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# In That Instant It Was Over: The Athlete's Experience of a Career-Ending Injury

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Lauren Aline Loberg entitled "In That Instant It Was Over: The Athlete's Experience of a Career-Ending Injury." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Exercise and Sport Sciences.

Craig A. Wisberg, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Lars Dzikus, Jeffrey T. Fairbrother, Howard R. Pollio

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Accepted for the Council:

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Carolyn R. Hodges,  
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records)

IN THAT INSTANT IT WAS OVER: THE ATHLETE'S EXPERIENCE OF A CAREER-  
ENDING INJURY

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Lauren Aline Loberg  
August 2009

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## Abstract

A career-ending injury is an event that causes the involuntary termination of an athlete's participation in his or her chosen sport. Over the last decade, research has focused on injury and career transition; however little was known about athletes' experience of career-ending injury. The purpose of this study was to obtain in-depth descriptions of the lived experience of athletes who have had a career-ending injury. Using an existential phenomenological approach, the focus of the study was on the athletes' own perceptions of this experience. The participants were thirteen male and female former athletes representing a number of different sports. Using a purposeful, snowball sampling technique, participants were identified and interviews were conducted. The thematic structure derived from the interviews contained five major themes, which emerged within the ground, "Love of Sports." They included: "Your Life is Never the Same: Now, Before, & After;" "Something is Ripped from You: Loss of Identity, Strength, & Other People;" "It Still Hurts: Pain, Anger, Depression, & Fear;" "It Wasn't Really My Choice: Denial & False Hope;" and "Nobody Else Knows What You're Going Through: Difficult Relationships, Misunderstandings, & Unconditional Support." The results extend the current research in sport injury and career transition and suggest that a career-ending injury is one of the most difficult transition experiences an athlete can face. For the participants in this study their final injury was a life altering experience that represented a critical turning point in their lives. The pervasiveness of their pain extended far beyond the initial injury and was only one of the long-lasting effects of their career-ending experience.

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## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

#### Introduction

A career-ending injury is an event that causes the involuntary termination of an athlete's participation in his or her chosen sport. Research has suggested that the experience of a career-ending injury can affect approximately a third of the athletic population (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Mihovilovic, 1968; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Over the last decade, research has focused on injury and career transition; however a gap still remains in the literature concerning career-ending injuries.

Few sport psychology consultants develop an ongoing or long-term relationship with an athlete that includes enough contact to discuss the issues of career termination and one's life situation after sport competition is completed (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). Typically, the intermittent contact with an athlete focuses on a specific aspect of performance or crisis intervention (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). Due to the complexity of identifying participants and analyzing retrospective data, few studies have focused on involuntary transition from sport due to career-ending injury. In this chapter previous research on injury and career transition is reviewed and the purpose of this study, definition of terms, assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the study are presented.

## Research on Injury

When a person participates in sports, injury is always a risk. Regardless of whether the injury is permanent or temporary, it can be behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively demanding for athletes (Brewer, 2001; Ford & Gordon, 1999; Weinberg & Gould, 2003; Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, Shaffer, & Morrey, 1998). Serious injury can imperil one's belief system, self-concept, values, commitments, emotional stability, and the ability to function socially, occupationally, or both (Ford & Gordon, 1999).

Injury is one of the principal reasons for involuntary career termination (Lavallee, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). Previous research has indicated that between 14% and 32% of competitive athletes are forced to retire because of a career-ending injury (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Mihovilovic, 1968; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Whenever an athlete is injured, the injury has the potential to be permanent depending on the diagnosis of a doctor. Often, however, there is a waiting period for healing to occur prior to the final diagnosis from the doctor. This period of uncertainty can become a stressful and unsettling time for the athlete, as well as, the final decision to end one's athletic career.

Earlier studies on athletic injury have utilized stage-based models (Astle, 1986; Brewer, 2001; Kubler-Ross, 1969) and cognitive-appraisal models (Brewer, 1994; Evans & Hardy, 1999; Rose & Jevne, 1993). The most prominent conceptual model of sport injury was developed by Wiese-Bjornstal et al. (1998) and involved a combination of a stage model and a cognitive appraisal model. This model offers a systematic framework for examining the cyclic nature of injury and rehabilitation. It also addresses the psychological outcomes of sport injury

that are associated with the complete injury experience. The core of the integrated model is the sequential impact of a sports injury on athletes' thoughts as well as their emotional and behavioral response to the injury. The model also addresses both the pre-injury and post-injury responses of athletes. Pre-injury contributors include the athlete's personality, history of stressors, coping resources, and interventions. The post-injury piece focuses on the athlete's response to the injury and the rehabilitation process. The three categories of post-injury response are cognitive appraisal, behavioral response, and emotional response, which is the section of the model this study will focus on.

Cognitive appraisal represents a "process of categorizing an encounter and its various facets with respect to its significance for well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 31). Personal and situational factors are presumed to exert an impact on cognitive appraisal and the athlete's reaction to and evaluation of the injury (Brewer, 2001; Evans & Hardy, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Personal factors include the athlete's age, athletic identity, investment in playing professional sports, level of involvement in the sport, and one's competitive trait anxiety (Brewer, 2001). Situational factors include characteristics of the sport (e.g., type of sport, level of competition), social influences (e.g., teammates and coaches, family dynamics), and environmental factors (e.g., rehabilitation facilities) (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998). Both personal and situational factors are also presumed to influence athletes' cognitive appraisal of injury (Brewer, 2001) and recovery outcomes.

The cognitive appraisal of injury includes four main components: (a) attributions for injury, (b) self-perceptions following injury, (c) coping strategies, and (d) perceived benefits of



injury (Brewer, 2001). An athlete's attributions for injury are sometimes overshadowed by the surprise and severity of the injury. Only after an athlete achieves a satisfactory level of emotional control is he or she able to acknowledge possible attributions as well as the debilitating effect and severity of the injury (McDonald & Hardy, 1999). The athlete's attributions can be based on both the personal and situational factors that may have contributed to the injury. An athlete's self-perception (i.e., self-esteem, self-worth) also impacts the cognitive appraisal of the injury. Self-perceptions are usually influenced by the athlete's previous injury and rehabilitation experiences (Brewer, 2001; McDonald & Hardy, 1999). Coping strategies represent the athlete's attempts to deal with physical and psychological suffering that emerges from the injury (Brewer, 2001). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p. 141). Athlete's coping strategies might include acknowledging the injury and then concentrating on becoming healthy and thinking in a constructive, optimistic manner (Brewer, 2001). Occasionally, athletes come to see benefits of the injury, such as a convenient escape from an activity they no longer enjoy. Personal development during recovery from an injury may also allow an athlete to develop other interests outside of athletics or provide additional time to reflect on life (Brewer, 2001).

When an athlete is adjusting to the consequences of injury, there is usually a change in his or her relationships with family and friends (Ford & Gordon, 1999; Rose & Jevne, 1993). Changing relationships with significant others can influence the degree of social support the injured athlete might receive. When encountering a significant change in their physical

condition, athletes are more likely to rely on others and anticipate an increased level of social support (Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Tuffey, 1997). It has been suggested that when dealing with a sport injury athletes need to seek out and use all of the social resources at their disposal (Brewer, 2001; Ford & Gordon, 1999). As one participant in a study of injured athletes expressed:

I felt like the injury should have affected my relationship with my friends. . . . I felt like I have been a complete grouch and they must hate me, but they have all been wonderful and I think it has actually brought a few of my friends and I closer together (Ford & Gordon, 1999, p. 250).

The relative contributions of peers, family, coach and team to an injured athlete's social support may differ depending on the type of sport the athlete competes in (San Jose, 2003). Individual sport athletes (e.g., swimming, track and field, and gymnastics), depend more on the coach's support compared to team sport athletes (e.g., football, soccer) who tend to rely more on the support of teammates.

According to the integrated model an athlete's emotional response to injury impacts recovery outcomes. Emotions provide insight into the individual's attitude about "self" and the "world" (Evans & Hardy, 1999) and reveal how the athlete views a situation related to his or her own well-being. Several studies have found that most athletes' initial reaction to injury is frustration, depression, or both (Brewer, 2001; Brewer et al., 1993; Mainwaring, 1999; Smith et al., 1993). Brewer et al. (1993) conducted four studies to determine whether the disturbance of a pursuit of self-defining activities is related to a depressed mood. The results of all four studies suggested that the importance of an athletic role was associated with the

degree of depressive reaction to a negative life occurrence such as injury (Brewer et al., 1993). The negative associations with situational factors of emotional distress include (a) impairment of sport performance, (b) level of sport participation, (c) medical prognosis, (d) recovery progress, (e) surrounding social support for rehabilitation, and (f) social support satisfaction of the injured party (Brewer, 2001).

The third element of the integrated model that is postulated to influence recovery outcomes is the athlete's behavioral response. Behavioral responses of injured athletes have generated the most research on injury in the field of sport psychology. These responses can be personal, situational, emotional, and/or cognitive (Brewer, 2001). Wiese-Bjornstal and colleagues (1988) suggest that typical behavioral responses typically include coping responses, increased or decreased effort and intensity, and/or use or disuse of social support. For example, an athlete's behavioral reaction to rehabilitation can be affected by clinic-based activities, modification made to the athlete's physical activity, physical therapy exercises performed at home, and the possibility of taking medication (Brewer, 2001). Behavioral responses are typically influenced by both internal and external personal factors. Some examples include the athlete's health, pain tolerance, inner drive, task involvement, and mental toughness (Brewer, 2001).

Pain tolerance is also a personal factor that can influence athletes' behavioral response to injury. While physical pain and injury represent a part of most athletes' lives, individuals differ with respect to the way they respond to pain. Many high performance athletes continue to

compete through pain and in so doing risk possible serious injury. Others might interpret the injury to be worse than it is due to a relatively low pain tolerance.

Research in other fields has primarily been limited to quantitative studies on chronic pain, with few researchers using qualitative methods. Thomas and Pollio (2002) conducted phenomenological interviews with nurses to achieve a better understanding about patients' experience of living and coping with chronic pain. The results indicated that the body became the main focus of chronic pain patients. Themes associated with the experience included a feeling of being out of control, living with a pain that was invisible to others, and experiencing a separation from other people. Themes associated with patients' coping responses included choosing when to hide or reveal the pain to others, accepting and/or denying the pain, accepting the lack of control and choosing to connect or withdraw from others (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Young, White and McTeer (1994, 1995) found that both male and female athletes tend to minimize the potential consequences of pain when it threatens their athletic lives (Young & White, 1995). For example, an elite female athlete expressed her denial of pain in the following way:

The first time my injury occurred, I ignored it, assuming it would go away, as did my previous aches and pains. Bruising, swelling, and muscle pain are integral aspects of basketball. Once the pain persisted, it became annoying. It never occurred to me at the age of 14 that my body was breaking down and needed a rest. I simply pushed harder because my injury was causing me to fall behind in my progress. (Young & White, 1995, p.51).

Mainwaring (1999) conducted a longitudinal, qualitative study of 10 injured athletes, ranging in age from 20 to 29 years old, in an attempt to assess the psychological response to sport injury beginning with the onset of injury and continuing during rehabilitation. The results were consistent with the integrated model and revealed three domains of experience that characterized the injured athlete's journey through injury and rehabilitation: (a) physical, (b) psychological, and (c) social. Initially the athlete experienced physical trauma, which produced a psychological response. Each subsequent response represented an attempt on the part of the athlete to restore order or to regain equilibrium in his or her life. Components of the physical domain include: (a) the injury itself and (b) the treatment and rehabilitation process. The psychological domain consists of the athlete's cognitive and affective responses to the injury. All of the injured athletes in the Mainwaring (1999) study described their experience as being disruptive to their lives. Negative emotional responses included: (a) anger; (b) anxiety; (c) loss of control; (d) depression in association with a perceived sense of reduced athletic ability, muscle atrophy, and social support; (e) sense of loss; (f) disappointment; (g) fear; (h) frustration; (i) sense of reduced pride and self-esteem; and (j) shock. The social domain emphasizes the athlete's connection with others inside and outside his or her sport. Mainwaring (1999) suggested that all three domains of the injured athlete's life needed to be considered during severe injury rehabilitation and discouraged focusing solely on the athlete's physical recovery.

### *Career-Ending Injuries*

While the majority of studies of sport injury have focused on athletes who eventually return to competition, a more modest line of research has examined career-ending injuries. Much of this research has focused on athletes' life satisfaction. For example, Kleiber and Brock (1992), used a quantitative approach to compare the life satisfaction of 54 athletes who had their careers terminated due to injury to that of 371 other participants whose careers were terminated for other reasons. The results suggested that athletes who had been pursuing a professional athletic career displayed lower life-satisfaction and self-esteem (for as long as 5 to 10 years after their careers were terminated) compared to the athletes who had no professional aspirations. Kleiber and Brock suggested that the athletes for whom "career in sport was central to an unfolding life 'story,' a story in which the presumed conclusion has been dramatically altered," were more dramatically impacted by the career-ending injury experience (1992, p. 73).

In an autobiographical account of career termination ( Lotysz & Short, 2004), a former professional football player responded to 86 interview questions based on Taylor and Ogilvie's (2001) model of career termination and the Athletic Retirement Inventory (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). The interview focused on the athlete's professional football career, his career-ending injury, the support he received, and his thoughts as to how helping professionals might assist athletes in dealing with the experience of career termination (Lotysz & Short, 2004). The participant in this study stressed the importance of giving athletes the opportunity to talk about

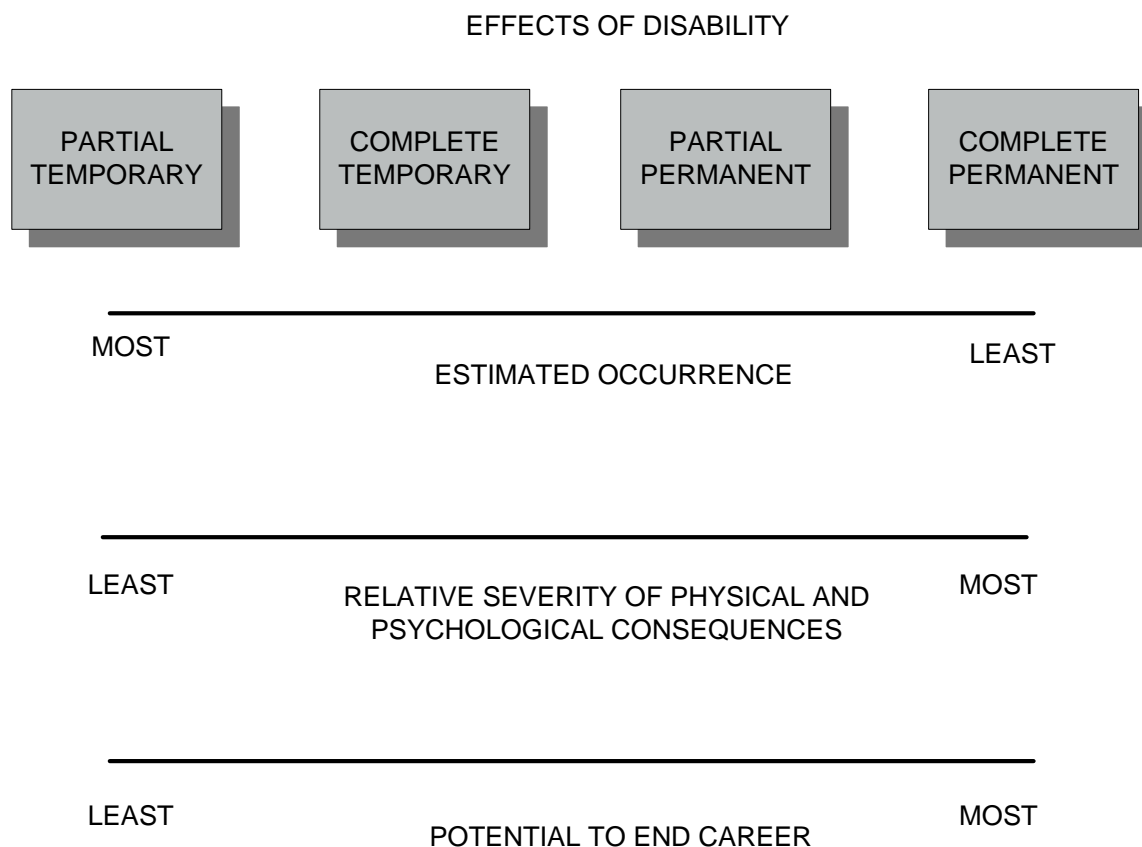
their career-ending injury experiences and how it has affected their lives. According to Lotysz and Short, when the final diagnosis comes, athletes

are forced to contend with the early age of career termination, the need to find another career to pursue, and the diverse ways in which they choose to or are forced to leave their sport (2004, p. 48).

Although Lotysz and Short's (2004) research provided some insight into the experience of forced retirement due to injury, relatively little is known about the phenomenon of career-ending injury. Recently, Loberg (2008) examined the impact of a career-ending injury and the transition out of sport on participants' self-concept and psychological distress. Participants were asked to recall the way they felt at several points during and following their injury, including the moment of injury, the moment they were informed by a medical professional that the injury was going to terminate their competitive career, and 9 to 15 months post-injury. They then completed questionnaires that required a retrospective assessment of their levels of self-concept and psychological distress at each point. The participants consisted of 11 injured athletes and a control sample of 13 healthy, competitive athletes who were matched by sport to each of the injured athletes. The results indicated that at the onset of their injury, injured athletes' total self-concept was reduced and their levels of psychological distress rose for a short period of time. The total self-concept scores of 9 to 15 months post-injury, however, were comparable to those of the healthy athletes. These results suggest that the impact of career-ending injury on athletes' psychological functioning may in some cases be transient. However, further research is needed

to gain a deeper understanding of the nature, extent, and duration of the impact of a career-ending injury.

In an early depiction of the various categories of disability due to injury, Lerch (1984) included career-ending injury (Figure 1) but said little more than that the estimated occurrence of a career-ending injury is relatively infrequent. He did, however, postulate that the physical and psychological consequences of career-ending injury would be considerably more pronounced than those for less severe injuries.





*Figure 1. Disability due to Injury.*

SOURCE: Adapted from Lerch, S. (1984). The adjustment of athletes to career ending injuries. *Arena Review*, 8(1), 54-67.

For example, the termination of a career may be viewed by the athlete as an opportunity lost, thus affecting the athlete's self-concept. The fact that complete and permanent injury in Lerch's model is associated with the highest likelihood of career termination warrants some discussion of the career transition literature.

### Research on Career Transition

An unanticipated injury, particularly one that produces a complete and permanent disability is one of four reasons athletes transition out of sport (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Lavalley, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). The other types of transition include age, deselection, and choice. Empirical studies have demonstrated that separation from a sport due to injury can be difficult (Brewer et al., 1993; Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004; Lavalley, 2000; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Sparkes, 1998), although discrepancies exist in the results of these studies regarding the degree of difficulty athletes experience with career transition (McPherson, 1984). Werthner and Orlick (1986) found transitions to be relatively difficult for athletes while other researchers obtained little evidence of psychological distress due to transition (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Kleiber & Brock, 1992; Baillie, 1993). Athletic career transitions can occur at different points and phases throughout an athlete's career (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Within an athlete's career both normative and nonnormative transitions are possible (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). A normative transition is one that is fairly obvious and/or predictable, while a nonnormative transition is situation-specific and often less predictable (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). An example of a normative transition is when an athlete shifts from being an amateur athlete to becoming a professional athlete. A

nonnormative transition may occur when the athlete's coach suddenly leaves the team to take another job or when the athlete experiences a sudden and severe injury.

