



Lady and the champ: The shared career experiences and retirement transition of a champion jockey and his partner

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ABSTRACT

Elite sporting careers are made up of a succession of transitions and adjustments across multiple layers. Part of the microenvironment is an athlete's romantic partner who moves through the transitions alongside them, being impacted along the way. Though researchers are yet to explore jockeys and their partners experiences within the horse racing context. Framed through the transition environment working model (Henriksen et al., 2024) and supported by the family systems theory (Broderick, 1993), this study aimed to explore the career experiences and retirement transition of a retired Champion jockey as perceived by him and his female partner. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, four semi-structured interviews were conducted with the two participants, Richard and Lizzie Hughes (M age = 46.5, SD = 2.1) who consented to their identities being disclosed. Three themes were constructed: "It was all worth it"; "You can't have the good times without the bad"; and "It's been a journey but one I clearly wouldn't change". Findings of this study highlighted the influence of the micro-level environment in shaping transition experiences, which ultimately impacted the partner too. Secondly, addiction and obsessive passion were found throughout transition experiences. Thirdly, despite being normative the retirement transition process presented emotional and physical challenges across jockey and partner. In all, the study provided a novel insight of the experiences and perceptions of both jockey and partner. Further research attention and applied support avenues for both parties are warranted, since their experiences are closely intertwined.

Elite sport and human performance continue to foster substantial scientific interest, exploring what it takes to be successful in these environments (Burden et al., 2021). Researchers may choose to explore significant samples or individual stories because of their uniqueness to help inform future work (Hodge et al., 2014). Through such exploration, it is understood that elite athletes must be intensely dedicated throughout their sporting careers, alongside balancing and managing the demands of everyday life such as family and romantic relationships (Anderson, 2012). Indeed, personal relationships have been found to influence athletes' performance and wellbeing, in part through mechanisms such as the spillover effect (Jowett & Cramer, 2009), supporting a more holistic perspective to developing elite athletes. However, despite increasing attention to the relational dynamics, there are certainly gaps regarding the experiences and perceptions of athlete's partners (Kent et al., 2025; Welcome & Hanley, 2025).

The literature focused on career development and transitions has evolved in its conceptualization over the last five decades (Stambulova et al., 2021; see Stambulova & Henriksen, 2025 for a comprehensive

review). Recently, researchers have suggested combining the holistic developmental approach (Wylleman, 2019) and the holistic ecological approach (Henriksen et al., 2010) to enrich awareness of athlete's transitions. This combination of embedding broader developmental and environmental systems promotes the understanding of athletes' holistic development and transitions as well as the environments around athletes, in and out of sport (Stambulova & Henriksen, 2025).

Career development and transition researchers recognize that athletes experience many phases, transitions, and crises across multiple interacting layers (Stambulova et al., 2021). Therefore, an athlete's lifespan is made up of navigating a succession of normative (predictable, anticipated, and voluntary); non-normative (unpredictable, unanticipated, and involuntary); and quasi-normative (predictable for a particular category of athlete) transitions (Schinke et al., 2015; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Retirement may be framed by the transition environment working model (Henriksen et al., 2024), where the athlete is seen holistically at the center. The transition environment is divided into two settings (doner, the old environment and receiving setting, the new

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environment), two domains (athletic and non-athletic), and two layers (micro, for example family or friends and macro, for example, the societal or sporting systems). The working model demonstrates how dynamic contextual, cultural, and systemic processes may impact athletes' preparation, orientation, and acclimation phases, and thus effectiveness of coping and functioning moving through the retirement transition.

Meanwhile, retirement transitions are happening to the partners of athletes too, under the assumption that interaction is inevitable, and humans naturally seek to define and understand their personal relationships (Brown et al., 2018). Family systems theory (Broderick, 1993) suggests a mutually causative system is produced within the units. Behaviors and emotions displayed are interrelated, leading to positive or negative developments in general functioning for each individual and the wider family unit (Haefner, 2014; Newhouse-Bailey et al., 2015). The most foundational unit in family systems theory is the one between two people, such as between romantic partners (Brown et al., 2019). Mutual dependency and communication are deemed necessary for balanced and functioning relationships, whereby partners sacrifice aspects of themselves and their shared experience (Kent et al., 2025). As such, the sporting marriage may be considered a career-dominated context, with both individuals within the dyad prioritizing the sport, day-to-day demands, and lifestyle which are a prerequisite for a successful sporting career (Kent et al., 2025; Ortiz, 2021). Though it should be recognized that the partners of athletes may share transitions and even experience their own multifaceted, interacting experiences such as identity struggles, life after sport, navigating the romantic space, and sacrificing their own career (Brown et al., 2019; Kent et al., 2025). This paper aimed to explore the career experiences and retirement transition of a retired Champion jockey as perceived by him and his female partner.

