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10           Going Pro: Exploring Adult Triathletes' Transitions into Elite Sport

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## Abstract

27 The transition into elite or professional sport plays a critical role in the overall athletic  
28 career (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009). However, studies of this  
29 transition have been conducted almost exclusively with adolescent, student-athlete  
30 populations. The purpose of this exploratory study was to develop a contextualized  
31 perspective of transitioning from amateur to professional sport as an adult. An  
32 interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 1996) approach was adopted to  
33 explore seven elite triathletes' transition experiences. Data were gathered through  
34 semi-structured interviews pertaining to the change process, the influence of athletic  
35 and non-athletic factors, and how these were managed. Five themes emerged: athletic  
36 development, social support (sport performance), social support (family and friends),  
37 financial resources, and self-identity. This study provides novel insight into the key  
38 factors impacting adult athletes in transition and how their experiences differ from  
39 those of younger athletes, highlighting the importance of tailored interventions for  
40 individuals at different developmental levels. Preliminary evidence is also provided  
41 for the relevance of the scheme of change for sport psychology practice (Samuel &  
42 Tenenbaum, 2011) for practitioners seeking to optimize adult athletes' transition  
43 experiences.

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45 *Key words:* career transition, amateur-to-professional, interpretative  
46 phenomenological analysis, endurance sport

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48                   Going Pro: Exploring Adult Triathletes' Transitions into Elite Sport

49                   Schlossberg (1981) described transitions as occurring when “an event or non-  
50 event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires  
51 a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (p. 5). In her model of  
52 human adaptation to change, Schlossberg (1984) identified two types of transition:  
53 normative and non-normative. Normative transitions correspond with sequential and  
54 predictable movement from one stage to another, whereas non-normative transitions  
55 are those that are anticipated but fail to occur, or come about unexpectedly as a result  
56 of important life events. Despite the increasing popularity of whole career  
57 approaches, and recognition that psychological development continues throughout  
58 adulthood (Schlossberg, 1981), most previous studies have focused on transitions  
59 made during adolescence. As a result, relatively little is known about adults’  
60 experiences of the within-career transitions that accompany increasing athletic  
61 proficiency (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004).

62                   Stambulova (1994, 2000) modeled the athletic career as comprising seven  
63 stages and six transitions, including the transition from amateur to professional sport.  
64 In order to successfully progress from one stage to the next, athletes must cope with  
65 the demands of that particular transition, conceptualized as a turning phase or process  
66 (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011). If an athlete is unable to overcome the difficulties  
67 encountered during this critical period, he or she is likely to experience emotional  
68 distress, which may result in a perceived need for psychological assistance (a crisis  
69 transition; Stambulova, 2003). However, this framework focused exclusively on  
70 athletic development, overlooking the possible influence of non-athletic factors.

71                   This was addressed by Wylleman and Lavalley’s (2004) developmental model,  
72 which adopted a holistic lifespan perspective constituting four layers: athletic,

73 psychological, psychosocial, and academic or vocational. These layers are  
74 interdependent, such that challenges or opportunities at one level may influence  
75 coping in other areas (e.g., Poczwadowski et al., 2014). Although this model  
76 expands the concept of the sports career to allow for interplay between athletic and  
77 non-athletic factors, it does little to elucidate the change process that takes place as an  
78 athlete transitions from one stage to the next. Thus, it does not address the lack of  
79 practical guidance for practitioners targeting the transition process (Pummell,  
80 Harwood, & Lavalley, 2008; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavalley, 2004).

81 Samuel and Tenenbaum's (2011) scheme of change for sport psychology  
82 practice (SCSPP) described a therapeutic framework to facilitate consultants' attempts  
83 to guide athletes who experience change events. This scheme conceptualizes  
84 transitions as change events, the appearance of which may cause emotional and  
85 cognitive instability, leading an athlete to appraise his or her coping resources and  
86 potential solutions before deciding how to respond. A number of factors may  
87 moderate this decision-making process (e.g., significance of the change, past  
88 experience, personal characteristics), and can themselves be influenced by secondary  
89 factors such as athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993), which may  
90 lead athletes to adopt varying approaches to the same change event within different  
91 contexts (e.g., Knowles & Lorimer, 2014).

92 If an athlete decides to address the change event and is able to successfully  
93 implement this action (e.g., by consulting significant others or a professional), he or  
94 she will experience an increased sense of control and reduced negative affect. In this  
95 way, emotional and cognitive stability is restored, and the individual is able to  
96 continue developing their athletic career. If an athlete chooses not to address the  
97 change event, or is prevented from implementing his or her chosen course of action

98 by environmental or intrapersonal obstacles (e.g., lack of motivation or psychological  
99 support), he or she will fail to progress, and negative affect and concerns will continue  
100 (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011).