### *Career Transition Models*

Since the career-ending injury experience produces a radical transition in an athlete's life, it is important to consider the important factors associated with the career transition process. Although a number of career transition models have been proposed in recent years, two have dominated the career transition literature. Both conceptual models focus on the demands of and reasons for the transition, coping processes, and the possible consequences of the transitions (See Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007, for a more detailed discussion). The first model was developed by Schlossberg (1981) and emphasizes the nature and challenges of human transitions of all kinds that occur in people's lives. Schlossberg proposed that transitions can change the role of the person, the relationships the person has with others, the person's routines, and/or the person's perceptions of himself or herself and/or the world (Schlossberg, 1989a). The extent to which one or more of these changes is present determines the magnitude of the transition. Thus, a transition experience for one person may be relatively traumatic whereas that of another could be relatively minor. The impact of a transition often lies within a "contradiction" or "inner conflict" between what the individual is and what he or she desires to be (Stambulova, 2000). Schlossberg (1981) defined a transition as an occurrence or outcome that can change one's belief about the world or the self and produce adjustments in one's behaviors and relationships. Reactions to transition

can range from perceived opportunity to perceived threat. Thus, each individual's cognitive appraisal is presumed to influence the person's reaction to the transition.

Schlossberg (2004) proposed three categories of transitions: anticipated transitions, non-event transitions, and unanticipated transitions. An anticipated transition is a major life event that is an expected part of one's development (e.g., going from elementary school to high school). The person's anticipation of the transition provides him or her with a long time to prepare for it (Schlossberg, 1989b). A non-event transition is one that occurs when the predicted event fails to occur (Schlossberg, 2004). Examples might include not getting promoted or failing to advance to the next level of a competitive team. An unanticipated transition is one that occurs as a result of an unexpected disruptive event. An example would be a career-ending athletic injury. Regardless of the type of transition, the resulting changes in the person's life can be a significant emotional challenge and require the development of various coping skills in order to successfully manage the transition. For example, one athlete undergoing a career-ending injury transition might cope by cultivating new interests, whereas another might cope by becoming completely inactive.

According to Schlossberg (2004), three components influence the complexity of the transition experience. First, a transition may change the individual's relationships, routines, roles, and assumptions (Schlossberg, 2004). For example, injury may produce a disruption of the athlete's role on the team, an adjustment in the athlete's daily training routines, a change in the athlete's relationships with teammates and coaches, and a change in his or her beliefs about him

or herself. The more profound these changes, the bigger the impact they would be predicted to have on the athlete (Schlossberg, 2004).

A second component influencing the complexity of the transition process is the time needed by the individual to deal with the transition. For some people, processing might take a few weeks or months while for others it could take years (Schlossberg, 2004). The third component influencing the transition is the athlete's mechanisms for coping. Schlossberg (2004) labels the coping process the "4 S system," with the "S's" referring to situation, self, supports, and strategies. The person's situation at the time of transition, such as the presence or absence of any other life altering events, can influence the person's ability to cope with the transition. In addition, the individual's inner strength (i.e., "self") can influence his or her coping ability. Finally, the support available to the individual (e.g., family, friends, etc.) and the strategies the individual employs to cope with change can determine how successfully the person manages the transition. For example, when an athlete has a career-ending injury he or she is no longer surrounded by his or her teammates in the same way as before the injury. Thus, the athlete may need to determine where and from whom he or she needs to obtain support.

Because sport injury is usually an unanticipated event, injured athletes may struggle with a lack of perceived control over their lives (Schlossberg, 1981), which in turn could affect their coping response. Schlossberg also relates the timing of transition to age relevancy and how people view their lives with regard to a timetable. Because an athletic lifespan is often unpredictable, it is difficult to determine how athletes might interpret a career-ending injury. To some extent the interpretation will be influenced by how athletes view themselves in their career

and how they accept the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Generally, when individuals retire, they are older and nearer the end of their careers. Hence, they are more likely to accept a new or different role in their lives than are individuals who are younger and forced to retire for other reasons (e.g., illness).

Whenever an injury occurs, it can be temporary, permanent, or uncertain, depending on the diagnosis from the doctor. Often there is a long waiting period prior to the final diagnosis. This waiting period of uncertainty can be stressful and unsettling for many athletes who have a need for control. Such a state of affairs can facilitate or debilitate the athlete's coping response (i.e., controlling what can be controlled or concluding "what's the use?").

A more recent athletic career transition model was developed by Stambulova and colleagues (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova, 2003, 2004). In this model, career transition is conceptualized as a process rather than a single event. Each athlete's career represents a process and throughout this process the athlete copes with a variety of internal and external demands or challenges on a continual basis (Stambulova, 2003). The athlete's success in coping with particular demands depends on the "dynamic balance between transition resources and barriers" (Stambulova, 2003, p.7). Successful coping occurs when the athlete's coping mechanisms match the transition demands. Stambulova emphasizes the importance of sport psychology interventions that provide athletes with the coping skills necessary for each type of transition. It is possible that the results of the present study will provide a better understanding of athletes' career-ending injury experience and some ways helping professionals can assist them in developing the coping skills necessary to manage their experience.

Stambulova (2004; 1994) proposes seven predictable transitional phases of athletes' sport careers:

1. The beginning of sports specialization
2. The transition to special intensive training in the chosen sport
3. The transition from mass popular sports to high achievement sports
4. The transition from junior sports to adult sports
5. The transition from amateur sports to professional sports
6. The transition from the culmination to the end of the sport career
7. The ending of the sport career.

Each transition has the potential to develop into a crisis if the athlete is not able to cope effectively and achieve the desired adjustment (Stambulova, 2000; 2004). Stambulova (2000) defines a crisis as “a turning (or transitional) point in the development of *a system* (an individual or a society, for example); it is connected to difficulty or even danger; and it influences the existence of the system” (p. 586). Each crisis allows the athlete to better understand the link between life events and athletic career stages and to develop connections between the past, present, and future, as well as between life outside sports and one’s athletic career (Stambulova, 2000).

The final transitional phase is the ending of the athlete’s sport career. Career termination can be either voluntary or involuntary. Voluntary retirement occurs when the athlete makes the decision to leave his or her sport; involuntary retirement occurs when factors beyond the athlete’s control such as injury, age, and deselection (Lavalley, 2000), force career termination.

Regardless of the cause for career termination, all athletes' careers end at some point and their responses to retirement often include a feeling of loss and a prolonged adjustment period (Crook & Robertson, 1991; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

Career retirement is a slow but sure transition process of social and psychological adaptation and pursuit of self-identity (Erpic et al., 2004; Lally, 2007; Lavalley, 2005; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Stier, 2007). For some athletes, retirement means parting from a valued position that brought them significant recognition and prestige (Curtis & Ennis, 1988). They may suffer from the loss of camaraderie with teammates and/or contact with friends the athlete competed or trained with. The impact of transition might last for a limited amount of time (Stier, 2007) or for a lifetime (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Fortunato & Marchant, 1999).

The impact of involuntary retirement is usually the most profound. Blinde and Stratta (1992) examined the unanticipated and involuntary career termination of 20 collegiate athletes who had participated in sports that were suddenly eliminated by their athletic department or who had been cut from their respective teams. In-depth interviews conducted four months after the career-ending event and again five months later revealed that the transition process was both disruptive and traumatic. One athlete described the level of hopelessness he sometimes experienced:

I felt my whole life was ended. I felt suicidal at times...I had nothing to live for anymore because...athletics is what kept me going through high school. It's what I was known for, for being *the* athlete in my high school. (Blinde & Stratta, 1992, p.17).



Another commented on the shock he experienced due to the unexpected nature of his career termination:

I think it's definitely not easy for anyone. I mean your sport is going to end at some point. When you end your collegiate career as a senior, you're expecting it... But this.... It's definitely harder because you are not expecting it. I mean it's so hard to describe, but it's nothing you ever really consider. It's definitely like someone has just died (Blinde & Stratta, 1992, p.16).

In addition to models of career transition proposed by sport psychology scholars, some discussion of this issue has occurred in the sociology literature. Specifically, Ebaugh (1988) examined the process of "role exit," which includes both "role-making" and "role-taking" perspectives. According to Ebaugh (1988), exiting a role entails a tension between an individual's future, present, and past, which evokes a method of detachment, disidentification, and resocialization. Role exit theory appears applicable to athletes undergoing career transition for two reasons. First, the theory addresses mid-life transitions rather than transitions related to old age (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998). Second, it offers a conceptual framework that can be applied to an athlete's transition from sport.

Ebaugh encapsulates the elements of an "ex" (e.g., ex-athlete) by suggesting:

To be an ex, therefore, is sociologically unique. It differs significantly from never having been part of a previous social role. Likewise, the exiting process has unique characteristics that distinguish it from the process of socialization into new roles.

Disengagement, disidentification, dealing with role residual, and being categorized as an ex-member of a group are a few of the elements that make role exit a unique social process (Ebaugh, 1988, p.6).

The notion of role exit is different from that of other types of transitions in several ways. First, the individual's past role is presumed to influence his or her present and future identity. Ebaugh (1988) refers to this influence as the "holdover identity." Athletic identity is for many athletes an example of "holdover identity." In addition, a person's role exit influences other individuals as well as the transitioning person. Finally, the way others within society view the person is related to how they viewed the person in the past (i.e., who he or she used to be). For example, a retired athlete may view himself as an "athlete" but that does not completely define his entire being. However fans or spectators may be unable to view the individual as anything other than "the athlete."

Ebaugh (1988) designed a comprehensive model to explain the four stages involved in becoming an "ex". They are called: (1) "First Doubts," (2) "Seeking Alternatives," (3) "The Turning Point," and (4) "Creating the Ex-Role." The first stage arises when an individual begins to doubt or question his or her role commitment within his or her changing situation. This reinterpretation of a social role that had been taken for granted previously may occur for a number of reasons, such as burnout, disappointments, and/or a specific event like an injury (Ebaugh, 1988). After the individual acknowledges dissatisfaction with his or her role, "seeking alternatives" becomes the next step. In this stage the individual contemplates alternative roles and compares the rewards and costs to those of the current role. This helps the person visualize

how he or she might fit in a new role and prepares him or her emotionally for the next stage, the “turning point.” During this stage old social obligations fade away or become undesirable and new interests are considered viable. Precipitants of this stage include: (a) particular, usually traumatic events, (b) situations that represent a climax to a series of events, sometimes described as “the straw that broke the camel’s back,” (c) time constraints (e.g., diminishing opportunity due to increasing age), (d) events that provide justification or excuses for an exit, and (e) recognition of the possibility that a decision to not exit could create serious consequences (Ebaugh, 1988). During the final stage of the exit process the individual creates the ex-role.

The ex-role constitutes a unique sociological phenomenon in that the expectations, norms, and identity associated with it do not so much consist in what one is currently doing but rather stem from expectations, social obligations, and norms related to one’s previous role (Ebaugh, 1988, p.149).

This process of assuming an ex-role includes some tension between the individual’s future, present, and past. For example, an elite athlete who has spent a large amount of his or her past and present training for his or her sport may have difficulty accepting the ex-role when his or her career ends abruptly due to injury. This transition and change in identity may create a tension between the athlete’s future, present, and past.

In a recent study, Stier (2007) utilized role theory, role identity theory, and symbolic interactionism to examine the career transition of eight Swedish professional tennis players who had had highly prominent social roles. The results of interviews with the players revealed a

pattern of role exit consistent with the four stages of Ebaugh's (1988) model. For example, leaving tennis did not just represent a withdrawal process in social space for these players, but also a source of questioning self-identity and self-concept, when "creating the ex-role." One athlete described the transition as difficult. "I was among the best players in the world and suddenly it's like being an amateur again. It's tough to realize that now you are worse at what you are doing. It affected my self-esteem" (Stier, 2007, p.107). Clearly this transition was linked to the ex-athlete's former role, which he considered to be a prominent component of his self-identity (Stier, 2007).

### Summary

The current literature on sport injury and career transition address the impact each of these events may have on an individual. The integrated model of sport injury (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998); the Human Adaptation to Transition model (Schlossberg, 1981); and Stambulova's (2000; 2004) transitional phases and the process of role-exit (Ebaugh; 1988) provide helpful frameworks for exploring the injury and life transition experience. However, the influence of career-ending injury on the life experience of athletes has received relatively little attention to date.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to obtain in-depth descriptions of the lived experience of athletes who have had a career-ending injury. Using an existential phenomenological approach, the focus of the study was on the athletes' own perceptions of this experience.

### Definition of Terms

The following definitions were used for this study:

Athletic Identity is a person's identification with his or her role as an athlete (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993).

Career-Ending Injury is one that refers to the inability to complete one's athletic career as expected due to an acute injury (Heil, 1993).

Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes the importance of living with a sharp awareness of responsibility and freedom as to who we are (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Existential Phenomenology is a "philosophical discipline which seeks to understand the events of human existence in a way that is free of the presuppositions of our cultural heritage" (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989, p. 6).

Hermeneutics is the philosophy introduced by Gadamer that challenges the researcher to think about the process of understanding and misunderstanding (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Injury is any physical impairment that restricts an athlete's active participation in sport (Ford & Gordon, 1999).

Phenomenology is a method of inquiry that "tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. vii).

Transition is a phenomenon that can be said to occur if an event or nonevent results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (Schlossberg, 1981).

#### Assumptions of the Study

The following assumptions are made in regard to this study:

1. The personal experiences of athletes are important in understanding the experience of a career-ending injury.
2. The athletes in this study were able to effectively articulate their experiences of a career-ending injury and communicate their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as openly as possible.
3. The phenomenological interview is a verbal method for attaining a useful description of athlete's personal experiences of a career-ending injury.

#### Delimitation of the Study

This study was delimited to the experience of thirteen athletes who volunteered to participate and who varied with respect to the type of injury, timing of injury, severity of injury, sport, and sport level.

### Limitations of the Study

This investigation included the following potential limitations:

1. Even though the athletes in this study were asked to describe their experience of a career-ending injury, the experience occurred between 3 months and 22 years prior to the interview. This lapse of time could have made it difficult to recall their experiences in a vivid memory.
2. Even though every attempt was made to identify themes that characterized each participant's experience of a career-ending injury, complete identification may not have been accomplished.
3. Some prospective participants chose not to participate because they were not ready to discuss their experience. These athletes may have provided additional themes that were not obtained from those who did choose to participate.
4. Four interviews were conducted on the phone, which prevented the researcher from observing non-verbal behavior.

## CHAPTER 2

### QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research begins with a question. Qualitative research provides a means of answering questions that deal with an individual's experience. A major method of qualitative research is the qualitative interview, which allows different people to talk about similar experiences using dissimilar words and different experiences using comparable words (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). Qualitative researchers recognize that human experience is not a static phenomenon and are careful to consider the context within which the experience has occurred and within what is described. Pollio and colleagues describe the human experience as,

a sensibly changing perspectival relatedness to the conditions, possibilities, and constraints of the world. It is always intensely personal and only infrequently transparent to itself; the meaning of one's experience frequently changes as it is described and/or reflected upon (1997, pp. 28-29).

According to Locke, qualitative research is a "systematic, empirical strategy for answering questions about people in a bounded social context...to define and answer the primordial question 'What's going on here?'" (1989, p. 2). This method is similar to the interaction that occurs between a sport psychology consultant and an athlete during a performance enhancement intervention (Dale, 1996). Therefore, qualitative research provides an avenue for discovering aspects of athletes' experiences that are not publicly measurable, such as the experience of a career-ending injury.



According to Thomas and Pollio (2002), qualitative methods allow researchers to (a) work with people as co-researchers rather than as subjects, (b) highlight feelings and perceptions through in-depth interviewing, and (c) provide rigorous interpretation of interview text. Therefore, to learn about a person's experience it is necessary to obtain that person's description of the experience through a dialogue. In this dialogue, the researcher and the participant are mutually devoted to exploring the world of the participant. Their verbal exchanges allow the participant to describe his or her experience, and to make the meaning of the experience clear to the other person (Pollio et al., 1997).

#### The "Nature" of an Existential Phenomenological Investigation

Existential phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that combines the philosophy of existentialism with the methods of phenomenology. Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with exploring what exists and what is occurring now. Phenomenology seeks to study the "phenomena" and/or experience. Both existentialism and phenomenology seek a rigorous description of human life as it is reflected upon and lived within first person ambiguity, urgency and concreteness. Hence, existential phenomenological psychology “seeks to explicate the *essence, structure, or form* of both human experience and human behavior as revealed through essentially *descriptive* techniques including disciplined reflection” (Valle et al., 1989, p. 6).

#### Philosophical Foundations of Existential-Phenomenology

The experiential field of an individual is not chaotic but organized. Existential philosophy provides grounds for believing that "reflections emerging in one dialogic context will *not* be incommensurate with, even if different from, those emerging in another context" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 34). A number of key theorists have shaped the philosophy of existential phenomenology. In the following section, a brief depiction of the contributions made by several of these individuals is provided.

### *Søren Kierkegaard*

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is considered the founder of existential philosophy. The philosophy of existentialism emphasizes the importance of living with a sharp awareness of responsibility and freedom as to who we are (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Its intention is to "elucidate the fundamental themes with which human beings invariably struggle" (Valle et al., 1989, p. 6).

### *Edmund Husserl*

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) was a German philosopher and is the person most often identified as the founding father of phenomenology. Husserl was also one of the first philosophers to use the term phenomenology, in order to identify a new rigorous science for the systematic investigation of "everyday life" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The phenomenological approach emphasizes consciousness and the need to describe human experience. It presents a way of looking at "'the things themselves' in their very essence" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 9).

Husserl used the word, *Lebenswelt*, or *life-world*, to represent the starting point (or ground) of existential-phenomenological description. *Lebenswelt* is the symbolic beginning of a dialogue co-created by the person and the world. In phenomenology the cause-effect relationship of normal science is eliminated (Valle et al., 1989).

### *Hans-Georg Gadamer*

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was a German philosopher who in modern times re-introduced the concept of hermeneutics, which challenges the researcher to think about the process of understanding and misunderstanding. In a more expanded sense, Gadamer suggested it is possible to view the life as a text individuals are always reading and decoding (Valle et al., 1989). According to Linge,

the task of philosophical hermeneutics, therefore, is ontological rather than methodological. It seeks to throw light on the fundamental conditions that underlie the phenomenon of understanding in all its modes, scientific and nonscientific alike and that constitute understanding as an event over which the interpreting subject does not ultimately preside (Gadamer, 1976/2004, p. xi).

Gadamer believed that the interpretation of the text and/or dialogue is related to both personal and historical memory. In order to understand a person's experience requires jumps between then and now and you and me (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Therefore, the researcher's objective is not to view the participant as an object but to make an effort to understand the person's experience with the person's assistance. Such an objective is also important for the sport

psychology consultant attempting to interpret what athletes say about their experiences, if he or she is to help the athlete with his or her performance. Thus, hermeneutics is an extremely significant component of analyzing dialogue. According to Thomas and Pollio,

The meaning of a word or phrase to one person is often not the same as it is to another person, and what seems required is that both individuals explore the meaning of any and all terms before even a seemingly straightforward question can be used as a springboard for dialogue. (2002, p. 22).

