggestion by Klint and Weiss (1986) that the gymnastic environment could be improved if coaches were encouraged to be more accommodating to their athlete's needs. In addition to this, however, they also concur with Miller and Kerr's (2002) athlete-centered model of sport, which is based on the presumption that optimal performance can only be attained through the full development of the individual. These theorists have proposed that the sporting environment should provide athletes with an opportunity to develop self-reliance, and have consequently contended that this will only be achieved if the power balance is "shifted away from the coach to give the athlete more responsibility" (2002, p. 147). As a result, they have suggested that coaches should not only be taught how to involve their athletes in age-appropriate decision-making, but also be encouraged to appreciate that athletes have a life outside sport and might, therefore, want to vary the degree to which they focus on training.

Drawing from the current participants' accounts it would appear that by adopting an approach such as this and, therefore, improving the coach-gymnast relationship, coaches could not only help their gymnasts to achieve a higher standard of performance but also ease their retirement transitions. After trusting their coaches explicitly throughout their careers a few of the participants explained how their coach-gymnast relationship had been 'special' because their

trust had been reciprocated. More often than not, however, the participants recounted, with bitterness, anger, how their coaches had failed to trust or believe in them. In much the same way as the gymnasts described by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000), these participants seemed to experience particularly difficult retirement transitions because they had to wrestle, and subsequently come to terms, with the negative feelings they were harbouring towards their coach.

When asked about what had made them “real” gymnasts, most of the participants in this study emphasized how they had approached their careers with single-minded dedication. In a similar way to the gymnast described by Krane et al. (1997), these participants “gave it their all”, and in accordance with Hughes and Coakley’s (1990) conceptualization of the sport ethic, this attitude appeared to stem from their premature acceptance of the sporting ideal that athletes should “be willing to make sacrifices and subjugate other experiences generally associated with growing up all for the sake of their quest” (1990, p. 308).

Wylleman et al. (1993) have proposed that in order to reach a high-level of performance, athletes must commit themselves to the sporting role, not just physically but also mentally and socially. In agreement with this proposition, all five of the participants hinted that they had spent the majority their athletic careers *living* for gymnastics. They were all encouraged to train for a minimum of 20 hours a week from the age of eight or nine and were, therefore, left with very little time to engage roles associated with anything other than gymnastics and school. As a result they were particularly susceptible to what Taylor and Ogilvie (2001) have described as role restriction.

Klint and Weiss (1986) have suggested that gymnasts who develop role restriction tend to fear life after gymnastics and in accordance with this contention, four of the participants in the current study reported that they had been reluctant to make the decision to retire. These participants continued to train even though they were unhappy and, in some cases, even forced themselves to endure both mental and physical pain. In contrast to Klint and Weiss’s participants, however, who reported that they had pondered the decision to retire for quite some time, these participants seemed to submerge the decision to an unconscious level until an adequate excuse finally allowed them to reach breaking point.

In addition to confirming their strong internalisation of the sport ethic, which dictates that “real” athletes never give up (Hughes & Coakley, 1990), these revelations could also be seen as a reflection of the imbalance of power within the coach-gymnast relationship. Whilst talking about the latter stages of their career, many of the participants explained how their coaches had completely avoided the subject of retirement in order to keep them in the sport for as long as possible. Once again, this suggests that their coaches had seen them as vehicle for their own success rather than a developing person. As pointed out by Klient and Weiss (1986), a reluctance on the part of the coach to talk about retirement contributes not only to the possibility that their gymnasts will suffer from low self-esteem after career termination but also to the likelihood that they will have to endure a long and agonizing retirement decision.

When they did finally end their careers, three of the five participants in the current study went on to explain how they had felt incredibly lost in a world without gymnastics. Their revelations resembled Kerr and Dacyshyn’s (2000) conceptualization of “nowhere land”, which arose from their participants’ “descriptions of being disoriented and confused after their retirement” (2000, p.122). Whilst attempting to explain this situation in greater depth, however, the current participants emphasized how they had experienced difficulties “fitting-in” and “starting again” in the real world and had consequently felt very isolated. As mentioned above, these individuals had been particularly susceptible to role restriction (Lavallee, in press; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001) throughout their careers and their accounts are, therefore, supportive of Greendorfer and Blinde’s (1985) contention that athletes who succumb to this condition can be left feeling isolated, lonely, and socially un-sustained in a world without sport.