The horse racing industry is a globally popular sport and billion-pound business, with interest and industry importance cited across contexts such as: Great Britain, Ireland, Canada, USA, France, Australia, New Zealand, United Arab Emirates, and Hong Kong (Roult et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2014). With countless stakeholders and syndicates responsible for producing winning racehorses (Richardson et al., 2020), deemed the final cog in the wheel of success and subsequent economic reward are the jockeys and their performances. Though, some within the industry consider jockeys not to be athletes but simply "somebody to sit on your horse and ride it" (Martin et al., 2017, p.22; O'Neill et al., 2025). Nevertheless, professional jockeys commit to enduring (and thriving) within competitive, physically demanding, and high-risk environments where thoroughbred racehorses reach speeds of 60–70 km/h on the track (Ryan & Brodine, 2021). Due to these nuanced demands, researchers have started to identify the sport specific stressors for jockeys, categorizing them across themes of competitive (pressure, current form, race day), racing industry (weight, workload, and travel demands), interpersonal (trainer, expectations of others, support networks) and career stressors (career uncertainty, opportunities, and transitions; King et al., 2021a).

One stressor that has received greater attention is weight making and the rapid weight loss practices employed by jockeys (Wilson et al., 2014). Jockeys are ordinarily required to make several different weights in one day and may be weighed up to 10 times on a typical race day; each time aligning their weight to the horse's age, sex, and handicap rating, aimed to balance the competition (Dolan et al., 2011; O'Neill et al., 2025; Poon et al., 2018). Moreover, jockeys are not given the privilege of replenishing prior to competition, being weighed before and after racing, with an expectation that their mass will be no more than 1 kg different (Wilson et al., 2014). As a result, jockeys are known to 'waste' within the horse-racing world by acutely reducing their body mass within the days leading to competition (Martin et al., 2017; Noonan-Holohan et al., 2024). Commonly, jockeys have been found to waste through methods of food and fluid restrictions, dehydration techniques (sauna, hot baths, or diuretics), extreme exercise often with sweat suits, and forced vomiting (flipping in jockey terms; Wilson et al., 2014).

These practices, while considered standard have not gone unnoticed with researchers exploring the short-term health impacts on jockeys such as negative mood profiles, disordered eating patterns, bone health, and hydration levels, impacting psychological and physiological functioning (Caulfield & Karageorghis, 2008; Ryan & Brodine, 2021). Moreover, mental health struggles are considered commonplace, with jockeys reported to experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, and alcohol misuse more than other elite athletes (King et al., 2021b; Losty et al., 2019). For example, an anonymous survey revealed 61 % of jockeys met the threshold for adverse alcohol use (King et al., 2020). In the longer-term, jockeys may have an exceedingly turbulent transition through retirement, due to being immersed in the sporting domain from youth, poor development of social support avenues, and help-seeking behaviors (King et al., 2021b, 2022).

So, while researchers indicate jockeys face various psychological challenges during their career and retirement respectively, there has been little exploration into jockeys' perception of their transitions throughout their athlete lifespan. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, no researchers have explored how such transitions are perceived and shaped alongside their partners. Understanding a jockey's transitions from the perspective of their romantic partner allows a novel perspective from the wider relational system, which aims to develop evidence and applied support for jockeys and those within their environments. This study addresses the gap by exploring the career experiences and retirement transition of a retired Champion jockey as perceived by him and his female partner, using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and framing career development and retirement through the transition environment working model (Henriksen et al., 2024). Furthermore, drawing upon the complimentary family systems theory permitted the sport's impact to be explored across a marital dyad, allowing the participant's individual and shared experiences to be presented.

1. Methodology

The current study adopted IPA, a qualitative approach which is rooted in three theoretical notions: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2022). IPA seeks to explore and understand the lived experience through a lens of individual sense making and further interpretation of meaning. IPA involves a double hermeneutic, whereby the researcher actively attempts to understand the participant/s, who are the expert of their world (Smith, 2019; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Consequently, IPA enabled an intimate reflection of the participant's rich and complex lives, exploring the career experiences and retirement as perceived by them.