Gadamer suggested that an understanding of the meaning of a person's experience is closely related to the individual's historical and personal context. Therefore, the intent of existential phenomenological dialogue can be described as an attempt to fuse the text of the participant's interview and the interpreter's present situation (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

#### *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*

The philosophy of existential-phenomenology as it relates to sport psychology has perhaps been articulated best by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). Of primary importance to Merleau-Ponty was the ability of the human being to describe the human experience from the first-person perspective (Pollio et al., 1997). Merleau-Ponty wrote that phenomenology "tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide" (1945/1962, p. vii). Two concepts that are foundational to a description of a person's experience are intentionality and the figure/ground phenomenon.

### *Intentionality*

To describe the human experience one needs to consider his or her continual engagement between person and world (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Intentionality is defined as the “basic structure of human existence that captures the fact that human beings are fundamentally related to the contexts in which they live, or more philosophically, that all being is to be understood as 'being-in-the-world'" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 7). Hence, intentionality describes the structure of the present situation for each individual. Within that situation, however, the specifics for each individual may differ. Individuals learn about themselves through encounters with people, ideas and others. According to Pollio and colleagues, "what we are aware of in a situation reveals something important about who we are" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 8). Hence, intentionality concerns both the person and the person's world.

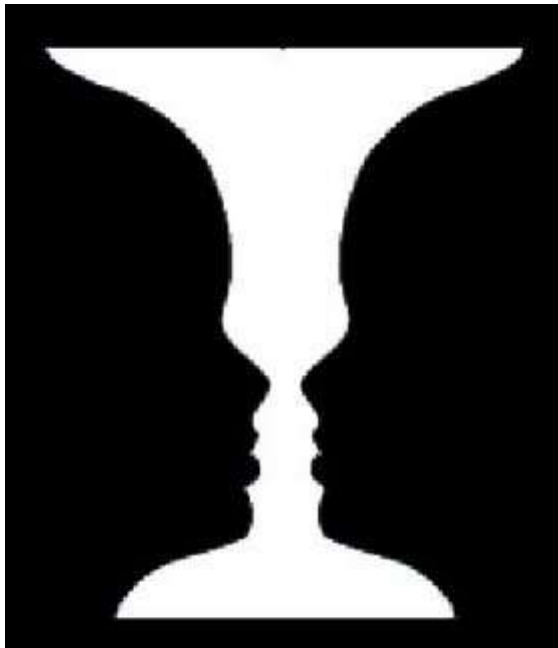
### *Figure/Ground*

To be complete, the notion of intentionality has to be considered in connection with the figure/ground relationship. Together with intentionality, Merleau-Ponty recognized that the perceived "thing" as a form or figure always exists against some background (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Rubin, as quoted by Pollio, stated the following four properties of figure and ground are necessary for obtaining an accurate representation of first-person perceptual experience:

1. "The figure appears to have a definite form and a sharp boundary; the ground is less defined and appears more diffuse.
2. The figure is experienced as closer than the ground, which is experienced as behind the figure.
3. The figure is more easily named and/or described than the ground.

4. The figure is experienced as in clearer focus than the ground" (1997, p. 12).

One of the more well known representations of how the figure and ground co-produce each other in human experience is the famous "vases and faces" diagram by Edgar Rubin (see *Figure 2*). Depending on the perspective of the individual looking at the figure, it can be perceived as either two faces or a vase. It is important to note, however, that neither the vase nor the faces can be viewed without the other (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Although the two objects co-exist, only one can be figural at a time (Pollio et al., 1997). Consequently,



*Figure 2.* The "vase and faces" drawing.

SOURCE: Adapted from Thomas, S., & Pollio, H.R. (2002). *Listening to Patients: A Phenomenological Approach to Nursing Research and Practice*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc.

it is never experientially valid to talk of an isolated figure of experience, perceptual or otherwise; rather, we must always talk about the figure/ground structure of experience (note the slash) to emphasize that human experience is a patterned event defined by focal and background aspects (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 13).

According to Thomas and Pollio,

All being can only be experienced as a being-in-the-world in which my "being" is figure and "in-the-world" is ground. There are no figures by themselves, and human experience is a patterned event constituted both by its central and contextual aspects (2002, p. 18).

Therefore, as an individual's life is experienced, its first-person meaning of that experience must always be considered in relation to each of its grounds. "Figure/ground implies a rootedness to contexts in much the same way as intentionality implies a relatedness to the world in general" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 16).

According to Merleau-Ponty, the four existential grounds that serve as background for many figural experiences are time, body, others and world. Time as an existential ground is something that moves away from us and toward us (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Merleau-Ponty considered the body to be an essential background of human existence that could be viewed in at least two different ways. First, the body might be considered as a "system of biological parts that work together as an overall pattern" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, pp. 53-54), and second, the body could be viewed more subjectively, in which case evaluations and social attitudes become important. The existential ground of other people is concerned with relationships and social interactions with significant others as they relate to an individual's experience. Lastly, the world

as an existential ground represents the lived space surrounding the individual. Thomas and Pollio state that, "no less than the domains of body, time, and others, the domain of world may be considered either from an objective point of view or from that of a being whose destiny is to be found and understood only as meaningful being-in-the-world" (2002, p. 206). It is within the context of one or more of these grounds that most people's experiences are interpreted.

### The Existential-Phenomenological Approach Used in This Study

Existential phenomenological interviewing was the major research methodology used in this study to obtain participants' descriptions of their career-ending injury experience in their own words. More specifically, the University of Tennessee model of qualitative research was used to conduct the interviews and thematize the resulting text (Pollio et al., 1997; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Figure 2 provides a general outline of the steps that were followed (Pollio, Graves, & Arfken, 2007). At the right of the diagram are six different focal points corresponding to the different phases of the research process. The activities that comprised each phase are discussed next.

#### *First Phase*

The first phase, "self as the focus," emphasizes the role of the researcher in choosing the topic. During this phase, a bracketing interview is conducted to help the researcher determine any assumptions or perceptions he or she may have prior to the study. Bracketing provides a way of seeing the research topic and it "refers to an attempt to identify and correct interpretations



in which the phenomenological perspective has been co-opted by incompatible suppositions"

(Pollio et al., 1997, p. 48). Accordingly, its purpose is to preserve consistency between the

participant's worldview and the researcher's interpretations.

An alternative approach to bracketing is for the researcher to provide a personal statement of his

or her reasoning for conducting the research. The exercise enables the researcher to experience

what it is like to think about personal experience and to provide a thematic description of the

researcher's prior understanding of the phenomena. This allows the researcher to become more

familiar with any presuppositions and sensitize him/herself to any possible impositions he or she

may place on the participants and/or the researcher's interpretation (Pollio et al., 1997; Thomas

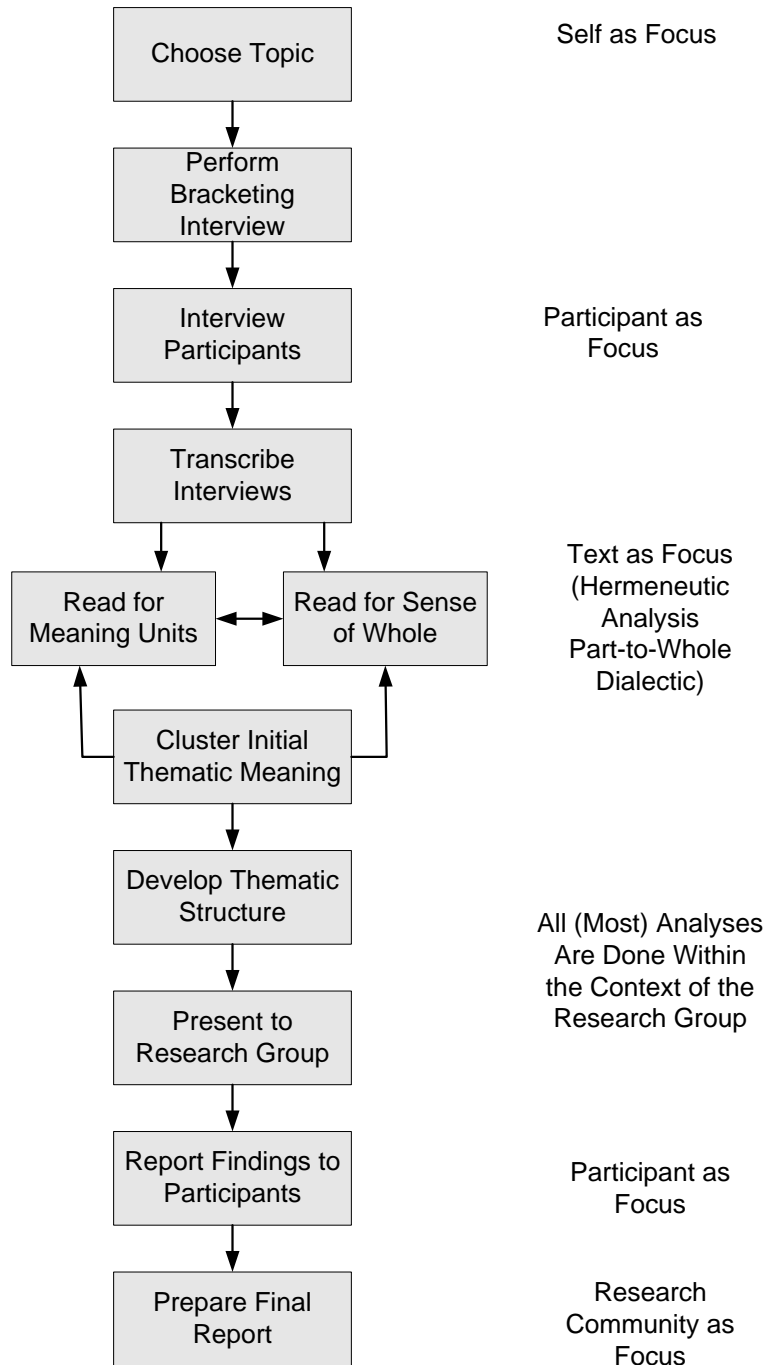
& Pollio, 2002).

### *Second Phase*

During the second phase, "participant as focus," participants are interviewed and the focus is on listening to their experiences. As in most research, there is a concern for potential bias. However, in existential phenomenological research, the meaning of the interview question is dependent on a commitment between the participant and the researcher. Consequently, the discourse between the two is grounded in participant experiences of the phenomenon and the context of the interview (Pollio et al., 1997).

As a result, it is extremely important for the researcher to initiate the dialogue with a question that addresses something the participant knows about and can elaborate. According to

Thomas and Pollio, "for purposes of description, 'what questions' not only are easier to answer but also help the person describe his or her experience by directing



*Figure 3.* Summary of Steps in Conducting an Existential-Phenomenological Study.

SOURCE: Adapted from Pollio, H.R., Henley, T., Thompson, C.B. (1997). *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

the conversation to 'what you were aware of' in some specific situation" (2002, p. 24). In response to the researcher's questions, the participant sets the flow of the dialogue. The researcher's responsibility is to create a safe and comfortable environment for the dialogue to occur. In this sense, the "interviewer *is* the research tool" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 26).

### *Third Phase*

The third phase, "text as focus," includes the transcription, reading and initial interpretation of the interviews. When interpreting qualitative data, the goal is not to maintain an a priori theory or to force the phenomena into specific categories to meet a theory (Polkinghorne, 1989). Rather, it is important to be aware of hermeneutic procedures to view the data as "text" and to concentrate on its meaning (Pollio et al., 1997). Merleau-Ponty believes that existential interpretation does not allow the researcher to completely "step outside of one's history to view the world from some ahistorical, transcendent perspective" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 45). The researcher attempts to clarify the transcripts in searching for a description of the lived experience. Such clarification is accomplished through (a) bracketing and (b) the hermeneutic circle (Pollio et al., 1997).

The interpretive group setting provides another opportunity to insure rigor with the existential phenomenological method. It is not necessary for the individuals in the group to be experts in the phenomenon being discussed. Rather, their role is to question the satisfactoriness of the researcher's suggested interpretation of the text. The group may also assist in identifying themes the researcher might otherwise have overlooked. The diversity of the group also provides alternative perspectives. Lastly, an interpretive research group functions as a public test

of the researcher's interpretation, thus increasing the rigor of the analysis. When someone suggests an interpretation, anyone in the group can ask "show, where in the text, you got that interpretation" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 49).

The bracketing interview is closely linked to another interpretive procedure, the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is a procedure used to relate a part of some text to its entirety (Pollio et al., 1997). There are three ways to implement this procedure. First, the researcher can use the interpretive research group to share his or her initial interpretation of the interviews. The researcher then periodically revisits the group to present any further interpretation he or she may have derived. Second, the researcher uses the interpretive research group to discuss and identify possible figural domains. Lastly, the researcher interprets each interview both by itself and in relation to all other interviews. The hermeneutic process is not meant to determine generalizability but to enhance the breadth of the researcher's interpretive vision (Pollio et al., 1997).

The discussions and dialogue about the text eventually produce themes and a thematic structure. Themes attempt to capture participant experiences as revealed in various situations and to describe the experiential relationships among them. As the researcher/interpreter reviews the interviews he or she takes into account a broader set of experiences and identifies ways in which one circumstance or condition sustains an experiential similarity to another (Pollio et al., 1997). The experiential commonalities depicted in terms of themes allow the researcher to develop a thematic structure by using the "part-to-whole procedure characteristic of hermeneutic description" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 52). The final product of an existential phenomenological

interpretation is the thematic structure, which describes the interrelationships between themes and the participants' experiences (Pollio et al., 1997).

#### *Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Phases*

Once textual interpretation is complete, additional analyses involving the identification of a thematic structure is accomplished with the assistance of the interpretive research group (fourth phase). During the fifth phase, "participant as focus," the thematic structure is presented to each participant in order to obtain their reactions to a question whether or not the structure has captured his or her experience. If not, modifications are made with the participant's assistance. In the sixth and final phase, "research communication as focus," the manuscript describing results of the study is prepared and distributed to the academic community, practitioners, or other individuals who might be interested in it or could possibly benefit from the information.

#### Methodological Rigor in Qualitative Research

According to Pollio and colleagues, there is no methodological guarantee that any rule applied in a specific interview encounter will have the same meaning or effect for the interviewer and the person being interviewed. For the interview to be a "path" to understanding the life-world of a participant, it must be allowed to emerge freely rather than to be constrained by predetermined injunctions (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 33).

It is also important to acknowledge that results can never be separated from the research situation. The following comment by Colaizzi (1978) emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives and the researcher's recognition of varied experience when interpreting a phenomenon:

It is a refusal to tell the phenomenon what it is, but a respectful listening to what the phenomenon speaks of itself. To the extent that I cannot deny my own experience, I cannot deny that others have experience. Objectivity, then, requires me to recognize and affirm both my own experience and the experience of others (p. 52).

According to Thomas and Pollio (2002, p.44), every phenomenological researcher should consider the following pair of questions during a phenomenological study: "(a) what about the topic was important enough for me to make it the major concern of an investigation? and (b) in what ways and situations have I experienced the phenomenon?"

### *Integrative Validity*

In phenomenological research, the criterion of validity is based upon the extent to which a reader acknowledges the point of view expressed in the researcher's interpretation of participants' experiences. This criterion does not force the reader to conclude that the researcher's interpretation is the "only or even the 'best' one" nor does it prevent the existence of other interpretations (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 53). Rather, the reader should be able to respond in the affirmative to the following question, "Is there convincing evidence for believing that the

thematic description affords insight into the experiential world of the participants?" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 53).

Figure 3 depicts the characteristics necessary for achieving satisfactory “phenomenological validity.” They include rigor, appropriateness, plausibility, and illumination (Pollio et al., 1997). As can be seen in the figure, the methodological and experiential concerns are reciprocal.

Methodological concerns focus on the procedural structure of the research (i.e., rigor and appropriateness) whereas experiential concerns focus more on the meaning and significance of the interpretive results (i.e., plausibility and illumination) (Pollio et al., 1997). For this study, plausibility is established in the results chapter where the thematic structure and supporting statements by participants are presented. Any resulting illumination is intended to produce an appreciation of the researcher’s interpretation or perhaps to engender alternative interpretations, which could promote even further understanding (Pollio et al., 1997).

### *Reliability*

Another important aspect of empirical investigation is reliability. In quantitative research, reliability focuses on the consistency of the research methods to obtain stable





*Figure 4. Phenomenological Validity.*

SOURCE: Adapted from Pollio, H.R., Henley, T., Thompson, C.B. (1997). *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

scores from the instrument used (Creswell, 2005). This definition of reliability is not possible in qualitative research since two interviews are never exactly same. Thus, in phenomenological interpretation, the criterion of reliability is based on thematic consistency (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

It is important to realize that an individual's explanation, depiction and/or meaning of an experience can change over time, reflecting ongoing changes in the person's life. Nevertheless, reliability should be evident to the reader if the reader is able to appreciate what the researcher sees in the text. Reliability also presumes the potential for achieving a similar thematic structure from other individuals with comparable experiences.

*Phenomenological Generalizability*

A key concern with many qualitative studies is whether the results can be applied to a group of people beyond those involved in the research. Polkinghorne addressed this point when he noted: “The purpose of phenomenological research is to describe the structure of an experience, not to describe the characteristics of a group who have had the experience” (1989, p. 48). By interviewing a number of individuals, variation is added to the research.

Thomas and Pollio (2002) feel that *phenomenological generalizability* also stems from the reader; each reader draws from the results, which in turn broadens the “generalizability” of the results. An investigation of the phenomenon of career-ending injuries is intended to enhance the current understanding of this phenomenon from the athlete’s perspective. According to Giorgi (2005, p. 77),

clarification of an actual lived state of affairs can lead to constructive change because there is often a discrepancy between what we are actually living and what we think we are living. A discovery of this difference and its correction can lead to more authentic living and interaction with others and thus to a better world.

### Summary

The methodology presented suggests the steps necessary to fulfill the objective of further learning about the athlete’s experience of career-ending injuries. Some previous research has examined athletes’ experience of injury but most of this work has dealt primarily with athletes who eventually recover from their injury and return to their sport. The purpose of the present

study is to extend this research by exploring the phenomenon of athletes' experience of career-ending injuries and of their transition to life after sport. Using an existential phenomenological approach, participants were asked to describe the career-ending injury experience in their own words.

CHAPTER 3  
METHODOLOGY  
Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify the personal meaning of an athlete's experience of a career-ending injury utilizing an existential phenomenological approach. In this chapter, a description of the participants and of the following methodological procedures is presented: a) the bracketing interview, b) a pilot interview, c) selection of participants, d) interviewing and transcription, and e) thematic analysis.

