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## **"Running In and Out of Pregnancy": Elite Distance Runners' Experiences of Returning to Competition After Pregnancy**

Karen M. Appleby  
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Karen M. Appleby entitled "'Running In and Out of Pregnancy': Elite Distance Runners' Experiences of Returning to Competition After Pregnancy." 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 Education.

Leslee A. Fisher, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Craig A. Wrisberg, Diana Moyer, Ronald Taylor

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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

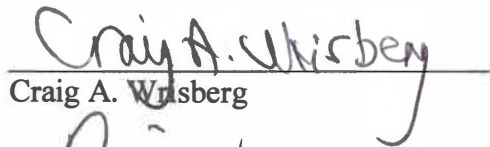
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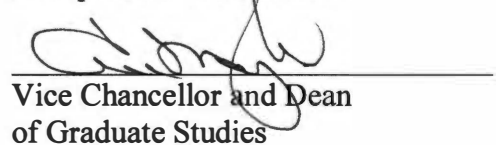


Diana Moyer



Ronald Taylor

Accepted for the Council



Vice Chancellor and Dean  
of Graduate Studies

**“RUNNING IN AND OUT OF PREGNANCY”: ELITE DISTANCE RUNNERS’  
EXPERIENCES OF RETURNING TO COMPETITION AFTER PREGNANCY**

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

**Karen M. Appleby  
May 2004**

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## ABSTRACT

Female athletes often feel compelled to make the difficult decision between being mother and pursuing a career as an elite athlete (Allred, 2001). The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of elite female runners' return to competition after pregnancy. A review of the current literature in sport and exercise psychology revealed very little information on this topic. The research that has been conducted, however, proposes that pregnancy and motherhood can both constrict and enhance performance in a number of ways. For example, Balague, Shaw, Vernacchia, & Yambor (1995) suggest that elite pregnant athletes may experience anxiety due to lower levels of training and body changes. Other research on the training patterns of non-elite mothering athletes conducted by Beilock, Feltz, and Pivarnik (2001) indicates that female athletes can drastically alter their training during pregnancy with no significant negative effects on post-partum performance. This research also indicates that women with strong efficacy ratings during pregnancy are more likely to regain high performance levels after pregnancy.

Eleven elite female distance runners who had returned to competition after pregnancy were interviewed for this study. Interviews followed a semi-structured guide (Patton, 1990) which explored issues related to identity, body image, and quality of life. Interviews were inductively analyzed and revealed the following four major themes: (a) athletic performance, (b) body, (c) self, and (d) social support. These themes describe a negotiation process that occurred for these athletes upon return to competition. This process entailed both resisting and reifying hegemonic notions of the "good" mother and the "good" athlete.

Implications from this research can potentially help coaches and sport psychology consultants working with female athletes who are either deciding to have children, who are currently pregnant, or who continue to compete while mothering. Recommendations for such groups are provided. It is also hoped that this research will help unravel some of the ambiguity that female athletes may encounter when choosing to become mothers while remaining high-level performers.



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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Feminist sport psychologists have recently called for more in-depth studies focusing on the experiences of women in sport (Bredemeier, Desertrain, Fisher, Getty, Slocum, Stephens, & Warren, 1991; Greenleaf & Collins, 2001; Krane, 2001; Oglesby, 2001; Whaley, 2001). Studying the unique manner in which female athletes experience their sport participation provides a foundation for athletes, coaches, and sport psychology consultants to better understand and enhance both athletic performance and life quality for this group. One unique aspect of the female experience is giving birth and, subsequently, motherhood. Motherhood can impact training and performance in complex ways. To date, there are few empirical studies in the sport psychology literature that document the experience of returning to competition after giving birth. More specifically, no sport psychology research has investigated how pregnancy and motherhood may affect body image, life quality, and/or identity development for mothering athletes. These aspects may either individually or together significantly impact the competitive experiences and performances of these athletes.

Society holds high expectations for mothers. Often, mothers are held primarily responsible for the physical, moral, and ethical development of their children (Chase & Rogers, 2001). These expectations may require a significant amount of time, emotional energy, and personal investment from mothers as they oversee their children's growth and development. For athletes who have often spent a large part of their lives devoted to training and competing, allocating their time to mothering may signal a significant shift in their athletic training and participation.

Balancing motherhood with an active athletic life challenges many of the

hegemonic stereotypes associated with the responsibilities of mothers. Motherhood has been conceptualized as a time in a woman's life when she is expected to surrender her own desires of self-fulfillment in order to foster her child's development (Chase & Rogers, 2001; Figs, 1998). Figs (1998) describes this sacrifice as characteristic of a "good" mother. The "good" mother is willing to sacrifice her own needs and desires in an attempt to nourish the physical, social, emotional, and moral development of her children. Paradoxically, the "evil" mother has intentions to better herself as opposed to her children. Figs' (1998) description of the "good" mother versus the "evil" mother illustrates the staunch binary choices that women often must make when they become mothers.

Both the requirements of mothering (i.e. being responsible for the physical, moral, emotional, and social development of children) and the stereotypes related to them (i.e. one must give her whole self in order to be a successful mother) may produce stress for female athletes who balance their sport and mothering duties. Professional triathlete and mother of two Julie Nievergelt has spoken of this very dilemma:

It's a very hard moral dilemma. Triathlon is a very time-consuming, self-absorbed sport. It's difficult to give your children your undivided attention. Being a pro triathlete and having kids is nearly impossible (Deardorff, 2000, p. 33).

While being a mother and a professional triathlete is possible, according to Nievergelt, it may result in significant personal struggle.

Much like triathlon, competitive distance running requires a high time commitment to training and competition. An elite runner training for a marathon may run anywhere between 50 and 100 miles per week. This running would then be supplemented with other training activities such as resistance training and stretching. Therefore, elite

marathon runners may spend anywhere between nine and 13 hours in just training per week. Balancing the time demands of motherhood and training for distance events may be difficult for these athletes. As Olympic gold medallist in the marathon Joan Benoit Samuelson put it:

I struggle with the decision to sacrifice training for my children, particularly when I want to run a full marathon. I know I need to rest more, but I don't want to give up time with the children. When I'm training hard, I'm a bear. My disposition changes; I get more irritable... You gain all kinds of strength with motherhood. I lost mental strength when motherhood was new to me. Now that my strength is back I'm always on a fine line trying to balance my career with my responsibilities as a mother (Lebow & Averbuch, 1992, p. 450).

Furthermore, elite distance runners are often held to extreme standards of thinness. Potentially both the time factors involved with training and the body image standards required of these athletes at an elite level may make mothering distance runners experience their return to competition as stressful. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of elite distance runners who return to a high level of competition after pregnancy, specifically with regard to identity, body image, and quality of life.

## Overview of Topics

### *Body Image and Sport Performance*

Athletes have unique relationships with their bodies. Much research has pointed to the tenuous relationship female athletes have with the look and shape of their bodies (see Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, & Stiles-ShIPLEY, 2001; Davis, 1992). The way athletes individually perceive their bodies can affect how they act and perform both in sport and non-sport settings. In many sport contexts, body weight and appearance are commonly linked with high performance (i.e., gymnastics, figure skating, distance

running). This tends to be the case in distance running where low body fat percentages and low body weight are generally the physiological norm for high-achieving athletes. Therefore, it is assumed that body image and how elite female runners experience their bodies after pregnancy may affect their return to competition after pregnancy. It has been shown that many post-pregnant women are less content with their bodies than before pregnancy (see Jenkin & Tiggemann, 1997). However, all of the research documenting women's experiences of their bodies after pregnancy has involved non-athlete populations. Therefore, examining the effect of body image on post-pregnant runners' performances is a central issue that was explored in this study.

### *Quality of Life and Sport Performance*

Female athletes who become mothers may also experience significant alterations in their quality of life (QOL) as their mothering requirements substantially change their sporting lives. Furthermore, considerable lifestyle changes can occur as a result of having a child. An article written about national master's triathlete Laura Sophia illustrates the life balance required of elite athlete mothers:

...Sophia's training schedule requires an art of balance. During Ironman season, she's out the door and running at 3:30 a.m., and in the pool by about 5:15 a.m. She bikes three days a week after work and does her long rides on the weekends, and her long runs (anywhere from 16-20 miles) mid-week before school. She's in bed by 9 p.m., unless family circumstances dictate otherwise, and any free time she has is spent shuffling kids to swim practice, spending time as a group, or alone with her husband (Gandolfo, 2002, p. 60).

Research indicates that QOL can be enhanced through one's participation in stimulating activities such as sport that result in personal advancement (Wrisberg & Johnson, 2002). Specifically, Wrisberg and Johnson (2002) suggest that... "athletes experience a higher level of QOL when they are able to engage in the kinds of activities

that allow them to grow as human beings” (p. 259). It can be hypothesized from this statement that female athletes gain a significant amount of personal satisfaction from both their sport participation and their parenting responsibilities. Therefore, it would seem reasonable to assume that in order to preserve their personal satisfaction and QOL, women should not be expected to abandon their sporting activities as a result of motherhood.

### *Gender(ed) Identities in Sport*

To adequately investigate how women experience mothering and competing in sport, an examination of gender identities (and the social factors that produce and maintain them) is essential. How identities are shaped (socially) and upheld (personally) is complex. In this dissertation the meanings that post-pregnant elite mothers make of their identities as mothers and athletes are described while situating these identities against dominant social (critical) discourse.

The concept of identity, as it has been traditionally defined, assumes that we all possess a “core” identity that guides our actions and behaviors based on our gender (Oglesby, 1984). However, postmodern theorists (see Butler, 1995, for example) suggest that while our identities are fluid and every-changing, they are also constantly composed in relation to binary others (e.g., man/woman; gay/straight; black/white; good mother/bad mother). Clinical psychologist Lynne Layton (1998) articulates a postmodern perspective on clinical practice and gender identity development. Unlike traditional theorists who only posit various reasons as to why and how identities are produced, reified, and maintained, Layton discusses how we can use postmodern theory in our work to improve people’s lives. Identity as it is used and defined in this dissertation is based on Layton’s

(1998) theory of postmodern gender identity. In sum, this theory suggests that women both enact and resist traditional concepts of the category “woman” in their everyday lives. Therefore, there is not a static “identity” for the concept of “woman.” At the same time, no woman reproduces herself along the same identity criteria in the same way everyday; “identities” are fluid and negotiable in response to social context. Furthermore, the category “woman,” which has been historically linked to certain political and social forms of control, can restrict specific actions in a woman’s everyday life. For example, a woman’s choice to have an abortion is as much made in regards to social law and expectation as it is to personal interest and ability to have and care for a child. In this study I was interested in understanding the process of identity change and negotiation that athletes face when giving birth and becoming mothers.

In summary, informed by the current literature, the purpose of this study was to better understand the personal ramifications of motherhood on elite female distance runners’ sport participation and competition. For those who work with such athletes, it is imperative to recognize the impact of an athlete’s social context on her sport experiences. Performance outcomes are as much a result of social, political, and personal expectations as they are of physical training. Personal experiences of identity negotiations, body image, and quality of life are all factors that may be influenced by motherhood and that may significantly affect the athletic experience.

#### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to critically explore how elite female distance runners experience their sport participation after giving birth. Specific areas that were investigated included identity development, body image, and quality of life issues as they



pertain to motherhood and sport participation. The intended outcome of this study was to illuminate the unique experiences of these mothering athletes and to describe them in a manner that will help athletes, sport psychology consultants, and coaches facilitate life quality and performance for this group. The specific research question addressed was: **How do pregnancy and motherhood impact elite female distance runners' athletic identity, body image, and quality of life as they relate to sport participation and performance?**

### Significance of the Study

Those who may benefit most from this study are the participants who were interviewed. By reflecting on how motherhood affects their sport participation, these athletes may have become aware of various social and personal issues that may constrain/enhance their athletic performance and quality of life.

Others who may benefit directly from this study are coaches and sport psychology consultants working with mothering athletes. Understanding athletes' perspectives and experiences is essential in order to help professionals facilitate athletes' performances and enhance their life quality. Filling the informational void concerning motherhood and competitive experiences in the sport psychology literature is a crucial first step toward recognizing the experiences of these often neglected voices.

### Limitations

This study was limited in the following ways:

1. Co-participants in this study were currently mothers of dependent children. While the age ranges of the co-participants' children varied between 1 and 17 years, it was expected that mothers of dependent children experience similar frequencies

of primary care giving responsibilities. This sample of mothers of dependent children was chosen in an attempt to gain the perspective of women who have had some time to adjust to both motherhood and the post partum body. Their experiences, then, were recollective in nature.

2. The scope of this study did not include the experiences of athletes who were currently pregnant.

### Delimitations

1. The co-participants in this study were elite female distance runners. Therefore, this study was not designed to investigate women's return to competition after pregnancy in other sports.
2. This study was delimited by geographic location. The participants in this study were all residents of the United States. Therefore, these findings may not be generalized to other continents in which both sport and motherhood may hold different cultural demands and expectations.

### Operational Definitions

The following operational definitions were adopted for this study:

Body Image: Internal personal representations of external appearances (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, Tantleff-Dunn, 1999).

Elite Female Distance Runner: Any woman who has qualified for the Olympics or competed on an Olympic team, competed at the Division I NCAA level in cross country and track and field, or competed in a national championship race in any distance at or beyond the 1500 meters.

Femininity: A socially constructed ideal of passivity, maternity, dependence, compassion, and gentility, which may undermine sport performance (see Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, in press).

Feminism: The study of gender as a social construction that seeks to illuminate

the everyday experiences of women and endeavors to eliminate sexist oppression (see Costa & Guthrie, 1994; Campbell & Wasco, 2000.)

Gender Identity: A continuously negotiated interpretation of one's self based on gender and relational experiences that both reify and resist cultural norms and societal canons (see Layton, 1998).

Hegemony: A political and personal "world-view" in which those of lesser power unconsciously accept and act out "commonsense" ideals that have been inscribed upon them by those in greater political and social power (see Williams, 1976).

Negotiation: The act of integrating certain social requirements related to gender, sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and ability into one's everyday actions, both consciously and unconsciously (see Layton, 1998).

Postmodern Theory: A theoretical paradigm that deconstructs "Truth" and challenges the notion of "core" identity. Postmodern theory assumes that binary identity categories (i.e., woman/man) are social constructions that only exist in relation to one another (see Butler, 1995; Layton, 1998).

Quality of Life: One's satisfaction with life based on feelings about physical well being, skill, and ability, the meaning one draws from personal activities, and one's ability to create and sustain personal and social relationships with others (see Pflaum, 1973).

This chapter briefly outlined the major topics that are discussed in the literature review for this study. The next chapter discusses relevant literature that locates motherhood as a social construction, body image for non-pregnant female athletes and pregnant non-athletes, quality of life as it relates to sport and sport performance, and gender identity theory with regard to sport and mothering.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

In this chapter literature on the following topics is reviewed: 1) motherhood as a social construction; 2) the relationship between body image and performance for female athletes; 3) the impact of pregnancy on body image; 4) how the requirements of motherhood may impact quality of life and performance for female athletes; and 5) gender identity formation and how it relates to sport performance.

### Motherhood as a Social Construction

For a woman, motherhood is viewed as the ultimate feminine fulfillment. It is a source of personal identity and self-esteem, and a way of attaining adult status (Denmark, Schwartz, & Smith, 1991, p. 10).

How society shapes the roles and responsibilities of motherhood can have a great impact on a mother's experiences. In this section the varying nature of feminist views and interpretations of motherhood from both a personal and social perspective is presented as well as the concept of the "good" mother and how this social mandate may shape the experiences of women who have children. In this section the unique experiences of female athletes with regard to these social norms is also highlighted.

### *Feminist Interpretations of Motherhood*

My dissertation is grounded in a feminist framework. It is, therefore, meaningful to discuss how feminist theory has impacted (or been impacted by) society's perceptions of pregnancy and motherhood. Many of the major empirical studies devoted to pregnancy have been biologically based (McMahon, 1995; Young, 1990). The onset of the feminist movement, however, spawned a newfound interest in the social, political, and personal meanings associated with pregnancy and motherhood. These theories, however, were

(and continue to be) very different in nature than those that preceded them.

First-wave feminists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century drew on the assumption that the major differences between men and women were primarily biological and celebrated pregnancy and motherhood as a strength unique to women. Women, specifically white, upper class women, regarded motherhood as “not only the bearing and rearing of children but also the nurturance of husbands, extended families, friendship networks, and cultural institutions” (Chase & Rogers, 2001, p. 5). Issues central to first-wave feminists included highlighting “feminine” virtues as ways to achieve social improvement and political advances (McMahon, 1995).

The perilous neglect of black and minority women’s experiences at this point spawned a new feminist philosophy, commonly referred to as second-wave feminism, some 100 years later. This movement denied the biological determinism of the first-wave and evolved various philosophies of social construction that illuminated the mandated roles of women, such as motherhood. Issues such as contraception, maternity leave from jobs, and day care were paramount subjects raised during this political period (Chase & Rogers, 2001). This particular feminist movement has been touted as “antimotherhood” in that pregnancy and motherhood were assumed to be oppressive roles that women were often forced to endure (Snitow, 1992.)

However, as McMahon (1995) points out, the objective of second-wave feminists was not to attack mothers or the act of motherhood, but to challenge the repressive reign of patriarchy and to offer women choices. At this time, alternative conceptions of motherhood (and feminist epistemologies) were refined. For example, Sarah Ruddick’s (1986) notion of “maternal thinking” distinguished the caring aspects of mothering and

motherhood as a form of moral orientation and Nel Noddings's (1988) feminist notion of an "ethic of care" celebrated the relational context within which women mother and teach. Both of these works critique patriarchal notions of individuality and have been cited as efforts that honor the relational aspects of motherhood.

Recent trends in feminist theory have also articulated the need to challenge patriarchal mandates of motherhood while at the same time appreciating the context and act of mothering. As McMahon (1995) suggests:

The challenge facing feminist analysis became one of valuing women's social capacity to care and/or their biological capacity to give birth, while resisting having these capacities considered definitive or "essential" or best in what it is to be a woman (pp. 9-10).

This point in particular is fundamental to my research, the conceptualization of my research question, and the analysis of my interviews. I do not feel comfortable suggesting that women feel compelled to become mothers only because it is a mandated social norm guaranteeing feminine authenticity. However, I do feel that women are still expected to devote a large part of themselves to the mothering process. For athletes, this self-giving may take the form of time away from training or, as Benoit-Samuelson (Lebow & Averbuch, 1992) indicated, precious energy that then cannot be expended in athletic endeavors. Both of these offerings appear to affect performance and life quality in some manner. It is a major objective of feminist theory to validate the experiences of both mothers and nonmothers (Snitow, 1992).

Stanworth (1990) calls this irony of motherhood, both as a woman's asset and her shortcoming, an "empirical paradox" (p. 297). Her conception of an empirical paradox suggests that motherhood, and the responsibilities that it encompasses, often represses

women. However, some research has shown that women often unearth newfound aspects of self-worth through their mothering experiences (McMahon, 1995). This “paradox” that locates motherhood as a restraining social construction as well as a process of self-exploration that may actually increase performance and life quality is what I attempt to describe in this study.

### *The “Good” Mother*

As previously mentioned mothers have historically been held responsible for the physical, moral, and spiritual development of their children (Chase & Rogers, 2001). Furthermore, motherhood has been described as a process of “moral transformation” (McMahon, 1995, p. 275). It was through their mothering experiences that the participants in McMahon’s investigation of new mothers’ identity development found themselves connected to and caring for their children in deep, self-transformative ways. In many cases motherhood was directly cited as a way to increase one’s awareness and caring for others:

I think having a child...certainly [makes you] less self-centered...Before I had kids...I was much more...egocentric...looking much more at the immediate, you know, just having a good time and having a fairly good social life (McMahon, 1995, p. 155).

Directly stemming from this moral reformation is the theory of the “good mother” (Chase & Rogers, 2001; Figs, 1998; Denmark, Schwartz, & Smith, 1991). In her book *Life After Birth: What Even Your Friends Won’t Tell You About Motherhood* (which is a cross section of both her own and other women’s experiences of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood), Kate Figs (1998) indicates that women are socialized to fit the concept of “the good mother” (p. 63). Figs states that...“if a woman chooses to have a child, then

she [must] feel duty-bound to sacrifice everything in her own life for her child's welfare" (pp. 63-64). Similarly, Bordo (1993) postulates that "the pregnant woman is supposed to efface her own subjectivity, if need be. When she refuses to do so, that subjectivity comes to be construed as excessive, wicked" (p. 79).

The social construction of the "good" mother implies that women must put their children's needs before their own. This may lead mothers to assume that all of their actions are "morally freighted" (Chase & Rogers, 2001, p. 30). Decisions that women make about their activities during pregnancy and motherhood seemingly become a public issue; everyone has an opinion about what mothers should and should not do. Chase and Rogers (2001) use examples such as the use of epidurals during labor, breastfeeding, sleep arrangements, and how much and what type of television children are allowed to watch as instances of morally influenced choices and decisions that mothers must make on an everyday basis. Exercise and taking time for oneself also become moral dilemmas in the life of a mother. For example, in her article on teaching a feminist class on motherhood, Chase (2001) says:

Even the most mundane actions carry moral weight. Some of my students in the 'Motherhood and Feminism' seminar talked about sneaking in half an hour of exercise after finishing their courses and studying for the day, before picking their kids up from day care. They didn't want their children or their caregivers to know that they had the audacity to spend time taking care of themselves. I have experienced this too (p. 31).