Due to the time commitments of their training schedule, these same three participants only learnt how to assume a few highly specific sport-related roles during their careers and were, therefore, left with a severely inhibited ability to interact with new people and adopt different roles when they eventually retired. In contrast to this, however, the other two remaining participants, who both appeared to by-pass this period of disorientation, reported that they had purposefully engaged in pre-retirement planning from a very early age. These two participants were able to move on to the next stage of their lives quickly and easily and, as a result, their accounts are supportive of the notion that pre-retirement planning can broaden an athlete’s

social identity and ultimately ease their transition into a world without sport (Grove et al., 1997; Sinclair & Orlick 1993).

Brewer et al. (1993) have suggested that athletes who prematurely adopt the sporting role tend to avoid the time consuming process of self-exploration and are, therefore, highly susceptible to identity foreclosure. Instead of merely adopting the athletic role during early adolescence, however, four of the current participants recounted how they had been encouraged to think and act like gymnasts from the age of five, and suggested that that this had caused them to grow into a gymnast rather than person. As a result, it did not matter whether they engaged in other activities outside of gymnastics like, for example, going to school, because they encountered these activities from the perspective of a gymnast. In order to counterbalance the problem of role restriction within gymnastics, therefore, it is currently suggested that instead of simply encouraging participants to engage in other activities, coaches and parents should, in fact, dissuade their youngsters from growing into “gymnasts”, rather than “people who do gymnastics”.

This was, however, not the case for four participants in the current study and as a result, they consequently developed what Taylor and Ogilvie (2001) have described as a uni-dimensional self-concept. In concurrence with Grove et al.’s (1997) findings, these four participants found it a lot harder to adapt to life without sport than the one other remaining participant, who had been encouraged by her parents to develop a more multidimensional sense of self. After retiring from gymnastics this particular participant was still a whole person and was, therefore, able to move quickly on. The others, however, needed to search for a new identity out in the real world, and for the three who had failed to engage in pre-retirement planning, this endeavour was not only difficult but also distressing.

After losing their role as a gymnast, the participants knew very little about who they were and what they wanted to do, and as a result, were catapulted into an extremely unpleasant and directionless phase of their lives (cf. Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). In order to escape this disconcerting stage, they had to make the appropriate life changes needed to embark on their search for a new identity. However, in accordance with Miller and Kerr’s (2002) contention that athletes who over-invest in the sporting role tend to experience problems with decision-making,

they found this process extremely difficult. The participant who had engaged in pre-retirement planning, however, was able to bypass this stage completely, because she had considered these decisions well in advance and was, therefore, able to make the necessary changes almost immediately.

In order to adjust to their post-sporting careers all four of the participants had to distance themselves from their gymnastic past. The degree to which they had to distance themselves, however, was dependent on a number of factors. Those who felt worthless and resentful at the time of retirement had to distance themselves completely and “put a lid” on gymnastics. On the other hand, however, those who had developed adaptive perfectionism, taken control of their gymnastic career, and enjoyed a fruitful coach-gymnast relationship, were able to keep the lid partially open and develop a new sense of self whilst still remembering their past.

An inductive analysis of their participants’ accounts led Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) to conclude that in order to adjust retiring gymnasts must not only establish a new identity apart from gymnastics, but also work through the painful aspects of their sporting experience. By taking a more detailed look at this transition, however, and extending its temporal boundaries, the current investigation has been able to reveal that these two challenges must, in fact, be dealt with separately. The participants in the current study who were harboring negative emotions directly after retiring felt too weak to deal with these feelings straight away. It was only after they had established a new identity apart from their past, that they were finally strong enough to re-engage with their gymnastic career and work through its negative aftermath. With the benefit of a new perspective these participants were able to see gymnastics in a positive light, and were, therefore, finally able to acknowledge it as part of their new identity.