Participants

Thirteen individuals from different sports participated in the study. Of these, 7 were male and 6 were female. It should be noted that each participant provided a retrospective account of his or her career-ending injury, which had occurred anywhere from 3 months to 22 years prior to the interview. It is also important to note that the severity of the career-ending injuries differed across participants. One of the athletes was able to begin another sport and achieve success at the NCAA Division-I level; others were able to remain physically active, even though their life as a competitive athlete had ended. Two of the athletes experienced life-altering injuries (e.g., a leg amputation). A brief description of each participant is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

*Description of participants*

Pseudonym	Sex	Sport	Level	Injury	Current Age	Length of time since injury	Interview format
Spencer	Male	Gymnastics	Elite youth	Back	26	10 years	Face-to-face
Grayson	Male	Lacrosse	NCAA D-I	Shoulder	35	5 years	Face-to-face
Willie	Male	Football	NCAA D-I	Nerve Damage	22	2 years	Face-to-face
Dawn	Female	Diving	NCAA D-I	Back	33	12 years	Phone
Jason	Male	WWE Wrestling	Professional	Neck	26	2 years	Face-to-face
Brooke	Female	Pole Vault	NCAA D-I	Back	20	3 months	Face-to-face
Lynn	Female	Soccer	NCAA D-I	Knee	21	3 years	Face-to-face
Matt	Male	Basketball	Professional	Knee	53	22 years	Face-to-face
Brad	Male	Diving	NCAA D-I	Eye	23	2 years	Phone

Table 1 (continued)

Pseudonym	Sex	Sport	Level	Injury	Current Age	Length of time since injury	Interview format
Little Lig	Female	Pole Vault	NCAA D-I	Neck	26	5 years	Face-to-face
Jackie	Female	Gymnastics	Elite youth	Back	34	16 years	Face-to-face
ITY	Male	Track & Field	Elite senior	Leg amputation	43	15 years	Phone
Ann	Female	Diving	NCAA D-I	Shoulder	24	2 years	Phone

The participants represented a variety of sports including individual, team, and professional. However, all of the athletes competed at a high-level within their respective sports.

### Methodological Procedures

#### Bracketing Interview

A blending of viewpoints always influences the human understanding of an experience. As a result, it is important for the phenomenological interviewer to remember that in a phenomenological interview “there are always two people and two histories, and communication takes place only when this fact is considered” (Pollio et al., 2007, p.255). The bracketing interview is meant to provide the researcher with an opportunity to identify her assumptions, knowledge and/or theories regarding participant experiences, which in this case was the experience of a career-ending injury. Thomas and Pollio (2002) describe the bracketing interview as a process that seeks to remove conceptual biases that may possibly alter the interpretation of the participant’s experience. Based on information obtained from such an interview, the researcher is in a better position to become aware of presuppositions and to allow participants the freedom to describe their experience from their own perspective and in their own words.

Prior to interviewing participants in this study, I participated in an audio recorded bracketing interview conducted by an individual skilled in interpretive research. In this interview I responded to the following initial question: "Why don't you tell me what your question is going to be and how you got interested in it?" Follow-up questions probed for my

perceptions of what the experience of a career-ending injury was like. Following the interview I transcribed the tape and obtained the assistance of an interpretive research group at the University of Tennessee to help thematize my responses. At the University of Tennessee, 2 or 3 interpretive research groups meet weekly for a 2-hour time period to read aloud transcripts and work together to analyze qualitative data. This group consists of individuals from a variety of disciplines (i.e., Nursing, Psychology, Political Science, Cultural Studies, Sport Studies, etc.) The reading is stopped intermittently when something in the text is noted as important or interesting to some member of the interpretive research group. All members of the group understood the nature of phenomenological research and several members suggested alternative viewpoints to my own, which reminded me of the importance of avoiding stereotypical interpretations of participants' responses.

As the transcript is read aloud during the group meetings, anyone is able to stop the reading at any point. This dialogue within the group consists of comments such as: "what stood out for you in that section?" As different members of the group draw the attention to a specific word or phrase, the rest of the group interjects the meaning they see in what is being read. When and if there are alternative viewpoints, the group discusses further and/or decides to read further to see if the answer is within the rest of the text.

Two main themes emerged as figural in my own personal experience of having a career-ending injury. The first theme dealt with the impact a career-ending injury had on my life. For me, a turning point represented a shift in my life that was initially frightening. I had planned on training for at least three more years but in an instant, my plan was over. It was important for me



to realize, however, that the participants I would be interviewing may not have experienced a similar shift. A second theme in my own experience of career-ending injury was my love of sport. The shift I experienced was away from something I loved which caused me to feel as though my identity was cut-off. It also led me to experience the loss of the friends for a while. I also spoke of how my love for sports has kept me involved in sports through coaching and sport psychology.

Although I spoke about my experience as an athlete with a career-ending injury, I also understood that not every interview would necessarily mimic my own and described that of another friend who had a different experience of leaving her sport. As a result, I realized it was important for me to avoid choosing prospective participants who had similar experiences to mine or ask the participants to further elaborate on experiences I may have had that they did not mention in their interviews.

Additional aspects of my bracketing interview are summarized in the following statement.

I am currently a third-year doctoral student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I also hold a graduate assistantship with the men's and women's athletic departments in the area of sport psychology. I completed a Master's degree at the University of Utah and my thesis was entitled "The Effects of a Career-Ending Injury on an Athlete's Self-Concept and Psychological Distress." I first became interested in athletes' experience of career-ending injury when my own career was cut short in two different sports due to injuries. The first time was at the age of 14 when my gymnastic career was ended due to a back injury. The second time, at the age of 22, I

experienced the end of my diving career due to another back injury. Although the latter experience occurred 13 years ago, I still remember its impact on my life. Having progressed through my own healing process, I now feel that it is important to provide a voice to others who have experienced a career-ending injury.

### Pilot Interview

Following my bracketing interview, I conducted a pilot interview with one athlete who experienced a career-ending injury. The interview provided me with an opportunity to refine my interviewing skills and to obtain feedback from the participant regarding the interview question and interview procedure. I asked the participant to respond to the following question: “When you think about your career-ending injury, what sorts of events, situations, and/or personal experiences stand out to you?” I asked follow-up questions only to obtain additional details or clarification of the participant’s responses. A transcript of the pilot interview was thematized with the assistance of the interpretive research group and the decision was made to make no changes to the research question. As a result, this pilot interview was included in the final study.

### Selection of Participants

In the process of recruiting participants, it is important to select an assortment of individuals who offer a “variety of specific experiences of the topic being explored” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p.48) rather than a more restricted collection of descriptions. Therefore, a purposeful sample of former athletes who had experienced the phenomenon of career-ending

injury was recruited as participants in this study. No limitations were placed on gender, race, ethnicity, or religious affiliation.

Participants were required to meet four criteria for eligibility. They had to (1) have experienced the phenomenon; (2) be willing to talk about the experience; (3) have been told by a medical professional that their athletic injury was in fact career ending; and (4) be above the age of 18. Individuals were recruited from a variety of sports.

A purposeful, snowball sampling method was used to identify prospective participants for the study. Recruitment was accomplished in the following ways: (1) an announcement was circulated to coaches, athletic trainers, athletes, and retired athletes who were familiar with the researcher, (2) participants were asked to share information about the study with other potential participants, and (3) individuals who had participated in the researcher's master's thesis project were invited to participate in this study.

Phenomenological research does not suggest a pre-determined sample size, although the sample size recommended by Pollio and colleagues (2002; 2007) is between 6 and 12 participants. Data collection is usually continued until the ongoing analysis suggests that no new themes are emerging from the text. At that point, two additional interviews were completed to insure no further themes were identified. In all, 13 individuals comprised the final pool of participants in this study (see Table 1).

#### Interviewing and Transcription

Prospective participants were contacted via phone and e-mail. Once it was determined that they met the criteria for participation, we discussed a date and time for the interview.

Interviews took place in multiple locations including my office, outdoors, a country club lounge, my home, a library, a participant's office, and over the telephone.

Both face-to-face ( $n = 9$ ) and phone interviews ( $n = 4$ ) began with a brief introductory conversation to establish rapport. I was cautious to avoid revealing any information that could be directly related to the actual content of the study. Some social conversation also typically occurred after the interview was completed.

Prior to the interview, participants had an opportunity to ask any questions they might have about the study and those who agreed to participate signed a consent form (see Appendix A). The participants who were interviewed over the phone received in the mail a copy of the consent form with an addressed envelope to return to the researcher. They were then asked to select a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes. Participants were then asked to respond to the following phenomenological question, "When you think about your career-ending injury, what sorts of events, situations, and/or personal experiences stand out to you?"

During the interviews, participants described their lived experience of a career-ending injury in rich detail. None of the participants asked me to stop the interview, but some took longer than others. Each interview extended between 15 minutes and 1 hour. For some participants relatively more time had elapsed since their career had ended or since they had last spoken about the experience than for other participants.

While each participant was talking, I listened carefully and respectfully to his or her stories. I asked follow-up questions only to gain further clarification based on participant responses but allowed each participant to dictate the flow and length of the interview. Examples

of questions I asked to obtain further clarification and to encourage further depiction of their experiences included, "You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_. Can you tell me more about that?" "Can you explain a little bit more?" or "Is there anything else that really stands out to you?" When I sensed no further information was forthcoming, I asked one final question "Is there anything else you would like to say?" I avoided questions that begin with the word "why" as they would have tended to transfer the dialogue away from the participant's description of the experience toward a more theoretical focus (Pollio et al., 1997). After each interview, I stopped the audio recorder and recorded additional field notes by dictating into the recorder. The notes included my impressions of the interview, a description of the location, and/or add any other comments the participant may have made after the recorder had been turned off.

Upon completion of each interview, I downloaded the digital recordings to my computer for subsequent transcription purposes. I then transcribed each interview in the exact language used by the participant, including pauses, inflections and notations of tone of voice. After each transcription was completed, I listened to the digital recording a second time to fill in any missing or misunderstood words.

### Thematic Analysis

The interpretive research group assisted me in thematizing the transcripts in this study. Prior to reading any transcripts, all members of the group signed a pledge of confidentiality (see Appendix B). Incorporating the same individuals who assisted me in analyzing the bracketing

and pilot interviews allowed me to receive feedback regarding any of my perceptions and assumptions that may have affected in the interviews.

With the assistance of the interpretive research group I identified meaning units and themes emerging from each interview as well as any incongruity or counterexamples within the text. Thematic descriptions for each interview were identified by (1) “mining the data for metaphors,” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 36) (2) deciding what is thematic, (3) “developing and refining the thematic structure” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 38) and (4) obtaining additional feedback from the participant.

Metaphors are often important in the thematization of qualitative interviews because they contribute to the intended meaning of the participant when he or she is unable to describe his or her experience in more literal terms. I decided what was thematic by contemplating the specific words in the transcripts, as well as the meaning of the words.

I created a table of contents separating the ground and each theme as it developed. I then drew quotes from each transcript, which were identified by the participant’s pseudonym and the line within the transcript. These quotes were then cut and paste under the themes and subthemes until interviewing and thematization was completed (see Appendix C for example). This table of contents and list of quotes was presented to the interpretive research group. This process allowed me to consider the context of the situation and the participant's story together (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Analysis continued concurrently with data collection until no new themes were identified.

Following thematization of all interviews, I developed a thematic structure I felt captured the main and supporting themes emerging from the interviews. I then developed a diagram characterizing the structure and presented it to both the interpretive research group and to the participants to verify that I captured the meaning of participants' experiences. The participant's responses included the following statements. Spencer said, "The graphic is interesting how everything is so correlated. Some of them are more pronounced for me than others, but I think all of them are very applicable." Dawn wrote, "The thematic structure looks good and representative of my experience." Little Lig expressed, "I'd say you nailed the theme!"

### Summary

The purpose of this study was to describe the experience of individuals who have had a career-ending athletic injury. The method used to obtain relevant information was the existential phenomenological interview as followed in the University of Tennessee model. In the following chapter a discussion of the results obtained in this study is presented.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This chapter presents participant description of the experience of career-ending injury as well as the sorts of events, situations and/or personal experiences that stood out to them. Following a description of the thematic structure, major themes, and subthemes will be introduced together with supporting quotes from the participants.

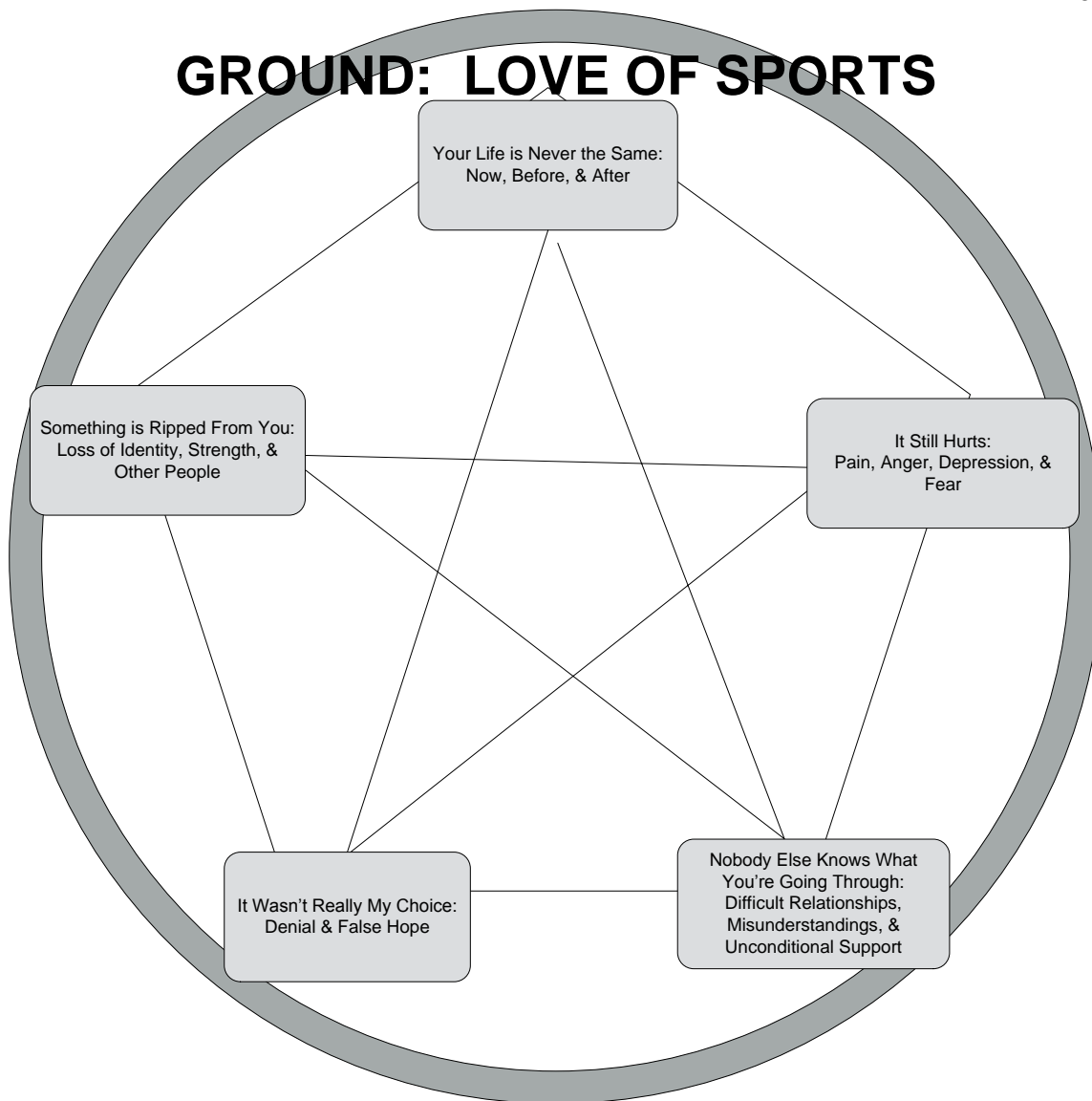
#### Thematic Structure

The thematic structure derived from the interviews (Figure 5) contained five major themes, which emerged within the ground, "Love of Sports." The titles from each theme are verbatim quotes from the participant interviews. Each of the themes and supporting subthemes captured some aspect of the participants' experience of a career ending injury.

The figure/ground approach describing participants' experience emphasizes the relation between "some experience and something experienced" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 15). The component of the ground for any figure is the person for whom it is figural. Therefore, the ideal view of figure/ground suggests, "the personal perspective is, itself, always a significant aspect to what is perceived" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 15). The focus of the career-ending injury experience is the figural event discussed in this study, an event which emerged from the multiple grounds of everyday events.



# GROUND: LOVE OF SPORTS



*Figure 5. Thematic Structure.*

The diagram depicted in figure 5 illustrates the participants' unique experience of a career-ending injury. However, one aspect of each theme may have been more figural for one individual than it was for another. For this reason, the themes represent specific aspects of participants' experience, as they were compared and contrasted with one another to achieve a more general summary.

The outer circle encapsulates the contextual ground of the individuals' love of sports. Despite having one's athletic career end due to injury, each participant felt a strong love for his or her sport. Within the ground are situated the 5 major themes: "Your Life is Never the Same: Now, Before, & After;" "Something is Ripped from You: Loss of Identity, Strength, & Other People;" "It Still Hurts: Pain, Anger, Depression, & Fear;" "It Wasn't Really My Choice: Denial & False Hope;" and "Nobody Else Knows What You're Going Through: Difficult Relationships, Misunderstandings, & Unconditional Support."

At the top of the figure is the theme "Your Life is Never the Same: Now, Before & After." Participants experienced this theme in terms of the way their lives completely changed after their career-ending injury. Directly below "Your Life is Never the Same: Now, Before & After" are the two themes, "Something is Ripped from You: Loss of Identity, Strength, & Other People" and "It Still Hurts: Pain, Anger, Depression, & Fear," which were closely linked to the changes that occurred after the career-ending injury. The theme "Something is Ripped from You: Loss of Identity, Strength, & Other People" was experienced in terms of expressing the loss amidst the existential grounds of identity, strength and other people. The theme "It Still Hurts: Pain, Anger, Depression, & Fear," was experienced in terms of how the physical and

emotional pain produced by the injury changed over time. Below the theme, “Something is Ripped from You: Loss of Identity, Strength, & Other People” is the theme, “It Wasn’t Really My Choice: Denial & False Hope.” This theme was experienced in terms of the way the individuals had no choice in the decision to terminate their athletic career. As everything related to their sport ended, the participants expressed a feeling of denial or false hope. This theme was directly related to the feelings of loss the participants articulated. Below the theme, “It Still Hurts: Pain, Anger, Depression, & Fear,” is that of, “Nobody Else Knows What You’re Going Through: Difficult Relationships, Misunderstandings, & Unconditional Support.” Participants experienced this theme in terms of the feelings of being alone and the perception that others were unable to understand their experience. Despite the fact that nobody could relate to their experience, there was still an abundant amount of unconditional support. This theme was directly related to the physical and emotional pain resulting from the injury. Contained within the pentagon is a star connecting each of the themes and demonstrating their interrelatedness among the five themes. The themes and subthemes comprising the thematic structure are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

### Themes, Subthemes and Supporting Quotes

This section is divided into two parts. The first deals with the contextual ground of the thematic structure: “Love of Sports.” The second part contains discussion of the five major themes and respective subthemes. For each of the themes, representative quotes are provided to stay true to the words of the participants (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

*Ground: "Love of Sports"*

For participants in this study, the major themes and subthemes that characterized their career-ending injury were grounded within their life as an athlete prior to the injury. As individuals reflected back on their career-ending injury experiences, they contextualized them in the passion and love they had for their sport. However, this passion and love seemed to be comprised of different elements for each participant. Some enjoyed the structure and focus sports added to their day, as well as the hard work that sport required. Others described their sport as something that had contributed to who they presently were as individuals.