Beyond the everyday moral choices, Chase (2001) suggests there are larger cultural assumptions about certain mothers that solidify their cultural locations as "bad" mothers. She argues that socially defined "bad" mothers generally fall into one of three following categories: 1) non-nuclear mothers (i.e., lesbian or non-married); 2) those who



do not protect their children either during pregnancy or motherhood; and 3) those whose children misbehave. In sum, overall societal assumptions are that lesbian and non-married mothers may subject their children to unusual or frequent sexual activity, that mothers such as teen mothers who may be financially unstable are unable to “protect” their children, and that mothers of children who misbehave went horribly wrong somewhere en route to moral instruction. While research has debunked all of these myths they are still pervasive in our society and continue to affect many mothers (Lewin, 1993; Palakow, 1993).

Naomi Wolf’s (2001) book *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected Journey to Motherhood* explodes many of these pervasive social standards. In this book, Wolf critically examines the entire experience of becoming a mother. From the first visit to the doctor’s office to a comprehensive “Mother’s Manifesto,” Wolf questions, challenges, and uncovers the unrealistic standards and ethics that often bond women to repressive social expectations of the “good” mother. Wolf cites actions such as breastfeeding, daycare, and epidural use as factors related to the moral choices mothers are asked to make in light of “good” mother standards. In fact, in Wolf’s introduction, she suggests that the very nature of such a book that questions the self-sacrificing, all-consuming proceedings of motherhood may be perceived as an act of “bad” mothering. She stated:

Are we bad women, bad mothers, for exploring such issues? Should pregnancy and birth remain such sanitized rites of passage that we can’t speak graphically or honestly about them? I believe not. This book delineates some of the drastic, absurd, and sometimes painful changes women go through in the transition to new motherhood...(p. 9).

Wolf’s book articulates the momentous process of becoming a mother and explodes

traditional theories about motherhood like the idea that women are “natural” mothers. Furthermore, this piece offers women a chance to realize that the social construction of the “good” mother is unrealistic and impossible to obtain; mothers are encouraged to question and, in that questioning, should not be fearful of being deemed a “bad” mom.

### *The Mothering Athlete*

For a woman deciding to return to sport after giving birth, abolishing her own desires often entails relinquishing training time, competition and travel to competition sites while also completely reprioritizing the values associated with her livelihood. If women choose to return to sport, they are often expected to integrate their motherhood somehow into their sporting lives. Many women navigate this requirement by having their children travel with them to practices and games. For example, Allred (2003) describes a common sight at one of the Austin Rage’s women’s football practices: “While more than a dozen moms duke it out on the gridiron, a mob of little cute people race up and down the field, on the stadium stairs, and around the concessions stand” (p. 95). In contrast, I have rarely seen small children running on the sidelines of an Indianapolis Colts (an all male NFL team) practice, and would, in fact, guess that they would be seen as a distraction to the players.

The different responsibilities expected of men and women for the rearing of their children is based on the fact that women are often asked to make choices in their lives (that men aren’t) which are contradictory and incompatible (McMahon, 1995). The words “female” and “athlete” are as dissimilar and culturally conflicting as are the words “athlete” and “mother.” When stringing these three words together (i.e., mothering, female, and athlete) we find that a female athlete who is a mother may constantly have to

negotiate her own aspirations with the needs of her children. Male athletes often do not have to make these choices or experience these contradictions. As former Olympic gold medal gymnast Mary Lou Retton once said, “let’s face it, ultimately, the responsibility (of parenting) rests on the woman” (Allred, p. 98, 2003).

Sport participation was once considered unsuitable for women because it was believed that it could severely impair a woman’s physical ability to have children (Dowling, 2000). In fact, women’s sport participation continues to be “contested terrain” (Messner, 1994, p. 65). For example, women were not allowed to compete in certain events (the Olympic marathon for women was not run until 1984) because Olympic officials believed that activities such as distance running might produce infertility. Despite these false reproductive theories, many early athletes disregarded the “warnings” and became successful, elite-level competitors. Fanny Blankers-Koen, a mother of two at the time, won all four running events open to females in the 1948 Olympic games in London.

Women are also inundated with restrictions about their physical capacities during pregnancy. For example, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) recently indicated that heart rates in excess of 150 beats per minute may be harmful to developing fetuses (ACOG, 1994). This maximum heart rate level would limit women to very minimal sport training during pregnancy. However, to date, very little research has been conducted to determine the effects of high levels of training on pregnancy outcomes. The absence of these reports is disappointing but understandable. Because of the limited guidelines highlighting the effects of vigorous activity on a developing fetus, many women have been hesitant to be “subjects” in such investigations.

The enforcement of stringent rules without empirical support, however, has led to confusion surrounding healthy ways to exercise and keep fit while pregnant. As Beilock, Feltz, and Pivarnik (2001) mention,

Although the ACOG guidelines acknowledged that a more physically fit woman (e.g., a competitive athlete) might be able to continue a more intense exercise program during pregnancy than her more sedentary counterparts, the guidelines provided no specific suggestions for these athletes. The 1994 revised ACOG guidelines also proposed no specific recommendations for highly trained athletes (p. 40).

Obviously, the lack of empirical research on the effect of exercise intensity and duration on a fetus's development may lead to confusion for female athletes about training during pregnancy.

Despite limited guidelines offered to women about physical activity during pregnancy, research has suggested that training and staying fit during a healthy pregnancy may actually be beneficial. In a study conducted on the effect of excessive running on a twin pregnancy, it was revealed that “an elite endurance athlete can continue to train intensively during a twin pregnancy with no apparent adverse effects on maternal and fetal health” (Davies, Bailey, Budgett, Sanderson, & Griffin, 1999, p. 417). Furthermore, the ACOG has indicated that staying active during pregnancy can significantly decrease health-related problems such as excessive weight gain, lower back problems, and mental health issues like depression and anxiety related to pregnancy (Dowling, 2000).

Aside from physical challenges after pregnancy, female athletes must face another question after giving birth. At what cost do they integrate sport and physical activity into their new lives as mothers? For female athletes, the responsibility of motherhood must be

balanced with other life priorities such as training and competing, both of which may take a significant amount of time away from their children. Jambor & Weekes's (1996) case study on an elite, non-traditional NCAA Division I distance runner suggested that one of the major conflicts this participant experienced with regard to her training and competing was often her mothering responsibilities. She expressed feeling as if she had to "juggle" mothering and running (p. 150). The following quote describes how she had to prioritize her life around the wellness of her family:

The whole week my son was sick, I hardly trained at all. It was hard on both of us because I wanted to go out for a run, but he felt too sick for me to leave him. I would have to wait until my husband came home from work, but sometimes he would work a double shift so I would get no running in (p. 150).

Furthermore, even at their greatest moments of victory, high-level female athletes have often felt guilty about their choices to integrate motherhood and competition. In a post-race interview after her gold-medal winning Olympic performance, Gwen Torrence indicated that while on the medal platform:

She had been thinking about her young son, about all the early mornings she had left him to begin her workouts, about the demands she had placed on her mother and other family members to provide child care, about her expectations that her husband, who is also her coach, would take care of things at home while she concentrated on her running (Fairchild, 1994. p. 377).

It seems evident from this example that motherhood may uniquely impact how female athletes experience training and competing.

The literature in this section positions motherhood and the responsibilities associated with it as a social construction as opposed to a biological determination. Moreover, matters relevant to mothering behavior such as the myth of the "good" mother and the unique experiences of mothering female athletes have also been highlighted. I

now turn my attention to the issue of body image and how body image may impact a woman after giving birth and, perhaps, when returning to competition.

### Body Image

Women are constantly aware that their bodies articulate powerful images in society (Bordo, 1993). As Bordo posits, "...frequently even when women are silent (or verbalizing the exact opposite), their bodies are seen as "speaking" a language of provocation. When female bodies do not efface their femaleness, they may be seen as inviting" (p. 6). Female athletes are no different; they are consistently aware of their bodies in relation to performance, social, and professional standards. Furthermore, pregnancy may have a large impact on a woman's body image. In the following section literature documenting the cultural requirements of women's bodies, how female athletes experience and negotiate these requirements, and the effect of pregnancy on body image for post-pregnant women is reviewed.

### *Cultural Requirements of the "Female" Body*

Our everyday lived experiences guide how our bodies "learn" certain cultural limitations (Bordo, 1993). Bordo discusses the Foucauldian notion of the 'direct grip' in which the everyday experience helps teach "our bodies what is 'inner' and what is 'outer,' which gestures are forbidden and which required, how violable or inviolable the boundaries of our bodies are, how much space around the body may be claimed, and so on" (p. 16). This concept of "taking up space" is especially important when studying female athletes. Due to cultural limitations, girls and women are rarely taught to make effective use of their whole bodies in physical endeavors (Young, 1990). For example, women very rarely assume that they are "capable of lifting and carrying heavy things,

pushing and shoving with significant force, pulling, squeezing, grasping, or twisting with force” (Young, 1990, p. 145).

Bordo has proposed the idea of the “material” body (p. 16). This notion asserts that our everyday lived experiences and behaviors reflect the cultural values ascribed to our bodies. Bordo’s focus on the body is centered on “the complexly and densely institutionalized system of values and practices within which girls and women—and increasingly men and boys—come to believe they are nothing unless they are trim, tight, lineless, bulgeless, and sagless” (p. 32). Correspondingly, female athletes are held to bodily requirements of smallness, low body fat, and lean muscle mass. Cole (1993) has, in fact, described the new “feminine aesthetic” as cyborg-like, “...versatile, athletic, hard, and slick” (p. 87). It is essential to recognize these culturally assigned body ideals when discussing how pregnancy, which dramatically changes one’s body shape, and motherhood, which may require significant time away from training, affect the body image of female athletes.

How female athletes learn to use their bodies is in constant social challenge. As stated earlier, women who participate in sport are supposed to fill two clashing roles. They are to be strong, athletic, and powerful while at the same time exude the feminine requirements of passivity, weakness, and non-competitiveness (Young, 1990). It is in the careful attention to everyday life situations, such as the contradiction that female athletes may feel about their own musculature, that the negotiation of these tensions may be best unraveled (Bordo, 1993).

Many women who participate in sport have worked very hard to attain levels of physical fitness and their bodies often reflect this painstaking effort. It is, therefore,

hypothesized that some female athletes may experience pregnancy as a physical burden to their body. For example, post-pregnant two-time Olympic speed walker Michelle Rohl indicated that, "...while [my baby] was inside of me sometimes she seemed to be little more than a growing tumor that made me fat and slowed down my workouts" (Allred, 2003, p. 88). Therefore, it was a primary purpose of this study to describe how female athletes navigate body image issues associated with pregnancy and the return to sport participation during motherhood without making judgments related to their perceptions.

It has also been suggested that in pregnancy, women may be less likely to experience bodily objectification. Iris Young (1990) proposes that pregnant women are socially viewed with approval as opposed to desire. While this may seem positive, such "approval" may actually be more associated with social validation of a woman's sexual orientation versus her pregnant status. As Chase and Rogers (2001) indicate, "a woman with a child is presumed to be heterosexual" (p. 32). Social endorsement of pregnant women may presumably be another way of defining the "good" mother.

### *Body Image and the Female Athlete*

The relationship female athletes have with their bodies is complex. As previously indicated, women in some sport must attain a high level of strength, power, and endurance in order to perform successfully. Obviously, the attainment of these characteristics is dependent on having a fit, muscular body. Female athletes, however, are also held to standards of femininity that suggest musculature is not feminine. In her research on the body image of female athletes, Krane (2001) suggested that social contexts directly affect the body image of athletes. For example, female athletes work both toward and against two contradictory ideals: "small and toned" in regular every-day



social contexts and “large and muscular” in athletic environments (p. 42). More specifically, this conflict “influenced their body image, eating behaviors, mental states, and self presentation” (p. 39).

Similarly, Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, and Kauer’s (in press) research on the negotiation process of female athlete identity and muscularity proposes that collegiate female athletes often embody two different body image identities. One identity relates to their athletic lives while the other correlates with their social/personal lives. The athletes interviewed in the Krane et. al. (in press) study, for example, were conscious of not becoming overly muscular and looking “like guys” (p. 12). They felt that looking masculine or embodying high amounts of musculature was an unwanted effect of training for sport. Interestingly, not wanting to possess a high degree of musculature could potentially limit a woman’s performance while also possibly restricting the sports in which she can participate.

These contradictions may have a significant impact on performance. Within the sport psychology and sport sociology literature, female athletes’ perceptions of “ideal” body images have been linked to sport participation initiation and adherence (James, 2000; Richman & Shaffer, 2000), social norms within athletic settings (Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995), and eating disorders and mental states (Davis, 1992). All of these factors may affect the way an athlete feels about returning to competition after pregnancy.

### *Body Image After Pregnancy*

While the previous literature illustrates how athletics may increase body image concerns, it has also been shown that pregnancy can significantly affect a woman’s body

image (Richardson, 1990; Toler & Digrazia, 1977; Walker, 1998). Richardson (1990) suggests that pregnancy “is a time in the woman’s life characterized by significant alterations in appearance and body function” (p. 93). This literature offers possible insight into how female athletes who experience body image as a central component to athletic participation may negotiate body image ideals after pregnancy.

Research indicates that pregnancy often leads to higher levels of fat content and weight gain for women (Walker, 1998). This bodily change may negatively impact a woman’s body image after giving birth. For example, Jenkin and Tiggemann’s (1997) study on the effect of weight retention after birth suggests that body image dissatisfaction intensifies after pregnancy. They found that 115 post-pregnant women were less pleased with their bodies than they were before pregnancy. Furthermore, these women split body image into two correlates, body weight and body shape, and expressed concern with both. Jenkin and Tiggemann (1997) suggested that high dissatisfaction may be related to unrealistic expectations pregnant women have of retaining their pre-pregnant shape and weight.

Further research conducted by Walker (1998) indicated that post-pregnant women may hold inaccurate perceptions about their bodies, which do not correspond to their true body mass index and weight. Walker suggested that these unrealistic associations may be due to a female’s post-partum negotiation between a pre-pregnant body standard of thinness and a more voluptuous post-pregnant body standard. This inaccurate perception and negotiation may prove uniquely difficult for athletes who may not be prepared for post-partum weight gain and the ways this may affect performance.

For the post-pregnant athlete, this demand to return to pre-pregnant body shape

and weight may be even more crucial as she returns to competition. While some athletes experience swift returns to the pre-pregnant body weight and functioning, for others it is much more difficult. For example, WNBA player Helen Darling described her return to basketball after having triplets as difficult and frustrating. She said, “the doctor said I should bounce back quicker than normal because of the good shape I was in. But when I came back, I felt like I was starting over again...I didn’t think it would be this hard” (Rosewater, 2003, p. 2A).

In sum, this literature suggests that body image ideals constantly shift during pregnancy and that post-natal women are more often displeased with their post-pregnancy bodies than their pre-pregnancy bodies. Specifically, for female athletes who may be held to specific social requirements of beauty and femininity as well as physical mandates of low levels of body fat, strength, and endurance, returning to sport participation may be a difficult experience if they are dissatisfied with post-partum body weight and shape.

### Quality of Life and Sport Performance

Quality of life (QOL) is a “broad concept” that has been studied in diverse ways (Dijkers, 1999, p. 286). Pflaum (1973) was the first to suggest that physicality, self-concept, and primary and secondary social relationships were intimately tied to QOL. Physicality or “biophysical functioning” deals with one’s ability to perform a physical skill as well as one’s current possession of overall physical fitness. Self-concept is related to one’s ability to find meaning and personal improvement in his/her activities. Finally, primary and secondary social relationships are concerned with an individual’s ability to sustain close personal relationships and other, more peripheral relationships. These four

elements have provided a basis for the limited research conducted on athletes and their experiences of QOL.

Pregnancy and motherhood are significant experiences in many women's lives that can impact QOL. Moreover, female athletes who become mothers may experience significant changes in QOL as their mothering requirements substantially change their sporting lives. As opposed to professional athletes who are allotted a substantial amount of time to train, "serious recreational athletes are more likely to report that motherhood has had a detrimental affect on their performance, simply because they've had less time to train" (Kort, 1986, p. 58). Furthermore, considerable lifestyle changes can occur as a result of having a child. The following quote by U.S. Olympic bobsledder Alexandra Powe-Allred illustrates the life adjustments that arise for a competitive athlete as a result of mothering: "the hard part (of being a mother) is adjusting to our new lives, making our significant others understand and help, and overcoming all the guilt and fears we face as new moms" (Allred, 2003, p. 82).

### *Athletic Participation and Quality of Life*

Morris, Lussier, Vaccaro, and Clarke (1982) first employed Pflaum's (1973) categories to assess the QOL of female distance runners. Drawing on previous research indicating that QOL increased as adherence to a physical activity program was maintained, these researchers hypothesized that nationally ranked distance runners would score higher on Pflaum's life quality inventory than would a comparison group of non-athletes. The Pflaum Life Quality Inventory (1973) was administered to 10 nationally ranked female masters runners and to a group of female non-athletes. The results of this study indicated that, on a whole, athletes had a significantly higher QOL than the non-

athletes. Specifically, in the area of self-concept runners were much more likely to indicate that they gathered personal satisfaction from their physical abilities compared to non-athletes. These findings support the hypothesis that regular, intense exercise accompanied by athletic success can contribute to a relatively high QOL.

In a subsequent review paper, Wrisberg (1996) analyzed the research on QOL and conducted a content analysis of various qualitative sport studies to estimate how athletes' experiences might impact their QOL. This review included an investigation of the following data: 1) the results of an NCAA Division I survey of the QOL of collegiate athletes (American Institutes for Research, 1988a, 1988b), 2) personal interviews, and 3) qualitative data found in other sport related studies (Young & White, 1995; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1992; Messner, 1992; Nelson, 1991; Pronger, 1990; Wright, 1988). Wrisberg (1996) concluded that Division I NCAA athletes may experience lowered standards of QOL compared to the rest of the student population due to the higher demands that competitive athletics place on personal time and external pressures associated with membership on a high profile team.

Other studies reviewed by Wrisberg (1996) (see Young & White, 1995; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1992; Messner, 1992; Nelson, 1991; Pronger, 1990; Wright, 1988) revealed that the personal significance of sport participation and gender-related differences notably impacted QOL for athletes. For example, being given the opportunity to learn and display their skills, cultivate relationships with teammates, and facilitate gendered identities were all cited as major factors affecting the QOL of female athletes.

An area that has not been covered in the QOL literature is the effect of parenthood on QOL. The mothering female athlete, as pointed out earlier, may also experience stress

associated with her restricted ability to be a “good” mother and family member due to her training requirements. The social stigma of being a “good mother” may, in fact, contradict many of the characteristics and qualities of being a good athlete. Being an elite athlete requires a sizeable investment of time for training and competition. As previously mentioned, being an “elite” mother requires a woman “to sacrifice everything in her life for her child’s welfare...” (Figes, 1998, p. 64). Therefore, it would appear that potential binary conflicts exist between mothering and being an athlete.

Interestingly, while this binary may appear to pit motherhood and sportswomanship against each other, it has been indicated by several elite-level mothering athletes that the two existences can successfully coincide. In order for female athletes to resume and continue sport participation, they may need to identify an appropriate balance between their sport-lives and their parenting lives. Therefore, recognizing how female athletes balance and negotiate their athletic lives around their parenting responsibilities is important when studying the QOL of this athletic group.

### *Quality of Life, Pregnancy, and Sport*

The research on QOL in sport emphasizes the important connection between QOL and performance enhancement for athletes. More importantly, research suggests that QOL can be both positively and negatively influenced by factors related to personal self-perception, physical fitness, relationships with others, and feelings of personal development. All these aspects are accentuated during pregnancy and motherhood. Therefore, a primary goal of my dissertation was to determine how these factors affect both QOL and the performance of mothers and mothering athletes.

Pedersen (2001) used a symbolic interactionist approach to study the experience

of being a mother and an athlete. She interviewed eight Danish athletes who were currently mothering while striving for professional careers in sport. These interviews revealed that motherhood presented these athletes with a personal balance that resulted in decreased pressure related to athletic performance. Furthermore, sport careers offered these mothers an alternative means of “self-expression” outside of motherhood (Pedersen, 2001, p. 267). Therefore, they did not feel confined to a binary self-representation of either “mother” or “athlete,” but combined the two in a balance of healthy self and social identity. This study concluded that motherhood can actually have a very positive impact on QOL for athletes.

In sum, a thorough review of the QOL literature indicates that athletes may draw significant gains in self-concept from their sport participation. On the other hand, high-level athletes may also experience stress due to time constraints resulting from practice and travel. Furthermore, QOL for high-level athletes may be conflated with mothering responsibilities and the social stigmas associated with being a mother. While research suggests that there may be performance enhancing aspects of motherhood, such as taking pressure off one’s self in competition, there are certainly a number of factors that must be integrated into a high-level athlete’s existence in order to preserve and increase QOL after giving birth and returning to competition.

### Identity Development

While the gifts new mothers receive are well documented, the losses are often hidden...Indeed, the greatest loss for many new mothers is a kind of loss of self (Wolf, 2001, p. 7).

So what is happening? Does bagging the traditional New Year’s Day five-mile Resolution Run...mean I was going soft? What next? Skipping a workout because the boys had runny noses? Forsaking the friends, vitality, and peace of mind that

come from aerobic playtime? Would I abandon me? Who would I become? (Simons, 2001, p. 144)

An essential area of sport that may be informed through feminist research approaches is identity development. For this project, I am drawing on Layton's (1998) theory of postmodern gender identity to frame the concept of identity. This theory emphasizes the use of postmodern perspectives in a clinical setting and identifies ways practitioners can use postmodern theories to improve and better understand their clients' lives. The following three components comprise Layton's theory: a) the influence of our social context, b) our personal "mediations" of this social context, and c) the "self" as a constantly developing pursuit.