101         Although further investigation of the SCSPP's (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011)  
102 practical application is warranted, a review of extant transition literature indicates  
103 some moderating factors may exert similar effects on different populations of  
104 transitioning athletes. For example, there is evidence social support can facilitate  
105 transitions into Olympic training centers (Poczwardowski et al., 2014), from junior to  
106 senior elite ice hockey (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008), and from club to  
107 regional level three-day eventing (Pummell et al., 2008). Thus, other factors  
108 identified by adolescents transitioning into professional sport may also influence adult  
109 populations, such as increased training intensity (Price & Anderson, 2000).

110         However, it seems probable other factors may apply uniquely to adult  
111 populations. For example, athletes transitioning as adults are likely to explore  
112 alternative roles (e.g., a businessperson, a parent) prior to committing to elite sport,  
113 which may facilitate the development of the coping strategies needed to transition  
114 successfully. In contrast, those who commit to the athlete role at a younger age  
115 without exploring non-sport identities (identity foreclosure; Petitpas, 1978), may be  
116 less likely to develop these coping strategies and, therefore, experience greater  
117 difficulty when transitioning (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Furthermore, although the  
118 potential impact of financial considerations on athletic involvement has been  
119 recognised (e.g., Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), this factor is largely absent from  
120 adolescent amateur-to-professional transition studies (Bruner et al., 2008), likely due  
121 to the high level of support offered to young athletes, often by their parents (e.g.,  
122 Pummell et al., 2008). This contrasts with findings from research with Masters

123 athletes (typically involving individuals over the age of 35 who participate in  
124 competitive sport; Young & Medic, 2011), whose commitment, motivation, and  
125 established athletic identities mean they do not necessarily rely on social support to  
126 maintain participation (Dionigi, Fraser-Thomas, & Logan, 2012). Adult athletes are  
127 also more likely to be financially and functionally independent, and may even be  
128 supporting their own children, thus, are unlikely to draw on the support of their own  
129 parents.

130         If practitioners are to assist athletes in structuring optimal experiences at all  
131 developmental levels (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), a greater understanding of the  
132 sport- and population-specific demands of post-adolescent, within-career transitions is  
133 required. However, most studies have focused on athletic retirement or the transition  
134 from junior to senior sport (e.g., Bruner et al., 2008; Finn & McKenna, 2010;  
135 Pummell et al., 2008). As a result, support programs for athletes transitioning into  
136 professional sport (e.g., the English Institute of Sport's Performance Lifestyle  
137 Program) are tailored to adolescent, student-athlete audiences.

138         Triathlon was identified as providing an appropriate context for this research,  
139 as it is a fast-growing sport in which athletes generally peak between the ages of 27  
140 and 35 (Gallmann, Knechtle, Rüst, Rosemann, & Lepers, 2014; Malcata, Hopkins, &  
141 Pearson, 2014). Therefore, it is common for athletes to transition into professional  
142 racing as adults, often having specialized in a single related discipline, such as  
143 swimming or road cycling, as adolescents. Triathletes were expected to offer a deep  
144 insight into the transition experience, as they are challenged to reach expert status in  
145 three diverse disciplines (cf. three-day eventing; Pummell et al., 2008). Finally, there  
146 is no single route into professional triathlon, which may involve gaining permission  
147 from a governing body, applying for a license, or paying a fee, so it was expected

148 these athletes would offer unique perspectives into a range of challenges encountered  
149 throughout this transition.

150 Therefore, the primary aim of this study was to explore the subjective  
151 experiences of elite triathletes who have made the transition from amateur to  
152 professional sport during adulthood. Although transitions may be objectively  
153 described using a common set of variables (e.g., role change, timing), it is the unique  
154 experience resulting from interaction between these variables and the individual's  
155 socio-cultural environment that is important (Schlossberg, 1981). Accordingly, there  
156 was a specific focus on developing a contextualized perspective of the transition  
157 process, the athletic and non-athletic factors influencing these individuals, and how  
158 they were managed throughout the transition experience.

## 159 **Method**

### 160 **Methodology**

161 Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) was adopted as  
162 an idiographic methodology concerned with understanding an individual's lived  
163 experience of a particular phenomenon. IPA involves exploring, describing,  
164 interpreting, and situating the means by which participants make sense of their  
165 experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Given this study's purpose to develop  
166 a subjective and contextualized perspective of athletes' transition experiences, IPA  
167 was adopted to produce fine-grained accounts of specific patterns of meaning, hung  
168 upon shared experience (Smith et al., 2009). This methodology is appropriate given  
169 the examination of a complex, novel process (Smith & Osborn, 2008), and is  
170 consistent with Stambulova's (1994) recommendation that objective characteristics of  
171 sports careers be supplemented by subjective athlete assessments. This is particularly  
172 relevant when studying ambivalent phenomena such as transitions, which may be

173 identified by certain objective components (e.g., Schlossberg, 1981, 1984) but are  
174 subjectively interpreted by those experiencing them.