In accordance with the contention that high-level athletes become highly attuned to self-perceptions in the physical domain (Brewer et al., 1993), all five of the current respondents emphasised how they had developed an extra-ordinary sense of bodily control throughout their careers. As a result of this heightened awareness, however, they were also acutely aware of the subsequent loss of physical control that they experienced during career termination. Chamalidis (1995) has proposed that retiring athletes can become obsessed with their changing bodies and in agreement with this position, most of the current participants recounted how they had been

extremely frightened of gaining weight directly after their departure from sport and had, therefore, developed disordered eating habits and exercise addictions in their attempt to maintain control.

These results are consistent with the contention of Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, and Delignieres (2003) that retiring athletes pass through a crisis stage provoked by an awareness of their deteriorating physical capacities. For the current participants, however, the duration of this stage lasted considerably longer than the “normal” five months proposed by Stephan et al. (2003). In line with the gymnasts interviewed by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000), most of the current participants suffered from a long lasting preoccupation with their body size. However, when the nature of women’s artistic gymnastics is taken into account this finding is not surprising. In addition to deriving much of their self-worth from their ability to stay “thin, small, and graceful” (Krane et al., 1997, p. 67), gymnasts also often retire during adolescence, which is already characterized by pubescent changes, which are likely to magnify the almost inevitable weight gain that comes with career termination (Koukouris, 1991). Taking both of these factors into consideration, it stands to reason that a retiring gymnast’s struggle to come to terms with her body image could be particularly challenging.

Whilst talking about the challenges of retirement a number of the participants also explained how they had developed an addiction to the feeling of gymnastic moves throughout their careers and had, therefore, suffered from intense “cravings” when these sensations were suddenly removed. Three of these participants also explained how the intensive training schedule they had grown up with during their childhood, had provoked in them an inability to relax and a constant hunger for both mental and physical stimulation. In light of these revelations many of the participants went on to emphasise the importance of slowly “winding down” from gymnastics as opposed to giving it up all together. These results suggest that a more athlete-centered approach to retirement might be required in which athletes are given the opportunity to reduce their training schedule without feeling rebuked by their coaches and the sport in general (Miller & Kerr, 2002).

Another coping mechanism that the respondents used was to find a meaningful replacement for gymnastics. In a similar way to three of the seven gymnasts interviewed by Kerr and

Dacyshyn (2000), all five of the current participants expressed an overwhelming desire to recreate the satisfaction, stimulation, and intensity of their gymnastic experience. For those who had thought about their future throughout their careers and subsequently developed passions outside of gymnastics this process was relatively easy. Unfortunately, however, due to their uni-dimensional self-concept and role restriction, the majority of the current participants found their search for an adequate replacement incredibly difficult. Once again, therefore, it would appear that in order to prepare their young athletes for the transition out of sport, parents and coaches should encourage them to engage in pre-retirement planning from a very young age.

The findings from this study are limited to the quality of the accounts provided. Interpretative phenomenological analysis focuses on the participants' experiences from their own perspective and can, therefore, only provide a detailed description of the processes that the participants were consciously aware of. The domains provided a reflection of the processes that the participants were consciously aware of and certain aspects of their experience may have been overlooked (Macran, Smith & Stiles, 1999).

As the aim of the current study was to capture the experience of retiring from women's artistic gymnastics from the participant's own view point, the use of a small homogenous sample was particularly beneficial. However, in just the same way as the study conducted by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000), the current exploration was limited by its sport- and gender-specific focus. We would recommend, therefore, that this study be replicated with different populations such as male gymnasts, as well as participants from other individual and team sports.

The retrospective design employed in the current study was thought to be particularly advantageous because it allowed the respondents to look back on their experiences with the benefit of hindsight and subsequently draw out the most relevant issues. Unfortunately, however, this methodology is seen by many as having a number of shortcomings associated with both memory decay, and recall bias (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Brewer, Van Raalte, Linder, & Van Raalte, 1991). These problems could, however, be overcome in future studies by conducting qualitative interviews with gymnasts at designated times both before and after their withdrawal from sport. Grove et al. (1997) have suggested that such longitudinal assessments are essential if the retirement from sport transition is to be understood fully.