Postmodern identity theories suggest that identity is a category (Butler, 1995; Layton, 1998) and that identity categories are binary distinctions (such as male/female; black/white) that essentially reify each other and exist only in relation to one another. Therefore, how one "identifies" (i.e., I am a white, heterosexual, woman) can only occur in opposition to this identity (i.e., I am not a black, homosexual, man). In addition, identities are not self-constructed; they are socially constructed through a constant positioning (and repositioning) of categories on a binary continuum of comparison. As Butler (1995) contends:

...It is simply not a strong enough claim to say that the "I" is situated; the "I", this "I", is constituted by these positions, and these "positions" are not merely theoretical products, but fully embedded organizing principles of material practices and institutional arrangements, those matrices of power and discourse that produce me as a viable "subject" (p. 42).

Butler's theory is very useful in critiquing how society produces and preserves our identities. However, she leaves very little room, in my opinion, for the agency of the



individual within these social confines. How do individuals challenge pre-determined binary identities (i.e., athlete/mother)? How do we integrate and negotiate binary identities (i.e., athlete/woman)? Layton proposes a “negotiation model” that helps flesh out these questions. Identities are comprised of patterns of both acceptance and resistance to personal and social requirements; self-esteem and self-identity are created in an effort to achieve agency and maintain social connection.

For example, sport has been deemed a “masculine” pursuit (Messner, 1994). In light of this philosophy, female athletes may be considered true “outsiders.” Despite this category of “otherness,” women still play, compete in and excel at sports ranging from road biking to Indy car racing, ballet to basketball. Therefore, if sport is a “masculine” domain, and women play sports, the bluff is called on the traditional notion of “core” identities and the reliability of research that draws “conclusions” based on investigations not informed by social context. A critical postmodern approach assumes that identity categories are fluid, negotiable, and contested (both personally and socially). Furthermore, this approach emphasizes that identities (and those behaviors stemming from them) result from the complex interaction between one’s internal (i.e., personal) and external (i.e., social) world.

Therefore, a critical postmodern approach that challenges the notion of the “core” identity essentially opens up our categories of woman/man. This in turn could potentially increase the behavioral choices (and, therefore, the tools) athletes employ to increase their personal fulfillment and performances related to sport. For example, if there was no “core” identity associated with being a female, female athletes would be less likely to perceive their musculature as “non-feminine” and, therefore, negative. Furthermore,

participation in sports once categorized as “male appropriate” and “female appropriate” would be uncategorized to provide the opportunity for either gender to excel. In addition, if the binary lines that traditionally have succeeded in reifying identities were obscured, we might potentially see less sexual harassment and violence aimed at those players who compete “outside” of socially prescribed gender roles.

While I align myself with such a postmodern take on identity development, I also believe that individuals have fundamental characteristics that shape the way they experience the world. However, the concept of a “core identity,” in keeping with a postmodern perspective, seems fallacious in a world in which we are constantly assuming many different identities (i.e., mother, athlete, partner, teacher, researcher, etc.) Therefore, I believe that individuals may possess negotiated identities. The concept of negotiated identities suggests that individuals’ identities shift and overlap depending upon social context and personal experience. This theory would render any research project erroneous that was specifically designed to investigate one-dimensional characteristics such as masculinity, femininity, and androgyny. In the case of this dissertation, I attempted to explore the layers (i.e., female, mother, athlete) of identities that female athletes possess, specifically those that emerge after giving birth.

For elite runners, the notion of self or identity may be intimately tied to running. Research on highly committed runners has shown that these athletes often look to their running to increase self-esteem and provide life management strategies (Major, 2001). When such athletes experience life-changing events, such as pregnancy and motherhood, and alterations in their training and participation, it may affect them in various ways. For example, athletes who are negatively addicted to (i.e., controlled by rather than having

control over) training and who may cease or modify training significantly may experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, irritability, tension, and guilt (Sachs, 1981; Morgan, 1979). Sachs (1981) describes the lifestyle of the addicted runner in the following statement:

...Participation becomes a habit, a regular part of daily activity. At this stage the runner is hooked. Other aspects of life begin to be shaped around the daily run, with changes in eating and sleeping schedules, as well as in time spent with family members. These are in addition to changes in diet and leisure time activities, the latter frequently encompassing races of long runs on Saturday mornings, and voracious reading of books and magazines on running. Running has become a compulsion, a habit, an addiction. When days are missed, withdrawal symptoms become immediately more apparent and generally powerful. Running has become much more than a means to the end of getting in shape; it has become the end itself. The need to run becomes omnipresent (p. 121).

In addition to running addiction, female runners who become pregnant may experience further complex feelings about their limited ability to participate, both during and after pregnancy, due to social norms associated with mothering responsibilities. Female athletes are often asked to choose between motherhood and sport. For example, a chapter in Alexandra Powe Allred's (2003) book titled *Are You a Mother or are You an Athlete?* exemplifies the strict binary distinctions society has constructed between motherhood and athleticism. While being a mother has traditionally been socially defined as the model identity for women, most athletes gain a rich sense of self from their sport involvement and accomplishments.

In sum, the purpose of this dissertation was to investigate the experiences of mothering athletes as they relate to and are affected by issues of body image, quality of life, and identity negotiation. It is difficult to separate these three topics as they are all closely interwoven in personal experience. However, research has indicated that female

athletes, in general, often feel as if they must live up to various standards of body image and athletic identities. These standards also hold true for mothering athletes who may feel pressure to embody social characteristics of “good” mothers. Attempting to live up to all of these social obligations may lead mothering athletes to experience their lives much differently than they did before becoming pregnant or having children. It is my hope that this investigation yields helpful suggestions that may improve both the performance and quality of life of athletes experiencing motherhood. I also hope this study assists coaches and sport psychologists who work with such athletes in improving the quality of women’s training and consulting experiences.

The next chapter describes the methodology I used in this investigation. A brief overview of how critical feminist theory was employed in this study will be presented. Furthermore, I will discuss co-participant demographics and the procedures I used to analyze co-participant interviews.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

In this chapter, the following methodological issues are discussed: (a) the rationale for employing a qualitative method; (b) a description of critical feminist theory and how it was used in this project; and (c) a detailed account of the data collection and analysis procedure used to describe the experiences of elite female distance runners' who returned to competition after pregnancy.

### Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methods have been identified as approaches that can articulate the emotional qualities of sport participation better than other "normal" scientific methods (Martens, 1987). In past years, qualitative research has gained popularity in sport settings (Cote, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993). It is through an in-depth qualitative process that participants are given the chance to articulate their personal experiences in a meaningful way. Because returning to competition after pregnancy has been relatively overlooked in the sport psychology literature, this study was meant to be exploratory in nature. I believed it was crucial to talk to athletes about their feelings and experiences in order to achieve a rich description of this phenomenon. Therefore, in order to answer the research question posed I believed a qualitative approach would be the best way to describe the phenomenon under investigation.

### The Goals of Feminist Research

Sport studies researchers are beginning to recognize the importance of attending to gender issues. As Krane (2001) mentions,

Although slow to gain scholarly momentum in sport psychology, gender issues

are an inherent part of sporting life. Athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists cannot avoid noticing the differential treatment of male and female athletes (p. 402).

While there is a relative dearth of feminist research in the realm of sport studies, a few researchers have used feminist frameworks to illustrate women's experiences (Gill, 2001). For example, studies utilizing feminist paradigms have investigated the impact of gender on sport participation for women (Lenskyj 1990), the affect of sexual harassment on female athletes (Lenskyj, 1992), the experiences of female sport psychology consultants (Roper, 2001), the navigation of body image by competitive female athletes (Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, & Stiles-Shipley, 2001), and the application of "feminist" consulting methods in sport (Gill, 1994). In general, feminist methods are employed to challenge dominant paradigms of power and to illuminate how people (of all genders) both resist and comply with these paradigms. The end result of feminist research is often practical application and political action.

Feminist inquiry is highly variable. As Campbell and Wasco (2000) suggest, "the writings that define feminist research are dense, span multiple disciplines, are highly philosophical, [and] inherently political" (p. 774). While these variations in philosophies and politics shape a host of feminist epistemologies, there are central tenets that underlie most feminist action and research. In the following section three principles inherent to most feminist research are described: a) being gender-focused, b) being self-reflexive, and c) being praxis-oriented.

### *Gender Focused*

As stated earlier, a key focal point in feminist research is gender. Therefore, most feminist paradigms support the philosophy that social mandates and subsequent gendered

“performatives” shape how we perceive ourselves and function in and among socially produced power differentials (Butler, 2000, p. 155). Viewing gender as a social construction allows researchers to look beyond sex and physical characteristics as valid grounds for difference and helps explain how, simply on the basis of socially derived ideals such as gender, one may be treated differently in society.

To suggest that feminist methodologies can accurately articulate the experiences of all women, however, is a misnomer. It is fallacious to propose that by definition of sex, all women share the same experiences. As hooks (1984) has suggested:

A central tenet of modern feminist thought has been the assertion that “all women are oppressed.” This assertion implies that women share a common lot, that factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference, etc. do not create a diversity of experience that determines the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women (p. 5).

This statement deconstructs the homogenous category of “Woman” and, as a result, places emphasis on the study of gender along with the intersection of race, class, sexual orientation, age, ability, etc. on women’s experiences in diverse settings. Therefore, feminist research attends to the variety of other social stratifications such as race, sexual orientation, ability, socio-economic status, age, etc. which also affect the experiences of women.

### *Self-Reflexive*

Traditionally, the field of sport psychology has been driven by positivistic research methods. These modes of inquiry, which seek to separate the researcher and the researched in order to achieve objective, unbiased results, offers a “socially convenient” way for those in power to unquestionably maintain their influential positions (Greenwood & Levin, 2001, p. 93). Feminist methods differ from positivistic methods by

incorporating self-reflexivity into the research design, data collection, analysis, and subsequent write-up of studies. Feminist approaches draw out the researcher's personal interest and investment in the project as a way to validate information and help articulate participant experience. As is evidenced by a number of feminist articles that present personal experience as the basis for their studies and lines of inquiry, self-reflexivity is a key feature of feminist research (see Bredemeier, 2001; Krane, 2001; Roper, 2001; Semerjian & Waldron, 2001).

### *Praxis-Oriented*

Finally, feminist researchers are commonly concerned with the practical application of their work. The term praxis refers to the application of theory to everyday action (Bredemeier, 2001). Feminist praxis is evidenced by the commitment to use research to "make discriminatory and marginalizing practices unacceptable" (Krane, 2001, p. 409). In order to achieve these high goals, feminist researchers strive to conduct research that is "woman-centered" (Lenskyj, 1990, p. 235). Woman-centered research is focused on political action, empowerment of women, and renovated relationships between the sexes. Furthermore, feminist research strives to increase the "emancipatory" knowledge of marginalized groups (Lather, 1991). In the following statement, Lather (1991) describes how praxis-oriented research has the power to liberate marginalized individuals:

...Emancipatory knowledge increases awareness of the contradictions distorted or hidden by everyday understandings, and in doing so it directs attention to the possibilities for social transformation inherent in the present configuration of social processes (p. 52).

Therefore, the feminist maxim that "the personal is political" is actualized by



recognizing, altering, and transforming our socially prescribed gender stereotypes through research that is designed to integrate theory and practice (Roper, 2001, p. 445).

### Critical Feminist Theory

How to make women's voices heard without exploiting or distorting those voices is an equally vexatious question (Oleson, 2000, p. 231)

Interpreting, questioning, uncovering, and challenging issues of reproduction and reproductive rights are long-standing projects of feminist research. Pregnancy and motherhood are delicate subjects that require a careful eye and cautious tongue to describe, explain, and analyze. As I stated earlier, the main struggle I encountered with this project was deciding how to describe women's experiences of motherhood and sport by situating them in a social context that identifies the hegemonic concepts that drive the institution of motherhood, while simultaneously illuminating the resistance that these mothers present to these hegemonic norms. I did not want these women's words to be interpreted as either "sour grapes" against motherhood or, as one participant said, "happily distracted" in celebration of motherhood. How does one resolve these two issues?

In order to attend to both the oppressive and the empowering aspects of motherhood, I approached this study from a critical feminist perspective. Critical theories place special emphasis on illuminating how the social constructions of power influence people's everyday lives (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Oleson (1994) suggests feminist methodologies, specifically those that are critical in nature, attempt to "center and make problematic women's diverse situations and the institutions and frames that influence those situations..." (p. 158).

In other words, critical feminist methods attempt to represent “lived experiences” while also attending to the potential change our research may have for women living this experience (Whaley, 2001, p. 420). Furthermore, critical feminist inquiry situates gender as a social construction that creates and forms our “consciousness, skills and institutions” (Lather, 1991, p. 71). Taking these aims and philosophies into account, it was my goal to explore the emotional process of balancing athletic participation with motherhood while also critically evaluating how society influences the perceptions and experiences related to this existence.

### Bracketing Interview

Qualitative research recognizes researchers as instruments in their inquiry (Thomas & Nelson, 2001). The researcher is not (and cannot) be an objective bystander who simply listens with no emotional reaction to the interviewee. Denzin & Lincoln (2001) suggest that qualitative inquiry is a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 3). Furthermore, McCracken (1988) mentions that a researcher’s familiarity or bias toward her research may “dull” her ability to critically explore and probe the data (p. 32). Therefore, it is important for researchers to recognize the biases that they may hold about their subject matter that may either constrain or enhance their data analysis.

In order to identify my personal biases about motherhood and distance running, I engaged in a bracketing interview prior to data collection (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997.) The same semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A) used with individual co-participants and described later guided this interview (Patton, 1990). A sport psychology researcher familiar with qualitative inquiry conducted the bracketing

interview. Because I have never been pregnant or given birth, the interview questions were changed to assess my feelings about pregnant athletes returning to sport. This interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to the same process described later. One specific question was added as a result of the bracketing interview. The question was added to the demographic section of the interview and asked co-participants to describe a typical day for them in terms of training, mothering, family responsibilities, and working. This question was included to help me get a feel for each co-participant's everyday life.

#### Bias Statement: My Athletic Experience

The bracketing interview helped me to both identify my biases and reflect on my personal experiences related to being an athlete. As Denzin and Lincoln (2001) suggest, “behind all research stands the personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective” (p. 18). My identity and experiences helped shape the construction of the research framework, including the questions I asked, the analysis I conducted, and the manner in which co-participant stories were told. Therefore, prior to the study, it was important for me to locate myself in relation to this project.

I have been an athlete my whole life. I started swimming at age nine and competed for nine years. During this time I also competed in gymnastics, softball, and track during my “off” seasons from swimming. In college, I joined the cross-country and track and field teams. I fell more and more in love with running the faster I got. As my times dropped my obsession with the sport increased to the point of near self-maiming in the Summer of 2000 when I found myself unable to run due to a serious back and leg

injury. Time off was the only answer that doctors, coaches, and friends could offer me. The thought of not running (and, consequently, not running fast) was a serious blow to my identity. I was a runner, plain and simple, and then I was faced with: Now who am I?

During my difficult transition out of competitive running I filled my time with other physical activities. I rock climbed, competed in triathlons, and raced my road bike. However, nothing filled the void of running for me. Now as I reflect on my training habits before injury, I realized how obsessive and harmful they were. I sacrificed a well-rounded lifestyle and a healthy body for running many times in my life; I am not willing to do this anymore. I am now able to see my injury as a blessing in disguise.

Also, as I think back on my athletic participation in general, I realize that it has been both enlightening and constraining at times. Even as a young girl, I was conscious that my body was different from other girls'; I was bigger and stronger than they were. I was involved in both "feminine" characterized sports such as gymnastics and swimming and "non-feminine" sports such as softball (Czisma, Wittig, & Schurr, 1988). Every sport I engaged in made me feel confident about being strong. When I was competing I felt good about my body and its strength. However, when I was not competing or practicing, I felt very self-conscious about being bigger.

Throughout my athletic experiences, I became aware of the tenuous and often constricting, relationship female athletes have with their bodies. Despite the positive feelings sport participation has generated for me, I am always conscious of attaining a "heterosexually" attractive appearance during my training and competition. The sports in which I participate/d involve very little clothing coverage (i.e. swimsuits, bodysuits, leotards, briefs, sports bras) and, consequently, any time I gain or lose weight I feel

differently about myself as an athlete and a woman in relation to this bodily change. Furthermore, I sense that my performance is somehow linked to how others perceive my body. Feeling good about how I look (when I know others think I look good) increases my confidence, motivation, and performance as an athlete.

In addition, while I was in my mid-twenties, many of my still very active and competitive friends became pregnant. I watched in fascination as their bodies grew. Their “six packs” disappeared and grew into large, round mountains of moving flesh. Their breasts, many of which were nearly non-existent before pregnancy, stretched and swelled as their due dates approached. Many of them were instructed to gain weight, a foreign and scary thought to many female athletes, in order for their babies to grow healthfully. Their once-trained, self-controlled bodies became enigmas to them as their balance, appetites, strength, bodily functions, and hormones all swayed according to the needs of the fetus growing within. While these mysterious sensations may make some women think negatively about their bodies, this is not what I noticed in my friends. Instead, they exhibited an elatedness about producing a new life. What became evident to me was that they were struggling to negotiate their feelings (often negative) about their changing body shapes and their ever-decreasing athletic abilities with their feelings (often excited and scared) of creating life. They were all, however, very concerned with what to expect when they returned to sport after giving birth. I wondered if they were experiencing similar feelings as I had when I was forced out of running due to injury.

Further discussions with my friends after they had given birth revealed that returning to training and competition was equally as difficult as experiencing their bodies in pregnant chaos. They were torn between training, something that they had experienced

as time for themselves, and mothering, something that they were now expected to do as a full-time job. While experiencing elation about giving birth to healthy babies, they struggled to maintain healthy balances for themselves. Resuming pre-pregnancy fitness was difficult and frustrating for many.

In summary, my bracketing interview revealed that I hold many beliefs about high-level runners returning to competition after pregnancy. For example, I believed that mothering runners would experience time constraints in association with training and mothering and that they would be relatively unhappy with the shape of their bodies after giving birth. On a brighter note, I also assumed that post-pregnant runners might experience a positive identity shift after giving birth. I expected the co-participants to suggest they had “a perspective shift” about their running identity and that, after having children, they would not feel as if they “had all their eggs in one basket.” Along these same lines, I expected a general perception among co-participants to feel as if becoming a mother made them “more well-rounded” athletes.

## Methods and Procedures

### *Interview Guide*

This study utilized a semi-structured interview guide in order to elicit information from the participants (Patton, 1990). The interview guide (see Appendix A) explored topics regarding athletic self-perceptions and identity development/changes, body image concerns, and quality of life as they relate to competing while mothering young children.

### *Pilot Testing*

After the interview guide was constructed, a pilot interview was conducted with a post-pregnant female athlete. This interview served a dual purpose. First, it familiarized

me with the interview process, which highlighted potential problems with the interview guide. Second, the pilot study allowed me to recognize aspects of the interview that were unclear (Janesick, 1994). For example, it became evident that I had not included questions such as, “How do you perceive society views the responsibilities of mothers?” and, “Are there ever any contradictions that you experience between being a mother and an athlete?” These are obviously important questions to discuss in light of the social and personal responsibilities mothers may feel they hold.

### *Main Study*

Upon IRB approval, two runners I knew were contacted by telephone and were asked to participate in the study. I also posted an email on a message board devoted to female runners that described my study and asked for co-participants. As each co-participant contacted me, I arranged an interview at her convenience. Before each interview took place, the co-participant was asked to read and sign an informed consent letter and was told she may withdraw at any time (see Appendix B).

The interview began with questions related to demographic information such as age, race, ethnicity, partner/marital status, number of participatory years, highest level of achievement in running, number and gender of children, and number of years since giving birth. Following those introductory questions, each co-participant was asked the same questions in roughly the same order contained in the interview guide (McCracken, 1988). Exploratory probes such as “Would you elaborate on that?” and “Could you say some more about that?” were used throughout the interview (Patton, 1990, p. 326). Two interviews were conducted in person and nine interviews were conducted over the telephone. Each interview was audiotaped and lasted between 60-120 minutes. At the

conclusion, I thanked each co-participant for her time and mentioned that she would be sent a copy of her transcript in order for her to provide corrections, deletions, and additions.

### *Co-Participants<sup>1</sup>*

There were three inclusion criteria for co-participants in this study: (a) to qualify as an elite distance runner before pregnancy, (b) to have given birth, and (c) to have returned to competition after giving birth and while mothering (see Table 1 for demographic characteristics of the co-participants). Inclusion requirements for “elite” classification were racing distances at or beyond 1500 meters at the following levels: (a) the Olympics (b) the Olympic trials (c) the National Collegiate/Post Collegiate level.

Co-participants were gathered in two ways. First, two co-participants were acquaintances of mine and I asked them to participate. Second, other co-participants were obtained through personal interest after I posted an email to an internet message board devoted to female runners. In this message, I briefly described the study and its purpose, the inclusion criteria for the co-participants, and included my contact information. In an attempt to reach “theoretical saturation,” eleven co-participants were interviewed (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143).