### 175 **Participants**

176 In line with IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2009), a relatively small group of  
177 seven triathletes were purposively sampled through a combination of personal  
178 contacts and peer recommendation (e.g., Martindale, Collins, & Abraham, 2007). The  
179 sample was homogenous in that participants must have completed at least one  
180 governing body-sanctioned race in the elite or professional category, and their first  
181 race as a professional must have been completed as a senior triathlete (i.e., aged 24 or  
182 above; International Triathlon Union, 2014). According to Wylleman and Lavallee's  
183 (2004) model, by the age of 24, athletes are likely to be in the adulthood stage of  
184 psychological development, and were expected to offer a novel perspective differing  
185 from the adolescent samples used in previous studies investigating transitions into  
186 elite sport (e.g., Bruner et al., 2008; Pummell et al., 2008).

187 The sample comprised four males and three females aged 31 to 39 years ( $M =$   
188  $35.57$ ,  $SD = 2.44$ ). Six of the athletes were British, and one was from New Zealand.  
189 Collectively, participants reported racing in triathlon for between nine and eleven  
190 years ( $M = 10$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ), and as professional triathletes for between one and nine  
191 years ( $M = 5.71$ ,  $SD = 2.81$ ). Athletes with differing perspectives were sought to  
192 provide a range of unique experiences within the transition process. Therefore, the  
193 sample included triathletes specializing in three different events: middle distance (1.2  
194 mile swim, 56 mile bike, 13.1 mile run;  $n = 1$ ), off-road (variable distances;  $n = 2$ ),  
195 and long distance (2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike, 26.2 mile run;  $n = 4$ ). Each  
196 participant had achieved qualification for the world championships in their specialist  
197 event. One athlete had been world champion numerous times, and others had won or

198 been placed at a range of national and European elite races. Four participants were  
199 full-time athletes for the majority of their professional triathlon careers, and three  
200 combined part-time triathlon with a non-sport profession. Three were employed as  
201 salaried athletes on professional teams; however only one trained with that team full-  
202 time. Both actively competing ( $n = 5$ ) and retired ( $n = 2$ ) professional triathletes were  
203 interviewed to obtain insight from current athletes and those with a time perspective  
204 on their finished career (Poczwardowski et al., 2014).

### 205 **Interview Guide**

206 In accordance with most IPA studies (Smith et al., 2009), semi-structured,  
207 one-to-one interviews were conducted to gather detailed data about participants'  
208 subjective experiences. A guide was developed identifying relevant topics for  
209 discussion, however the envisaged questions and order were adjusted during the  
210 course of each interview in light of participant responses (Smith & Osborn, 2008).  
211 Questions were based on models of athletic career transitions (Samuel & Tenenbaum,  
212 2011; Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), and drew upon previous  
213 transition research by Pummell et al. (2008) and Poczwardowski et al. (2014).

214 After an initial rapport-building conversation, each interview began with the  
215 general question, "Please could you tell me how you first got involved in triathlon?"  
216 allowing the participant to recount a descriptive experience (Smith et al., 2009). The  
217 researcher invited examples of actual experiences and the meanings associated with  
218 them (e.g., Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005; Winter & Collins, 2015), using questions  
219 such as, "Please could you describe your journey from amateur to pro triathlete?",  
220 "What were the challenges you faced during the transition?", and "How did these  
221 challenges affect you?" Probes were used to clarify or elaborate on specific points

222 (Patton, 2002), such as “Please could you describe?” and “Could you tell me more  
223 about what you mean by that?”

224 A pilot interview was conducted (Gratton & Jones, 2003) with a triathlete with  
225 professional experience as an interviewer. As a result, the questions were re-ordered  
226 into chronological sections addressing the periods before, during, and after the  
227 transition (e.g., Poczwardowski et al., 2014), improving clarity and facilitating  
228 participants' responses. A concluding conversation was incorporated to provide an  
229 opportunity for the participant to add any additional points (e.g., Collins & Nicolson,  
230 2002). Additional questions were incorporated throughout the data collection process  
231 in order to gain further insight on unanticipated topics.

### 232 **Interview Procedure**

233 After approval was granted by the university's ethical committee, prospective  
234 participants were contacted individually via email and each gave written consent to  
235 participate. Interviews were conducted by the first author, who had personal  
236 experience as a triathlete, and lasted between 74 and 105 minutes ( $M = 83.17$ ,  $SD =$   
237  $11.92$ ). One interview was conducted in person, two via telephone, and four via video  
238 call. To help overcome possible rapport-building limitations imposed by interviewing  
239 via telephone (Nicholls et al., 2005), the first author contacted each athlete prior to  
240 interview to discuss the purpose of the research, confirm anonymity and  
241 confidentiality, and answer any questions. Participants received a copy of the  
242 interview guide and an information sheet, and it was explained that the duration of the  
243 interview would depend on how much they had to say (e.g., Nicholls et al., 2005). All  
244 interviews were audiotaped to accurately record what was discussed.