1.1. Participants

Two participants were purposively recruited and consented to their identities being disclosed, before institutional ethical approval was obtained. As an idiographic method, IPA sampling is purposive and homogenous to provide a sufficient perspective given adequate contextualization (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Data were collected from Richard and Lizzie Hughes (M age = 46.5, SD = 2.1). Specifically, their longstanding involvement, alongside their shared and personal lived experiences within British and Irish horse racing were prerequisites for their participation. Richard was born and raised in Co. Dublin, Ireland, brother to Sandra and son of Eileen and Dessie Hughes, Irish racing legend. At 21, he moved to England to further his racing potential. His career as a professional flat jockey, spanned over 16,000 rides, winning one in every ten, including two British classics and 31 Royal Ascot wins. He was also the British Champion flat jockey in 2012, 2013, and 2014. At the time of interviewing, Richard had been retired from racing for six years, having transitioned into horse racing training. Lizzie was born and raised in England, a triplet with two brothers Henry and Richard and three older sisters, Claire, Fanny and Julie. She was born into a racing

family, the daughter of Josephine and Richard Hannon, a legendary and successful racehorse trainer. Throughout their marriage, she remained involved in horseracing supporting her husband's jockey career and through retirement. In fact, Lizzie runs her own hat company for race day goers called Lizzie's hats. Lizzie and Richard met in 1995 before getting married in 2002 and having three children together born in 2008, 2010, and 2016.

1.2. Procedure

Participants were initially approached through a personal contact, with the project discussed verbally and then confirmed in written form. Informed consent was acquired, and it was communicated that participants could cease involvement in the study at any time by contacting the first author. Despite pseudonyms being widely employed within social research to protect anonymity; it was discussed and agreed that due to the study's intimate glance into their lived experiences, their names would be kept their own. Additionally, since a significant portion of Richard's experiences are documented within a published autobiography (Hughes & Mottershead, 2012), naturally that data is not confidential. These decisions are supported by researchers highlighting the power a name holds for individual's perception of self and for reader interpretations (Guenther, 2009). Thereafter, a convenient and comfortable space was decided upon for the first author to undertake face-to-face individual interviews with each participant. All interviews occurred within the participants' home, although for convenience, the first author joined Richard on his morning work, conducting portions of his interviews on the gallop, while watching the horses train. All interviews lasted around an hour, which is standard for interviews in IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In total, four interviews were conducted with Richard and Lizzie (total hours = 4 h and 28 min).

1.3. Data collection

Initially, Richard's published autobiography, "A weight off my mind" (Hughes & Mottershead, 2012) was read by the first author while making brief notes to develop familiarity of life events and identifying key areas of the timeline (from the first author's perspective). Notably, not all areas identified were covered, since the interviews were designed through IPA to be participant driven (Smith, 2019). After asking both participants where they would like to begin, broadly, areas spanning from childhood, early jockey years, Champion jockey years and retirement were covered with both participants. Interviews were semi-structured, adopted on the recommendation of previous researchers as the exemplary method for IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This format allowed the researcher and participant to engage in a mutual dialogue and adapt questions during the interview considering participant responses (Smith, 2011). As advised in IPA, open questions were asked initially, followed by probes to encourage development of the individuals voice and personal sense making (Smith, 2019). Examples of key questions for Richard ranged from exploring his career: "Do you have any particularly memorable races or horses throughout your career?" and other areas of life: "Talk to me about your Champion jockey years and how you balanced life at home?" Questions posed to Lizzie directly explored her experience, for example: "What were the first few months like for you adjusting to Richard's retirement?" as well as their shared experience, for example: "Richard spoke about the weight making becoming easier once he had stopped drinking alcohol, did this change the experience for you?"

1.4. Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded, then transcribed verbatim. Following Smith's (2019) guidelines for IPA, the transcription process was the first stage of familiarization, however the transcripts were then read and reread several times to advance understanding. Throughout

this time the first author began annotating the transcripts in the left margin to record initial perceptions and pinpoint individual and shared experiences between the participants. The right-hand margin saw the development of themes from the annotations. With IPA being a dynamic process, the transcripts were then read and reflected on several times, drawing on the second author as critical friend to ensure a cohesive narrative was developing. The participants perspectives were kept central to the findings through the cohesive connections made between the themes and participants voices built into themes (Nizza et al., 2021; Smith, 2019). Related themes were then clustered together before three experiential themes were developed that portrayed patterns of similarity and individual idiosyncrasy (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Direct quotations were also drawn from the interviews to form these experimental theme titles, grounded in the participants voice to reflect their shared lived experiences (Smith, 2011).