Co-participants had a mean age of 37 years and a mean of 18.9 years of competitive distance running experience (see Table 1). Co-participants had a mean average of 2 children. Ten co-participants were white; one co-participant was African-American (CP5). Nine co-participants were married. One co-participant (CP4) was

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<sup>1</sup> The results obtained in this study will be a reflection of both the researcher’s and the co-participants’ knowledge and experiences. Therefore the term “co-participant” is used to reflect the shared, reciprocal



Table 1

*Co-Participant Demographics*

CP #	Age	Race	Years Running Experience	Marital Status	Number Of Children	Occupational Status	Running Experience
CP1*	37	White	20	Married	2	Full-time Outside Home	Olympic Trials '96, '00
CP2	32	White	25	Married	1	Full-time Outside Home	Olympic Trials '04
CP3*	38	White	18	Married	2	Full-time Outside Home	Olympic Trials '00
CP4	53	White	15	Divorced	1	Full-time Outside Home	Olympic Trials '94, '88
CP5*	34	African- American	12	Married	1	Full-time Outside Home	Olympic Trials '88, '94 '96
CP6	31	White	15	Married	3	Full-time Inside Home	National Ranking '94
CP7	40	White	24	Married	2	Full-time Inside Home	Olympic Trials '96, '00
CP8	30	White	17	Married	1	Full-time Outside Home	½ Marathon Nat'l '00
CP9	41	White	24	Re-Married	3	Full-time Inside Home	Olympic Team '96, Qualifier '84, '88, '92 '00
CP10	35	White	20	Married	3	Full-time Inside Home	Olympic Trials '04
CP 11	38	White	18	Married	3	Full-time Outside Home	Olympic Team '92/ Runner up '96

process of knowledge production and creation between myself and the women interviewed for this study (Fisher & Bredemeier, 2000; Lather, 1988).

\* Signifies co-participant is currently pregnant

divorced and one co-participant was remarried (CP9). Six co-participants had qualified for the Olympic trials in events at or beyond 1500 meters. One co-participant had qualified for the Olympic trials, but had not yet competed in them (CP10). Two co-participants had represented the United States on an Olympic team (CP9 and CP11). One co-participant had competed at the U.S. national level (CP8) and one co-participant had competed at NCAA nationals as a Division I college runner (CP6). Seven co-participants had full-time occupations outside the home and four co-participants were full-time moms.

### *Data Analysis*

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. These verbatim transcripts were given back to each co-participant in order for her to add, subtract, or clarify experiences that she thought were representative of returning to competition/participation after pregnancy. Only two participants corrected their transcripts. CP4 (co-participant 4) included more information about her experience in the Olympic trials in 1985 and CP9 made minor grammatical changes to her interview.

After transcription and member checking, I inductively analyzed each interview as a case study (Patton, 1990). This inductive analysis helped me identify the individual experiences that were significant for each co-participant. During this step, I attempted to recognize the important individual structure of each co-participant's experience "without presupposing in advance what the important dimensions [of the overall experience would] be" (Patton, p. 44, 1990). I specifically used a process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to help with this step. Open coding is the first step toward distinguishing "properties" and "dimensions" in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). In order to open code, I wrote down notes at the end of each sentence in the interview that seemed

significant. For example, the following paragraph from CP1 was coded as “social recognition from running”:

You know what I liked about [running] was it gave me an extra identity or just something that sets you apart. Like you’re at work and you’re working and people all of the sudden see your name in the paper and people are like ‘that’s you?!’ you know and it kind of adds a whole new element of respect and I really like that.

Next, I cross-case-analyzed each interview in order to identify connections and differences among all of the interviews (Patton, 1990). This system of cross-case analysis helped me identify similar behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that all co-participants discussed. I paid specific attention to words and phrases that were repeated (i.e., “struggle” and “hungry to run”), metaphors that were insightful (i.e., “whispering” when talking about the bad parts of motherhood), and stories that were told (i.e., the creative training strategies that each co-participant engaged in after pregnancy). This cross-case analysis helped me identify major themes and subthemes that described co-participants’ experiences on a whole.

Subthemes were identified through a process of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Subthemes help give the overall category or concept “greater explanatory power” by answering questions about each theme such as “when, where, why, how, and with what consequences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 125). For example, the major theme *Performance* was supported by the subthemes *Personal Investment*, *Efficient Training*, *Decreased Pressure*, and *Setting Realistic Goals*. Each of these subthemes offered specific insight into the co-participants’ experiences of their performances after pregnancy.

Finally, I reanalyzed the data in relation to outside theory that has documented

non-athlete mothers' and elite athletes' experiences of their life quality, body image, and identity development. I did this in order to ground my categories in a context of previously generated theory. I asked myself questions such as, "Why would these athletes feel pressured to change their training as opposed to just going on as usual?" and "How was the social support they received influenced by the elite running community?" My goal at this point in the analysis was to find out how the categories fit together to create an integrated set of experiences in relation to the co-participants' stories and outside theory.

After the data were analyzed, I sent the co-participant's the following materials: (a) the model illustrating the experience of elite mothering runners' return to competition (see Figure 1), and (b) a brief description of the themes and subthemes that I identified as figural to their experiences. I asked the co-participants to provide feedback if they felt it was necessary. I received feedback from only one co-participant (CP9) who felt that both the model and the themes generated were consistent with her experience. She said, "...it looks like you did a superb job collecting and analyzing all the data. I would love a copy [of the final dissertation] if you can spare one."

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to critically describe eleven elite distance runners' experiences of returning to competition after pregnancy. In this chapter I discuss results of semi-structured interviews conducted with co-participants.

Co-participants' stories relayed information regarding the following four major themes: (a) athletic performance, (b) body, (c) self, and (d) social support. These four themes occurred in the context of two socially constructed hegemonic categories—the “good” mother and the “good” athlete. Each theme is discussed in turn in the following section. But first, co-participants' descriptions of the social constructions of the “good” mother and the “good” athlete are presented.

### Presentation of Hegemonic Social Constructions

From a critical feminist perspective, presenting individual experience against the backdrop of predominant social discourse provides a glimpse into the mental, physical, and emotional actions (and interactions) that occur as individuals negotiate their own desires within the hegemonic power structures that guide their everyday lives. As I conducted and analyzed the interviews, it became clear to me that co-participants both aligned themselves with and resisted the hegemonic dimensions of “good” mothers and “good” athletes. They carved out small niches of resistance to both of these norms in order to continue running and performing at a high level.

### *The First Social Backdrop: The “Good” Mother*

As indicated earlier, the “good” mother is an unrealistic, binary portrayal of a woman's responsibilities after giving birth (Figes, 1998). Often, these responsibilities

include actions such as being selfless, always present, sacrificing her own desires for the needs of her children, and never putting her child at risk. Motherhood has been regarded as “the most public of personal conditions” (Smiley, 1998), in that seemingly everyone has an opinion about how a woman should or should not act during pregnancy and motherhood. Therefore, society, may have great influence over how a woman may initially construct her mothering responsibilities.

Throughout co-participants’ interviews, there were several acknowledgements of how the “good” mother concept affected how they felt about their responsibilities after giving birth. Specifically, co-participants discussed feelings of guilt about being absent due to training, sacrifices they had to make as mothers, and how they became aware that pregnant women were viewed as harming their children if they continued training during pregnancy.

#### *The “Good” Mother Part #1: Being Present*

A general stereotype of the “good” mother was that she is eternally present in her children’s lives. Several co-participants discussed feeling guilty about being absent due to training. CP5 talked about how she shortened her training time after she realized that she was not spending enough time with her child:

I slowly mentally started thinking about it’s not worth it ...my training. I just didn’t train for two hours—maybe just an hour and 30 minutes because I wanted to be with my kid. (CP5)

CP10 made the choice not to run with other runners so that she could “tuck her kids into bed” at night:

I’d say one of the big things, I met with conflict is if I were to join a running club or join up with other runners and (I’ve) had people, especially recently, inviting me to join them and working out and even another gal that’s working towards the

trials and I've kind of backed off and said "well maybe on Saturday." That to me is really difficult because if I run from my door back to my door I can still be back in time to tuck the kids into bed, read them stories. (CP10)

Finally, CP11 told me that she had "eternal" conflict about taking time for herself to run.

The only conflict for me is the selfishness. That's the only conflict. I don't see any conflict between nurturing a child and competing at a high level. Um...the only conflict for me is taking that time for yourself. That would be, to me, the only conflict in that is what I'm doing too selfish? That would be eternal. (CP11)

### *The "Good" Mother Part #2: Sacrifice*

Many of the co-participants described the sacrifices they had to make as a result of their mothering responsibilities. For example, CP10 talked about the perspective shift that motherhood evokes when she said:

Suddenly you've got, whereas you might have thought running is important, the house...whatever...all of the sudden you have this little being that you need to raise and I mean all of the sudden everything else is like no big deal...Suddenly there's somebody who's much more important than yourself.

Other co-participants discussed the concept of sacrificing for their children. Sacrifices ranged from shifting training schedules to giving up certain parts of training, such as lifting weights or stretching. CP4 specifically felt as if she had to "give up a lot" of things she enjoyed after she became a mother:

I'm responsible for nurturing another life. And that includes various things and mainly it includes also giving up a lot of things on my part because it's more important to make sure that my child gets what he needs. (CP4)

CP6 believed that mothers should stay at home with their kids in much the same way that her own mother had stayed home to raise her and her siblings. Despite feeling good about her decision to be a full-time mom, she told me that this full-time job required a high amount of "sacrifice." She said, "I'm in the mothering minority who sacrifices a lot to stay at home to raise my kids as I think my mother did and most of that whole generation

did.”

### *The “Good” Mother Part #3: No Harm*

Many of the co-participants discussed the “good” mother stereotype of never putting their children in harmful situations. As suggested previously, there are very few studies documenting how exercising during pregnancy affects the health of a fetus. Despite this limited knowledge, each co-participant exercised during pregnancy. Their exercise was highly modified as they substituted cross-training activities such as swimming and Yoga. Despite being careful, however, some of the co-participants experienced the societal stigma against pregnant women exercising. For example, CP1 had to stop running due to social expectations. She said, “I started having all those Braxton-hicks contractions and everyone said to me ‘you’re not still running are you?’ So I had to stop for fear that people from work would see me out running. Literally...”

Some co-participants felt that their doctors even reinforced the “good” mother stereotype. For example, CP1 questioned her doctor’s recommendation to stop running after having an amniocentesis when he did not require her to stop her “mothering” duties such as cleaning the house as well:

I had an amnio with the third one and the doctors were like “well don’t run for a week” and I was like, “why?” And then I said “well can I stop vacuuming my house and cleaning and picking up my children too?” You’re going to make me stop doing the one thing I enjoy doing? The one thing where I get a little time for myself? But they never say that.

While all of the co-participants broke the societal norm of working out during their pregnancies, they were also very careful to suggest that they worked out within reason; they also had expectations of pregnant women. As CP9 passionately described it:

I just can’t understand these women...and you can quote me on this...who think



of themselves and not of their baby and continue to run for themselves. You know if your heart rate is over a certain...140 [beats per minute] and if your body temperature goes up you risk brain damage to your child. And so why would people risk that? I've heard women bragging "oh I ran a marathon' you know and "I was six weeks pregnant" and I think that's the ultimate selfishness. And they're worried about body beautiful and not baby beautiful.

### *Discussion of the "Good" Mother*

As is supported by the quotes provided above, co-participants were aware of the social standards of the "good" mother (e.g., being selfless and sacrificing, being present in their child's lives, and never putting their children at harm or risk.) While they attended to social norms co-participants also challenged many of these social constructions as will be evidenced later.

The theory of the "good" mother is a social construction that often shapes how women who have children think, feel, and behave. Social policy and historical movements have played a large role in society's conception and creation of the stereotype associated with the "good" mother (Chase & Rogers, 2001). While "good" mothers in the early twentieth century were responsible for creating ideal citizens who would be prosperous workers and leaders within their communities, the shift away from industrialized America in the late 1930's and early 1940's changed the dominant paradigm of motherhood and the responsibilities of mothers (Chase& Rogers, 2001).

At this time child rearing became specifically "child centered" (Chase & Rogers, 2001, p. 68). According to Chase and Rogers (2001), mothers became solely responsible for the mental and emotional growth of their children. Moreover, McMahon (1994) describes how this child-focused perspective led to the conception of children as "innocent," "virtuous," and "redeeming;" for those who had failed in their gendered and

social identities, giving birth and becoming a “good” mother could even rectify one’s life mistakes (p. 190). The “good” mother typecast began to require the selflessness and self-sacrifice that is still a pervasive hegemonic condition ascribed to modern mothers today.

All of the co-participants in this study were attentive to the social conditions attributed to pregnant and post-pregnant mothers. The results indicated that many of them felt that mothers had responsibilities (social and personal) toward their children, which included being there for them at all times, sacrificing certain personal pleasures, and not harming their children in any way. However, as stated previously, many of these conceptions were also resisted when the co-participants discussed their training and competitive lives. This point is discussed in the following section.

### *The Second Social Backdrop: The “Good” Athlete*

Similar to the “good” mother, the “good” athlete is a binary social construction that encompasses a variety of acts carried out on a quest for performance outcome. The “good” athlete is one who is fully committed to his or her sport, single-minded, and performance-driven. For the “good” athlete, the entirety of his or her life is centered on training for and achieving a high level of athletic performance in his or her sport. This, of course, is another unrealistic, socially-created condition that athletes sometimes feel compelled to embody.

#### *The “Good” Athlete Part #1: Focus and Commitment*

Co-participants often described being driven and motivated solely by running before they became pregnant. This drive and motivation often led them to feel as if there was no time to have children while continuing their quest for high performance. For example, CP9 discussed how the subculture of running makes women feel this way when

she said:

Well you know there's always another championship. You know in... '94 it was 'the world championships are next year,' and then in '95 it was 'it's an Olympic year next year,' and then in '96 'well there's another world championship the next year.' And a lot of females try to time their babies for their odd year. There's one out of every four years that there's no championship so you see people scrambling to get pregnant that year... And they'll say 'well what about the world championships' but there's always another race. ALWAYS another race. ALWAYS another season. We're such a nation of specialists that when a woman gets into athletics she just gets so focused on that specialty you don't hear the other voices.

CP9's additional admonition that the running community often does not see "the forest for the trees," was similar to the way CP5 discussed being "depressed" when she first found out she was pregnant, because it meant she could not compete in the upcoming world championships.

You get kind of depressed about it and you're like 'oh I can't run.' I remember with [name of son] and my first pregnancy... I think world championships were around that time and I was in really good shape and I got pregnant. It was so disheartening to me. Because running was just like everything and you associate your identity with it and I was so depressed about being pregnant.... Initially, because I did not want to be pregnant, I was thinking 'oh that's going to ruin my chances for a world championship.' So initially it made me want to train harder. Because this wasn't in the plan and I wasn't going to let it stop me from continuing my... I was 28 I think... and it wasn't going to stop me. I remember calling my agent and saying 'I'm pregnant but that's ok—you know'

Furthermore, before they became pregnant, co-participants discussed being highly committed to their training. A "good" athlete must do whatever it takes to get in all of her training. CP1 told me that her training before pregnancy was much more intense and focused:

I took my training pretty seriously. I still did the Thursdays and Saturdays kind of like I do now but the intensity was a lot higher. And we did a Tuesday running group where we met on the track and that was a lot higher. I would come home from work everyday and run 8 or 9 or 10 miles to get my runs in. And on the weekends whatever we needed to... 15, 20 [miles] whatever we needed to.

Similarly, CP8 described how, before she had her children, very little would get in the way of her training on a daily basis:

I was very driven and very committed and very competitive with myself and set a lot of goals. And pretty much...when I was training at my highest it was just like it was a huge priority...not much was going to get in the way of me getting my run in.

### *The “Good” Athlete Part #2: Performance Expectations*

Co-participants also described how the overall running community held differing expectations of them and their running after they had children. For many, expectations from the running community were either that they would return to competition quickly as if nothing in their lives had changed or that they never would compete again. Both CP9 and CP7 felt that others in the running community believed that their competitive days were over when they became pregnant. CP9 told me, “Everybody thought I was done. That it was over and I wasn’t going to run again.” Along the same vein, CP7 said, “I think there were probably some people who kind of thought ‘well [she’s] probably done.’ Or there’s no way [she’s] going to be able to [return].”

Other co-participants felt pressured to compete and perform at a high level again immediately after giving birth. CP4 said, “There were expectations of...the entire running community that I would compete again.” CP1 described being frustrated with how the local runners in her Thursday night training group expected her to return to her pre-pregnancy shape very shortly after giving birth. She said:

I think the people on Thursday nights, because I’ve been going there for like 8 or 9 years, they were kind of like ‘oh I can’t believe you’re [running in the back of the group].’ It doesn’t bother me but it’s just funny and I go well ‘have you been paying attention to what I’ve been doing lately? It’s not like a big surprise here’ I think those people were like surprised so I have to remind them. You know...I

have kids and I work... 'cause even before they knew I was pregnant this time they were like 'are you going to try and qualify again?' and I'm like 'have you been paying attention to what I've been doing in my races?' I'm not exactly close.

CP9 even suggested that it was the culture of the elite running community that constrained a mother's ability to perform. She told me:

I obviously ran in and out of motherhood. I had some of my best races... my very best races after [first daughter] and some damn good races after [second daughter]. It's not like I was physiologically incapable of doing it but it was a cultural landmine to negotiate.

### *Discussion of the "Good" Athlete*

Overall, co-participants recognized that before pregnancy they had internalized aspects of the social construction of the "good" athlete, such as being focused and committed to the sport of running. They also acknowledged that the overall running community often held either unrealistically high expectations of them when they returned to competition or did not expect them to come back at all. In addition, responsibilities and priority shifts (and possible performance enhancement opportunities) that encompass being a mother went unexamined by most in these women's athletic communities.

Often, the "good" athlete requirement leads athletes to feel as if their identities are solely tied up in the training and performance of their sport. As indicated earlier, for runners especially, personal identity is oftentimes intertwined with training and performance. For example, the running identity was described by one elite marathoner in a personal narrative by Park (2000) as: "All I know is that this sense of identity—"I am a runner" is rooted as deeply as any other element that I would use to describe my attitude, my personality, and my being" (p. 1).

Specifically, in sport circles, commitment to one's sport participation has been

identified as an important aspect in elite performance. In his research on elite athlete's identification process, Stevenson (1999) suggests that the process of becoming an elite athlete is interactive. This theory implies that the commitment to become an elite athlete is based on one's own desires as well as social requirements and expectations. In a review of Stevenson's (1999) work, Coakley (2001) noted that when athletes make the decision to become elite, they recognize that "the resources needed for participation could disappear or that changes in other parts of their lives could force them to alter the importance of sport participation." (p. 86). Pregnancy and subsequent motherhood are among those life situations that could require an athlete to significantly change her involvement in sport.

Throughout the interviews, co-participants discussed the contrast between their pre-pregnant and post-pregnant identities. Often, their pre-pregnant selves were characterized by an intense focus on running and performing; in other words, very little would impede their training on a daily basis. They also discussed the "interactive" influence of the running community on their training, such as the hegemonic ideal that post-pregnant athletes would not return to competition or that they would return as if nothing had changed. As will be evidenced shortly, many of these stereotypes were both reified and resisted by co-participants upon returning to competition.

### Presentation of Major Themes

In the next section the following major themes, identified as central to co-participants' experiences, are described: (a) athletic performance, (b) body, (c) self, and (d) social support. Each major theme that emerged as significant throughout the interviews is supported and comprised of various subthemes that more specifically

describe the essence of that theme for the co-participants in this study (See Table 2).

### *Theme #1: Athletic Performance*

A significant experience for each co-participant was how she performed after pregnancy. In six cases, performance increases were experienced (CP2, CP3, CP4, CP8, CP9, CP10). Two co-participants (CP1 and CP6) were in the middle of their “mothering” years (i.e., competing in between births but without enough time to train and compete nationally) and were experiencing a subsequent halt in performance. One co-participant experienced overall performance decrement after having her child (CP5). Two co-participants experienced no change in overall performance after pregnancy (CP7, CP11). It should be noted that performance decrement in the case of CP5 was not solely attributed to pregnancy and motherhood, but to general life factors such as employment, and age.

Overall, co-participants described their performance modifications in terms of factors related to the subthemes *Personal Investment*, *Efficient Training*, *Decreased Pressure*, and *Setting Realistic Goals*.

#### *Theme #1, Subtheme #1: Personal Investment*

Pregnancy and motherhood significantly changed co-participants’ personal investment in the sport of long distance running. Many of them described being “obsessed” with training before pregnancy. CP8 told me that before she became a mother, “not much was going to get in the way of me getting my run in” on a daily basis. There was a general sense that running was one of life’s main priorities before becoming a mother. While running continued to be a priority after pregnancy, motherhood appeared to significantly change co-participants’ personal investment in running.