### 245 **Data Analysis**

246 Data were collected and analyzed in a concurrent fashion to allow further  
247 exploration of certain topics within the interview process. Following verbatim  
248 transcription of the audiotaped interviews, each transcript was read several times by  
249 the first author to reach in-depth familiarization with the data. Notes were made in  
250 the left-hand margin to clarify the researcher's understanding and reflect on  
251 preliminary comments and associations. These initial notes reflected the participants'  
252 comments in vivo, and were used as a guide in the tentative identification of emergent  
253 themes representing more precise psychological terminology (Smith & Osborn,  
254 2008). These themes were documented in the right-hand margin, before being  
255 clustered based on apparent similarities and interrelationships (Nicholls et al., 2005).  
256 During this process, themes were checked against the transcript to ensure the  
257 connections were consistent with the primary source material (i.e., what the  
258 participant said). Representative quotations were selected and a written account  
259 developed to describe the participants' experiences, using their own words wherever  
260 possible. Initial analysis was completed by the first author, before both authors  
261 engaged in extensive discussions to review the analytic approach and uncover any  
262 biases. Where disagreement occurred, the original transcripts were reread and the  
263 written account reviewed until consensus was reached (Winter & Collins, 2015).

#### 264 **Trustworthiness**

265 Two techniques, bracketing and member checking, were used to enhance the  
266 trustworthiness of the findings, as described below. Furthermore, the authors  
267 encourage the reader to consider whether the descriptions and quotations included  
268 provide sufficient depth to enable a 'grounding in examples' (Elliot, Fischer, &  
269 Rennie, 1999), allowing the reader to make his or her own assessment of the  
270 interpretations.



**296 Athletic Development**

297           Although the transition into professional triathlon occurs at a specific point,  
298 namely an athlete's first race in the professional or elite category, the participants  
299 perceived this as a single step in an ongoing shift towards a more focused and holistic  
300 approach to training:

301           The analogy I use is: when I first started triathlon I was a 65-70% athlete,  
302 which meant on my programme I'd probably get 65-75% of it done well, and  
303 then the other 30% I would either not do or I'd do really poorly. By the end of  
304 it I was a 100% athlete; if I had a programme I would turn up every day and I  
305 delivered on what I was meant to do. (Tim, part-time, retired)

306           The participants had already performed at a high level in order to meet the  
307 relevant criteria to race as professionals and were generally confident in their ability  
308 to successfully transition at an athletic level. They also had prior experiences of  
309 competitive sport, usually in related disciplines such as swimming, road cycling, or  
310 mountain biking. These factors seemed to reduce the perceived significance, and  
311 therefore the stress associated with, the transition:

312           I think because I'd been doing sport for so many years beforehand . . . it didn't  
313 feel like a big thing. I think it was almost like a different badge; I'm now  
314 going to race in the pro class as opposed to the age group. (Ian, full-time,  
315 currently competing)

316           However, the requirement to achieve an elite standard of performance prior to  
317 becoming a professional meant two of the athletes who transitioned from part-time to  
318 full-time training experienced slower and less significant improvements than they had  
319 anticipated:

320 If you're already quite good then, yes, you will make gains, but they're not  
321 going to be as significant as you think. . . . there comes a point where you have  
322 to be realistic about what your expectations from the sport are and what you  
323 think you can achieve. (Martin, full-time, currently competing)

324 Further, the participants disagreed as to the likelihood of a newcomer reaching  
325 a level of expertise equivalent to fellow competitors who had been triathletes since  
326 childhood. One athlete believed that, despite having experience of elite competition  
327 in one discipline, his overall performance would always be limited by a lack of early  
328 experience in another:

329 I guess there's always been the challenge for me as an older athlete, learning  
330 the swim side. . . . I think at the end of the day you do need to have been doing  
331 it since you were a kid really; it's very hard to pick up when you're 30. (Ian,  
332 full-time, currently competing)

333 One athlete experienced an increased rate of injury relative to when he was  
334 younger, and two had experienced significant illness or injury after transitioning,  
335 which limited their training volume and performance capability. One participant also  
336 expressed concern at the lack of time available to reach her peak, before age began to  
337 impact her athletic ability:

338 I didn't have the time to learn the ropes through trial and error. It was a case  
339 of: learn from people who'd made mistakes, learn from the people around you,  
340 and learn from everything that I'd done before and accelerate in my sport,  
341 because I don't have time on my side. (Susie, full-time, currently competing)

342 Despite such challenges, these athletes strived to learn continually, and were  
343 motivated less by achieving a specific outcome than by the opportunity to explore  
344 their potential:

345 I didn't say I wanted to be a professional triathlete because I want to be world  
346 champion. It was: "I'm going to be a professional triathlete because I  
347 absolutely love what I do and I want to be the best that I can be, I want to keep  
348 getting better, I really enjoy the training and I want to see how far I can push  
349 my body". (Rachel, full-time, currently competing)