In the following quote, Willie described the lifetime commitment he had made in search of his dream of becoming a professional football player.

*This (being a professional football player) is something you have been dreaming about since you was a kid playing football and then going pro. And, ya know, my future was looking bright! And, ya know, I had, like I had been playing ball since I was a little kid, since I was 6 years old. And I used to be like "man, I'm going, I'm going to go D-I." Everything I said I was going to do, I had done, up until that point. Ya know, it wasn't always easy, but I had done it...and so, pretty much, like I had never imagined like, never imagined, never thought about in my life, like a career-ending injury.*

Spencer described the ongoing influence of a sport career that had stretched far beyond the success he experienced as an athlete. He commented, "When you're an athlete for so long and everything revolves around your athletics, it kind of directs you on a certain path for the rest of your life."

Most of the individuals described their love for the sport and the exhilarating feelings they experienced when participating. Simplistically, Ann, Lynn and Dawn all said, "I loved it!" when describing their sport. Grayson described playing lacrosse as his "heroin." He continued by explaining:

I don't know what it's like to be, ya know, in a hospital bed, with like the morphine things where you can like push the button, but it's like you push the button and it happens. And you feel something different. That's what it's (*playing lacrosse*) like.

Later in the interview, Grayson talked more about the feeling he had when on the field.

The whole zone thing you lose yourself in it and everything slows down. And it's just, you don't think about anything else. You put on your helmet and you're a different person.

Jason articulated a similar emotion when stepping into the wrestling ring.

There's no better rush. No better drug. There's no better high then when you're out there in front of 20,000 people and they're just going nuts. Every little, any little mannerism you do can totally, you can affect their emotions. And, (pause) thinking about it, ya know, I miss that part of it. I hated everything else that went along with it. I just loved getting in the ring. I loved everything about that.

Sport was something these participants had been immersed in to the point of losing themselves in athletic performance; and it was in this context of passion for sports that each of the following major themes characterizing their career-ending injury experience emerged.

*Theme I: "Your Life is Never the Same: Now, Before, & After"*

"Things happen to good people. Things happen to bad people. Things happen to young, old. That's life. Life is about change." In the preceding quote Willie explained how he has dealt with the change resulting from his career-ending injury. All 13 participants described the changes they experienced from now, before, and after; and nature of the process that they went through to get from the former to the latter. When discussing his career-ending injury, Spencer describes, "It is the turning point of my life." Jackie on the other hand describes the finality of her career-ending injury when she explains, "In that instant, it was over." The changes participants experienced varied depending on the length of time that had transpired since the career-ending injury. The participants described when the injury happened, the unexpectedness of the event, their initial emotional reaction, the process necessary for them to move forward, the filling of a void, and a new positive outlook.

The most profound change in these athletes' lives took place when the career-ending injury robbed them of the experience of their love of sports. Brooke, a pole vaulter, whose career ended only 3 months prior to the interview, commented,

I've always been an athlete and then it just stopped one day... not being an athlete is completely different from being an athlete. I mean, having your life centered around one thing and then, not having that anymore (Brooke).

Many reported that they remembered, "just when it happened," "like it was yesterday," and the memory remained vivid and was "something that is still very ingrained in my head." As one put it,

A very hard transition...hard to, to flip the switch. To change every, my whole life changed...I'll never forget cause it was just like, it completely, my life completely changed (Jason).

Jason also said,

when you get taken out of it, it's just...I, I, I really don't, I really can't put it into words besides the fact that your life is never the same...on so many levels.

The sudden change caused some to feel "blindsided." The injury was described as re-directing, life changing and a turning point that would alter their paths of life forever.

You've been doing it (*sport*) all your life. You were good at it. Uh, and uh, now you can't do it. But people that... (pause)...probably are not as talented, are doing something that you loved to do. That's hard to watch. So, I, I stopped that. My wife would attest to this, I didn't watch a basketball game for probably 2 years (Matt).

Jason conveyed the suddenness of it all.

So to get there, reach your goals, ya know, and then the minute you get to right where or where you're about to be. You're about to be, you're about to peak. Like that (snaps his fingers), it gets taken away from you.

Spencer explained further, "Where I'd put 10 years, 12 years in gymnastics into my life and it was not easy to just dismiss that 12 years, even for an injury."

The emotional experience of the career-ending injury produced different initial reactions among the participants, but the change was a shock to most, some even describing the experience as a "big disaster in my life."

Your life is at that point, is never the same no matter what you do...it's like a part of them is dead (Jason).

Initially, Lynn explained, "it has to soak in first. Everything has to soak in;" while Matt described the first week following the injury as being "by yourself in the wilderness." Matt returned to the United States after playing in Europe to discover that he was alone trying to figure out his next step.

Our mind, just runs crazy sometimes...what our mind says, our mind just runs, runs wild. And, makes up all the, plays all these scenarios for us, and...and we have to be, we have to feel, I think, to quiet that voice (ITY).

You're so down about everything for so long, you waste time and then you waste time that you could be actually doing important things or making things better (Lynn).

The change in some of these individual's lives included the disappearance of a "driving force," and the need to figure out how to accept this adjustment in their lives.

Another type of transformation occurred as each person went through the process of moving beyond the career-ending injury and deciding to progress forward. They had to "re-think," "re-evaluate," and change their mindset.



I felt more relief than anything else. Ya know that, ok, that, that's after the injury. The hard time that's done. Now it's time to get back...and, and to heal and get ready somehow. To get the body strong, get the mind back strong, get the spirit back strong. Um...(pause)...to move, ya know, through this process (ITY).

At first it almost looked like a dead end...but it wasn't completely a dead end. I just had to realize that there was something else that I could do...just being re-routed (Spencer). Although Spencer had a career-ending injury, he was healthy enough to get involved in a new sport and “re-route” his focus.

After moving through the process one participant, Dawn, described the feeling as, "let's just deal with reality here...rip the band aid off." At that point, another individual said he began "experimenting," becoming more "career focused." To him it was like "walking out on a limb."

That unexpected roadblock. I didn't know how to deal with at first. Ya know, and so, I had nowhere to go at least in my mind, that's what I had thought. Um, until I realized, OK, I have to keep going somewhere. And that's where the new direction kind of presented itself (Spencer).

Brad felt a similar need to “keep going.” He commented,

Since you put so much of yourself in to it, you think, “oh, ya know, oh my god!” um “my life’s over. What am I gonna do?” And, um, I think from that you learn that there’s a lot of other things that you can do. And that even when one thing ends, something

better could, ya know, will come along. And you just have to look for it and keep going (Brad).

Another aspect of the change process for some participants was the need to fill the void of no longer participating in athletics. Some experienced it as the absence of structure in their day, while others felt it represented an entirely different life. Even 5 years later, Little Lig and Grayson still seemed to be searching.

I'm still in that search to kind of fill that, that void of, um, not being able to compete and setting new goals (Little Lig).

I don't know what...physically would ever replace that. Um, intellectually, I've got plenty of stuff that replaces it in work and career and especially working with athletes, but, but physically there's nothing like it (Grayson).

For others, the void minimized the pressure associated with competing and training, and provided freedom. Jackie, the elite youth gymnast, mentioned, "I realized I could start experiencing things for the first time."

Depending on the length of time that had elapsed since their career-ending injury, participants seemed to be at different points in the process of experiencing change. A number had moved forward with a positive outlook and described the growth they had experienced as a person and the life lessons they had learned. Two years since his injury, Willie expresses,

Every day I go through this process, I grow a little, a little bit more as a person...cause it teaches me a little bit more about myself every day. And I just keep growing (Willie).

It wasn't just career-ending for me, it was life-threatening. Um...and it's something that should be one of the worst circumstances in my life and always still will be, but I've turned it, I've flipped it on its back and made it a, a very positive one (Jason).

Some had taken their experience to the "next level" and incorporated the passion they experienced from being an athlete into their current activities.

Using the tools that I had, kind of in the, in my life, for being a world-class athlete. I used those, um, those training techniques and the, the mental part of it to, um, push myself to get better (ITY).

I guess little nuggets that come out of this...is that A. I couldn't do what I'm doing right now if I hadn't had the injury...I wouldn't be living this phenomenal life of helping others (ITY).

Matt's career-ending injury was twenty-two years ago allowing him the time to reflect back on his experience in a positive manner.

Over all these years, the basketball and the experience there has been used in a positive way to help me achieve things in the business side. That, it's, it's been, what I have learned there, uh, couldn't have ever learned in a textbook. And those lessons were more

valuable to me and what I had done professionally than what I actually learned in college (Matt).

It has taught me so much, like, it has taught me way more than football or basketball or any of those sports I used to play can ever teach me. Like I have affected a lot of people's lives. Way more people's lives than I had affected playing sports (Willie).

In summary it appeared that while some of the participants viewed their transition as a continual process, others highlighted the positive experiences that had resulted from their career-ending injury.

*Theme 2: "Something is Ripped from You: Loss of Identity, Strength, & Other People"*

Twelve of the participants in this study discussed a feeling of loss due to their injury that was related to one or more of the two existential grounds: body and other. More specifically, they experienced a sense of loss of identity, strength, and other people. Each of these subthemes is discussed next.

*Identity*

The passion toward sport and the love these participants had for athletics was deeply intertwined with their identity. The shift they experienced from being an athlete to no longer being an athlete not only created a feeling of loss but also a feeling of being lost. Ann

commented, “You don’t know what it’s like to have something ripped from you” as her sport was no longer part of her identity. Some said they wondered "who am I?"

I was lost. I didn't even know who I was without that. Because I had used gymnastics to identify as me. Take that away and I was empty (Jackie).

It's not just the rush of playing, but there's an emptiness in not playing. And that part of my identity that used to be so tied up in being an, an athlete with a capital "A"...(pause)...cause there's a lot of other identities that get filled up on a daily basis (Grayson).

A big motivating force in my life was gone...It was just, like, nothing. It was just like, wasn't that great, wasn't that bad, it was just kind of like I was going through the motions of life. Uh...just like a zombie or something like that. Just blowing through... it was kind of like for a month or two everything was just kind of like a blur (Brad).

My senior year, it was ya know, every night during basketball season, you turned the news on and they'd be talking about what I was doing trying to break the record and all the other stuff going on. And so people, you, ya know, that's your identity. Your identity is, you're a basketball player. Now, when that's gone and you have to, ya know, now what are they gonna know you by (Matt)?

It feels like you were made to do that (*gymnastics*) and not to be a human instead of the other way around. You should feel like a human first and that gymnastics is secondary. But instead, gymnastics became who I was and everything about me, so take that away and I was left blank. I was left with nothing (Jackie).

Athletics did not just represent a daily activity but it was their entire world. Ann described this loss by stating, "I'm never gonna love anything as much as I love diving." She continued, "I felt that it was all that I had. And then, it was all that I had and all that I loved. And then, it was being taken away from me, so then I had nothing left."

Although ITY was aware of his other identities, the loss he felt due to his career-ending injury created a significant emotional impact.

The emotional impact is, uh, I think, uh (sighs) it, it doesn't necessarily have to do with fact. Right? Um, because the emotions are the response to the situation that is factual and not factual. Um, so when I was hurt. The facts were, ya know, my track and field career was probably over as far as I could look. Um, and ya know I was looking at my leg in this dislocated state. And that really didn't bother me so much as my identity of who I, then perceived who I was. Why was my emotions, ya know, taking over? And why was I doubting and questioning, if I was still going to be, ya know, a husband to my wife, was I still gonna be a son to my mother and father, if I was still gonna be a dad to my son. Ya know, why was all that, ya know, those things were still factual too. I was still those things. But why was my, why were my emotions taken over and making me constantly to think, if I was gonna be those things. I was still the same person except I

just was hurt. Um, and so my, ya know, what, what were my abilities to provide for the family. Ya know, those were all emotional things (ITY).

In summary, the loss of their athletic identity left many of the athletes to question whether or not they were the same person.

### *Strength*

Beyond the emotional impact of a career-ending injury, there was a loss of strength that the person had previously been able to perform. The impact of the loss on each participant varied in severity, but each was abundantly aware of how the experience of the career-ending injury had damaged the body. Ann said, "our bodies just give up;" while Little Lig communicated the perception that her body did not feel the same as it had before the injury. Little Lig said, "Why can't I just do this? It was so easy a week ago, ya know, before this all happened." The loss of strength was not simply athletic strength, but the strength necessary every day.

A lot of things that my injury affected. Ya know life basically, And, um...and it was just, it's just a struggle, like. It is a, it's a everyday struggle. It gets better for, my arm and things like that, but just when you have to go through life used to doing things with two arms and...you have to start doing things with one arm. Like, things, like, getting dressed or putting in a belt or brushing your teeth or just brushing your hair. Like, things, things that used to be real simple that took no time that was automated. Now it takes time (Willie).

My first time standing up on, on my leg after the injury, um, and when my leg was gone, my upper, I was so weak. I had gone from about 198 pounds down to 154, I think I was...at the lowest. So, I mean, I lost 40 pounds...and I was just very, very sickly, very weak and I stood up on my one leg (ITY).

Jason explained the frustration he experienced with a simple skill when he said, " it gets annoying...I have the grip of like a 9 year old though...when I grip something, it's like pathetic...it's sad." Grayson on the other hand said he just missed "being able to do some things that not a lot of people can do." In a word, many of the athletes struggled with the inability to perform either athletic or daily skills their body had previously performed.

### *Other People*

The world of sport and the individuals who inhabit it are closely related. For some participants in this study, the loss they felt because of their injury stemmed from the lack of support they received from others, such as coaches, family, friends, and teammates. "You have people fall by the wayside" (Willie). Lynn felt that her coach was no longer there for her as she sat out from injury. There was a lack of communication. She commented, "You're there but you're not seen." Little Lig, who had experienced a complicated career-ending injury did not feel the support she expected from her teammates or the training room.

The training room didn't really...they just...weren't very helpful. Cause it (*the particular injury*) wasn't something they were used to rehabbing (Little Lig).



Little Lig felt that her teammates did not reach out to her because they were concentrating on their lives and passion toward sport. Jackie indicated that the support she initially received eventually faded away.

You feel that support for a little while and you get cards and letters and people care.

They don't wanna see you go. But after, ya know, that goes away, nobody really calls to see how you're doing. Because their lives are just as busy (Jackie).

For Jason, the lack of support he received seemed associated with a loss of trust people had in him.

To me the hardest part of the fact is I don't feel like any of my friends and family here believed me...because they didn't have (*medical*) records. Because WWE would seal the records. They wouldn't let 'em show 'em. And so, they were like, no. I mean, that to me today still gets to me. To this day that's the only thing about the whole situation that still gets to me...um, but, ya know it's one of those things where nobody and really nobody believed me. And I still do to this day, they just, no one said, they just believed me.

This loss of trust of others had carried over into Jason's daily life creating a real loss of trust for them.

There's a trust factor there. You trust yourself with the other. You trust with your buddies. So, mine, the problem with mine is, I think the biggest thing, that, that changed my life is trust. It's affected my trust with girls, my trust with my family, it's affected my trust with my friends. I mean, my best friend, my parents, ya know, everybody. I think

that's the biggest thing for me is trust. Ya know, now it's hard for me to trust anybody or anything fully (Jason).

The athletic community was a big part of these participants' world and then it was suddenly gone. One participant felt like she was "the castaway" and she had "the plague." Not only did the participants feel as though they were no longer part of their teams, but they had difficulty being in the athletic environment and watching others perform or participate.

There's always a little bit of that ache just where you can kind of feel it in your chest like you kind of get it watching sports, but...um...there is a little bit of...there's a little bit of emptiness still inside that I can feel in my stomach and my chest that I'll never get to do those things in that way again. And other things seem to come close, but they're not quite the same as being on a team playing (Grayson).

I found that hanging out with (*teammates*) isn't always easy...I like wanna know how they're doing and if they're doing good, but it's hard for me to ask (Brooke).

I don't expect people to really relate to me, because they're not in my situation. Ya know, this didn't happen to them, so I really don't expect them to. But, sometimes, ya know, like...like going to school and, like going to school and trying to do everything with your left hand, like it's not easy as it may look. Ya know what I'm saying. Like people can look at you and think things are easy. Or when things like that happen, it's not so easy to just go on with your life. So I say, ya know, when you've been doing

something your whole life and it gets stripped away from you, like it's not just, it's not something you can just pick up where you left off and just go on about your life (Willie).

In conclusion, some athletes felt a separation from other individuals whom they had received support from in the past.

### *Theme 3: It Still Hurts: Pain, Anger, Depression, & Fear*

Ten of the participants described the pain of their injury across time. Five athletes had experienced multiple injuries prior to the one that led the doctor to evaluate as career-ending. For the others, injury immediately led to the end of their career. In all cases, the experience of pain at the moment of injury included both physical pain and emotional pain.

#### *Physical*

As athletes are in-tune with their bodies, these participants knew "something doesn't feel right." The physical pain was now preventing them from performing.

I was freaked out more than anything. Cause I also didn't know, I mean, how bad this could get. I mean, if I'm, I don't know what's wrong with me. Could I maybe not make it out of a match. Would I, I mean there was a chance if, I can't press on without this. There's a chance I'm, if I take the wrong bump, I'm dead. And I was like, "maybe I should go to the doctors." So, it was just really scary depression too (Jason).

Others spoke of the initial impact of the injury and of knowing instantly that something was wrong. Matt described the actual injury: “Come down and my knee just explodes. Crawl off the court.” Recalling that day he said, “it was almost like an out of body experience.” Spencer felt his injury was due to a stupid mistake. I made a stupid mistake and that’s when my injury occurred. And, so I remember, just frustrated, but then, then it, the pain came. And then, shortly after, the fear came...this is not something that I can just avoid (Spencer).

While Spencer described the pain and anger that came with his injury, Jason immediately looked for ways to alleviate the pain. “I had about 3 or 4 beers waiting for me outside to hopefully, ease the pain...Took about 15 to 20 ibuprofens.” These participants' career-ending injuries had occurred anywhere from 3 months to 22 years prior to their interview. Eight of the athletes spoke of the pain they continued to experience in their everyday life. Grayson and Brooke stated matter-of-factly, “It still hurts.” Brooke described her pain as “the norm to live with it. So, it’s not like, when I start feeling it, I’m like ‘Oh my gosh! It’s hurting again.’ It’s kind of just like ‘Oh! There’s that pain I’m so used to.’”

People don't understand how hard it is to do everyday things that might be easy for them. Ya know, like, oh you're 26! My body can't say that. Ya know, and like, like just, honestly sleeping sometimes...it sucks. Ya know, and, doing little things that everyone else can do pretty easily, I can't without having a tingle in my hands or having a sharp little snap in my neck (Jason).

Willie's injury was more extensive than those of some of the other participants. He had been going to physical therapy for 2 years and was still involved in rehabilitation.