Table 2

*Examples of Raw Data Themes and Subsequent Subthemes and Major Themes.*

Raw Data Themes	Subthemes	Major Themes
Adding a child gave me more questions to ask It's not fair for me to do all three (work, run, mother) I gave up things that I needed to do	Personal Investment	
Anytime I got the opportunity to run I would take it I had no fat to trim—I had to get all the meat in Your timing must become more efficient	Efficient Training	
		Athletic Performance
I don't have to earn my dinner I hadn't put off other dreams I don't have to prove anything to anyone	Decreased Pressure	
I loved getting back in shape; it was a fun challenge I kept getting pleasantly surprised Those first couple of races are just a learning experience	Setting Realistic Goals	
There's nothing more painful than childbirth Pain from running is like nothing	Perceptions of Pain	
You have to learn your running style back over I didn't even feel like I was running I couldn't believe I couldn't run 9-minute miles	Body Performance	Body
I like my flat stomach and that's hard to deal with I worked this hard and I want my body back	Shape and Appearance	
Part of me was thinking, 'I need something for myself' I can still have my alone time I was so much better off having that hour everyday	Something for Me	
I feel like the best teacher is through showing them It helps my children having me do something You want your daughter to look up to you	Being a Role Model	Self
Now...I'm a lot of other things before I'm a runner Motherhood [was] a big blessing in disguise	More than just a Runner	
He gives me time to not feel guilty and train He'll...keep them busy for an hour or two I couldn't have done it without [my family]	Primary Support	
		Social Support
You have to create...an intentional family My coach has more confidence in me than myself	Creating an "Intentional" family	



In fact, many suggested that their personal investment in running changed because motherhood made them question the “validity” of running at a high level. For example, CP11 said:

I’ve always questioned the validity of competing at a high level. I’d always wondered what the right place for it in someone’s life was and adding a child just gave me more questions to ask when I was in that space of wondering the worth of whatever I was doing.

Similarly, CP5 “struggled” with the concept of her whole life being about running after she became a mother. She said, “I struggle with it being about just running...Because when you look at the world and everything...it’s just running. Yeah—it is a struggle for me.”

Questioning the worth of running often compelled co-participants to feel as though they had to make changes to their life priorities and subsequent investments. CP4 felt as if she did not have adequate time in her life to view running as a “priority” anymore after she had her son:

For a long time my priorities were running, and work. You know running was first, work was second and social relationships were third. Then I got married and things changed a little bit but then after [name of son] was born...he was first, running was second, and work was third. I felt like I didn’t have much time for much else.

In direct response to this concept of shifting priorities, many co-participants described the choices women in general are often forced to make between being a “good” mother, having a successful marriage and career, and continuing their quest for athletic performance. CP9 alleged that it was nearly impossible for a woman to have success in all three of these things in her life:

I believe a woman can do two out of these three things. She can either have a great career and a great marriage. She can have a great marriage and great kids, or

she can have great kids and a great career. But all three I found impossible; something had to give.

Similarly, CP1 felt that it was not “fair” to her children to invest herself both in running and work:

Well you can’t do both. I mean because I’m working I can’t [run full time and mother]. If I wasn’t working I think I could do both. And definitely you could do both if you weren’t working. It’s just not fair for me to do all three. That’s where I’ve decided it’s not fair for them.

Sometimes their investment in mothering was viewed negatively. A few co-participants suggested that their mothering duties required a decrease in their investment in running. For example, CP4 described feeling “depressed” and “oppressed” by mothering; because of this she did not feel she could invest herself into her running when her child was young.

I think that I was pretty depressed after he was born. I had a c-section so I stayed home for 2 months on medical and I just remember he just had taken over everything. We had no schedule because he wanted to eat every hour and ...like physically, mentally, and emotionally I was shot because I was so tired. And I was trying to run and that didn’t work so well either...you know I couldn’t get a good night’s sleep. I felt pretty oppressed by the responsibility of it all. I was so tired that I couldn’t think ahead and take a long view of things and so it was...I was pretty overwhelmed. I didn’t have the freedom to say ‘oh I’ll run later’ I had to run when I could. I gave up things that I needed to do like lifting weights or stretching and things like that just because I didn’t have the leisure.

On the other hand, CP1 described being “okay” with her decreased performance because she had not “invested” the proper amount of time into training:

Here I am running a minute and half slower in a 10k and I’m ok with it. I’m not as fast as I used to be and I’m ok with it. I really thought it would be harder and it’s not. I just know that I can’t get that much out of it because I haven’t put that much into it or as much. It’s kind of like that deposit/withdrawal thing. I haven’t put that part in so I’m not entitled anymore. So I’m ok with it...I didn’t do all the work I was supposed to.

Societal perceptions also affected how they felt about necessary priority shifts.

For example, CP7 experienced a great deal of social pressure not to train as much after pregnancy. She told me: “There were some people thinking that I must be, to run [successfully], I must be neglecting my family...if you’re running marathons you must not be paying enough attentions to your babies.”

Interestingly, as they acclimated to motherhood, many of the co-participants described becoming more invested in their performance because it meant having to be away from their children. CP2 told me that she felt validated only when she performed well:

If I’m gonna race I should try to race well otherwise I could spend the time at home. You know if I just want to be recreational that’s fine if that’s the decision I make you know I’m not going to beat myself up about that but then...I don’t need to do that in times that I’m away from my family.

Comparably, CP11 said motherhood “hardened [her] resolve” to race well because training meant taking time away from her family:

Once I did decide to [compete at a high level again] I was much more resolved in my decision...once I had committed to that use of my energy and my child’s time...I knew I had to make the most of it. So in some ways it hardened my resolve once I managed to come around to it.

Overall, the co-participants suggested that motherhood made them feel as though they had to shift their life priorities. They felt, in some ways, that becoming a mother had made it more difficult to invest the time they needed in order to perform at a high level. However, it appears that as they became more accustomed to their mothering responsibilities, their investment in performance actually became stronger in some cases. They did not want to “waste their time” in training if they were performing poorly because that meant sacrificing time they could be spending with their families.

### *Discussion of Theme #1, Subtheme #1: Personal Investment*

As this subtheme indicates, many co-participants discussed the concept of changing their personal investment in running after they had children. Oftentimes, priorities shifted from running to mothering at least in the first few months after giving birth. Many talked about re-prioritizing their lives in order to include training in their everyday activities. In fact, every co-participant, at some point after giving birth, gave mothering first priority. Some even suggested that it was impossible for women to be a “good” mother, a “good” runner, and also pursue full-time employment. However, as CP9 said, “something had to give,” and, for most, it was the amount of time they spent training. Often the co-participants reframed this lack of investment in training and running as something that surprised them but did not disappoint them.

In her research on women’s perceptions of their social and familial responsibilities, Steiner-Adair (1990) has indicated that women often feel obligated to be “superwomen.” The “superwoman” standard often compels women to feel required to adopt traditional gender roles such as mothering full time. Directly correlated to this theory is the concept of the “supermom” (Bart, 1971). “Supermoms” are those women who have chosen to invest themselves 100 percent in the rearing of their children. Bart’s (1971) research on the empty nest syndrome has indicated that a woman’s embodiment of the “supermom” stereotype can lead to depression, specifically after her children leave home. As Shibley-Hyde (1996) indicates, “The supermothers have invested so much of themselves in the mother role that they have the most to lose when it has ended” (p. 150). Co-participants in this study indicated feeling pressured to live up to “supermom” standards in some cases. They talked about feeling guilty and as if their children were

more important than themselves. In this respect, co-participants reified and embodied many of the “supermom” (or “good” mother) stereotypes.

However, while they reified “good” mother stereotypes, co-participants still fit training into their everyday lives, just not for the same amount of time. In their research on the training patterns of post-partum non-elite athletes, Beilock, Feltz, and Pivarnik (2001) suggest that time allotted for and motivation to train are among the largest barriers for performance among this group. While many of the participants in the Beilock, et. al. (2001) study returned to training after pregnancy, lack of time to train often decreased their motivation to return to competition. It may be that motivation is decreased due to performance decrements as a result of not training at a high level. The fact that in both the present study and the Beilock, et. al. (2001) study co-participants indicated having a significant lack of time and having to make subsequent priority shifts as a result suggests that such athletes may feel pressured to position their mothering responsibilities before their running or athletic priorities.

While acknowledging and acting out these responsibilities may be viewed as a “choice” for many women, it is often the socially “expected” role for mothers to embody; mothering is often considered “women’s work” (Hochschild, 1989). Many feminist texts have discussed the concept of such a sexual division of labor. Chase and Rogers (2001) suggest that the gendered context of labor resulted from a mix of ideologies created during the American and Industrial revolutions. It was during these periods that the “public” and “private” spheres of work were conceptualized. Men were traditionally assigned to the “public” sphere of work while women attended to the “private” realm. Chase and Rogers suggest (2001):

This split between the domestic realm and the productive, economic realm led to the doctrine of separate spheres for women (domestic) and men (economic) among the white middle and upper classes...The economic sphere was thought of as masculine and competitive, and as requiring rugged individualism, while the home was supposed to offer feminine warmth and shelter, an antidote to the cruel outside world (p. 63)

While several of the co-participants did work outside the home as well as inside (CP1, CP2, CP3, CP4, CP5, CP8, and CP11), they were also aware that they were expected to be the primary care-givers for their children. This led them to feel the need to dramatically shift their life priorities away from running in order to accommodate raising a “good person” (CP5).

#### *Theme #1, Subtheme #2: Efficient Training*

Another aspect of performance that changed as a result of motherhood was training focus and efficiency. As CP9 said, “I had no fat to trim—I had to get all the meat in” when describing her time for training after pregnancy. Once co-participants had negotiated their time and invested themselves back into training, they found that their training schedules had to become more efficient. Before motherhood, they could find numerous times in the day to train. However, after pregnancy there were only certain times when they could fit their runs in; these times were not missed. CP2 described this change when she stated:

Before I could always say “oh—I’ll do it tomorrow” but then after him it was like anytime I got the opportunity to run I would take it. Like I knew not to mess around. So it was, the time was scheduled or if I could fit it in. I clearly take advantage of that a lot more than I ever did before... ‘cause I know that it may be a couple of days before I get the opportunity again.

A strategy that many of the co-participants used to balance these time constraints was to run when their children (or entire families) were still asleep. For example, CP1 said “It’s

only fair for me to run when they're not awake." Similarly, CP8 described how the combination of having her daughter asleep and her husband at home dictated her running schedule:

When I was breastfeeding I would get up, usually I would breastfeed her at like 4 in the morning on her last feeding and then I would get up and go run because I knew that would be my only chance typically because [my husband] was still there and then I had that time where I knew I was going to be tired regardless. I was like I may as well get up then and go because I know she's going to go back to sleep and be fine.

Co-participants noted that their training schedules were constructed in direct relation to their families' needs. They suggested that they trained when they were not "hurting"

(CP3) anyone. CP3 told me,

Your timing must become more efficient. And so you think okay 'hey I've got to take advantage of time while my child's sleeping so I can go run before they get up or my family is sleeping' and so you become more efficient. You don't just do miles; you do quality. And so I think because you're more busy you tend to be more efficient. You tend to focus in on exactly what you need to do...A lot of times, especially in the peak of my training, I just get up before they get up. I'm back even before they wake up. Or, a lot of times, after they go to bed, I'll go run. Now, my schedule is so wonderful that from 9:30 [a.m.] to 11:00 [a.m.] I just go and run and I run an hour a day so I figure if I can get my run in then if someone calls me to go run in the afternoon it's just icing on the cake. I just know that if I can't [run in the afternoon] then I've already done my running and they're both in school so I'm not hurting anyone.

CP2 mentioned that her increased feeling of focus was driven by the fact that she did not want to "impose" on her husband:

I try to work around it so it's the least imposing it can be on everyone else. Like my son would finally go to sleep for several hours like around 9:30 at night, and so I could just like head out the door right as it was getting dark just to run around our neighborhood and it wouldn't—like my husband could just hang out and he didn't have to do anything. And I thought well this is just the easier way.

In some instances, the co-participants talked about the performance-enhancing aspects of becoming more focused; in other words having less time to train meant less



overtraining. CP9 discussed her lack of training time as a strategy she unconsciously used to avoid overtraining:

It forced me to be extremely efficient and it kept me from overtraining ...which is a great thing. I had so much time on my hands when I wasn't a mom that I had a lot of junk miles and was tired a lot. And when I was a mom I just... I could only fit in 40 minutes of work in the morning because my baby was [daycare.] I only had childcare between 3 and 6 so I would coach and run a lot at the same time. I was very very strict about not missing because there wouldn't be another opportunity—you couldn't put it off. If you had scheduled the babysitter for this time you had to get your run in at that time. So I think I was much better at scheduling and goal setting and things like that.

CP3 felt that her restricted focus on running actually facilitated a sharper focus during competition:

I think I'm stronger actually. You know when I compete I don't have time for nonsense. I'm there to run. I'm there to do a particular thing and I think it's kept me a lot more focused.

Co-participants also found creative ways to integrate training into their new lives.

For example, CP10 used her housework as a substitute workout:

Sometimes I'll just clean the house top to bottom one day as an alternate workout even. I do that a lot of times on the days that I don't run because I'm so used to so much running that I've got way too much energy.

CP9 described how she mixed training with caring for her children:

I was doing things like running from my house. I bought a treadmill. I put the baby monitor out by the mailbox and I'd run up and down the hill and listen at the top of the hill every interval to see if I heard a cry.

In sum, there was a general sense among these co-participants that training focus was much more intense after they had children. The idea that one was more likely to get in "quality" miles versus "quantity" miles was also prevalent among these mothers. In addition they were able to integrate their training with their mothering responsibilities through creative training strategies. Some of the co-participants actually felt that this



focus and efficiency increased their performance due to restricting overtraining and making them more centered on their actual performance goals.

*Discussion of Theme #1, Subtheme #2: Efficient Training*

Priority shifting was legitimized by the co-participants in this study as a way to increase the focus and efficiency of their training. They suggested that the responsibilities and time associated with mothering often helped them become more focused in their training and competing. They found that due to their mothering duties, they had less time to train overall and hence had to “take advantage” of the time that they did have. The subtheme *Efficient Training* described how the co-participants combined their mothering and their running responsibilities. They were not willing to abandon either running or mothering altogether. What they did was to employ creative training strategies (i.e., putting the baby monitor in the mailbox in order to do hill repeats outside one’s house) and efficient time management strategies (i.e., running when their families were sleeping) in order to attend to both “good” mothering and “good” training. This resourceful use of time and creative training approaches indicates both an acceptance of and a resistance to the “good” mother and the “good” athlete stereotypes.

As previously mentioned, Beilock, et. al. (2001) found that lack of time often leads to low motivation and subsequent lack of training for mothering female athletes. The findings from the current study do not support this trend. Co-participants in this study discussed feeling stretched for time after they had their children, but employed efficient training strategies in order to continue training at a high level. As CP9 told me with regard to time management strategies after pregnancy, “I had no fat to cut. I had to get the meat in.” Therefore, it appears that elite female distance runners may be a highly

motivated group who, in the face of time obstacles and social pressures, still make time to train at a high level.

*Theme #1, Subtheme #3: Decreased Pressure*

Another performance-related concept of motherhood was the notion that motherhood actually helps decrease pressure related to performance. Before pregnancy, many co-participants described feeling pressured by both their own expectations and the expectations of the overall running community to perform at a high level. For example, CP5 described how, before motherhood, running was so important to her that she would not allow herself to take a break even when she performed badly. In fact, it became like an addiction:

...My body was so broken down and I did not want to take a break. So my agent would say “you need to be at a race here” and I knew that I shouldn’t be going to those races getting 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> place and not running well but I kept doing it cause I didn’t want to take a break. And I struggled with that at that time you know “I don’t want to take a break” because then everyone would be like “why is she not running?” Even though I would run like crap, feeling totally depressed, I’m going to keep doing this. I’ll just keep pushing my body and doing all of these things because it had become such a mental issue. And you know we can rationalize and say ‘I’m totally fried and totally tired’ but you’re not gonna [stop] ...it’s like somebody who’s on drugs. It becomes an addiction in itself you know because you’re so wrapped up in it.

Later on, she described how motherhood helped her put her running into “perspective” and take the pressure of performance off when she said, “Finally when I came to that realization you know ‘you’re not like making a million dollars’...once you really put [running] into perspective it takes pressure off you.” CP3 also felt that having a family helped her put her running into perspective. She said:

Plus, you also think ‘I’m still going to go home to my family’ after this. I don’t have to earn my dinner. You know it’s also with a job...you know I’m not running in this race just to win money...yes that would be nice, but I don’t have

to win to pay my bills kind of thing. So, being a mother you just kind of say it's ok.

CP9 told me that because she had not been forced to choose between motherhood and making an Olympic team, she felt much less pressure associated with competition:

I hadn't put off my other dream and so I felt like I was very relaxed going into it. It wasn't like I made huge sacrifices—it wasn't like I gave up a family for this. So I could go in thinking 'well I can take it or leave it. If I make it fine. If I don't fine' but if I put off having a baby like poor Libby Hickman. You know she put off having her baby until she made the Olympic team and after she had her sweet baby she said 'why didn't I do this sooner?!' There was so much on the line for her to make that team cause she put off having her baby...

Therefore, there was an overall sense that factors such as not being forced to choose between mothering and running and putting mothering responsibilities before running outcomes decreased the pressure of competition for some co-participants.

Other factors were also cited by co-participants as pressure releasers. These factors included not feeling as if one had to "prove" oneself to others (CP1) and not taking performance outcomes so seriously. In her first marathon after giving birth to her first child, for example, CP1 overcame feelings of pressure related to her performance by thinking realistically about how becoming a mother had changed her life:

I thought 'oh I can do this...I'll be able to bounce back. I should be fine. I should be fine' but that was the marathon I didn't finish. Because I was running and I was running not so hot and people were passing and I thought to myself 'you know, what am I doing this for?' I just had a kid, I don't feel well, I had a cold and I'm like 'you know...I don't have to prove anything to anyone.' And I stopped and everyone was like 'what are you doing stopping?' And I would just say 'I don't have to prove anything to anyone.'

CP9 talked about how taking care of her children became her number one priority, which, in turn helped decrease pressure associated with running:

I think [running] became less important. I'm sure that it did after I had [name of daughter] because I realized that really she's what mattered and my running was

an expression of joy in my life. When before, running...I put so much pressure on my running to be the be all and end all of my life. I HAD to succeed. I HAD to perform because this is it...THIS is what I was doing you know? And then once I had [name of daughter] I thought well [name of daughter] is what I'm doing and running is a treat on the side. And I was very efficient about running really really hard in short periods of time. But it took just the right amount of pressure off of my running to allow me to succeed as a runner.

Another key aspect of decreasing pressure was how motherhood helped co-participants appreciate the fun and enjoyment of running. Running often became a manifestation of “joy” (CP9) and, from this, pressure associated with competition was often decreased while motivation increased; competition became fun again. CP8 felt that the combination of lowering her expectations to a realistic level after pregnancy and being able to attain this level (or to exceed this level) decreased her feelings of pressure and increased her motivation:

When you release pressure from yourself a little bit sometimes you can really perform...obviously if your expectations are lower you can perform at a better level if you're surprised and happy about it which is motivating in itself.

Similarly CP7 said,

[Being a mom] has made [competing] more fun like because it isn't the most important thing anymore. I can really enjoy the times that I do get to race in really competitive situations and they're kind of few and far between now but the times that I do get to do it and do it well, they're just so much more enjoyable now... It's not so much life and death because I raced bad here and then it's going to affect all of these other things and you know sometimes it just happens for a lot of reasons.

Therefore, it may be that taking time away from running and experiencing a dramatic life-changing event such as giving birth and becoming a mother may actually amplify the intrinsic motivation of an athlete. For co-participants in this study, taking a break away from running during pregnancy made them appreciate how much running and competing meant to them when they returned to training.

### *Discussion of Theme #1, Subtheme #3: Decreased Pressure*

As evidenced by the above-mentioned quotes, motherhood, in some ways, allowed co-participants to decrease pressure associated with their performance. This decline in pressure was attributed mostly to aspects such as gaining a different perspective about running, feeling less inclined to have to prove themselves to others, and feeling that, after pregnancy, running and competing became a source of significant self satisfaction and enjoyment.

The subtheme *Decreased Pressure* denotes that the runners often felt as though mothering took just the right amount of pressure off competition to allow them to compete well again. This pressure decrease was often attributed to the fact that their children did not care if they won or lost the race and the fact that winning the race was “not going to put dinner on that table” (CP3). This, in turn, allowed co-participants to see performing well as “icing on the cake” as opposed to the ultimate goal of competition.

This shift in performance perspective could be due to an increased quality of life for co-participants. Quality of life has been closely associated with the prevalence of strong personal relationships. Pflaum (1973) indicated that primary relationships (such as those created with one’s family) are major factors in determining life quality. It may be that co-participants viewed their overall life quality as higher after they had adapted to the birth of their children and developed subsequent relationships with them and their spouses. After this acclimation, and as their perspectives shifted, it appears that they were able to view performance outcomes in a less dramatic light. As CP9 stated, they were more likely to see the “forest for the trees” (CP9).

### *Theme #1, Subtheme #4: Setting Realistic Goals*

The last major aspect of performance that was discussed in detail by the co-participants was their ability (and willingness) to set realistic long-term goals after giving birth. Many described being happy taking small steps on their journeys back to competition. For example, CP2 told me how she did not have any high expectations of herself:

I didn't have this like defining moment or I didn't say, after I had [name of son] "I'm going to qualify for the trials" I...just started running again I guess about two weeks after [name of son] was born. But for like 5 minutes—it was awful I couldn't run at all. I remember running one day with my sister and I was happy because we ran nine-minute miles.