### 350 **Social Support (Sport Performance)**

351 As mature triathletes who were not part of an Olympic programme, none of  
352 the participants received any formal, institutional support, either during or after their  
353 transition. In addition, as competitors in an individual sport, five of the participants  
354 predominantly trained alone and experienced varying degrees of isolation:

355 The structure of your day is completely defined by yourself. . . . I'm spending  
356 all my time on my own, basically, training. . . . I've gone from having a lot of  
357 interaction with people to having very little, and going through a process of  
358 acknowledging that and realizing . . . I didn't realize how important that was  
359 for me. (Susie, full-time, currently competing)

360 Of the three athletes who worked with a coach during their transition, only one  
361 trained with them full-time. Most of the athletes relied largely on their own expertise,  
362 with sporadic input from networks of peers developed through their athletic and  
363 professional experiences:

364 I was a bit apprehensive that I didn't know what I was doing, but what I really  
365 did was just apply the same principles of training that I'd learned being a  
366 swimmer when I was younger to triathlon. . . . You speak to people, you don't  
367 do it all yourself. You do need experts or people you can just tap into for bits  
368 and pieces of information. (Rick, part-time, currently competing)

369 All the athletes had trained with a group at some point in their careers, and  
370 seemed to benefit greatly from being within such performance-focused environments  
371 and surrounded by like-minded athletes:

372 I went over to Australia and I trained; I swam with a swim group and I had a  
373 lot of other professional athletes around me and that's what they did all day.  
374 You eat, you sleep, you train, you recover, you train again, and you train to  
375 numbers and figures and you hit targets which you're supposed to hit. That  
376 was when I really felt like I was professional. (Rachel, full-time, currently  
377 competing)

378 Only one athlete was immediately contracted by a live-in, professional team at the  
379 point of transition. While she found her new teammates to be extremely hostile, the  
380 performance benefits she perceived within the team environment provided a means of  
381 coping with the challenges at a social level:

382 With regards the other members of the team, I simply blocked it out. I  
383 focused on giving everything to training, and used my improving performance  
384 in training and racing to give me the confidence to continue. . . . At the time  
385 they were pretty unpleasant, but that shaped me into the athlete I became, so  
386 retrospectively it may have actually been beneficial. (Laura, full-time, retired)

### 387 **Social Support (Family and Friends)**

388 The athletes generally received very little practical support from their parents,  
389 as most were living and working independently prior to transitioning. They received  
390 varying levels of emotional support: five participants described "invaluable" support  
391 from certain family and friends, yet three also experienced a level of disapproval due  
392 to the lack of financial stability as a professional athlete. Those in long term  
393 relationships identified their partners as the people most important people for their

394 athletic career. Indeed, two of the athletes received financial support from their  
395 partners that allowed them to pursue triathlon full-time. This benefited these  
396 participants in terms of their athletic performance, but while they had anticipated the  
397 need to make some practical changes (e.g., live more frugally), they were perhaps less  
398 prepared for the impact this would have on their roles within the relationships:

399         It changed my relationship with my boyfriend as I'd be dependent on him a lot  
400         more. . . . it changed my level of independence. . . . the fairness and equality in  
401         the relationship. . . . and it was obviously difficult at times. (Susie, full-time,  
402         currently competing)

403         Four of the participants had been involved in romantic relationships with other  
404         athletes, two of which were ongoing at the time of the study. Although these athletes  
405         enjoyed a high level of support and empathy from their partners, they also struggled  
406         to maintain healthy relationships and meet the demands of their sport:

407         We've just got a really good relationship anyway and we both understand each  
408         other because we both know what it takes and what we want to do. But it is  
409         difficult because we do all the same things and we don't really get much time  
410         to have a normal relationship . . . because we're tired all the time, it's  
411         sometimes not a proper relationship. But I think I wouldn't want it to be any  
412         other way. (Rachel, full-time, currently competing)

413         The two participants who were also parents spoke of the importance of creating an  
414         environment that accommodated both their sport and familial responsibilities, for  
415         example, turning their races into family events in order to involve their children as  
416         much as possible: "It's almost like a family hobby that we all do, go to Daddy's  
417         races". (Ian, part-time, currently competing)

418 Most of the participants also struggled to maintain relationships with non-  
419 triathlete friends in light of the time-consuming and, ultimately, selfish nature of their  
420 sport. They were consciously aware of this, and either took active steps to maintain  
421 these relationships, or rationalized the loss of these friendships as a necessary part of  
422 their pursuit of excellence:

423 You choose to meet up with your friends and family or you choose to do your  
424 training and to be less socially active, and I think quite early on I realized that  
425 needed to be a conscious choice, and you can't then resent it. (Susie, full-  
426 time, currently competing)

427 However, one retired athlete described the difficulty he experienced towards the end  
428 of his triathlon career, having continually prioritized his own athletic performance:

429 I went through this period where I was really lonely, and it was actually quite  
430 a revealing time; I'd neglected a lot of people who were important in my life  
431 for my well-being. . . . all my life was about exercise . . . and I realized that I'd  
432 probably focused too much in one area. (Tim, part-time, retired)