1.5. Methodological rigor

Guided by our methodological approach, the reader is encouraged to use the following indicators to judge the quality of this IPA research: constructing a compelling unfolding narrative, developing a vigorous experimental account, close analytic reading of participants words, and attending to convergence and divergence (Nizza et al., 2021). Aligned with these quality indicators, two techniques (critical friend and member reflections) were used to enhance the study's methodological rigor (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

The second author (An experienced qualitative researcher and registered practitioner psychologist) acted as a critical friend throughout, promoting reflexivity, and acted as a sounding board in relation to the processing of autobiographical information, data collection, and analysis (Smith & McGannon, 2018). For instance, reflective conversations following Richard's first interview helped shape key open questions going into Lizzie's next interview, for example: "Richard spoke about his burnout through the Champion jockey years, what was it like for you being Richard's support system?". Engagement in these open conversations led to more nuanced research decisions, management of interviews, and alignment to IPA as an overarching methodology, recentering the participant's perspective (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Secondly, member reflections provided an opportunity to further engage in collaborative discussions with the participants, while findings were being developed (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Participants were invited to read the first author's interpretations of key findings and initial results, encouraging further considerations and amendments (Nizza et al., 2021). For example, additions were made regarding Richard's personal and professional identity shift throughout retirement, while Lizzie reinforced the significance of modelling their respective childhoods within their own children's upbringing. These conversations aided the reflection and interpretation process when representing the participants lived experiences.

2. Findings

Three experiential themes were developed directly from the participants' voices to portray their lived experiences throughout the jockey career and into retirement. Each theme highlights the complexity and interlinked nature of Richard and Lizzie's perception of individual and shared experiences across the athlete lifespan and reflective perspectives retiring from professional racing. The first theme: "It was all worth it" discussed the inception of Richard's jockey career, career highlights from both participant's perspectives, the significance of both of their fathers, and Lizzie's role in Richard's life and sporting career. The second: "You can't have the good times without the bad" represented the perceived lows, sacrifices, and jockey contextual realities that accompanied the achievements. Thirdly: "It's been a journey but one I clearly wouldn't change" reflected on Richard's retirement into racehorse training and subsequent adjustments for participants regarding work

opportunities, their relationship, and with their children. All three themes are presented with direct quotations from Richard and Lizzie.

2.1. *"It was all worth it"*

The first theme introduced both Richard and Lizzie as insiders to the horse racing world, embedded in the culture, expectations, and norms due to both of their father's involvement and successes. This theme explored and celebrated Richard's vast accomplishments across his 25-year racing career, the significance of family, and Lizzie's involvement and support. All deemed "worth it" despite challenging factors such as weight management and alcoholism.

Lizzie was embedded within the horse racing culture through growing up with her father, Richard Hannon, legendary racehorse trainer. This conceivably developed her understanding around horse racing and partnerships beyond the track, seeing the marital dyad through her parents, commenting: "It was lovely, so that's why I'm quite good and enjoy when people come into the house, I have always grown up with it". Similarly, Richard also drew on his father and other jockeys for inspiration: "Dad was a jump jockey, and he warned me to do everything in my power to stay on the flat because he broke every bone in his body".

Both participants discussed Richard racing horses trained by Lizzie's father and their strong personal and professional relationship: "It was a great team the two of them ... it wasn't just him jumping on the horse, he'd be up there every single morning putting his input in" (Lizzie). Reflecting on the dyadic partnership between themselves, Richard and Lizzie balanced, supported, and learnt off each other:

Richard likes me to entertain and talk to people, he thinks I'm better at that sort of thing ... He's made me realize that all horses have different personalities, he knows the ins and outs of them, I love to listen to him after a horse runs, I can't make my own mind up until I've heard what he says. (Lizzie)

For Richard, it was evident that a genuine passion and love for horses drove his successes: "Pure obsessive when I was young", with Lizzie stating: "It's not just a job to him, he just loves them". From the beginning, Richard's addictive nature and passion, whether obsessive or harmonious (Vallerand & Verner-Fillion, 2020) was dominant in his approach to racing: "It was nearly an addiction, nearly like how someone needs to smoke or take heroin, I needed to ride horses and compete, like I love it so much". Lizzie recognized his natural and skillful approach to racing which allowed him to feel fulfilled and express himself: "Richard, as a person is not particularly confident in a crowd or with people, but as a jockey, he was really cocky ... always looked like he knew what he was doing and more often than not, in the right position". Richard reflected on special opportunities racing provided, such as racing horses owned by the Queen and racing across Japan, India, Hong Kong, and Dubai. He achieved Champion jockey three years consecutively from 2012 to 2014 by riding the most winning horses during a season. This was against all odds with Lizzie stating: "Never would you have thought he would be Champion jockey ... we didn't think his body, or anything would take it". Referring to the weight making challenges and sobriety discussed in the next theme which: "Totally changed his mentality, way of life, trust, everything ... he became far more professional in everything he did and had people around him who knew he could be Champion jockey and helped in any way they could."