CP10 described how she had to adopt a long-term perspective regarding her running after pregnancy. She said, "So I had to kind of sit back and think 'ok what's realistic for a year from now?' and then I knew I could do whatever I wanted in training after that." CP9 told me how setting small, realistic, achievable goals actually made her return to running "a fun challenge":

But the coming back, I loved getting back in shape. It was a fun challenge and I made my own little program for getting back. A mile a day for the first week. Yeah at the end of the week I timed it. I wasn't afraid of the clock I just wanted to see where I was. And then 2 miles for the second week; three miles for the third week. And then I had a bit of a fitness jump. And then four miles a day the fourth week and then 5 miles a day the fifth week and six miles a day the sixth week. And then I started the second set of six weeks and then I started working out one day a week. So I had a very systematic approach to my comeback with no expectations.

Setting small achievable goals for performance often led these women to be "pleasantly surprised" (CP2) with their racing performance after giving birth. This surprise often facilitated a general sense of happiness and motivation related to running and performing. For example, when asked about her first race back after pregnancy, CP8

said:

It was really good 'cause it was just I had no idea...I mean I was hoping to break 20:00 and I think I ran like 18:28 or something like that and it was a hard course and I was like 'wow' and I didn't feel bad until like the last half mile.

Similarly, CP2 recounted how her realistic goals and expectations increased her motivation to continue training:

I kept getting pleasantly surprised...I was shocked at how fast I ran. I was like 'Wow!' It was like 30 seconds above my PR and I was like 'well maybe I should train because maybe I'll be able to run'. So then I started just over the summer working more and more and I realized I would go back and look at my training logs from before and I realized I was training more and I was doing [workouts] faster. So I thought hmmm...I should probably try another marathon. It all happened really gradually.

It is interesting to note that CP2 had not qualified for the Olympic trials prior to having her son. She found that the combination of training focus and realistic goal setting she employed during motherhood helped increase her performance substantially.

CP3 had a similar experience. After the birth of her first child, she set PR's in her longer distance events (marathon and 10k) and described how, after seeing this increase in performance, she contemplated having another child just to see if it would make her times drop even more:

So those first couple of races are just kind of a learning experience again. But it's amazing how close you are to what you could have run before. And so then you fine-tune it and you start doing some workouts or speedwork and you're back to where you started before. So both times [after having children] I felt like I came back stronger when I actually started training. To be honest with you after my first pregnancy, and I had all those PR's afterward I started thinking 'maybe if I have another child...' You know? I mean honestly...I dropped 40 seconds off my 10k time. You know, which is kind of hard to do and in a marathon, [my youngest child] was a year and a half when I ran 2:45.



### *Discussion of Theme #1, Subtheme #4: Setting Realistic Goals*

The last factor associated with performance and mothering was the act of realistic goal setting. Co-participants identified setting post-partum goals that were practical and attainable. Oftentimes, this allowed them to skirt frustration as they returned to competition. While some co-participants returned remarkably quickly (CP3, CP5, CP8, and CP10), even those who did not return as fast indicated feeling as if they knew they would return at some point.

This subtheme also both reifies and resists standards of the “good” athlete paradigm. “Good” athletes are goal focused. However, co-participants indicated being process oriented with many of their goals as opposed to outcome motivated. Process goals are focused on the specific actions that must occur for performance to increase while outcome goals are centered around competitive ends such as winning (Weinberg & Gould, 2003). For example, co-participants indicated being aware that they needed to get their running form back before they were able to compete at a high level again. While, in some cases, they felt pressured by the subculture of running to return to competition, they also understood that they needed to take some time to relearn their old running habits before they could achieve high performance again.

Research on goal setting suggests that effective goal setting strategies include setting goals that are specific, measurable, realistic to one’s abilities, and attentive to individual motivation (Weinberg & Gould, 2003). Co-participants in this study observed most of these principles. They were considerate of their individual progress as they returned to running and were elated with the feeling of returning to running again. While their bodies sometimes did not feel or act the same as before, they were able to celebrate



small steps along the path back to competing successfully.

Beilock, et. al. (1998) also found that post-pregnant athletes who felt confident in their ability to return to competition achieved their post-partum competitive goals more quickly than those who felt unconfident. Co-participants in this study rarely felt as if they did not have the ability to return to competing at a high level. This confidence in their personal ability combined with realistic goal-setting strategies often led to a fairly quick rate of return to competition for co-participants.

As the quotes above document, changes (both positive and negative) in performance were central to the co-participants' experiences of returning to competition after pregnancy. Issues related to personal investment, focus, decreased pressure, and realistic goal setting were documented as lived experiences.

### *Theme #2: Body*

The manner in which the co-participants described feelings about their bodies both before and after pregnancy was significant. Specific experiences that were identified in relation to their bodies were *Perceptions of Pain*, *Body Performance*, and *Body Shape and Appearance*.

Before describing their feelings about their bodies after giving birth, it is important to note that the majority of co-participants discussed feeling “fit” and “empowered” by their bodies before pregnancy. A particularly emotional time during my interview with CP4 occurred when I asked her about her relationship with her body before she became pregnant. She described her feelings of empowerment as:

[Before pregnancy] I felt pretty, very empowered by [my body]. My body fat was really low and I had muscle. I lifted weights. I did a lot of things that women weren't doing then but I felt pretty strong. In fact I felt like I could get to

anywhere that I wanted in any conditions and I felt a certain amount of freedom with running that I hadn't ever felt before.

She mentioned never feeling this way again after she gave birth. Specifically CP4 missed the feeling of "freedom" that was associated with having muscle and being able to run "anywhere" and in "any conditions."

Throughout the course of the interviews, it became obvious to me that elite athletes not only feel empowered by their bodies, but also have a very special corporeal awareness when it comes to their bodies' habits and natural functioning. For example CP9 stated, "as an athlete...you're very aware of your body. So I knew exactly when I was ovulating and things like that." Three of the co-participants knew they were pregnant even before a test or a doctor told them because of this bodily sensitivity.

The athletes were also aware of the myths associated with pregnancy and described, in many cases, how wrong these myths were. For example, CP9 told me:

...All the myths about how wonderful pregnancy is--It sucks. I mean it's really hard and your body changes so dramatically and you feel gross and ugly and you think it's never going to end and then you have nursing, which is so difficult, milk is squirting out of you 24 hours a day. And all you ever hear is how wonderful it is and how lucky you are and blah, blah, blah and yeah that's going on but you also feel like this is so hard. This is so horrible. This is so gross. There's milk everywhere; it stinks. I never sleep. I never have sex anymore. The list of how horrible it is goes on and on and on but no one ever used to talk about that.

### *Theme #2, Subtheme #1: Perceptions of Pain*

Across the interviews, I began to notice general common experiences co-participants had about their bodies after they gave birth. For example, three of the co-participants specifically discussed how their perceptions of pain changed as a result of experiencing childbirth. CP3 told me how experiencing the pain of birth actually made her mentally tougher when she competed:

I've always believed in a pain file. And there's nothing more painful than childbirth. So...you're thinking 'you know...this is no big deal.' And so you do get mentally tougher I think.

CP4 graphically recounted her experiences of birth and how nothing she had ever done (running-wise) compared to this pain:

[During delivery] he wasn't going to get through and in fact his head got stuck. They had a little trouble pulling him out. You know my contractions were like being run over by a semi and it was just like nothing I wanted to repeat again. So just pain from running is like nothing.

While childbirth may help one become mentally (and physically) tougher in a race, the reverse did not appear to be true (i.e., that racing would help one through the pain of childbirth.) For example, CP1 described how the pain of childbirth could not be anticipated or trained for:

[During delivery] my husband said 'now what mile marker does this feel like?' and I go 'this does not feel like ANY mile mark' and I said 'at least for a marathon I could train' you can't train for giving birth.

Collectively co-participants felt that the pain of childbirth helped them become mentally tougher in races. However, as their memories of childbirth grew fuzzy their recollection of that pain and the subsequent performance enhancement aspects of it tended to subside.

#### *Discussion of Theme #2, Subtheme #1: Perceptions of Pain*

As the quotes above demonstrate, co-participants often discussed how giving birth modified their perceptions of running pain. CP3 described how she had always kept a mental "pain file" that helped her assess different experiences of pain during athletic competition. There have been no studies related to the physiological adaptations of athletes to pain after giving birth. It has been speculated, however, that coaches in East

German block countries in the 1970's and 1980's encouraged their female athletes to get pregnant and give birth between their Olympic races in order to increase performances due to such increases in pain tolerance (Murphy, 2001; Pirie, 1987). For example, Russian middle distance runner Tatyana Kazankina won the Olympic gold medal in the 1500 meters after the birth of her first child in 1980 and established world records in the 2,000 and 3,000 meters after the birth of her second child in 1982.

It is speculated that giving birth may decrease one's perceptions of pain and/or increase one's pain tolerance. This seems to be the case among several of the co-participants in this study. CP1, CP3, and CP4 specifically identified giving birth as one of the most painful experiences of their lives; it made running a race seem easy in comparison. This increased awareness of the intensity of pain allowed them to view racing as less painful than before. Subsequently, their performances improved.

#### *Theme #2, Subtheme #2: Body Performance*

Beginning to run again was a noteworthy memory for co-participants. Each was able to recollect easily (and sometimes comically) the way her body felt and how it performed when running again. On the whole, returning to running was remembered positively. However, while co-participants often described returning to running as "glorious" (CP9), they also recounted the surprising physical sensations they experienced.

Two co-participants described running after pregnancy as "starting from scratch" (CP11). CP3 discussed how she felt she had to start anew in her running in the following statement:

But you feel different because for a while, especially when you first come back,

you feel still...you have to learn your running style back over again because you had been compensating for 8 months or 9 months.

Many co-participants recounted their bodily sensations when returning to running.

For example, CP4 likened returning to running as “running under water.”

I remember a lot of sensations like feeling like ok I’m running really slow. And it felt like I was like running under water or something. It was just very difficult. And then I really wanted to get in shape so I persisted running at you know 10 minute pace when I was used to running under 7.

Similarly, CP7 discussed how running after pregnancy did not even feel like the running she had known and loved before pregnancy:

I had no leg lift. I felt like I was dragging my legs and I couldn’t even jump a puddle. This went on for probably a couple of months like I was really dragging myself. It didn’t really feel like running.

In almost a direct contradiction to CP7’s experience of “running through water,” CP10 was surprised by how light and “fast” she felt after giving birth. She said, “you actually feel off balance a little bit. You know like my legs and arms were sort of flying (laughing). Like there’s no control here because all of the sudden you can go fast.”

Closely related to the way their bodies felt after giving birth, co-participants also recounted how their bodies performed when they returned to running and competing. Often they were surprised at how slow they were in comparison to their pre-pregnant selves. Both CP2 and CP7 compared themselves to how non-elite runners must feel. CP2 said:

I couldn’t believe I couldn’t run nine-minute miles. I remember going for my first run [after giving birth]. Well I went for a walk and then I was going to run a little and like my feet were scuffing the ground because I couldn’t...I didn’t really pick my knees up and I thought ‘I’m like one of those six hour marathoners that can’t pick their legs up’ (laughing). (CP2)

You know initially it was just lose the weight. And then it was run a race. You

know I ran a 5k and finished behind people who I always thought were really slow. (CP7)

While some remembered the debilitating aspects of their bodies upon returning, other co-participants recounted how pregnancy actually made them feel physically stronger. Both CP10 and CP8 discussed how pregnancy helped them gain strength:

I probably kept on about 6 or 7 extra pounds which was actually—that just put me at more of a normal [weight range]...I've always been really thin. And so that was really actually probably necessary. And then I didn't really try hard to lose those extra few. I was feeling really strong running and so I just felt like "hey this is ok. I'll take the strength" and plus what I was going into wasn't a sprint so it was ok to have a little bit extra. (CP10)

I was really happy because I think I had run like 7 or 8 races and this one girl who'd gone to a Division III school had beaten me every time and we ran at this race and it's super hilly, and I'm a terrible hill runner, and I beat the crap out of her and I was so happy. Like you know that was like March—five months [after I gave birth]...so that made me happy that I could just run off of strength. (CP8)

Despite unexpected bodily changes that resulted from pregnancy, co-participants experienced a general feeling of self-control over being able to get their bodies back into competitive shape after a certain awkward stage after pregnancy. For example, CP11 described her body as a "tool" she could ultimately control and how she used this philosophy to recover her athletic performance after pregnancy:

As far as physically you're body's basically a tool and I mean I wasn't where...I tried not to think about where am I relative to where I was. I just said "ok this is what I have to work with...how do I build this body back to being the tool that I want it to be?"

### *Theme #2, Subtheme #3: Body Shape and Appearance*

As was previously indicated, pregnancy can significantly impact a woman's body image. While analyzing these interviews, I became aware of the fact that, while co-participants' had a general dissatisfaction about their bodies after pregnancy, in some



cases, they also felt that their experiences during pregnancy and motherhood had improved the shape and appearance of their bodies.

Several co-participants described bodily perceptions such as feeling “flabby” (CP2) or “lumpy” (CP7) after their pregnancies. Many described the unusual feeling of being overweight, when, due to excessive training and running, they had never before felt or looked overweight. For example, CP6 said, “just from running I’m always fairly fit and lean so it’s kind of strange to just have no control and just have flab on your body.” Similarly, CP2 described how excessive weight gain during pregnancy in contrast to before pregnancy made her feel anxious to get the weight off quickly:

...I’d never been like what anyone would consider truly overweight in my life...I mean I gained 40 pounds when I was pregnant and had a six-pound baby so there was like 34 more pounds of something else. So I would say about a week after [name of son] was born I had you know 20 pounds on me. Some of that was probably still water and stuff like that but I was just...I was just like the sooner I can get this off the better.

Along the same lines, CP3 described how being a runner always made her confident in the way her stomach looked, but how after pregnancy, she became very aware that her stomach did not resemble its pre-pregnant shape:

One thing about being a runner or an athlete is I like my flat stomach and that’s hard to deal with when I couldn’t have my flat stomach because that’s one thing I’ve always had. My butt can get bigger or smaller or whatever but my stomach’s always been flat so it’s kind of hard in that way.

Some of the co-participants suggested that, despite the fact that they loved having children, they felt their bodies had paid an unfair price as a result of pregnancy and childbirth. CP1 told me, “part of me is like I worked this hard and I kind of want my body back. It’s not fair to be taken to have kids,” while CP6 said,

I mean I love having kids and I don’t mean to be vain but it’s not great to be done

having the kid and having like fat around your belly and whatever...I wasn't crazy about it.

In contrast, three co-participants (CP2, CP7, and CP10) felt as if pregnancy and motherhood had offered them an opportunity to get stronger. They attributed this to the physical acts of picking up children and carrying small children around on an everyday basis. CP10 felt that the physicality of mothering actually made her a stronger runner,

I mean you just don't realize how much you're going to do physically as a mother and it's amazing how much strength I had. In fact that was one of the reasons I didn't think I should try and lose the extra weight because I knew I was carrying extra muscle too. There was a time when the wind would hit me when I was running and I would feel like I was going to blow over. Or I'd hit a hill and it'd just completely wipe me out. And [after pregnancy] I was hitting hills and the wind would hit me and nothing phased me.

Similarly, CP7 described her fear of losing the muscle strength and definition she had developed from picking up her kids,

...After lifting kids...my arms are probably more defined now than they've ever been. And I worry now because I haven't pushed them in a couple of years and I don't pick them up anymore like I used to so I don't know if that's gonna go away and I'll have to start using my weights or something but I never used to have much definition in my arms and now I do.

In sum, co-participants' indicated that while the effect of pregnancy was to alter their body shapes and change their performances momentarily (i.e., during their first race or when they first began running again), in general, they felt as though they were in control of the look and function of their bodies shortly after giving birth. In addition, some of the co-participants indicated a general positive sense about their bodies due to the physical requirements of mothering.



*Discussion of Theme #2, Subthemes #2 and #3: Body Performance, Shape, and Appearance*

It was indicated by co-participants in this study that pregnancy significantly altered their body's performance, shape, and look. As stated earlier, in their research on the body image of collegiate female athletes Krane, et. al. (2001) suggest that female athletes often feel required to achieve body standards of high musculature and low body fat. Distance runners are especially encouraged to attain very low body fat percentages in order to compete and perform at a high level (Murphy, 2001). Former college distance runner Leslie Heywood (1998) described how her coach encouraged her and her teammates to keep an unrealistically low body fat percentage during cross country season.

Coach wanted us all under ten percent [body fat]. Anything higher was occasion for great shame, not to mention a threat to our scholarships...If you wanted to see a bunch of paranoid, catty women who would give you a stomachache for at least three weeks, all you had to do was sit in on one of our team dinners. Strained silence, everyone looking at everyone else's plate, victory to she who ate the least (p. 204).

Despite these rigid requirements, many co-participants resisted this unrealistic body standard. For example, CP10 told me that she was happy that she gained a few extra pounds as a result of pregnancy; it got her up to "normal" weight and made her feel stronger. CP9 took pride in the fact that she never lost her period while she was training at high levels. Other co-participants recognized that, while they may not have enjoyed the extra weight that accompanied pregnancy and childbirth, they did not see any detriments to their performance as a result. CP7 told me that, while her body had changed after pregnancy, she was still able to perform at a very high level against her much younger

teammates:

I have these skinny legs, skinny arms and this little pudge in the middle...but oh well. I didn't have a completely flat stomach before anyways. But...it became very obvious this past weekend when I went to USATF cross country nationals and I ran on the team...I ended up not hurting the team too much!

It should be noted that CP7 came in 10<sup>th</sup> overall during this meet and beat all of her much younger teammates.

Therefore, in direct contrast to the body image dissatisfaction that Jenkin and Tiggeman (1997) and Walker (1998) found for non-athlete populations after giving birth, the results of this study suggest that elite female athletes may be better equipped to negotiate body image changes after pregnancy. This may be due to the fact that female athletes feel as if they have control over their bodies and have confidence that they can still compete at a high level despite the fact that their body shape may have changed. This result also points to a resistance against the “good” athlete concept. While “good” athletes are supposed to be keenly aware of their bodies in terms of high musculature and low body fat, the co-participants in this study suggested that post-pregnancy weight was not always viewed as a detriment to performance or self-concept. In some cases, they were able to reframe weight gain as a performance enhancer.

Athletes, in general, have a special relationship with their bodies. They are acutely in tune with the adaptations and stresses of training and competing. For female athletes who give birth, this kinesthetic awareness is even higher. The results of this study indicate that after pregnancy, co-participants had experiences of their bodies relating to varying perceptions of pain, body performance, and changes in body shape and look.

### *Theme #3: Self*

Another major theme that was identified was the concept of Self. After the co-participants gave birth and began mothering they formed new ideas about themselves in relation to both their running and their lives in general. Overall, before pregnancy the majority of these co-participants defined themselves through their running accomplishments. After pregnancy, however, their sense of self began to change. Their running became less of an all-consuming self-definition and motherhood offered them the chance to gain a multidimensional self-perspective. The subthemes that supported the major theme Self were *Something for Me*, *Being a Role Model*, and *More than Just a Runner*.

Before discussing how the co-participants negotiated identity after motherhood, it is important to describe how they perceived that running had impacted their identities before having children. It was evident that the co-participants defined themselves through their running and performance. They suggested that running offered them a significant amount of social recognition. CP4 told me, “I was defining myself by how I competed and who I was as a runner. I didn’t have an identity before [running]. Running and competing was kind of my ticket into recognition.”

They also believed they gained respect in both the running and non-running community for their athletic accomplishments. CP1 felt that her running set her apart from other people and helped distinguish her from her co-workers:

What I like about [running] is that it gives me an extra identity or just something that sets you apart. Like you’re at work and you’re working and people all of the sudden see your name in the paper and people are like ‘that’s you?!’...It kind of adds a whole new element of respect and I really like that.

CP3 enjoyed the recognition she gained as a result of her local running accomplishments:

If someone knows me they say 'oh you're the runner.' Even parents that will come in and look at the school [she works in] they're like 'you're the runner.' I want people to do that for a long time.

Despite the fact that she was both a graduate student and an assistant track coach, CP5

felt that her running identity before motherhood was very one-dimensional:

When [running] is what you've done...[running] is what you're known for, you're self-esteem, everything. Even with going to school and doing other things that you do, that's who you are. That's how people are familiar with you...they just come to know you by that.

### *Theme #3, Subtheme #1: Something for Me*

After pregnancy, co-participants often used running as a way to feel “normal” (CP4) again. They described how running became a simple pleasure away from the stress of having a completely new life. Running had the power to “link” them back to their pre-pregnant selves. CP4 said:

I think that the be all and end all was that new life. And you know part of me, most of me was thinking I need to have something for myself. And so baby joggers were first being made back then and I wouldn't get one because I wanted to have a time when I could go out and run and be by myself and to have some kind of link to my former life.

While finding time for oneself was initially difficult after giving birth, running offered the co-participants the opportunity to have some personal downtime. CP2 told me, “I think that all parents especially moms need some time for themselves and you know I figure it's better than going to the mall or something like that.” Similarly, CP3 described the stress-reducing aspects of running after pregnancy when she said, “I still can plan my day and I can still de-stress and I can still have my alone time.”

Running was also viewed as a personal pleasure or activity that made co-

participants happier about themselves and their lives. CP8 said, “I’m a much happier person when I’ve run,” and CP3 alleged, “I’m a better person if I [run].” CP7 described how she negotiated her need to run with her care-giving responsibilities,

I was so much better off having that hour everyday or 40 minutes or whatever it took just to go get my run in and whether I did it by myself or I pushed the kids in the jogger you know that became important too—just getting out of the house and all that.