No time limit on the injury, so how can I not be where they want me to be at if they told me there's no time limit on it. That don't make sense. It just messes with your mind, like, and then they tell you about your injury. They like, man, your injury is not gonna be a sprint. Like, you're not recovering, it's going to be like a marathon (Willie).

While Willie continued to struggle with his everyday challenges and pain, Ann viewed her pain as a symbol of her athletic identity.

I kind of, at this stage, I kind of like it. It's really weird, but it's like my battle, like...yes, I was a serious athlete and I have the pain to prove it sort of thing. And I always, this is sick, but my gymnastics coaches used to say like "Pain is good. It means you're working hard." And I was told that at such a young age, and even though I know how ridiculous it sounds. I still, kind of believe it.

Regardless of how participants felt about their pain at the present time, many shared a concern for how the pain would influence them in the future. "The constant worry of when is it gonna come back to bite me in my lifetime" (Dawn), resonated with many of them.

It happened once 5 years ago, but I still feel the effects of it and I probably will 'til. Ya know, all athletes will I think. Ya know they don't feel pain as much when they're young, but the time we're 40, 50, 60 years old. It's, it's gonna hurt (Little Lig).

It appeared that most of the participants realized the long-term effects of their injury on the body and how the effects might be manifested over time.

When is it gonna come back and haunt me? When will I ever, if ever, regret ever having been a diver...(pause)...and that's a pretty powerful thing and again not realizing it until I'm speaking out loud about it. I didn't realize that that is something that really worries me (Dawn).

One coping mechanism the participants used to deal with their pain concerned their relationships to other people. Some of the participants found comfort in realizing that their circumstances could have been worse.

When they told me when I woke up, I, I was just like "man, I'm blessed. I'm so blessed to be in this situation cause it could've been a lot worse and I could've lost my life last night." So I was just, I was just thankful that I was still there. I wasn't worried about my arm or nothing like that; I was worried about my life (Willie).

Although Willie realized the severity of his injury, he remained aware of others less fortunate than him and their situations.

I know there's people out there with situations much worse than mine. Ya know, and that helps me out a lot. Because I realize that, I mean I have been to a lot of centers, like for rehab and therapy, where people in there, and way much, way worse condition than me. And that makes you humble. You know what I'm saying. That makes you appreciate life also.

*Mental and Emotional*

In addition to the physical pain associated with their career-ending injuries, all 13 individuals articulated the emotional pain that came along with the experience. A number of emotions including anger, depression and fear were expressed by the participants. Brad described the experience as, "Just mentally and emotionally. It's just a huge drain." Jackie characterized her experience as "devastating" and "emotionally hard." She said, "it made me nauseous...I was that sad." Jackie had to step away from the sport completely for a while to manage this type of pain.

The initial adjustment and realization participants had that their athletic career was over due to their career-ending injury was frightening. Not only did the individuals have to deal with the physical change to their bodies, but in emotional changes as well. Dawn felt "crushed" and "helpless" asking herself, "oh, why me?"

I remember, ya know, thinking over and over in my mind...of how bad is this really? I've never experienced anything like this. I had no idea what to expect and that scared me (Spencer).

I had things going for me, but I mean, it's like my whole life was taken away from me. That's really legitimately all I had. And so, I was just, I think it was just like scary depression. I'm like what am I gonna do if this doesn't work out, like, this is what I wanted my whole life. Pretty much what I wanted to do and love, but, I just, I was freaked out more than anything (Jason).

Many participants expressed the importance of hiding the emotional pain they were experiencing. They did not want to let others know how they were feeling and struggling.

On the outside, I'm like "oh, good job." Ya know. "Good luck. You can do it. You're getting through it." Ya know, all this stuff and then on the inside I'm just like..."Woe is me" (Little Lig).

I can't just really just go and watch ya'll play. When, it's just something I love to do. And I can't do it. Like, it hurts! You know what I'm saying, it hurts, like, every day it hurts. People might not see it, cause I won't show it. Ya know what I'm saying. I can handle it, but it hurts. Ya know what I'm saying, like, I want to do it! I wanna do those things. I'm 22 years old and can't go play basketball (Willie).

Clearly the emotional pain experienced by many of the participants was something they expected might never go away. As Dawn reflected back on her experience and the last twelve years, she began to get choked up. She mentioned:

I think mentally...I never had any closure from that. And I think that was something that I'm only realizing now. I never did have real closure (Dawn).

The diver, Ann, experienced her career-ending injury two years ago.

Ultimately I had my breakdowns and still do...I like to think that each breakdown I have means I'm having, like, one less later, like they're slowly, the number's decreasing (Ann).

It always will...I'll come to grips with it, but it still gonna depress me (Jason).



It's always in the back of your head...it's always gonna be there. It's just not, I can't dwell on it. Like, I can't look back on it every single day. But, ya know, the thought does cross your mind once in a while (Lynn).

Thus, the pain these athletes experienced spread across a continuum from pre injury/injury to present to future. Both emotional and physical pain affected each of the individuals depending where they were along the continuum.

*Theme 4: "It Wasn't Really My Choice: Denial & False Hope"*

The fourth theme "It Wasn't Really My Choice: Denial & False Hope" distinguished the involuntariness of the athletes' transition out of sport. This theme included one subtheme "Denial & False Hope" which explained the initial reaction to the experience of having no choice.

The career-ending injury is an event that leaves the athlete no choice as to whether or not to continue his or her athletic career. Ann rationalized, "It wasn't really my choice...I knew it was gonna happen but somebody else had to stop it. I couldn't' continue to dive the way I was, I couldn't continue to live the way I was." It is an abrupt ending to a passion and love experienced for many years. In the end, a medical professional is the one who makes the career-ending decision for the athlete by pronouncing that the athlete's body is no longer capable of meeting the challenges of the athlete's sport. The following quotes are representative of the theme of "It Wasn't Really My Choice: Denial & False Hope."

He (*physician*) said, "Your back is so bad...I work with people that are 80 years old that don't have backs like this...It's so bad and so compromised that if you continue to do a sport like gymnastics, you will most likely not be walking by the time you're 25...Your body just can't handle it anymore" (Spencer).

It was other people's decision for me to stop. And, even though, like now see, like, I know my coach did me a favor. The doctors did me a favor, but...(pause)...at the time I was mad (Ann).

I flew back to the States, and, uh, they said, "No....You tore ligaments, ACL, the whole thing. It's, it's a mess." So that would've been the third one on that one knee in, uh, 4 years. So, the doctor said, "Your playing days are over. Uh, ya know, we don't even think you'll be able to play pickup games, nothing like that." They were right. That did it (Matt).

This theme sheds light on the impact the injury had on each athlete's body and of the career-ending pronouncement each athlete received from a medical professional.

### *Denial/False Hope*

Many of the participants in this study reacted to the inability to choose their path with initial denial or a sense of false hope. Some didn't tell anybody when the injury first occurred.

I was trying to be real positive. Talk to myself in fact, and I did, was gonna be alright. But I knew, I knew...and I knew I was hurt. Um...but ya know, you always think well, it'll feel better tomorrow...never try to live on false hope (Matt).

Initial denial...you don't go into practice thinking it's gonna be your last...you don't think that's gonna be the last time you're ever, ya know, get up on the runway...not thinking that you've actually done something that's gonna cost us such an effect (Little Lig).

So if I avoided it...and pretended it didn't happen, I wouldn't have to deal with it...you pretend that it didn't happen, you don't have to go through that pain over and over again (Ann).

Others knew their career had ended but the emotion of disbelief still dominated.

The leg was gonna be saved. And that you, they could fix it back up, because of, I had seen that before with other individuals that had been hurt in similar situations. And, I never heard of anybody losing a leg through a dislocation...um, so I thought that, I, they would, ya know, it was a bad injury of course, but they're gonna, gonna fix my knee and I can get back up and I'll be, ya know, in a year's time, ya know, I can get back running again (ITY).

The night they told me. Honestly, I went to sleep and was like, man, this, this gotta be a bad dream. Ya know, I'll just wake up in the morning. Everything will be gone. It'll be

cleared up. That's how my mind was. Cause I was like, man...I can't believe it...I can't, I can't, I can't deal with it, pretty much (Willie).

The inability to choose whether to finish their career caused a reaction of denial and/or false hope based on the feeling that the athletes' did not want their athletic career to end.

*Theme 5: "Nobody Else Knows What You're Going Through: Difficult Relationships, Misunderstandings, & Unconditional Support"*

The final theme "Nobody Else Knows What You're Going Through: Difficult Relationships, Misunderstandings, & Unconditional Support" emphasized the experience of feeling alone in the subtheme, "Difficult Relationships" and "Misunderstandings" despite the subtheme of "Unconditional Support." When an athlete experiences a career-ending injury, there is a sense of being alone and that no one can understand what he/she is going through.

This theme extended far beyond the feeling of loss of others. People may attempt to provide encouragement, but the fact is that most do not have the relevant experience to understand the athlete's overall feelings about being forever separated from the passion the athlete had for his or her sport. This sentiment is reflected in the following quotes.

I don't think they have any grasp mentally, physically, emotionally what it does to you. It totally changed me, totally. My entire life, my life will never be the same (Jason).

The people, the coaches in the gym, they knew it was hard, but they didn't understand what it was like (Jackie).

I felt like nobody else understood. And if somebody that wasn't, like, still doing their sport, they didn't know what it was like. But they'd say "Oh, I feel so bad for you. I understand what you're going through." I would think "Oh, no you don't. What are you talking about? You don't know what it's like to have something ripped from you!" (Ann).  
"Nobody knows, nobody else knows what you're going through," explained Lynn. These feelings affected relationships and shaped misunderstandings.

### *Unconditional Support*

Despite feeling that no one could understand their career-ending experience participants in this study had a number of people who tried their best to provide support unconditionally. Nine of the individuals highlighted the enormous amount of support they received from others and how helpful this was to them. Sources of support included family, friends, teammates, coaches, athletic trainers, medical staff, and fans. The following quotes illustrate the support these athletes had received and appreciated.

Just how my family, my teammates...coaches. A lot of people in the world where I didn't even know. Ya know, just used to encourage me helped me out a lot. A lot of people probably didn't know, but...like the fans, my family, my coaches, my teammates, my friends, like they helped me out more than anyone during that situation. Like, everybody, pretty much, whoever, just shouted me a couple of encouraging words or just asked me how I was doing. That meant a lot to me, because I was going through a lot at the moment. So, just everybody who was behind me, helped me, just, ya know, people

look at me and be like “man you handle the situation great!” but, there was a lot of people who helped me handle the situation great. If I didn’t have them people, I probably wouldn’t have handled the situation the way I did (Willie).

The second (*example of support*) is with family. Is that, you can, really, I really really could tell who, my real, ya know, quote un-quote family and friends were...during that time. Um, cause when the heat's turned up, ya know, people will either come to your assistance and aid or, they won't (ITY).

Although Willie and ITY both had severe injuries, the unconditional support was important for all of the participants. Brad, who had had an eye injury remarked,

I was pretty appreciative...I had a lot of people come up to me...other people, who aren't necessarily related to my sport, ya know, are still keeping up with what's going on...It was just really nice when...someone, ya know, says something nice to you, and, uh, especially when you're going through something tough and they're, ya know, trying to cheer you up, ya know (Brad).

Six of the participants discussed the support they received from a higher power or faith.

I remember, at the time thinking, “well, ok, if you had any doubts about retiring, this is like the universe saying, ‘it’s time to do *the next thing*’” (Grayson).

Maybe the Lord has something even better than that for me in what I was gonna be doing in my life in the future (Matt).

... It played a major role. Because when it happened, ya know, if I wouldn't 've been in touch with my religion, ya know, things like that drive people crazy. When stuff like that happened and um...I was pretty much already had my mind made up that everything in life happens for a reason and God never takes anybody through anything they can't handle. So...I just accepted the situation and knew that god has a bigger plan for my life (Willie).

Four of the participants found great comfort in talking with another person who had experienced a career-ending injury as well or had left the sport due to difficult circumstances.

Anyone that's had a career-ending injury you can kinda relate and share stories and that's the bonding thing (Little Lig).

I also reconnected with some of my other friends who had quit due to injuries or hard circumstances...because it was kind of like you were finally in the same boat with somebody (Jackie).

### Summary

Athletes' experiences of a career-ending injury emerged through the contextual ground, "Love of Sports." The themes that emerged from the narratives of the career-ending injury experiences were: "Your Life is Never the Same: Now, Before, & After;" "Something is Ripped from You: Loss of Identity, Strength, & Other People;" "It Still Hurts: Pain, Anger,

Depression, & Fear;” “It Wasn’t Really My Choice: Denial & False Hope;” and “Nobody Else Knows What You’re Going Through: Difficult Relationships, Misunderstandings, & Unconditional Support.” The thematic structure provided a visual depiction of the participants’ experience of a career-ending injury. The following section, Chapter 5, provides a discussion of the findings and implications for future research.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Discussion

I don't think they have any grasp mentally, physically, emotionally what it does to you.

It totally changed me, totally. My entire life will never be the same (Jason).

The purpose of this study was to provide a detailed description of the experience of athletes like Jason who have suffered a career-ending injury. The question used to obtain this description was "When you think about your career-ending injury, what sorts of events, situations, and/or personal experiences stand out to you?" Thirteen participants were interviewed following the University of Tennessee model (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) and based on the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962).

In the previous chapter a thematic structure depicting athletes' experience was presented as it emerged from the participants' interviews. In this chapter each of the themes and subthemes comprising the structure are discussed in relation to each other and to the existing literature on injury and career transition. Following this, conclusions and recommendations for both practical application and future research are offered.

The integrated model of response to sport injury (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998) focuses on the sequential impact of an injury on athletes' cognitive appraisal of the event and their emotional and behavioral responses. This model also highlights personal and situational factors

that affect athletes' cognitive appraisals and impacts physical and psychosocial recovery outcomes (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998).

Many of the elements within the integrated model appeared to be present in the experiences described by the 13 participants in the present study. These former athletes discussed both situational and personal factors that impacted their cognitive appraisal of the injury. The theme "Something is Ripped From You: Loss of Identity, Strength, & Other People" was consistent with the sense of loss or relief in the integrated model. Emotional responses such as fear of the unknown; tension, anger, depression; and emotional coping were also consistent with the model and present in various fashions in all five of the major themes. Wiese-Bjornstal and colleagues include among their examples of behavioral response "use/disuse of social support." The current participants' experience of social support surfaced in the themes, "Something is Ripped From You: Loss of Identity, Strength, & Other People" and "Nobody Else Knows What You're Going Through: Difficult Relationships, Misunderstandings, & Unconditional Support."

The present findings concur with previous research indicating that injury can be difficult (Brewer et al., 1993; Erpic et al., 2004; Lavalley, 2000; Mainwairing, 1999; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Sparkes, 1998), but also extend previous literature by revealing that career-ending injury can be life changing. As the participants discussed their experiences they used statements such as, "a turning point," or "a big disaster in my life." Several of these individuals felt like they were alone in the wilderness and that they had to "re-evaluate" and "walk out on a limb" in order to discover what the next step might be for them. The process of dealing with a career-ending

injury described by the 13 participants in this study appeared to be considerably more complex and traumatic than previous literature suggests.

From both an experiential and biological perspective, the body is a crucial aspect of competitive athletics. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) argued that the body is a fundamental component of human existence, and one aspect of the human experience of the body is that of pain. Thomas and Pollio (2002) discussed the experience of chronic pain with respect to two themes: the pain itself and coping with the pain. These two themes were highlighted in the present results under the theme of Pain. Participants discussed the experience of physical loss, the pain they experienced at the time of their injury, the pain they currently experience, and the pain they anticipate in the future. This ongoing perspective of the pain experience represents an extension of the current research in sport psychology and sport sociology. Previous literature has focused on the connections between pain and injury and the athlete's life and identity (Curry & Strauss, 1994; Waddington, 2000; Young, White, McTeer, 1994; Young & White, 1995). Based on the comments of the athletes in the present study it might be argued that their pain is qualitatively different from that of the average person because the pain is part of who they are as former athletes. For example, Ann described her pain as a symbol of her athletic identity. Beyond this, the present findings suggest that athletes experiencing a career-ending injury realize that their bodies will never be the same and that they will experience the pain everyday for the rest of their lives.

The current literature in sport psychology focuses on the pain an athlete experiences when he or she is competing, training, or injured (Young & White, 1995; Young, White &

McTeer, 1994). As a society we often read in the popular media of the effects of injury on professional athletes, however, the lasting effects of these injuries have until this study not been reported in previous research. Many of the participants in this study were concerned with the long-term impact of a career-ending injury on their lives and how the pain that they dealt with on a daily basis would exacerbate their condition.

Research by Lotysz & Short (2004) highlighted the need to give athletes an opportunity to talk about their career-ending injury experience and how it has affected their lives. This recommendation was reinforced by the comments of several participants in the present study: One athlete said that she discovered during the interview that she had never felt any closure about her injury experience until that moment. As she described her experience, she surprised herself when she got choked up. Other participants said that they typically did not speak about their experience with other people, because they did not feel that many people could relate to what they were experiencing. As a sport psychology consultant, it is important to allow individuals to talk about their career-ending injury experience but only when they are ready.

The results of this study did not support some of the findings from prior research by Loberg (2008). Loberg (2008) found that when participants attempted to move forward with their lives, their total self-concept and level of psychological distress returned to near the levels of a healthy competitive athlete after only 9 to 15 months. Although many of the participants in this study appeared to have a positive outlook, they still struggled. Some even commented that they were only “ $\frac{3}{4}$  complete” and that a part of them had “died” when their athletic career ended.

There are several possible explanations for the discrepancy between the findings of the present study and those of Loberg (2008). Loberg used a quantitative approach by administering several questionnaires to a small sample of athletes ( $n = 11$ ) who had had career-ending injuries. Thus, it is possible that other life situations not addressed in the questionnaires may have contributed to the way participants responded to the items. Demographic data revealed that some of the athletes were in the process of graduating from college, getting married, and/or having legal problems. These events could have also impacted their responses on both the self-concept questionnaire and that assessing their level of psychological distress.

In the present study, an existential phenomenological approach was taken that allowed a more in-depth examination of athletes' lived experience of career-ending injuries. As a result, a number of factors emerged that suggested caution in interpreting Loberg's (2008) results. For example, it was evident from the current participants' stories that the impact of their career-ending injury lasted much longer than the 9 to 15 months suggested by Loberg.

Previous research has also identified career-ending injury as one of the four possible causes of involuntary career transitions (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Lavalley, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). However, the comments of the participants in this study suggested that the suddenness of career-ending injury makes it a more difficult adjustment than that of other types of involuntary transitions (e.g., age, de-selection, choice).