Richard continued to hit milestones even nearing the end of his jockey career: "I rode my first Classics winner on Sky Lantern in the 1000 Guineas ... then a month later I won the Oaks on Talent, so I had two top wins in the space of two months after waiting my whole career".

2.2. *"You can't have the good times without the bad"*

The challenges experienced as a professional jockey and partner to a jockey were portrayed in this second theme. Participants discussed chronic wasting, alcoholism, and burnout, and how these 'lows' overlapped and connected throughout, shadowing the 'highs' of their experiences and Richard's sporting career.

Wasting, the short-term reduction of body weight prior to competition was a consistent and inevitable concern for Richard due to his height which made keeping his weight down even more challenging:

At 5 foot 9 I was probably a little bit too big to be a flat jockey ... my natural weight is about 10 stone 5 now, so no matter what diet, how good I was, how dedicated I was ... I needed to go deeper to make 8 stone 7.

He became accustomed to an intuitive awareness of his weight, all year round due to his packed racing schedule: "I would know in the morning what weight I was, I'd know putting on my socks, I'd know by my watch if it was getting tight". Internal motivation, comparisons to other jockeys, and organizational markers combined to create Richard's benchmark for success: "I knew if I wanted to be Champion jockey, I had to do 8 stone 7 ... most top flat jockeys do that so I'm either a flat jockey or I'm not".

Richard's professional daily routine involved a combination of methods to enable his low weights, including: "The extreme of flipping", dehydration (through alcohol, sauna, hot baths, and diuretics) and decrease of food and fluids: "I used to get in the sauna some days with 7 pounds to lose and my skin would be burning but I was like, I will do this!"

Flipping, a jockey specific term meaning forced vomiting for the purpose of wasting was something Richard viewed as:

The easiest way to keep sane ... You might be 9 stone 1 before a race, but you had to be 9 stone, so you'd run in and flip your cup of tea that you had maybe half an hour ago ... so now you've done the weight, that's what it got to some days ... I went to see a doctor about doing it, I only went to keep Lizzie happy, but I would have kept doing it because I was riding great horses.

For Lizzie, while this was difficult to witness, a practical perspective was retained: "He looked so thin ... and when he would eat and bring it up, it was hard for me, but he was happy doing it and he really had no choice ... he got better at it as the years went by". Arguably, due to Lizzie growing up within a racing family, norms of the culture may have been more readily accepted than an outsider to the world. Correspondingly, Richard actively hid his flipping from the press and his autobiography, fearing to: "Glamorize it" or not wanting to: "Encourage young people to do it". Wasting led to food cravings, cramps, faintness, and brief deafness: "I went deaf on them [diuretics] one day when I got really light ... I got immune to them, I remember taking 14 of them one day, I passed out".

Alcohol use began to present as a significant challenge for Richard personally and professionally until 2005, when he entered sobriety. Richard's drinking was not always problematic, as Lizzie remarked: "He was young, enjoyed a drink and a bit of a party. He got away with quite a lot drinking wise because he was so talented". Moreover, the underlying issue for Richard was arguably accepted and encouraged through the British and Irish racing culture at the time, rather than flagged, as it may have been in other environments:

There was a huge drinking culture, especially up the north of England there would be cans of beer and bottles of champagne in the sauna ... there could be four empty bottles of champagne in there before you started riding ... now it would be frowned upon, it's more professional.

Similarly, Richard reflected on the interplay between his alcohol use and wasting: "Being an alcoholic I defended it, it helped me, I used to be

telling people I can't eat so I need a drink ... I really used that to my advantage, like a real sneaky alcoholic". But ultimately it took his best friend to make him accept the fact: "He looked at me and said you're an alcoholic you know, and I was like oh no, I knew it but for my best friend to tell me, I knew he wouldn't lie to me". Refocusing on his passion for competing and horses, further motivation came from comparisons to other jockeys who were performing well, without alcohol:

It was bothering me that he was better than me, I was watching him thinking, he's doing it right and I'm not ... when I gave up drinking it didn't matter who was the best jockey because I was on a level playing field ... I was twice the jockey when I gave up drinking.