References

- Baillie, P. (1993). Understanding retirement from sports: Therapeutic ideas for helping athletes in transition. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 21, 399-409.
- Bianco, T., Malo, S., & Orlick, T. (1999). Sport injury and illness: Elite skiers describe their experiences. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 70, 157-169.
- Blinde, E., & Stratta, T. (1992). The "sport career death" of college athletes: Involuntary and unanticipated sport exits. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 15, 3-20.
- Blinde, E. M., & Greendorfer, S. L. (1985). A reconceptualization of the process of leaving the role of competitive athlete. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 20, 87-94.
- Brewer, B. W. (1993). Self-identity and specific vulnerability to depressed mood. *Journal of Personality*, 61, 343-364.
- Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., & Linder, D. E. (1993). Athletic identity: Hercules' muscles or Achilles heel? *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 24, 237-254.
- Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., Linder, D. E., & Van Raalte, N. S. (1991). Peak performance and the perils of retrospective introspection. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 13, 227-238.
- Carr, C., & Bauman, N. J. (1996). Life skills for collegiate student-athletes. In E. F. Etzel, A. P. Ferrante, & J. W. Pinkney (Eds.), *Counseling college student athletes: Issues and interventions* (pp. 281-307). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.
- Chamalidis, P. (1995). Career transitions of male champions. In R. Vanfraechem-Raway & Y. Vanden Auweele (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 9th European Congress on Sport Psychology* (pp. 841-848). Brussels: European Federation of Sports Psychology.
- Dunn, J. G. H., Caugrove-Dunn, J., & Syrotuik, D. G. (2002). Relationship between multidimensional perfectionism and goal orientations in sport. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 24, 379-395.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Greendorfer, S. L., & Blinde, E. M. (1985). "Retirement" from intercollegiate sport: Theoretical and empirical considerations. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 2, 101-110.
- Grove, J. R., Lavalley, D., & Gordon, S. (1997). Coping with retirement from sport: The

- influence of athletic identity. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 9, 191-203.
- Hale, B.D., James, B., Stambulova, N., & Collins, D. (1999). A cross cultural analysis of the dimensions of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale: A Herculean undertaking. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 30, 83-100.
- Hamachek, D. E. (1978). Psychodynamics of normal and neurotic perfectionism. *Psychology*, 15, 27-33.
- Hughes, R., & Coakley, J. (1991). Positive deviance among athletes: The implications of overconformity to the sport ethic. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 8, 307-325.
- Josselson, R. (1987). *Finding herself: Pathways to identity development in women*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kerr, G., & Dacyshyn, A. (2000). The retirement experiences of elite, female gymnasts. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 12, 115-133.
- Kleiber, D., & Brock, S. C. (1992). The effect of career-ending injuries on the subsequent well-being of elite college athletes. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 9, 70-75.
- Klint, K. A., & Weiss, M. R. (1986). Dropping in and dropping out: Participation motives of current and former youth gymnasts. *Canadian Journal of Applied Sport Sciences*, 11, 106-114.
- Koukouris, K. (1991). Quantitative aspects of the disengagement process of advanced and elite Greek male athletes from organized competitive sport. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 14, 227-246.
- Krane, V., Greenleaf, C. A., & Snow, J. (1997). Reaching for gold and the price of glory: A motivational case study of an elite gymnast. *The Sport Psychologist*, 11, 53-71.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Lavallee, D. (in press). The effect of a life development intervention on sports career transition adjustment. *The Sport Psychologist*.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Macran, S., Smith, J. A., & Stiles, W. B. (1999). How does personal therapy affect therapists' practice? *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 46, 419-431.

- Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp.159-187). New York: Wiley.
- McPherson, B. D. (1984). Sport participation across the life cycle: A review of the literature and suggestions for future research. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1, 213-230.
- Miller, P. S., & Kerr, G. A. (2002). Conceptualizing excellence: Past, present and future. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14, 14-153.
- Murphy, G. M., Petitpas, A. J., & Brewer, B. W. (1996). Identity foreclosure, athletic identity, and career maturity in intercollegiate athletes. *The Sport Psychologist*, 10, 239-246.
- Nicholls, J. G. (1989). *The competitive ethos and democratic education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ogilvie, B. C. (1987). Counseling for sports career termination. In J. R. May & M. J. Asken (Eds.), *Sport psychology: The psychological health of the athlete* (pp. 213-230). New York: PMA.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. (2nd ed). Beverly Hill, CA: Sage.
- Pearson, R. E., & Petitpas, A. (1990). Transitions of athletes: Developmental and preventative perspectives. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 69, 7-10.
- Petitpas, A., & Champagne, D. E. (1988). Developmental programming for intercollegiate athletes. *Journal of College Student Development*, 29, 454-460.
- Sinclair, D., & Orlick, T. (1993). Positive transitions from high-performance sport. *The Sport Psychologist*, 7, 138-150.
- Smith, J. A. (1995, March). Qualitative methods identity and transition to motherhood. *The Psychologist*, 122-125.
- Smith, J. A., Jarman, M., & Osborn, M. (1999). Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis. In M. Murray, & K. Chamberlain (Eds.), *Qualitative health psychology: Theories and methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research* (2nd ed). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Stephan, Y., Bilard, J., Ninot, G., & Delignieres, D. (2003). Bodily transition out of elite sport:

A one-year study of physical self and global self-esteem among transitional athletes.

International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 1, 192-207.

Taylor, J., & Ogilvie, B. C. (2001). Career termination among athletes in R. N. Singer, H. A.

Hausenblas, C. M & Janelle (Eds.), *Handbook of sport psychology* (2nd ed., pp.672-691).

New York: Wiley.

Werthner, P., & Orlick, T. (1986). Retirement experiences of successful Olympic athletes.

International Journal of Sport Psychology, 17, 337-363.

Wylleman, P., De Knop, P., Menkehorst, H., Theeboom, M., & Annerel, J. (1993). Career

termination and social integration among elite athletes. In S. Serpa, J. Alves, V. Ferreira

& A. Paula-Brito (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 8th World Congress of Sport Psychology* (pp.

902-906). Lisbon, Portugal: Universidade Tecnica de Lisboa.

Table 1

Constituent themes in each domain and the number of participants represented by each theme

Domain	Constituent Theme	Frequency
The path to perfection	Driven by the need to progress	5
	Constant external pressure to progress/get things right	5
	Maladaptive vs. adaptive perfectionism	5
	Taking vs. losing control of career	5
	Self-worth determined by ability to meet potential	4
	Learning to cope with inbuilt perfectionism post-retirement	4
Balance of power in the coach-gymnast relationship	Coach sees gymnast as a dispensable physical tool	5
	Fruitful coach-gymnast relationships are built on equality	5
	Important for coach to trust and believe in gymnast	5
	Coach-gymnast relationships involve an imbalance of power	3
	Progression requires faith in coach's ability and dedication	3
Giving it their all	Living for gymnastics	5
	Elite gymnasts are serious, dedicated, and single minded	4
	The taboo of giving up/holding on until breaking point	4
	Feeling lost post retirement	4
	Difficulties starting again in the real world/ fitting in	3
	The importance of pre-retirement planning	3
Searching for an identity	Growing into a gymnast vs. a person who does gymnastics	5
	Putting a lid on gymnastics-completely shut vs. partially open	5
	Finding a sense of self in the real world	4
	Deep sense of disappointment/loss that can't be faced	3
	Losing identity on retirement	3
	Re-engaging with gymnastics from a new perspective	3
Losing, maintaining and regaining control of retirement	Maintaining/losing extra-ordinary control over body	5
	The importance of finding a worthwhile replacement	5
	Addiction to the feeling of gymnastic moves	4
	The importance of winding down	4
	In constant need of a challenge/unable to relax	3