The results of this study were consistent with the Human Adaptation to Transition Model (Schlossberg, 1984) in several ways. First, career-ending injuries of the participants mirrored the unanticipated transition that occurs as a result of an unexpected disruptive event (Schlossberg,

2004). Additionally, Schlossberg's three main components that influence the complexity of transition were all identified in the thematic structure that emerged from the interviews. First, there are the changes in an individual's relationships, routines, roles and assumptions due to transition. Each individual in this study discussed the change that occurred in their lives from before the injury to after the injury and how this change produced losses of identity, their skill, world, and relationships with others. Second, there is the aspect of how much time is necessary for individuals to process the career transition. Discrepancies exist in previous research relative to the nature of career termination and/or transition (McPherson, 1984). For example, Werthner and Orlick (1986) identified transitions as being difficult; while other researchers found little evidence of psychological distress related to transition (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Kleiber & Brock, 1992; Baillie, 1993). The present findings suggest that the time that has passed since the individual's career-ending injury and/or the stage the individual is in with regard to his or her life can influence his or her current response to transition. In this study, two athletes, Brooke and Matt, had very different outlooks with regard to their experiences. Brooke had experienced her injury three months prior to the interview and as a current college student was trying to find her way as both an ex-athlete and a college student looking for a major to focus on. At one point in the interview, Brooke found her task so suddenly overwhelming that she seemed unable to say anything as tears filled in her eyes. Matt, on the other hand, had had 22 years to look back on his athletic career. Now as an extremely successful businessman, he had moved forward and had worked through the difficult times.

The third component of Schlossberg's (2004) model that mediates the complexity of career transition focuses on the athlete's mechanisms for coping. In the present study, athletes provided various examples of how they coped with their career-ending injury. Some participants felt that their family, friends, and other individuals could not relate to what they were going through, and thus relied on coping resources that were under their own control. However, some found the inner strength to cope easier than did others. Schlossberg (2004) also relates the ability to cope to the individual's perceived control of a situation. In this study, the perceived lack of control experienced by some participants was highlighted in the theme: Not My Choice. These participants described helplessness and frustration they felt over having the decision to end sport participation made by another individual (i.e., a physician). This finding is consistent with the literature suggesting that there is a feeling of loss of control that impacts athletes' adjustment to life after sport (Crook & Robertson, 1991; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

Ebaugh's (1988) model of role exit also received some support in the present study. Ebaugh (1988) suggests that an individual's past athletic role impacts the individual's present and future identity. The strong athletic identity of the participants in this study, which expressed in their love for sports, clearly seemed to contribute to their present and future identity. Steir (2007) found that athletes facing career termination confront doubts prior to actually leaving sport. The present findings similarly revealed the denial and false hope of some participants who were not ready for their career to be finished and initially rejected the idea that their careers were over.

Many of the participants in this study said they were unable to watch their sport after their career-ending injury. However others indicated that they had re-connected to sports after a sufficient time period. Such a phenomenon represents another example of how each individual comes to understand their career-ending injury experience and copes with the inevitable results.

### Conclusions

Based on the results of this study the following conclusions are offered:

1. The experience of a career-ending injury involves a number of common themes as well as individual differences.
2. The responses of each athlete depend on a number of factors, such as the amount of time that has passed since the career-ending injury and the severity of the injury.
3. A career-ending injury is a life-altering event that represents a critical turning point in an athlete's life.

When the participants in this study reviewed the final thematic structure, it was clear that different themes resonated more strongly with different athletes. As postulated in the Wiese-Bjornstal et al. integrated model, there were also individual differences in the ways participants cognitively appraised their injury and responded to it both emotionally and behaviorally. These differences in appraisal and response were also reflected by differences in recovery outcomes.



### Recommendations for Practitioners

Several recommendations for those individuals working with athletes experiencing career-ending injuries are as follows:

1. It is important for the practitioner to provide continual support for athletes processing the ramifications of a career-ending injury, particularly when other forms of support are absent from the athlete's daily life.
2. Practitioners should try to help athletes identify other potential life experiences, as well as the current qualities they possess, that will help them move forward in life.
3. It can be helpful and even therapeutic to provide athletes the opportunity to speak with others who have had a career-ending injury.
4. Few sport psychology consultants develop an ongoing or long-term relationship with an athlete that allows them to discuss the issues of career termination and life after sport competition is completed (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). The results of this study suggest a need for practitioners to provide support for athletes experiencing a career-ending injury and offer some examples of what this support might consist of.

### Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations are made for future research in this area:

1. Additional studies of the life altering aspects of a career-ending injury are needed.

2. Because the severity of career-ending injuries appears to differ, examination of the influence of this component on the career-ending experience deserves further study.
3. Additional research is needed to determine the impact of the athlete's life stage when the injury occurs on his or her career-ending injury experience.
4. As literature on chronic pain exists in other disciplines, it would be helpful for sport psychology researchers to investigate how former athletes experience chronic pain.
5. Further research is necessary to better understand the impact of an athlete's experience of a career-ending injury on his or her everyday life, including both psychosocial and physical recovery outcomes.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
CONSENT FORM

## **INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT**

The Last Dive: Athletes' Experiences of a Career-Ending Injury

### **INTRODUCTION**

You are invited to participate in a research study I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation at the University of Tennessee. The purpose of this study is to learn more about ex-athletes' experience of career-ending injuries.

### **INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY**

Should you decide to participate in this study, we will schedule an interview at a time and location of your choosing. During the interview you will be asked to describe in as much detail as possible your experience of having a career-ending injury. I may occasionally ask follow-up questions to gain further clarification or to obtain additional details.

The interview should last approximately 1 hour depending on the depth of your responses. I will audio record the interview and then transcribe it (i.e., type it out on paper) for further analysis. I will then send you your transcript to be sure it accurately portrays what you were trying to say in your interview. At that time you may choose to adjust or delete any part of the interview in order to provide a more accurate description of your experience. If you want, you can also leave it as it is.

### **RISKS**

The risks of this study to you are minimal. You may feel some discomfort thinking about or talking about personal information related to your career-ending injury. These risks are similar to those you might experience when discussing personal information with others.

### **BENEFITS**

There is no direct benefit to you for your participation. However, I hope that the interview may help you gain a deeper understanding of your career-ending injury experience. The information you provide will add considerable information to the body of knowledge on career-ending injuries. If you would like a copy of the results of the study please let me know.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your data will be kept confidential except in cases where I am legally obligated to report specific incidents. These include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk. All other information will be kept confidential. Your transcribed interview

\_\_\_\_\_ Participant's initials

will be stored in a locked filing cabinet or on a password protected computer located in an office in the Health, Physical Education, and Recreation Building at the University of Tennessee. The only people who will have access to your transcripts will be my major professor, the members of a research analysis group, and me. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches you with your interview, including audio tapes, will be destroyed.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact me at (865) 974-0601. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Tennessee Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466 or the Counseling Center at (865) 974-2196.

### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

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### **STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have read the above information and have had all of my questions answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study and understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX B

INTERDISCIPLINARY PHENOMENOLOGY RESEARCH GROUP  
CONFIDENTIALITY

PLEDGE OF





## APPENDIX C

EXAMPLE QUOTES FROM THE GROUND: "LOVE OF SPORTS" AND THEME 1:  
"YOUR LIFE IS NEVER THE SAME: NOW, BEFORE, & AFTER"

## LOVE OF SPORTS

Grayson (line 137-138): everyday from, ya know, 4 to 6 you have practice...I really liked the structure of that

Ann (line 110): I loved having the day structured like that.

Jason (line 522-523): you didn't go out until 6 in the morning and wake up at 9 in the morning and train.

Jason (line 530-533): you're so program, you're programmed. And, it's the military. You're programmed. People, people like, "it's fricken wrestling." You don't understand, like...literally, like most, all sports have an off-season. There's no off-season. You're literally on the road 5 days a week, every week.

Jason (line 36-38): seeing how hard I worked for, ya know, the body I had...how hard I worked to get there...I busted my chops to get there.

Jason (line 440-441): you learn how to manipulate your strength and your body. But it is the most taxing thing you will ever do.

Grayson (line 94): everybody meaning the same thing.

Grayson (line 255): it is my heroine

Grayson (line 273-275): I don't know what it's like to be, ya know, in a hospital bed, with like the morphine things where you can like push the button, but it's like you push the button and it happens. And you feel something different, that's what it's like.

Grayson (line 329): all the colors look better.

Lynn (line 43-44): I just loved it.

Dawn (line 91): I loved it.

Little Lig (line 107): I loved everything.

Spencer (line 247): it was athletics...it was what I loved to do.

Ann (line 28-29): it was the place where, like, I got my confidence.

Ann (line 32-34): I loved it!...I just love, like, all it has done for me.

Dawn (line 183-184): I think it's taught me, diving and gymnastics, taught me full-commitment, and doing something all whole-heartedly versus doing something half-assed, part-time.

Dawn (line 190-195): sport teaches you so much, in general. Sports teaches you so much discipline and they teach you about how well you can cope with stress or mentally, how you can...deal with hardships...how you can deal with disappointment...(pause)...you can deal with, suck it up and do it again.

Dawn (line 162-163): I would never, ever want to regret having done any athletic sport because I think it's, it was such an important part of my life and such a huge part of my development in who I am.

Spencer (line 262): for a long time athletics was my passion

Matt (line 110-111): you love doing it. You've been doing it all of your life. You were good at it.

Jason (line 4 & 5): I've worked my entire life to get to where I was at...I was there top guy.

Jason (line 23-27): I don't know the heck I got through it, but I knew if I didn't I'd probably get fired or, ya know, I'd probably lose my spot, so. I guess one of those things you realize, you don't realize how dumb you were until you take yourself out of it. You're so involved, you're so focused on the goal. So, that probably, when I look back, that's one thing I think about the most was, I can't believe I did that (laughs).

ITY (line 524-533): if, if I would not have had some of the successes of those experiences. The, the running track, and ya know, the Olympic trials... the 3-time All-American. And having dealt with the press, and having dealt with, um, kind of being a, not a, kind of a quasi-celebrity. Like, like a college celebrity. Ya know, you're in the paper a lot for that, so around campus people know you, and, and, that they know the athletes and stuff. So, kind of that quasi- I call it, uh... uh...celebrity status. Um, and having to deal with that. And, and knowing that your actions are under a microscope. People are watching so you gotta watch your actions, unless you want it in the paper. Ya know that's...that's kind of what I'm talking about. Not like the big, paparazzi or anything like that.

Spencer (line 4-6): when you're an athlete for so long and everything revolves around your athletics, um, its, kind of directs you on a certain path for the rest of your life.

Willie (line 348-352): this is something you've been dreaming about since you was a kid playing football and then going pro. And, ya know, my future was looking bright! And, ya know I had, like I had been playing ball since I was a little kid, since I was 6 years old. And I used to be like "man, I'm going, I'm going to go D-I." Everything I said I was going to do, I had done, up until that point. Ya know, it wasn't always easy, but I had done it...and so, pretty much, like, I had never imagined like, never imagined, never thought about in my life, like a career-ending injury.

Jason (line 9): I was on a pretty substantial contract and I had obligations to that.

Jason (line 48): since the day I was born I wanted to be a wrestler.

Jason (line 73, 75-76): they advertise you....Our biggest market, one of our biggest markets. And I was the main event. I was advertised. I was the champion.

Jason (line 188): you are so focused

Jason (line 242): you're a rock star

Jason (line 277-281): there's no better rush. No better drug. There's no better high than when you're out there in front of 20,000 people and they're just going nuts. Every little, any little mannerism you do can totally, you can affect their emotions. And, (pause) thinking about it, ya know, I miss that part of it. I hated everything else that went along with it. I just loved getting in the ring. I loved everything about that.

Grayson (line 284): passion about sports

Grayson (line 53-54): felt like an athlete first

Grayson (line 91): that's who I am

Grayson (line 304-306): the whole zone thing you lose yourself in it and everything slows down and it's just, you don't think about anything else. You put on your helmet and you're a different person.

Grayson (line 315): lose yourself in it

Dawn (line 167): part of who I am

Spencer (line 36-37): [gymnastics] it was who I am...I associated myself with that.

Spencer (line 37-38): When people asked me, that was one of the things that helped define who I was, was me as a gymnast.

Spencer (line 209-212): my mother always said that it was something that we were talented at, but it didn't take away from our schooling or anything else...she said it was something that was part of who we are and she needed for us to define ourselves.

Ann (line 33-34): Cause I even wrote my main college essay on how athletics had shaped my, who I am today, like my personality almost.

YOUR LIFE IS NEVER THE SAME  
BEFORE

Grayson (line 3): just when it happened

Grayson (line 121): I can still see the guy who went through my shoulder.

Spencer (line 25): I remember it like it was yesterday

Spencer (line 26): one thing that I really remember.

Spencer (line 28-30): I remember, ya know, things very, very vividly from that injury; and that is something that will always stay with me I think. It's not something that'll go away.

Spencer (line 64-65): I think about it all the time. It's weird. Um, flashbacks.

Spencer (line 73-74): I remember their faces. I remember the reaction of my coach. Um, I remember my own reaction, because I didn't know what had happened.

Spencer (line 85-86): I remember so vividly

Spencer (line 96-97): I remember that week of my injury very, very vividly.

Spencer (line 100): that's something that is still very ingrained in my head.

Ann (line 3) just the day...I remember everything.

Matt (line 49-60): description of event

Little Lig (line 124-125): I just wasn't ready for it to end.

Spencer (line 35): it's always unexpected

Spencer (line 368-371): Where it came out of nowhere...as an athlete, everybody understands that there is a potential for injury and potential for things to happen, but nobody expects them to. Especially athletes...it's life changing.

Spencer (line 376-377): I felt very blindsided, and it just came out of nowhere.

Matt (line 3): I got hurt before everything ended.

Willie (line 294): It's just like wow! It's like a wow type of situation.

Jason (line 3): after it happened, knowing that, that was it.

Jason (line 56-58): so to get there, reach your goals, ya know, and then the minute you get to right where or where you're about to be. You're about to peak. Like that (snaps his fingers) it gets taken away from you.

Jason (line 235-236): when you get taken out of it, it's just...I, I, I really don't, I really can't put it into words besides the fact that your life is never the same...on so many levels.

Lynn (line 123): it's really changed my life.

Lynn (line 207): I was negative about it...I wasn't looking at the positive sides.

Lynn (line 253-254): it has to soak in first. Everything has to soak in.

Matt (line 342): It was just a week of...by yourself in the wilderness, I guess, thinking, man, ya know, is it gonna get better?

Brooke (line 18): I've always been an athlete and then it just stopped one day.

Brooke (line 69-70): not being an athlete is completely different from being an athlete. I mean, having your life centered around one thing and then, not having that anymore.

Little Lig (line 149): just healthy living versus like competitive superwoman

Brooke (line 19): that was my passion and then it's just all over in one day.

Brooke (line 23-25): everything that you've been doing. Everything that you've been planning your life around is just like over. So, it's like you have to find a new passion...cause...there's nothing else to fill it until you find something.

Matt (line 110) you still have a passion for something.

ITY (line 231-235): all those things I was thinking about as losses at, at one particular, ya know, point in time. But in reality, it's not, you're not really losing anything. You're actually, I, I, I've turned it around and began to think about, ya know, what I'm gaining. Um, and so, ya know, gaining a more appreciation of life and, ya know, of who, uh, who I really am. Uh, is not tied to this identity as I.T.Y., the athlete. Ya know, I have all of these other personas as well.

Jason (line 560-561, 562-563): that's your life is at that point, is never the same no matter what you do..."it's like a part of them is dead."

Jackie (line 11): in that instant it was over.

Little Lig (lines 4-5): you don't think that your last practice is gonna be, ya know, the day that you hurt yourself.

Brooke (line 19-20): that was my passion and then it's just all over in one day

Little Lig (line 299): you set goals and you're almost to your goals but then it gets cut off.

Spencer (line 52-53): it is the turning point of my life.

Spencer (line 169-179): Where I'd put 10 years, 12 years in gymnastics in to my life and it was not easy to just dismiss that 12 years, even for an injury.

Brad (line 62-63): just the toughest part about it, ya know, something that you're thinking about and kind of planning for, ya know most of your life. And, uh, and then all of a sudden, it's just, it's done.

Spencer (line 11-12): at first it was a big disaster in my life.

ITY (line 160-163): I felt more relief than anything else. Ya know that, ok, that, that's after the injury. The hard time, that's done. Now it's time to get back...and, and to heal and get ready somehow. To get the body strong, get the mind back strong, get the spirit back strong. Um...(pause)...to move, ya know, through this process.

Willie (line 168-169): it's just on you. What you wanna do?

Ann (line 114-115): it made me start looking at how I had been, figuring out what I want to do.

Brad (line 132-138): After, after I got injured, um, I saw the movie "Friday Night Lights." And, uh...it was uh, the, the running back in that movie. He broke his leg or tore his ACL or something. And, and I remember him sitting in the car with a phone call crying, saying, ya know "I can't do nothing else." Ya know, "This is all I can do." I remember, ya know, thinking, ya know, I, I felt pretty grateful that, ya know, there's, there's a lot of other stuff I could do. And that, ya know, this, this wasn't like, ya know "oh my god! What am I gonna do with my life?" ya know. I got school and I'm gonna, ya know get a job and ya know, do other things, ya know.

Brad (line 26): Since you put so much of yourself in to it, you think, "oh, ya know, oh my god!" um "my life's over. What am I gonna do?" And, um, I think from that you learn that there's a lot of other things that you can do. And that even when one thing ends, something better could, ya know, will come along. And you just have to look for it and keep going.

Spencer (line 4): it totally re-directed my life.

Brooke (line 20): you have to move on.

Willie (line 122-123): things happen to good people. Things happen to bad people. Things happen to young, old. That's life. Life is about change.

Jason (line 226-231): You just gotta do what you gotta do. Ya know, and...I guess I worked so hard, I got there and then when I got taken out of it. It's like, I just completely changed as a person. Like, my mindset, my thing.



Jason (line 515, 516-519): a very hard transition...hard to, to flip the switch. To change every, my whole life changed...I'll never forget cause it was just like, it complete, my life completely changed.

ITY (line 28-29): a lot of times, we might think we know ourselves. And, um, during...um, during adverse times, our, I think our character really becomes revealed to us.

ITY (line 46,48,49-50): made me rethink and reevaluate...put me in a different mindset... it's weakness in ourselves and turn it inside to try to make that into a strength or a strength in that area, in our life.

ITY (line 73-74,77): it took a process of me going through that, that a couple of nights by myself thinking about those things...how changed and how different I was.

Willie (line 96-97): when you do something your whole life, like...and then, just one day you can't do it no more.

Spencer (line 340-341): I was working for this goal and when my injury happened before that goal came it re-routed me, I mean, completely.

Spencer (line 345-346): a completely new direction presented itself, because now that roadblock had occurred and I couldn't go any further in the direction I had initially planned

Spencer (line 353-356): that unexpected roadblock. I didn't know how to deal with at first. Ya know, and so, I had nowhere to go at least in my mind, that's what I had thought. Um, until I realized OK, I have to keep going somewhere. And that's where the new direction kind of presented itself.

Spencer (line 358-360): at first it almost looked like a dead end...but it wasn't completely a dead end, I just had to realize that there was something else that I could do...just being re-routed.

Spencer (line 58-60): I had to totally change the direction of my life. That was the turning point for me. That was the one point that I can always look back and say, "This is what changed my life the most."

Spencer (line 7-9): when my injury occurred, it completely severed that and all of a sudden I had to figure out something else to do. And so that change developed.

Spencer (line 14): I had to completely change my thought process

Jason (line 537-538): it's just so hard to, to get out of that lifestyle. And get put into like the "real" world. Like, how, am I supposed to do all day?

Jason (line 540-542): I had no earthly idea of how I was gonna get through the day. Like, I was so warped. Cause I was so used to, literally, not stopping 12, 14 hours a day.