### 433 **Financial Resources**

434 All but one participant cited lack of income as the greatest challenge  
435 encountered throughout the transition experience. The athletes universally stressed  
436 the importance of taking a long-term view with regards their development and  
437 accruing sufficient financial resources pre-transition to sustain themselves during their  
438 early triathlon career. The athletes implemented a number of strategies to cope with  
439 their reduced incomes, such as contacting race organizers to arrange free  
440 accommodation, relying on savings, and selling property. Three of the athletes also  
441 maintained a non-sport career alongside professional triathlon to relieve the financial  
442 pressure on their performance. Two of these participants spent the initial post-

443 transition period as full-time athletes, but were unable to sustain themselves long-  
444 term:

445 I had individual contracts with sponsors but there was a few times where I  
446 wasn't paid. . . . that and halving the prize money, paying less deep, and it's  
447 like, this isn't financially viable any more. (Rick, part-time, currently  
448 competing)

449 Although sponsorship contracts were highly valuable in terms of goods or  
450 services, monetary agreements were hard to come by. This posed a particular  
451 challenge for those with significant financial commitments:

452 You get given free bikes and some energy drink and things like that, but  
453 probably aren't getting much in the way of cash sponsorship . . . you can do  
454 that when you're in your early twenties, can't you? But when you get into  
455 your early thirties and start having kids and houses, it doesn't work. (Ian,  
456 part-time, currently competing)

457 Three of the athletes secured salaried contracts with professional teams, which  
458 relieved them of the burden of administering their own sponsorship deals. This  
459 allowed them to focus purely on their sport, with the additional security of a regular  
460 salary. However, two of these individuals had already been racing as professionals,  
461 and struggling to cover their costs, for more than a year before being offered  
462 contracts:

463 If we'd realized it would be pretty much four years of... hardship, I guess,  
464 then... I don't know, we might have made the same decision, but you don't  
465 realize what it will entail from the outset. (Susie, full-time, currently  
466 competing)

467

468 **Self-Identity**

469           Each athlete's transition experience was strongly influenced by his or her own  
470 sense of identity, as exemplified by the varying terms they used to describe their  
471 profession. Three athletes who were or had been paid members of teams willingly  
472 described themselves as professional triathletes, however were not comfortable using  
473 this term prior to or following termination of their contracts. Four of the participants  
474 were reluctant to identify themselves as professional athletes as they felt they did not  
475 conform to the norms of professional sportspeople:

476           I just tell people I'm a full-time athlete. . . . I've never really thought about it  
477 and I've never really analyzed it, why I have this hang up on it. I think maybe  
478 it's guarding . . . I'm 35, and this is my first year as a professional triathlete. In  
479 anyone's head, that's ridiculous. . . . My only regret is that I wasn't in a  
480 position to do this five years ago, when it might have been seen as being less  
481 stupid. (Martin, full-time, currently competing)

482 Two athletes also spoke of questioning the value of careers in an environment they  
483 perceived to be one-dimensional and selfish:

484           I was also constantly questioning whether pro triathlon was really the career  
485 and associated lifestyle for me. It seemed like a self-absorbed existence with  
486 everything targeted towards the pursuit of your own goal. I missed having a  
487 job, a normal life, I missed my friends, and a career where I was at least trying  
488 to effect positive change in the world. (Laura, full-time, retired)

489 One athlete also struggled with the relative lack of mental stimulation of full-time  
490 sport:

491           If you've got no limitations on your time, all you've got to do is that training,  
492 then it becomes even harder to force yourself out of the door. . . . it just shows

493 that different people work in different ways, and not everyone's wired in the  
494 same way. . . . it's about playing to your personality and playing to how you  
495 operate. (Martin, full-time, currently competing)

496 In addition, the participants stressed the importance of maintaining an identity  
497 external to triathlon in order to overcome setbacks and transitions such as injury and  
498 retirement:

499 What you need to do is focus on the things that you can do and not wallow and  
500 be miserable . . . you focus on what you can do and the opportunities that all  
501 this spare time has now afforded you, and fill it with things that you haven't  
502 been doing and things that you want to do. (Susie, full-time, currently  
503 competing)

504 The athletes all identified with certain characteristics such as positivity and  
505 determination, and five participants described experiencing a sense of personal  
506 growth and development throughout their transition. This made a significant  
507 contribution to the perceived success of their transitions:

508 I got to that place where I was 100% focused. I had this moment in my life  
509 where I just felt anything was possible. . . . I did love being in that place, that  
510 was a pretty cool place to be. (Tim, part-time, retired)

### 511 **Integrating Perceptions of the Transition**

512 Overall, these accounts depict the transition into professional triathlon as an  
513 ongoing process of adaptation and development of the participants' athletic abilities,  
514 self-identities, performance expectations, and their sport and social environments.  
515 The athletes' ages did not compromise the success of their transitions, but presented  
516 certain challenges evident within accounts of their financial concerns, the pressure to



542 events and challenges not yet explored in transition research. This indicates although  
543 the transition into professional sport may be categorized as normative, the subjective  
544 transition experience may vary according to an athlete's stage of development and the  
545 socio-cultural context within which he or she is operating (Schlossberg, 1981).