Running and competing well after pregnancy also aided co-participants’ pride in themselves and their accomplishments. As indicated earlier, the general running community does not necessarily view motherhood as a precursor to successful performance. In fact, CP9 described how many elite runners viewed motherhood and high-level performance as incompatible:

I remember Lynn Jennings one time saying before ’96 that there’s no way a mother can make an Olympic team—it’s too hard. She said that in the print [media] because it was kind of a reaction to Patty Sue Plummer trying to come back....And you know Patti Sue and I both made the Olympic team that year.

Therefore, competing successfully after the birth of children often became a source of pride for these co-participants. Both CP6 and CP7 described how running competently after pregnancy made them proud of themselves:

You know there’s some kind of pride in that because a lot of people after they do have children, that’s the end of it. I think [I feel] pride in myself (CP6)

So to [qualify for the trials] again after having twins you know I kind of thought...I felt a little special and that was really cool. (CP7)

### *Discussion of Theme #3, Subtheme #1: Something for Me*

The sub-theme *Something for Me* indicated that co-participants drew a large part of their identities, even after the births of their children, from their running. For co-participants who did not work full-time outside the home, running was seen as a “way to

get out of the house” (CP7) and as a time to be with friends. For co-participants who did work full-time outside the home carving out times to run had to be much more planned and efficient. Full-time, outside-the-home working moms often ran either at early hours in the morning (before their families woke up) or at odd hours during the day (lunch breaks or late at night). Regardless of their work status, however, each co-participant indicated that running was something she did for herself. This admonition resists the hegemonic notion that “good” mothers are selfless at all times, but, interestingly, fits the “good” athlete requirement.

McMahon’s (1995) research on the identity development of mothers suggests that mothers do not always think they should be self-sacrificing at all times for their children. One participant in McMahon’s study described the “good” mother as one who recognized that there could (and should) be boundaries between self and child:

[A good mother is] a person who has some self-knowledge so that they can know their own limits...and don’t [feel] that they have to be a supermom all the time...they have to accept the negatives and acknowledge that they are not going to be able to do everything (p. 156).

Similarly, co-participants in this study recognized that running was an important part of their self-concept and that they were not harming their children by running. Many of them, in fact, reframed running as a way to make them “a better mom” (CP10).

While there has been limited research on the impact of leisure activities on women with children, such research suggests that leisure pursuits are important aspects related to the quality of life (QOL) of women who mother dependent children. Kay’s (1998) study on the daily life experiences of full-time working mothers with pre-school aged children suggested that mothers often view leisure time as a “respite” from

mothering duties. She found that mothers of young children often used any time away from their children, no matter what it was, as leisure time. As Kay (1998) suggested, “the demands of children could be so all-consuming that any type of activity away from them became a form of personal time for mothers” (p. 445). Similarly, co-participants in this study viewed their running as a break in the day from their mothering responsibilities.

Other research by Bialeschki and Michner (1994) examined mothers’ experiences of returning to leisure activities following pregnancy. In this study, leisure pursuits were defined as any activity that was self-focused. Bialeschki and Michner (1994) indicated that, while they were in the process of mothering dependent children, these women rarely felt as if they had any time for themselves. Oftentimes, this lack of self-time led mothers to feel as if they had little freedom because they were overwhelmed with obligations to their families. The same was true for co-participants in this study who felt “depressed” and “oppressed” by mothering responsibilities at times. Even while in the midst of mothering young children, a woman’s QOL is contingent upon her ability to recognize her need to recover time for herself and engage in activities that are meaningful personal pursuits.

In sum, co-participants viewed running as a necessary (i.e., not optional) form of daily activity. They resisted the “good” mother stereotype more so than the mothers in both Kay’s (1998) and Bialeschki and Michner’s (1994) research. The mothers in these studies fit leisure activities in whenever they could but not on a daily basis. Results of the current study suggest that high-level mothering athletes may be more inclined to continue their training (and running for leisure and personal fulfillment) than non-athlete mothers because they have internalized running as part of their identity; running is not something

that has only to be done—it is something that is enjoyable and satisfying. For example, CP9 indicated that running was an “expression of joy in her life” after the birth of her first daughter when she told me:

[Running] was really like singing. I was like “LAAAA” when I went out for a run where before I had trouble getting a morning run in because it was drudgery. This burden was just lifted as soon as I had my first daughter.

### *Theme #3, Subtheme #2: Being a Role Model*

Another identified aspect of self was the co-participants’ internalization of being a role model for their children. Being a role model was associated with demonstrating the importance of physical activity, showing your kids that “mommy does something else” (CP10), and demonstrating that women can be athletes for their young daughters.

Many of the co-participants felt very responsible for showing their kids that physical activity was an important part of life. This gave them the opportunity to use their running as a model for lifetime wellness. CP7 told me, “it’s a good example that it’s important to get exercise.” CP3 also discussed using her running as a way to provide a general example of how important a healthy lifestyle was to her children:

As far as like nutrition and being an example in exercise and that type of thing, I feel like the best teacher is through showing them in how I live my life and hopefully that will rub off on them.

Both CP8 and CP3 told me that they liked the fact that their running (and their good performance) made their families proud of them, when they said, “It’s kind of like you want your daughter to look up to you and you want your daughter to be proud of what you’re doing” (CP8), and “I want something that my husband and my children will be proud of. And I think running has done that for me.” (CP3). CP6 extended the notion that her running served as a good role model for her children when she told me that her



running actually “complements” her mothering:

It helps [my children] having me do something...they go to races and they get excited when their mom wins races and you know I give them trophies and I give them medals and I think they complement each other both...motherhood and running.

A few co-participants also felt that their success in running was a particularly good example for their female children. It showed them that girls could be good mothers and successful athletes. CP10 said:

My little girl goes around and pushes the stroller and says “I’m going to go run a race now...Daddy’s going to watch the dollies.” And her friends come over and her friends are like ‘you’re doing what? What does this have to do with playing house?’ whenever she plays house with them she says ‘let’s take the babies running.’

Interestingly, being a role model was also associated with helping one’s children become less self-centered. CP7 told me that her take on being a role model included letting her children know that they were not the only important people in the family:

Even though they’re very important and you do have to make a lot of adjustments in other ways to accommodate their needs...you have needs too. And I need to drink milk so ‘no you can’t have it all’ kind of thing. So, yeah you’re very important but you’re not the most important; everybody’s important.

The concept of being a role model often validated their quest for high performance. Because they felt that they were “role models” for their children, they were able to recognize the positive impact that running had on their children as opposed to the negative stigma that society may have attached to time spent away from children due to training and competing.

### *Discussion of Theme #3, Subtheme #2: Being a Role Model*

Co-participants repeatedly suggested that being a role model for their children was important to them. Many were aware that their children were cognizant of their

nutritional and training habits; they had high hopes that these would “rub off” (CP3). Furthermore, co-participants expressed that role modeling for their female daughters was especially important to them. They endeavored to show their daughters that mom could be more than just a mother; she could be an athlete too. In sum, several co-participants indicated that they felt running was something that would make their children and their families proud of them.

The concept of role-modeling specifically for young girls, has been cited as a resistance strategy to the hegemonic notion that only men can be athletes (Gutkind, 2003). In her study of how female athletes negotiate their identities in light of media images, Gutkind (2003) suggested that many high-level female athletes cite being a role model for young girls as important. The athletes in her study recognized how being a strong, confident, athletic woman could break down barriers for girls who wanted to follow in their footsteps. Co-participants in the present study described similar feelings. They felt their running could teach their young children many things about nutrition, living a healthy lifestyle, and self-discipline. Specifically for their female daughters, their running provided them an opportunity to show that mom can be many things, including an exceptional athlete.

### *Theme #3, Subtheme #3: More than Just a Runner*

Motherhood also prompted co-participants to recognize multidimensional aspects of their lives; they became “more than just a runner” after having children (CP5). As illustrated earlier, before motherhood, many co-participants saw themselves as one-dimensional. They defined themselves mostly by their running accomplishments. Motherhood helped them appreciate other important aspects of their lives. However, it

should be noted that not all co-participants felt as if their running was the only thing that defined them before they had kids. CP10 had always taken her athletic career seriously but it was not the only thing she had in her life:

[Running] was always a part of my life and that's the thing, it was always A PART of my life. Growing up it was never my whole entire life. It was a great thing and I really enjoyed it but I really enjoyed other things too. I liked school. I liked other activities so it was not my main thrust. And before my babies were born, I loved being an athlete. I loved competing at a high level but I also continued to pursue the dream of getting a PhD and so I never really gave myself over to being a professional athlete 100% before my babies were born.

However, many of the co-participants felt as if becoming mothers helped them achieve life balance. For example, CP5 described motherhood as a “big blessing in disguise” when she recounted how it took her some time to adjust to the fact that her life was not all about running anymore after she had her son:

So [motherhood] was a good thing you know. It took about a year or so to finally appreciate that and see that...It's so much more than running...family, job, trying to raise somebody to be a good person. So for me [motherhood has] been a good thing. A big blessing in disguise.

For CP7, becoming a mother helped her recognize the multiple layers in her life:

...I get described a lot as [CP7] the runner and that has always been...Ever since college at least that has been a real big part of who I am. Now it's kind of you know 'I'm a mom' and I'm a lot of other things before I'm a runner ...or in addition to.

### *Discussion of Theme #3, Subtheme #3: More than Just a Runner*

Co-participants in this study indicated that motherhood allowed them to expand their self-identities. They viewed themselves as more than just runners after they had their children. Kay's (1998) research on full-time working mothers outside the home suggests that these women often view working and mothering as “dual roles” (p. 446) or two completely separate activities. However, the results of the present study, specifically

the subtheme *More than Just a Runner*, point to the notion that running and mothering were actually internalized by co-participants as activities that coalesced and enriched their overall identities; motherhood was often viewed as a self-enlightenment. Frequently, co-participants in this study felt as if their mothering and their running “complemented” (CP6) one another. In terms of becoming more multi-dimensional, they saw motherhood as a “blessing in disguise” (CP5). Therefore, it may be that elite female distance runners are able to continue training and competing at a relatively high level because they frame their mothering as a performance enhancement strategy that allows them to experience and recognize different self-dimensions.

It has been suggested that motherhood is a central element in the development of a woman’s self-concept. Robinson & Stewart (1989) mention:

Because women are physiologically equipped to bear children and nourish them, it is frequently assumed that becoming a mother is an essential component of being a woman. Motherhood has been seen as being critical to the development of gender identity, femininity, and self-esteem (p. 861).

The results of this study both confirm and dispute this theory. Running and competing at a high level was still viewed as an important part of their identity after these women gave birth; it was something that they did for enjoyment and satisfaction on daily basis and something that made them feel “proud” of themselves and their accomplishments. While motherhood often helped them view themselves as “more than just runners,” it also did not deter them from making time for training and their competitive endeavors. For example, while co-participants still attended to the “good” athlete concept of maintaining fitness by not missing training runs and workouts, they also became much more flexible with their training. If a child was sick or if something came up during the day and they

could not run, it was less unsettling than before they had children.

Overall, the theme Self described how co-participants felt that their personal identities changed significantly after the birth of their children. Their shifting identities both conformed to and refuted societal concepts of the “good” mother. They viewed their running as a way to carve out time for themselves during the day, as a chance to be a strong role model for their children, and to view themselves personally in a more multidimensional light.

#### *Theme #4: Social Support*

The final theme that emerged as relevant to the co-participants’ experiences was social support. How partners, family, friends, coaches, and others supported them was a factor in how they negotiated their training and competing during motherhood. Two subthemes were identified as relevant to the major theme Social Support. These subthemes were *Primary Support* and *Creating an “Intentional” Family*.

##### *Theme #4, Subtheme #1: Primary Support*

The subtheme *Primary Support* encompassed the large variety of assistance that these women received from their partners, immediate families, and close friends when they returned to training and competing. All but one of the co-participants (CP4) discussed feeling as though she had a large support network encompassing partners, family, and friends that made returning to competing and training much easier. Husbands provided the most social support upon return. For example, CP6 described how her husband eased her “guilt” about not being with her children because he enjoyed the time he got to spend alone with their children:

He was always very supportive and excited for me and it never became a problem

as with some dads. It's so easy because he always wants to be with the kids when he's home so it gives me time to not feel guilty and train.

CP3 explained how her husband--who is also her coach--would entertain the kids while she ran to help ease her guilt about training for several hours on a Sunday afternoon:

He's been very supportive as far as saying you know 'why don't we not go eat yet... We'll ride around the park while you run.' And he'll bring the bikes and I'll run and they'll ride the bikes. He'll go and keep them busy for an hour or two hours if need be and then we'll meet back up for lunch just to have a good afternoon. So I know a lot of our Sundays and weekends have been consumed with my training.

Co-participants who had husbands who were also runners described how they "tag-teamed" (CP8) when taking care of their newborn babies so they could both fit in their runs. CP8 said:

For awhile we tag teamed. He would run for 20 minutes and then I'd run for 20 minutes and then you know we would just kind of tag team when she was really young. So I had good support.

CP7 told me:

If he's training for a marathon his training might take precedence over mine. I might only be going 10 and he might need to do 17 or something and it's like you get to pick the time then and I'll go whenever.

Swapping runs often became a source of guilt for the co-participants when their runs took precedence (and subsequent time) over their husband's. CP10 described how she felt guilty about taking so much time on her three-hour runs on Saturday mornings:

I actually feel more guilty asking my husband for the time sometimes than leaving the kids for an hour or two. Because I know they're okay but it's every Saturday morning I'm like 'well I'll be back at noon' and although we try to swap some time he takes about a half hour to do his run and I take three.

Beyond partners, co-participants identified other close family members as a wealth of assistance when it came to training and competing. CP11 described how she

and her husband would schedule their track meets around her mother-in-laws' availability to watch their children. She said,

...Both my family and my husband's family, my husband's family in particular, have been very helpful with the kids...I couldn't have done it without them. Early on I was able to leave my daughter with my mother-in-law for four days at a time or five days at a time if necessary to compete and I couldn't have done it without someone like her.

CP2 described how her dad watched her son on Saturday mornings so she could fit in her long run:

Like this Saturday I'm doing a long run and my dad lives just a few miles from us and I'll just take my son there for like 2 hours and do my run and they get to play....So he's really good about it too because my dad's retired. And he's also a former runner so that's very helpful.

Therefore, social support helped the co-participants not feel guilty about training and helped them create spaces of time to train and compete. Most often this support was provided by husbands and immediate family members.

#### *Theme #4, Subtheme #2: Creating an "Intentional" Family*

Co-participants who did not have immediate family around them systematically sought out others who would serve as their "intentional family" (CP9). Because taking time to train and compete was identified as something that often made the co-participants feel "guilty" in many cases (CP3, CP8, CP9, CP11), having friends who validated what they were doing (i.e., let them know that mothering and running were compatible life choices) became very important. Often, they had to seek these friends out. For some co-participants, finding these types of friends was difficult. CP11 said the hardest part of mixing motherhood and running was the fact that she and her husband (who is also an elite-level runner) were the first among their peer group to have children:



I was one of the first people in my peer group to have a baby in the running community so the guys and the girls, a lot of them just really didn't even know what that meant. And it wasn't lack of support but they just had no concept of what it meant to bring a baby to a race or what I meant that I needed to go home on Saturday immediately following the race instead of staying around and partying and enjoying the experience.

CP4 told me that because she did not know any other runners who had been pregnant, she was unaware of what to expect from labor and subsequent return to training and competition:

I didn't really know anyone who had been pregnant. Most of my friends were younger....either unmarried or hadn't had children and my family wasn't near by and so it was...I kind of expected that the pregnancy would have been easier because I knew I was in shape and I thought the labor would be easier because you know, I was an athlete; I should have been able to handle it.

After the birth of her first child, CP9 was an NCAA Division I coach who was, at the same time, mothering and competing at a high level. She told me that her lack of social support in the running community was due to the fact that no one had ever seen anyone coach, mother, and run at a high level:

I was constantly coming up against clueless men. You know I was coaching meets with [my daughter] in my backpack for six hours...back and forth, back and forth at an indoor meet. Put the baby down for a nap, come back and run my own race, qualify for nationals. You know all in one Saturday. And I hear these coaches say 'I don't know how you do it!'

When co-participants found themselves without social support they had to create what CP9 called "intentional families" so they wouldn't feel as if they were "bad moms."

So you have to create what I call an intentional family. You have to find people you like that serve as mothers that serve as sisters...I call one of my running friends my sistah. S-I-S-T-A-H because she is my sistah because I know that she's got my back and I can complain to her about how hard it is and she won't think I'm a bad mom.

For those who had them, coaches were also identified as significant sources of



social support who the co-participants sought out as members of their “intentional families.” It was important for co-participants who had coaches to feel supported in their decision to take some time off. For example, CP6 trusted her coach’s knowledge about training during pregnancy because he had trained both his wife and other athletes before and after pregnancy:

My coach from college, his wife ran competitively and he trained athletes who were mothers and he just said “you know what, you’re going to be out of shape to an extent running wise ‘cause you can’t run the last trimester that much just because of risk of miscarriage.” He just said “it’s just not worth it.”

Furthermore, CP6 described how her coach increased her confidence in her abilities after she gave birth:

[My coach] always had more confidence in me than myself...at least in my ability. So when coming off cross country that fall season [after having a baby] when I finally broke 18 [minutes] he said ‘you could break 5 minutes again in the mile’...I thought that was unrealistic you know ‘cause I’m older and lacking speed like I used to have...and eventually that happened.

Comparably, CP11 told me that her coach did not consider her career as a runner over at all when she told him she was pregnant. Instead, he helped her see pregnancy as necessary time off. He told her:

Ok...you’re having a baby and we’ll work around that.’ He treated it as you called me to tell me you’re not going to train for six months basically and that’s great—take the break you need and we’ll get back on it when you’re ready.

Co-participants also sought out other running moms as support. CP9 told me that she believed that mothering runners would not be considered the minority in the running community if there were more women mentors. She said, “If there were more women mentoring women in our sport, [it] would be a little different...there would be more running moms.”

Along these same lines, CP1 told me that she was inspired by her running partner who had given birth to twins and then qualified for the Olympic trials in the marathon. She told me, "Until she [made it to the trials] I probably wasn't even sure I was capable of it. And then she did it and six months later there I was trying to do it. So that helps a lot." When asked about how the running community reacted to her returning to competition successfully and so quickly after giving birth, CP8 told me how another mothering runner in her community had paved the way. She said, "I think people are so used to seeing [name of another runner in her area] come back, kid after kid, that it was very easy for me to come back and run fast." CP2 found that she just had more in common with other mothering runners after she had her son. She told me, "I think I definitely spend a lot more time talking to other women that have children as compared to before because now we all have something in common."

While women were most commonly cited as being sources of social support for returning mothering runners, men were not discounted as sources of assistance. CP11 recounted an interesting story about how she and her husband were able to negotiate their babysitting and racing responsibilities due to the help of a male running friend at nationals:

...There were some older guys [in the running community] who had kids and they were much more understanding. They had been through it. They knew what it meant and they were very understanding and supportive. Specifically they made an effort to be supportive and understanding. And in fact, at one race at nationals one year...I think it was in '94 at outdoor nationals when my first child was just an infant my husband and I had worked out how to go to nationals together. My race was the day before his race and so he said he would watch the baby that day that I had to race and I would watch the baby his day when he was racing. A fluke thunderstorm cancelled my 10,000 meters and moved it to the next day. So that meant that my husband and I were both racing on the same day with this infant. In fact our races were 15 minutes apart or something like that. And it was an older

[male] friend who had two kids who we found to take care of the baby for us so I could run essentially. Because I'd already committed that day to my husband. It was really my problem (laughing) it was my problem. So he helped out. He made it possible for me to run that race and I ended up getting second place—it was a pretty good race. And I couldn't have done it without him. I couldn't have done it without that person—that older guy who said 'just give me the baby. I know exactly what to do. I'll take care of it. Have no worries.'

The concept of the “intentional” family was created in order to find social support in areas where the co-participants might not have felt supported before. Those who validated the mothering/running connection were other people in the running community who had children, other mothers who were also runners, and coaches who allowed co-participants to feel okay about taking time off to have children.

*Discussion of Theme #4, Subthemes #1 and #2: Primary Support and Creating an “Intentional” Family*

Research on the importance of social support in the life of athletes has been well-documented in the sport psychology literature. Social support has been linked to successful injury rehabilitation (Gould, Udry, Bridges, & Beck, 1997), athletic performance (Rees, Ingledew, & Hardy, 1999), and quality of life among athletes (Wrisberg & Johnson, 2002; Wrisberg, 1996). Specifically, Rees and Hardy (2000) identified the following four main sources of social support athletes receive that can help improve performance: (a) emotional, (b) esteem, (c) informational, and (d) tangible. Emotional support included athletes feeling as if they had others to “turn to” when they faced obstacles in their sport career (p. 335). Esteem support included feelings of assistance in relation to one's fitness, nervousness, and self-doubt. Informational support contained elements of support related to one's problem solving abilities while tangible support encompassed being supported with resources necessary to overcome obstacles.

Co-participants in this study gleaned sources of assistance from both primary and “intentional” sources that related to the aspects of support identified by Rees and Hardy (2000). For example, husbands, family members, and coaches provided a significant amount of emotional and esteem support for co-participants upon their return to training after pregnancy. These aspects of support included encouraging the co-participants to run when they felt they needed to get out of the house or when they wanted to run with friends. Furthermore, informational and tangible support were often offered by coaches and running friends as a way to solve a time management problem during training. CP11’s description of her male running friend who offered to babysit while she and her husband competed at nationals is an example of the tangible support that was provided to the co-participants.