Jason (line 288-289): I can tell you every little thing that's happened. After that, I cannot...I don't remember anything in the match...I literally blacked out and I rolled out of the ring.

ITY (line 241-242): those things weren't always gone. They were just kind of suppressed, because that was a track & field thing I was focused on at, at the, at the one moment in time.

Matt (line 85-86): the realization probably hit...maybe 4 or 5 months later.

Jason (line 550): people don't realize that's one part of your life ending.

Brad (line 71): a big motivating force in my life was gone.

Brad (line 73): I just didn't get excited about stuff

Brad (line 73-74): I just didn't really get excited about and, everything was kind of just mundane

Brad (line 80-82): It was just, like, nothing. It was just like, wasn't that great, wasn't that bad, it was just kind of like I was going through the motions of life. Uh...just like a zombie or something like that. Just blowing through.

Brooke (line 72-75): the passion for pole vaulting...was kinda like I got up every day to pole vault...it's just like you don't have that one central thing that you're working for. You don't have that drive to achieve a certain goal that pole vaulting gave me.

#### YOUR LIFE IS NEVER THE SAME AFTER

Matt (line 379-382): I obviously took it for granted. I know I did. But, that, that was a great time. It was an absolute, fantastic time. So that so over weighs the injury and what happened there, ya know, it's just, I almost feel guilty about thinking about the injury. And how, how I responded. Because, everything else was just, so monumental about it after.

Little Lig (line 107): I still am looking for something to channel that energy into.

Little Lig (line 318-319): I'm still in that search to kind of fill that, that void of um not being able to compete and setting new goals.

Ann (line 303-305): I try to relate work to sports...you don't get the same high...but I'm trying to relate the two.

Willie (line it makes you strong in the end, but if you don't think about it like that it could get the best of you sometimes.

Grayson (line 145-147): I don't know what...physically would ever replace that. Um, intellectually, I've got plenty of stuff that replaces it in work and career and especially working with athletes, but, but physically, there's nothing like it.

ITY (line 370-371): everybody's life is significant. Everybody's life is important. Everybody's life impacts each other.

ITY (line 349-351): running into people that knew me before I had the accident...one never knows who's watching you going through your time of testing.

ITY (line 360-362): "I watched you through that whole process and I don't know if I could've been as strong as you were"...and that's, ya know, I, I don't, that, that's a blind sport for me. Because I'm just walking as myself, as I.T.Y

ITY (line364-365): I'm not thinking about the impacts that, that my walk is having on others.

Jason (line 472-474): it wasn't just career-ending for me, it was life-threatening. Um...and it's something that should be one of the worst circumstances in my life and always just still will be, but I've turned it, I've flipped it on its back and made it a hu-, a very positive one.

Spencer (line (293): understanding what my limits are.

Jason (line 220-221): I kinda changed my mindset of what was important and what I wanted had a life more than anything.

Jackie (line 50-51): The strength, and courage, and trying new things...helps you be able to move on later.

Jason (line 244-247): your initial perception and it's hard to get rid of. And, um, I don't, I mean, it is what it is. Ya know, I think that was, that's one thing now that still effect me is like when people see it, they think...my credibility in some respects is, is hindered in some people's minds. Um, on the sports side, not at all.

ITY (line 317): I try and let them get a sense of a, of a glimpse into my world.

Matt (line 191): I've always been a goal oriented guy.

Willie (line 218): that give you something to shoot for.

Willie (line 436): keep on going. Keep on pushing.

Jason (line 251, 252-253): perception, whenever they say those things, I was like "well, did you reach every goal you ever wanted to?" (pause) Most people say no. And, I can say, "yes."

Lynn (line 185-186): you have that time gap. Ya know, the 3 hours that you don't know what to do with.

Lynn (line 197): you have that whole day to do nothing and I hate doing nothing.

Dawn (line 44-45): I also remember a little bit of freedom because I didn't have to go to practice all of the time.

Brooke (line 8-9): I had a lot of time that I wasn't used to and I didn't like that...I was bored a lot.

Brooke (line 14): I wasn't used to not doing stuff all the time.

Brooke (line 21): look for things to fill your time

Ann (line 63): at first I didn't know what to do with my time.

Ann (line 112): not having every minute of your life planned out.

Ann (line 144): I just had a lot more free time.

Willie (line 230): it could take anywhere from 2 years to 6 years.

Willie (line 511-513): every day I go through this process, I grow a little, a little bit more as a person...cause it teaches me a little bit more about myself every day. And I just keep growing.

Ann (line 326-327): I've gone through experiences because I can handle them and so then I can help somebody else.

Willie (line 138-141): I'm getting better... like I came a long way, like...I'm, like, people on the outside looking in they probably, ya know, don't think so. But like, with me going through it and from where I was when it first happened to where I am now; I like came, like, a long, I like came like super far like a long way. I'm still progressing every day.

Little Lig (line 74-75): just learning how to listen to certain people and then, then to others. And comparing and trying to make the decisions for myself.

Ann (line 105-106): I'm sure I'll discover more things, just like, why that happened, when it happened later on down the road.

Jason (line 477-478): ok, it happened for a reason. Let's move on.

Jason (line 479-480): after that initial couple fo days, I was like "alright, let's do this. What's next?"

Jackie (line 61-62): you don't really find out who you are until after it's over with.

Grayson (line 108): if I can't do that the second best thing would be to work with athletes.

Lynn (line 133-134): I hit the point where I think this is right for me right now. And, I'm happy where I am, I guess.

Jackie (line 25-26): I realized that I could start experiencing things for the first time.

Brooke (line 79): now a days, I'd say, it's more career oriented.

Little Lig (line 120-121): I had a chance to maybe focus on what I wanted to do with my career a little bit more.

Little Lig (line 160-162): I'm proud of what I did but I, it doesn't, it's not who I am, all encompassing, ya know. It's, it's just a part of my past and I can move on.

Little Lig (line 188-189): it's helped me in my career now.

Little Lig (line 200): it's not the end of the world. Ya know, that you will get back to regular life.

Spencer (line 381-383): the trickle down effect has happened...everything technically from hen has been a bi-product of it.

Matt (line 82): I know now, what I didn't know then.

Matt (line 115-116): Got me focused on finding a job and redirecting my career and my energies toward something else.

Matt (line 161 & 164): A wonderful experience for me...it took awhile to realize that, but it's, ya know, it couldn't have worked out any better.

Matt (line 219): it helps you deal with other things

Matt (line 232-233): you draw off of all of that that's happened to you in the past.

Willie (117-119): I would never try to think about my situation pretty much, I try to look at my destination. Like, where I'm trying to go in life, so when things get all, like, ya know, I just try to press on and pray and just ask god to give me the strength.

Willie (line 124-126): tough times they don't last. And I know that. Like, tough people do, so if you let the situation get the best of you, it could break you down. It could tear you down. But...if you get the best of your situation, you'll come out a lot stronger, a lot smarter, a lot wiser.

Willie (line 130 – 134): I've always seen myself as just gonna be a successful person, period...I always just see myself doing something positive and being a successful person...and I, I just

won't let my situation get in my way. I won't let my situation define my life and just stop me from doing whatever I wanna do,

Jason (line 213): now my whole life is kids.

Jason (line 326-328): granted, I love what I do. I absolutely like, I wake every day excited to go to work, which I never did when I was wrestling. I love coaching. It's what I've always wanted to do after wrestling. I always said "If I left wrestling and I wanted to coach." Love it.

ITY (line 95-97): using the tools that I had, kind of in the, in my life, for being a world-class athlete. I used those, um, those training techniques and the, the mental part of it to, um, push myself to get better.

ITY (line 354-355): I guess little nuggets that come out of this...is that A) I couldn't do what I'm doing right now if I hadn't had the injury...(pause)...I wouldn't be living this phenomenal life of helping others.

ITY (line 536-537): that door is now open, but I can do that on my terms, and not really, and not on their, and not on somebody else's terms

Brad (line 17-19): kind of a life lesson...I got a lot out of it. And it still, uh, helped me with a lot of other thing that I'm doing in life.

Brad (line 125): I don't want to say I'm patient, but I got more patient.

Matt (line 215-216): in a way, I'm not playing, but in a way I am, because I'm using some of those things that I learned, and I, you do it all the time.

Matt (line 225): it's a good lesson to draw on.

Matt (line 178-181): over all of these years, the basketball and the experience there has been used in a positive way to help me achieve things in the business side. That, it's, it's been, what I have learned there, uh, couldn't have ever learned in a textbook. And those lessons were more valuable to me and what I had done professionally than what I actually learned in college.

Matt (line 235-236): it becomes a great learning tool for you, as you move forward in the future. It's been a great learning tool.

Matt (line 248): experience is the great learner.

Matt (line 254-255): a tremendous learning experience for me...you always have things to draw back on.

Matt (line 257-259): it was very easy to draw back and say, “ya know, I’ve been through something pretty tough already one time. Uh, I didn’t go crazy. I didn’t, ya know...I didn’t go off the deep end with that. I got through it. I’m better for it.” And you learn from that and it becomes a great learning tool for you.

Willie (line 5-13): how much this situation has just taught me in life. It’s just like all together has made me like a better person. Cause like, it’s just made me stronger in my mind. Ya know it, like it teaches me patience that helped me out with a lot of variable things in life. Variences, like, patience isn’t just putting like the simple things in perspective. Which are now, they kind of toughen me, because I had like the things I used to do that didn’t take no time to do. Right now, I have to take time to do ‘em. It’s just been a long, just a long time coming. And it just teaches me a lot of patience. Like I had to be patient. Real patient. And before this, I didn’t have the patience. Like my patience was short, like, but overall the whole situation has just made me a stronger person and just made me look at life totally different.

Willie (line 277-280): it just touches you pretty much. Ya know what I’m saying. It just makes you not want to take anything just for granted. Like not that I was the type of person ever in life to take things for granted, but, ya know, you just ain’t always appreciate things as, as much as you should. You know what I’m saying. Like, you don’t miss a good thing ‘til it’s gone.

Willie (line 303-305): It has taught me so much, like, it has taught me way more than football or basketball or any of those sports I used to play can ever teach me. Like I have affected a lot of people’s lives. Way more people’s lives than I had effected playing sports.

Willie (line 539 & 540): Being a successful person...because of what happened to me, it will be because of my injury.

Willie (line 183-184): I think with athletes. I mean, that’s what I work with now, that’s what I love to do, it’s just like, ya know, I know what their mental state is. I mean, you’ll do anything to reach your goal.

Jason (line 465-467): I can basically tell ‘em everything you can know to reach their goals in whatever sport they do. And I can also tell ‘em, what it’s, that, that the back side of it. To make sure that you have that back-up plan.

ITY (line 106-107): pushing myself just a little bit more each time...to get, get myself back up front. So sports used that, I used sports in that, what I had done in the past...um, to help motivate me in the present.

Jason (line 464): can teach ‘em how to reach their goals

Jason (line 482-483): “What’s what am I going to have to do to get my goal?”

Dawn (line 134, 138): I’ve stayed really active...the only good thing that came out of the experience.

Dawn (line 121-122): let's just deal with reality here...rip the bandaid off

Willie (line 16-18): it's just made you appreciate life cause I almost lost my life during the injury. So...like every day I just appreciate it so much. Like I just have fun. I don't try to worry about the petty things or just get down about things that don't really matter.

Matt (line 262): use it as a positive and as a positive tool.

Spencer (line 280) I learned not to take things for granted.

Willie (line 533): taught me a lot about people, about real people, about fake people

ITY (line 471-472, 496-497): she did something so significant that changed my life...that was, that was a metaphor for almost the rest of my life, really...that changed me, those few words.

Lynn (line 125): I've grown up a lot.

Jackie (line 81-82): it was like I walked around being born for the first time.

Brooke (line 67): it's just a different life.

Spencer (line 18-19): learning to deal with that abrupt change is something that has helped me with other changes

Spencer (line 251-254): it changed from being an athlete myself and developing as much as possible for me from gymnastics, then diving, and then eventually coaching a little bit, to helping other people improve their health. Um, which is where it lead me to now as a personal trainer.

Ann (line 125-126): I'm not gonna have this like comfort zone of being at University so it was very...I guess how I was, walking out on a limb.

Willie (line 96): [adversity] I'm still going through it today

Jason (line 197-198): I've matured my mindset. It just changed. What, what was important in my life, kind of almost like, changed right away.

ITY (line 152-157): it was really time to move on. And so I kind of graduated through all those steps pretty quickly. But that's not to say that I, it was totally, totally gone. Um, because, I still had thoughts that, ya know, dreams at night that my leg was still on. And...um, and it, so it, it took a little bit, that took a little bit of time. But, uh, but the decision to move forward, because nothing had really changed in me, except for, I now had this one leg, that was, that was made pretty quickly and early on.



Brooke (line 29): it kind of gets me excited for something new and different

Brooke (line 30): experimenting with stuff

Little Lig (line 310): transfer some of my drive

Spencer (line 20): draw on that experience of my injury.

Spencer (line 22-23): not only did it affect me physically, but it affected me for the rest of my life.

Spencer (line 227): my ideas about who I was and what I have in ahead of me as far as my life goes.

Spencer (line 316): [plan] it changes all the time.

Matt (line 134-136): , that was everything I had thought about in my entire life here. So, when that life dream is all of a sudden gone, it's very, it's, ya know, then you gotta, then you gotta decide now what am I gonna do the rest of my life.

Matt (line 174): re-focus all of my energies

Matt (line 205): able to redirect those things into what I wanted to do business wise.

Matt (line 208-210): so many of those things from sports have transferred into life and especially, especially business. Um, refocusing all of what I had been doing for really a short period of time in life now, to say kind of transfer that into an extended period of time in my life.

Willie (line 233-234): you just gotta keep your eye on the prize. And just keep working. Stay focused.

Willie (line 308-309): it has made me so much of like a better person just in general. Like it has made me, like I have grown from this so much. Like...I can't, it still amazes me! How much I've grown from it.

Jason (line 305-306): I don't wish that upon anybody...it makes you really realize what's important.

Jason (line 377-379): it is something you just always gonna, I mean, you can either let it go, and move on or you can just hold a grudge. And there's no reason, I'm just too lazy to hold a grudge something like that.

Jason (line 485-486): you can still turn every negative into a positive...shit happens for a reason, ya know. Just...go from there.

Jason (line 554-555): the past, it's not like your life is, that part of your life is dead. And now you got to start your, I always call it your second life.

ITY (line 254-255): it's a scary thing to jump to something that, uh, that's new.

ITY (line 292-298): though it was fearful, I leapt out into it, because of one, faith. I knew, I knew I could do the job. And two, I believed that I had, I had the belief, trust in the system was going to...do what it promised it was going to do. So, those were, ya know, those were some of the things that I had to, um, I had to come to grips with. Uh, before I did that. And I think that's, I think that's more real...uh, to people, that fear of not wanting to strike out on your own, because you got this brilliant idea. And you just, keep with the status quo. That's a lot more scary than losing a limb, or, or having something that's taken from you.

ITY (line 503-504): learning all across my life that culminated in the injury.

ITY (line 506): I had all these experiences that I could draw strength from when I was hurt.

Little Lig (line 142-144): just changing my goals from what I used to be able to do to things that are just important for me now just to say fit, and healthy, and lean.

Little Lig (line 162-164): I didn't get all the goals that I set out, but, ya know, just making peace with that, cause it's time to make new goals and...and change...for the future.

Little Lig (line 301): change my goals

Spencer (line 327-332): making those goals even if they don't happen, they don't happen. But, a lot of times you're shooting for the goal you're in a specific situation, it can change. But, it's usually because you were headed in that direction but you found a new path to begin. Ya know, and so, you might be shooting for that direction or shooting for that specific goal and find out what you really want to do.

Little Lig (line 115-116): just coming to accept it...was the hardest thing, big task.

Lynn (line 239-240): if you look at the negatives for too long you don't see the good thing in front of you.

Lynn (line 341-342): once you're positive, you're everything changes

Jackie (line 69): I felt free.

Brooke (line 42-43): a nice little breather, I don't have to do anything.

Ann (line 302): the world's not over.

Matt (line 227-228): the sun will always come up the next day, so you gotta find a way.

Grayson (line 33): Things changed over the days and weeks and years after that.

Lynn (line 179-180): the longer out and the better I do maybe the less I focus on it.

Lynn (line 293): can't go back and change time...I'm just gonna move forward

Brad (line 76-77): it was kind of like for a month or two everything was just kind of like a blur.

Matt (line 85-86): the realization probably hit...maybe 4 or 5 months later.

Matt (line 159): a wonderful time period of my life.

Matt (line 231): I was probably immature in carrying it as long as I did.

Willie (line 535): taught me a lot about myself.

Little Lig (line 118-119): at the same time there was a little bit of peace because athletics at that level, there's just so much pressure

Spencer (line 276-280): how fragile we are, ya know, physically. But also at the same time, how resilient we are. My body literally fell apart but it was able to continue on and do something else.

Lynn (line 163-164): to completely get over it, I don't know if I'll ever do that.

Lynn (line 172): I've come like...¾ of the way.

Dawn (line 91-92): after 3 years...I loved it! But I didn't miss it anymore.

Little Lig (line 118): it's still a transition.

Lynn (line 242-243): you're so down about everything for so long, you waste time and then you waste time that you could be actually doing important things or making things better

ITY (line 324, 328-329): our mind, just runs crazy sometimes...what our mind says, our mind just runs, runs wild. And, makes up all the, plays all these scenarios for us, and...and we have to be, we have to feel, I think, to quiet that voice.

Willie (line 408): nobody will treat you like you treat yourself.

Willie (line 413-414): you gotta teach yourself also. You can't just depend on someone your whole life.

Willie (line 462-463): they not gonna do for you, like they would do for theyself. Or, like you would do for yourself.

Matt (line 291-293): How I was raised and how I was trying to live my life and so I could, I could really have an identity, just based on who I was, and how I was gonna live my life. And it didn't have to be shaped whether I was a basketball player, was I leading the company or nothing else. Had nothing to do with it.

Matt (line 278-281): I've also found out that, that experience really hasn't and what I was going through there...before I got hurt and after I got hurt, ya know, my identity was not geared around sports. Ya know, that there were qualities about me that people liked, enjoyed, and whether I was playing basketball or doing whatever. Ya know, I was...I was still the guy that they enjoyed being around.

## VITA

Lauren Aline Loberg was born in Summit, New Jersey in 1974. She graduated from Sycamore High School in Cincinnati, OH in 1992. She entered UCLA and competed as a diver on the swimming and diving team. Graduating in 1997, Lauren earned her Bachelor's degree in Geography: Environmental Science. In the summer of 2004, she returned to the University of Utah in 2004 and received her Master's degree in Psychosocial Aspects of Sport. She began her doctoral program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in the fall of 2006. During this time, she taught in the Physical Education Activity Program. She was also employed by the Men's and Women's Athletic Departments as a graduate assistant in the Mental Training Center. In August 2009, she received her Doctor of Philosophy degree in Sport Studies with a concentration in Sport Psychology. Her future plans are to complete a Master's degree in Mental Health Counseling at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, pursue an academic position at a college or university, and continue consulting in the field of applied sport psychology.