546         The idiosyncratic nature of this transition was exemplified by the athletes'  
547 differing accounts of what constituted a successful transition, which included factors  
548 such as establishing financial sustainability and reaching their perceived potential.  
549 Every athlete evaluated his or her transition as a success, despite achieving markedly  
550 different levels of athletic attainment, and reported using a range of coping strategies  
551 to overcome adverse change events. This contrasts with the high rates of drop out  
552 reported within adolescent samples (Stambulova et al., 2009), suggesting more mature  
553 athletes are perhaps better equipped to cope with the transition into professional sport.  
554 Samuel and Tenenbaum's (2011) framework proposes six moderating factors that  
555 influence an athlete's selection of a coping strategy, including the perceived  
556 significance of the event, previous experience, and the athlete's characteristics. This  
557 framework is broadly in line with these findings, and thus provides a means of  
558 interpreting and situating the experiences of these athletes.

559         The perceived significance of the transition into professional sport was  
560 reduced by the athletes' understanding of this change as a long-term, developmental  
561 process (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011; Schlossberg, 1981). By drawing upon  
562 previous experiences of high level sport to inform their strategic decision making, the  
563 athletes increased their self-sufficiency and confidence in their ability to cope with the  
564 demands of the transition. Furthermore, by adopting a self-referenced motivational  
565 style, characterised by goals such as reaching their potential, these athletes are likely  
566 to have benefited from increased perceived control, self-esteem, and motivation

567 (Duda, 1989; Nicholls, 1984). This is consistent with findings reported in Rathwell  
568 and Young's (2014) case study of a 52-year old athlete, who committed to sport  
569 because he inherently enjoyed training and competing, and contrasts with the socially  
570 referenced goals often reported by adolescent elite athletes (e.g., Bruner et al., 2008),  
571 which may be maladaptive and compromising when an individual feels doubtful of  
572 his or her athletic competence (Olympiou, Jowett, & Duda, 2008).

573 Consistent with Dionigi et al.'s (2012) study of Masters athletes, these  
574 participants were intrinsically driven and did not rely on social support as a source of  
575 motivation. However, social support did play a significant role in facilitating other  
576 elements of the transition, as indicated by the SCSP (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011)  
577 and previous transition research (e.g., Bruner et al., 2008; Pummel et al., 2008). As  
578 predicted by Wylleman and Lavallee's model (2004), participants' partners played  
579 prominent roles in their transitions, in some cases influencing whether an athlete was  
580 able to pursue his or her sport full-time, or was required to maintain an additional  
581 career. Parenthood also increased the importance of support from a partner, and those  
582 with children were cognizant of the need to structure their training around the  
583 demands of family life (Stevenson, 2002). Although the participants acknowledged,  
584 and in some cases struggled with, the social isolation inherent to professional careers  
585 in an individual sport, most were able to sustain relationships with either athlete or  
586 non-athlete partners. However, this required adaptation and compromise within the  
587 relationship to accommodate the changes associated with the transition, such as  
588 reliance on a single income, prioritization of sport over socializing, and physical  
589 exhaustion due to increased training intensity (Price & Anderson, 2000).

590 Even those athletes who were supported financially by their partners cited  
591 financial pressure as a significant hurdle to overcome. This may be due, in part, to the

592 relative lack of prize money and sponsorship opportunities available within triathlon  
593 relative to sports such as ice hockey (Bruner et al., 2008) and equestrianism (Pummell  
594 et al., 2008). However, it is suggested the prominence of financial change events for  
595 these athletes is primarily related to the athletes' age and the context within which  
596 they were operating (Samuel & Tenenbaun, 2011). As independent adults, these  
597 athletes were required to support themselves and meet existing commitments such as  
598 a mortgage, which influenced the way they structured their environment, and in some  
599 cases required the athletes to risk compromising their athletic performance in order to  
600 supplement their income through a non-sport career. Financial concerns have been  
601 acknowledged by Wylleman and colleagues (Wylleman, De Knop, & Reints, 2011;  
602 Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), but have not featured prominently in previous transition  
603 research with younger athletes, likely due to the support offered by their parents and  
604 structured training environments in which coaches and governing bodies provide  
605 guidance, instruction, and direction (Knowles & Lorimer, 2014).