As illustrated, many of the co-participants actively sought out support from others when they did not feel supported by their primary social network. Several discussed seeking out other women who had children in the running community as sources of support to “validate” the fact that one can both run at a high level and mother successfully. Layton (1998) suggests that this active acquirement of social support may be a way to help women obscure binary gendered limits:

It is clear that women seek and find other women to help them out of the painful confines of the gender binary. Engagement with other women offers female recognition and validation of the category “woman.” It also gives permission to question the legitimacy of gender inequality, which leads to change (p. 60-61).

Specifically in the case of CP9, who suggested that she sought out other women to affirm her love for running so she would not feel like a bad mom, this “intentional” search for female social support was extremely important and figural for performance.

Overall, the theme Social Support identified the major foundations of assistance and encouragement that the co-participants experienced after giving birth. For many of them, having others in the running community (specifically women) to serve as role models and mentors was a considerable help when returning to competition. The co-participants who received social support from their husbands, family members, and coaches described feeling less guilty and more likely to take the time they needed to heal after birth than those who did not feel significantly supported. Therefore, being socially supported may be a major indicator of the success a female athlete can experience after giving birth and returning to competition.

### Conclusion

In summary, the results of this study suggest that athletic performance, body, self, and social support were all experiences that emerged as central to the lived experiences of co-participants. In the next chapter, a model that illustrates the interrelationships between the themes is offered along with conclusions and recommendations for athlete, coaches, and sport psychology consultants.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of eleven elite distance runners and their return to competition after pregnancy. Specifically, the areas of identity development, body image, and quality of life were assessed using a semi-structured interview format. Inductive qualitative analysis revealed that such notions were revealed as a kind of figure/ground representation of these co-participants' experiences. The themes *Athletic Performance*, *Body*, *Self*, and *Social Support* all occurred within the social contexts of hegemonic constructions of the "Good" Mother and the "Good" Athlete.

### Model of Elite Distance Runners' Return to Competition After Pregnancy

The model presented in Figure 1 represents a visual description of the negotiation process co-participants in this study experienced upon returning to running after pregnancy. This model reveals the personal factors (e.g., athletic performance, body, self, and social support) that accompanied this return. Each of these personal factors were often influenced by hegemonic social perceptions (and stereotypes) of "good" mothers and "good" athletes. While the "good" mother and the "good" athlete are unrealistic (and unhealthy) standards for most people to achieve, they do heavily influence our experiences, feelings, and behaviors. Co-participants described negotiating back and forth between the binary ideals of "good" mother and "bad" mother and "good" athlete and "bad" athlete. For example, these women employed personal investment modifications and efficient training strategies so as not to be absent in their children's lives. These adjustments reified the stereotype of the "good" mother. Conversely, reframing running

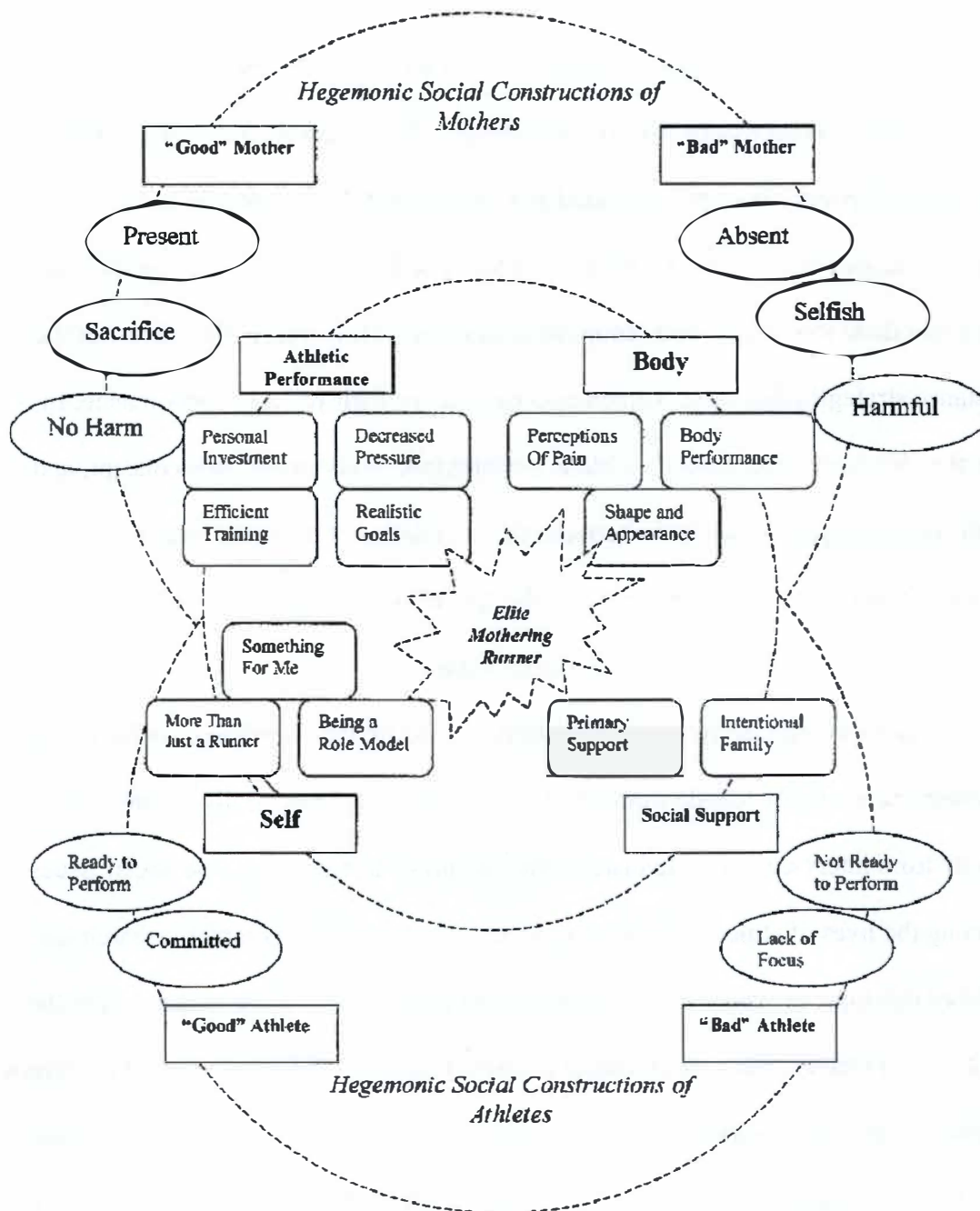


Figure 1. Model of Elite Distance Runners' Return to Competition After Pregnancy



outcomes and body image was interpreted as a resistance against the “good” athlete stereotype; co-participants were willing to be flexible with body image and performance outcome as long as they were still competing well. This model figuratively illustrates how co-participants constantly mediated and internalized the hegemonic social requirements of both the “good” mother and the “good” athlete (i.e., they were always aware that these stereotypes and requirements existed.) However, it also identifies the resistance strategies that these women employed along their paths to performance. In sum, the elite mothering runner’s athletic performance, body image, self-concept, and social support opportunities lie in between the boundaries of society’s binary representations of the “good” mother and the “good” athlete.

### Conclusions

It is hoped that the results of this study expand on the knowledge we have about the experiences of elite female runners who are mothering. Specifically, quotes taken directly from interviews provide insight into the physical, emotional, and social issues affecting the lives of athletes returning to sport after pregnancy; no other research has explored this topic in such a way. Several overall conclusions can be gleaned from the results. The purpose of this study was to investigate how motherhood affected the return to competition for high-level distance runners with regard to their identity development, body image, and quality of life. The next section discusses specific conclusions drawn from the results based on these three categories.

### *Identity Development*

A key question in this study was “how does motherhood impact an elite athlete’s identity development?” Mothering has been described as a key experience in the



development of a woman's gender identity (Chase & Rogers, 2001; McMahon, 1995; Robinson & Stewart, 1989). In fact, McMahon (1995) has suggested that becoming a mother may "produce" as opposed to simply "express" one's gender identity (p. 158.) Therefore, motherhood is viewed as a dynamic time in a woman's life when she may begin to recognize several self-transformative experiences that change the way she views herself and her responsibilities.

Studies exploring the identity development of female athletes suggest that women who play sports may be susceptible to social pressures such as excessive femininity and strict body image standards that shape how they embody their athletic participation (Davis, 1992; Krane, et. al., 2001). Furthermore, it has been indicated that distance runners may hold a unique identity in relation to their running. Research has shown that the "distance runner identity" (at any ability level) may consume an individual. In fact, as Morgan (1979) suggests, the distance runner's mentality may become "addictive" and one-dimensional, making it difficult for the runner to be flexible with his or her training if life occurrences (such as pregnancy) intervene (p. 112).

So just how do people develop their identities and how is that related to this project? Layton's (1998) theory of identity development suggests that identities are negotiated and are generated through "struggle" against dominant social paradigms. Female athletes, as suggested earlier, resist hegemonic social norms simply by engaging in athletics. In fact, co-participants in this study often recognized that female athletes were not as highly valued as their male counterparts. As CP6 told me, "I don't know that people in society in general think much of female athletes." While co-participants discussed feeling obligated to meet general standards of the "good" mother in many

ways, they also indicated that their personal identities were tied up with being great runners.

In sum, co-participants negotiated their mothering and running identities by justifying their running as time for themselves that would make them better mothers and by reframing their running as a way to role model healthy lifestyle choices for their children. After having children they did not identify solely either as mothers or as athletes but as a mix of the two. The mothering part of this identity permitted them to take pressure off of themselves in competitive settings and to see personal success as based on much more than just running successfully. These results support the notion that elite runners can successfully continue their quest for high-level athletic performance after giving birth.

### *Body Image*

The research on post-pregnant women's perceptions of their bodies indicates that they are often displeased with the look and shape of their bodies (Jenkin & Tiggemann, 1997). These women also have a tendency to hold unrealistic expectations about their body's return to pre-pregnant shape after giving birth (Walker, 1998). The results of the current study support a general dissatisfaction with body weight gain and look after pregnancy. However, all co-participants indicated that they felt confident in their ability to return to a high level of competition (and body image) despite these changes.

Furthermore, several co-participants indicated that they gained strength after pregnancy. This strength gain was attributed to higher levels of pain tolerance and increased muscle mass after pregnancy. Several suggested that they were physically stronger as a result of caring for children (picking them up and carrying them around) on

a daily basis. For some, pregnancy was the first time they ever experienced being at a “normal” (CP10) weight. Subsequent strength gains were attributed to this. Therefore, while these elite female distance runners were, for the most part, dissatisfied with their bodily changes after pregnancy, they had confidence in their ability to compete successfully again despite increased body weight and even acknowledged some positive benefits of such body change.

### *Quality of Life*

Another question that was posed at the onset of this study was, “How does quality of life change for elite runners who give birth?” Quality of life issues that were explored in the interviews were biophysical functioning, self-concept, and primary and secondary relationships (Pflaum, 1973). Biophysical functioning is an indicator of one’s fitness levels, self concept is linked to the personal meaning and fulfillment that one gains from his or her activities, and primary and secondary relationships relate to one’s ability to maintain close personal connections with others. Co-participants discussed feeling as if their QOL changed significantly along each of these lines after they gave birth.

As was indicated earlier, co-participants felt confident in their ability to return to their pre-pregnant weight and performance. In some cases, they felt that pregnancy had made them mentally and physically stronger. Moreover, many used running as an expression of joy in their lives; just the sensation of running, whether it be slow or fast, was indicated as “glorious” (CP9). They felt as if running was a meaningful and significant part of their lives. Even when they were not running as fast, co-participants suggested that running was something that added joy to their lives. Therefore, on a whole, biophysical functioning and self concept were cited as positive aspects of QOL

upon return to running after giving birth.

Social support from primary and secondary sources was also cited as a major component of life quality. All but two co-participants indicated feeling a great amount of support from their partners, friends, family, and coaches after giving birth. This support increased confidence in their abilities to return to competing successfully.

Taken together, co-participants' descriptions of their internal desire to run again combined with the support they received from both primary and secondary sources indicated that they did experience a high quality of life as they returned to running and competing. Despite feeling guilty about taking time to train, many were able to employ efficient training and time management strategies to curb this guilt. If they were able to do this, quality of life levels were perceived as high.

### Applications and Recommendations

It is my sincere hope that this research will enable athletes, coaches, and sport psychology consultants to better prepare (and help prepare) athletes for the experience of mothering and the return to sport participation after pregnancy. Furthermore, I hope that this research will expand and encourage further empirical studies devoted to women's experiences in sport. Therefore, in the following section I offer several recommendations for athletes, coaches, and sport psychology consultants.

#### *Recommendations for Athletes*

The first piece of advice to new mothers who want to return to competition post-partum is to set realistic and attainable goals for training. The results of this study suggest that co-participants were successful in their return because they established realistic training and performance goals in association with their mothering duties. Most found it

helpful to create a plan for running a certain distance in a realistic time period. Others were successful because they decreased the intensity of their training at the onset and gradually worked back into high level training as soon as their bodies were fully recovered and they felt mentally stable enough to start training again. In sum, it is suggested that new mothers start off slowly and do not attempt to return too quickly to competition.

Another strategy that new mothers can employ is to seek out support networks. Having social support was a significant factor in the life quality perceptions of the athletes in this study. While many did not have to actively search for social support, others made finding support a priority. Therefore, it is recommended that new mothering athletes seek out others who may help them both tangibly (i.e., child care) and/or intangibly (i.e., validating that it is okay for new mothers to take time for themselves). Others who may be sought out to provide social support include but are not limited to partners, coaches, family members, and other mothers who are also competitive athletes.

### *Recommendations for Coaches*

For those co-participants who had coaches their coaches' reactions to their pregnancies greatly affected how they felt about their post-partum return to competition. CP2, CP5, CP6, and CP11 discussed how their coaches' reactions to their pregnancy made them feel confident in their abilities to return to a high level of competition. Therefore, it is important for coaches to recognize that those athletes who are becoming mothers need support from them.

It is both unfair to assume that these athletes will never return to a high level of performance and unrealistic to suppose that these athletes will not change after they give

birth. Coaches need to be flexible with new mothers' training schedules, help them set realistic training and competitive goals, and recognize that good performance is often generated through flexibility and individualization of training programs. Furthermore, many of the co-participants discussed the notion of wanting to be "lifetime" runners; they wanted to continue running their whole lives. Therefore, it is also recommended that coaches help athletes adopt a long-term perspective toward training and competing. Helping athletes recognize that life quality is a major indicator of performance and that elite athletes have many years of optimal performance within reach is essential.

### *Recommendations for Sport Psychology Consultants*

Sport psychology consultants (SPCs) can help post-partum athletes in a number of ways. First, SPCs can endeavor to be part of the post-pregnant athlete's "intentional" family. By helping the athlete recognize that sport participation and mothering are not dissimilar life ventures, SPCs can begin to break the "good" athlete paradigm that may inhibit some athletes from returning to competition. SPCs can also help post-pregnant athletes set practical and realistic goals for future training and competition. Furthermore, it is extremely important for SPCs who work with mothering athletes to utilize a "whole person" perspective when consulting. The "whole person" paradigm attends to much more than the performance outcomes of an athlete; it involves helping the athlete explore various issues in her life, such as quality of life and identity development, that may be inhibiting her from achieving her life goals. SPCs can use the information in this study to help post-pregnant athletes look for networks of social support, identify effective training and time management approaches, and help them reframe their perceptions of their bodies after giving birth.

## Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study suggest several potential paths for future research on the subject of mothering athletes' return to competition after pregnancy. One of the major limitations of this research was that it did not include a diverse section of the athlete population. Co-participants were mostly white (n=10) and all identified themselves as heterosexual. The inclusion of athletes of differing races and sexual orientations may provide further insight into the overall experience of mothering runners and how they negotiate training and competing after giving birth. Future research should include a more diverse population that would provide insight into the various cultural demands and social expectations of the "good" mother and the "good" athlete how these may affect athletic performance and experience.

This research was also focused on elite female distance runners. As previously suggested, non-elite female athletes tend to experience higher levels of stress associated with their return to training and competition after giving birth (Kort, 1986). It may be that elite and non-elite athletes differ in their confidence and motivation to return to training and competition. Elite and non-elite athletes may also experience vastly different foundations of personal and institutional social support after giving birth. Therefore, studying the process of returning to competition for non-elite athletes would be an insightful addition to future research on this topic.

Finally, another potentially rich area to explore would be the experiences of mothering athletes in different sports. This study focused solely on distance runners. The subculture of distance running is based on specific foundations of training, body image, and individualism that are exclusive to the demands of this sport. Investigating how

athletes in other sports, specifically those that are group or team-oriented (e.g., basketball, hockey, football, softball, and soccer) may further illuminate the negotiation strategies female athletes who are also mothers employ.

It is my hope that this research illuminated the experience of being an elite female distance runner and a mother. This is a critical issue to explore in the field of sport psychology as women are becoming more seriously involved in both recreational and professional levels of sport. It is my overall hope that this research will help athletes, coaches, and sport psychology consultants better understand the dynamic between being a mother and a competitive athlete and help increase the performance and life quality for this group.



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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

#### Demographic Information

1. Age
2. Race/ethnicity
3. Partner status
4. Number of Children
5. Ages of Children
6. Number of years as a competitive runner
7. Highest level of performance
8. Occupational status

#### Introductory Questions:

9. Describe a typical day for you in terms of family, work, and running responsibilities.
10. What do you feel are the responsibilities of mothers?
11. What do you feel are the responsibilities of athletes?

#### Identity Development Questions:

12. Describe yourself as an athlete before you became pregnant...
  - a. What was your training/competing regimen like?
  - b. How important was your sport participation to you?
13. Tell me about being a mother and an athlete...
  - a. How have your responsibilities changed?
  - b. How has your sport participation changed?
  - c. How important is your sport participation to you now?
    - i. In what ways has it changed?
  - d. Are there things that you did not expect?
14. Are there conflicts between your mothering identity and your athletic identity?
  - a. If so, how do you negotiate these?
15. Are there similarities (congruence) between your mothering identity and your athletic identity?
  - a. If so, how do they impact your sport performance?

#### Quality of Life Questions:

16. What type of support did you receive when returning to competition?
  - a. from partner?
  - b. from spouse?
  - c. from family?
17. Tell me about your decision to begin participating/competing again.
  - a. What were the expectations you held for yourself?
    - i. Were these realistic/unrealistic?
  - b. What expectations did others hold for you?

18. How has motherhood changed your athletic/sport life?
  - a. Training time?
  - b. Time for yourself?
  - c. Pressure associated with competition?
19. Tell me about your current level of participation/competition
  - a. How satisfied do you feel with your sport participation right now?
  - b. What type of personal satisfaction do you generate from your athletic participation?

*Body Image Questions:*

20. Describe your feelings about your body after giving birth.
  - a. Were these feelings different than before getting pregnant?
  - b. Are/were there times when you were happy/unhappy with your body?
  - c. Did your feelings about your body impact your return to sport?
21. Tell me about competing after pregnancy?
  - a. What were your expectations?
  - b. What was different from before you became pregnant?
  - c. How did you feel physically?
  - d. How did you feel mentally?
  - e. Did participation take on a different meaning for you after you gave birth?
  - f. Any Problems?
22. Anything else you think is important about the experience of returning to competition/participation after pregnancy and while mothering?

## Appendix B

### Participant Informed Consent

This is a research study on women's experiences of motherhood and athletic competition. During this interview, I will ask you to talk about some of the experiences you have had before, during, and after your pregnancy and how these experiences may have directly (or indirectly) impacted your current sport participation. This interview will be conducted in an agreed upon location or by telephone and it will last approximately sixty to ninety minutes. This interview will be audio taped, transcribed by me, and described by thematic categories. Whatever you say will be kept strictly confidential and used only for research purposes. At no time will your identity be revealed in published reports without your permission. In addition, I may wish to conduct a later half-hour follow-up interview if I need additional information. Only university members of the research team, who will sign a confidentiality agreement, will have access to the transcribed interviews. This consent form will be stored at the University of Tennessee for three years past the completion of this study.

Your participation in this study is based solely on your interest and, thus, it is voluntary. If you have questions about the study and/or participation, please call Karen M. Appleby, M.S., 350 HPER Building, at (865) 974-0601. Once the study is completed, I will discuss the findings with you. With further questions you may contact Leslee A. Fisher, Ph.D., 349 HPER Building, at (865) 974-9973 or the University of Tennessee's Office of Research Compliance, 404 Andy Holt Tower, at (865) 974-3466

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (print name), understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice, and still obtain information about the study results in a later meeting.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witnessed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Vita

Karen Meredith Appleby was born in Indianapolis, IN on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1976. She graduated from Pike High School in June 1994. She attended Hanover College, a small liberal arts school in Southern Indiana. During her time at Hanover she studied English and Secondary Education and was a member of the women's cross country and track and field teams. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English in May 1998.

In the fall of 1998 Karen began her Masters degree in Sport Management at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Her academic and personal experiences during that year prompted her interest in Sport Psychology and, in the Fall of 1999, Karen began her pursuit of a Masters degree in Sport Psychology. She successfully defended her thesis in the Summer of 2000. After taking a year off to travel the country, Karen returned to the University of Tennessee to pursue a Ph.D. in Sport Psychology.

Karen's pastimes include racing her road bike, mountain biking, rock climbing, and running with her dogs. She and her husband, Sam, also own and run a small company called KRIEG climbing. Her life goals are to become a professor of sport psychology and to continue racing, researching, teaching, and enjoying life.

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