606         The athletes' financial status also influenced their self-identity, in that some  
607 participants did not fully embrace their role as professional athletes until they had  
608 achieved financial sustainability. This contrasts with previous research showing  
609 Masters athletes benefit from a high level of commitment to the athlete identity  
610 (Dionigi et al., 2012). Furthermore, extant research generally indicates maintaining a  
611 non-sport participatory role and multifaceted self-identity can facilitate successful  
612 athletic career transitions (e.g., Brewer et al., 1993). This appeared to be true in that  
613 these athletes were able to draw on their non-sport roles to cope with setbacks such as  
614 injury, and relieve the monotony of their day-to-day routines. However, some  
615 individuals seemed to experience discord between their pre- and post-transition  
616 identities, perceiving a lack of meaning in their careers as triathletes, which was, in

617 some cases, regarded as selfish and even foolhardy for an adult sacrificing a  
618 successful non-sport career.

619         The athletes showed a high level of self-awareness in reporting such  
620 fluctuations in their sense of identity, and in actively questioning their commitment to  
621 the athlete role. On one hand, this appeared to facilitate the transition through  
622 enabling them to make conscious decisions about how to adapt and structure their  
623 environments to ensure their needs were being met. However, others seemed to  
624 struggle with a perceived violation of social norms and expectations, having turned  
625 professional at an age when most athletes are looking towards retirement, and most  
626 non-athletes are approaching their career peak (e.g., Stambulova, 1994, 2000;  
627 Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). This suggests both adults and adolescents moving into  
628 professional sport may struggle to establish and maintain adaptive and well-rounded  
629 self-identities (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). However, it is perhaps more likely that, in  
630 adults, this reflects the challenge of incorporating a new role into their existing self-  
631 concept.

632         Becoming a member of a triathlon team or group seemed to facilitate  
633 reconciliation of the athlete role within the participants' existing self-identities, not  
634 through removing their concerns about their commitment to an athletic identity, but  
635 through conferring a degree of success and viability that enabled them to rationalize  
636 their concerns. Although this was due, in part, to practical considerations such as  
637 reduced financial pressure and increased informational support, it is possible joining a  
638 team also conveyed a sense of conformity and increased commitment to the athlete  
639 role through incorporating membership with self-concept (Kelley, 1983; Schmidt &  
640 Stein, 1991). In contrast with research in adolescent, team sport contexts (e.g., Bruner  
641 et al., 2008), teammates played a minimal role in facilitating the transition. Similarly,

642 Evans, Eys, and Wolf (2013) reported that groups may be more important for  
643 individual athletes during adolescence, whereas the importance of being close with  
644 teammates during adulthood was context-dependent. None of the athletes in the  
645 current study were required to cooperate with other members of their team, which  
646 may explain why the most salient aspect of team membership was not social support,  
647 but the practical and financial assistance that was offered.

#### 648 **Limitations and future research**

649         It should be noted these findings reflect only the opinions of these participants,  
650 and do not attempt to be representative of all professional athletes. However, the  
651 inclusion of diverse perspectives offered by current, retired, part-time, and full-time  
652 athletes, with expertise in different triathlon formats, suggests conceptual  
653 transferability could be tentatively attempted to other adults transitioning from  
654 amateur to professional triathlon within similar cultures (e.g., Poczwadowski et al.,  
655 2014).

656         A number of factors identified in this study warrant further exploration. The  
657 possible role of social conformity processes and the impact of self-identity on  
658 transition success could be addressed through comparing the experiences of those  
659 who transitioned within the context of a team relative to those who were operating as  
660 individuals. Future research could also compare the experiences of athletes who  
661 evaluated their transitions as successful relative to those who did not, and of full-time  
662 versus part-time athletes, to better understand the critical variables differentiating  
663 these groups.

#### 664 **Practical Implications**

665         Although this study was of an exploratory nature, some tentative suggestions  
666 can be made regarding practical application of these findings. The overall transition

667 experiences of these athletes were broadly in line with extant transition frameworks  
668 such as Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) developmental model, however, such  
669 frameworks are not sufficiently flexible to provide a meaningful characterization of  
670 the interplay between change events at different levels when athletic development  
671 occurs at a later stage. Furthermore, the influence of the athletes' socio-  
672 environmental context on their selection and implementation of coping strategies  
673 highlights the need for an individualized approach to transition optimization, taking  
674 account of their personal definition of success. Reports of the change process were  
675 broadly consistent with the SCSPP (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011), indicating this  
676 framework may be a useful source of guidance for practitioners through prompting  
677 consideration of each athlete's unique circumstances and characteristics.

#### 678 **Conclusion**

679 This study provides valuable insight into the transition into professional sport  
680 as experienced by adult triathletes, and corroborates the conceptual relevance of a  
681 practical model of change, the SCSPP (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011), for practitioners  
682 working with athletes in transition. A number of discrepancies were identified  
683 between the experiences of adult and adolescent athletes, demonstrating the  
684 importance of flexible and individualized interventions tailored to athletes at different  
685 stages of development at athletic and non-athletic levels. It is hoped this preliminary  
686 work will stimulate further research in this area, with a particular focus on practical  
687 interventions to support athletes in structuring optimal transition experiences at each  
688 stage of their career.

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