Beyond performance, both participants considered the detrimental impact alcohol had on Richard's mental health and relationships. Lizzie discussed the effect on Richard, herself, and them as a couple:

It was starting to affect him, me and well, us, we were going to get married, and I had my doubts about him, he was off, and I didn't trust him, the drinking was taking over ... so our wedding was called off.

Richard spoke in-depth regarding some of the guilt surrounding his alcohol use:

I kept getting away with it and people saying well done, oh the guilt, well done Richard, if only you knew?! That was the worst of it and ringing dad straight after racing because I knew an hour or two later, I'd be drinking so get the phone call in early ... horrible but I'd keep getting away with it, keep getting another winner and people wouldn't know.

The reality of racing at the very top was exposed. Richard reflected on the intense mental and physical burnout from riding so much to compete for Champion jockey: "From March to November I rode 1000 rides". Richard continued:

It was more relief that elation that I had done it you know, yeah it was funny that after all the hard work it wasn't something so brilliant, it was a relief it was over. One of the years I won, I did 7 winners in 1 day, I rode 14 winners in 4 days and that kind of put it to bed.

These lived experiences revealed a challenging approach in the pursuit of the end goal, one where the enjoyment of riding was replaced with overwhelming pressure and focus on being Champion jockey each year after the first: "It was a bit of a curse ... if anything it burnt me out a bit because once you're Champion, I knew I had to be Champion again and I knew what it would entail."

2.3. *"It's been a journey but one I clearly wouldn't change"*

Following the highs and lows previously outlined, the final theme reinforced the participants journey over time and reflected on their experiences six years into Richard's retirement from racing. Discussing life, the sporting retirement decision, the transition into racehorse training and future aspirations on their journey.

As aforementioned, Richard's father was a strong and consistent influence on him. Lizzie expressed: "He used to ring his dad 3-4 times a day and he would always ring up like 'how did I do dad' that kind of thing". As such, following his father's passing in November 2015, Richard felt it was the right time to retire from racing:

I was only doing it for him you know ... I was seeking his approval for him to say well done, that was gone. It felt like what is the point because I knew that I could keep riding winners, but it just didn't mean as much. So, then I started thinking well it might be time to give it up.

With Richard's long-term routine suddenly halting, it was surprising he did not miss riding at first, though this could be attributed to his experience of depression after losing his father: "I remember going to see

a doctor ... he said you definitely have a bit of depression but it's more you haven't grieved". Lizzie reaffirmed this concern from her perspective, highlighting the interlinked and complex experiences they both went through personally and together. Conceivably, Lizzie's experiences were intensified through worrying for Richard too: "When his change of career came ... he needed his dad and his dad was gone, that was really hard, and I was pregnant with our third child, and he just needed his dad".

Over the years however, Richard's continued to adjust to life still intertwined in horse racing, without racing himself:

I don't know if I'd say I miss it or not, I remember missing Royal Ascot, the crowds, it was brilliant in front of the crowds. So going to Ascot not riding, walking around, talking to people was just painful because I know Ascot as competing, winning, it was either elation or deflation. So that was the hardest bit, I was used to going to Ascot with five good rides every day to going with nothing, no adrenaline, nothing.

Understandably, Richard's day-to-day demands shifted dramatically from holding the: "Responsibility of winning and not fucking up" to a more central, business role. Richard reflected:

I was doing what I loved doing all my life, easy, go racing, ride ... now business and big mortgage ... wages, results, and horses to worry about, horrendously different ... I was a bit blinded by it watching my dad and Lizzie's dad training, I'd seen all the glamorous bits because that's what I wanted to see, never really thought of the real stuff.

The transition was unsettling for Lizzie to witness: "I've never seen such a change of dynamic in a person to the point he's a nervous wreck sometimes when these horses run, when he was a jockey, nothing phased him, nothing bothered him one bit". But the connection between their partnership and additional support from friends was evident from jockey to trainer career:

None of it matters unless he's happy doing what he's doing basically, it's kind of top of the ladder and then we'll all fit into place kind of thing ... he's always said he's very lucky that he trains for his friends and has so many great people around him, they're a great support as well, I've often rang them too" (Lizzie).

Additionally, Richard's body went through adjustment to retirement: "The appetite went as soon as I could eat, I didn't want to eat ... my bladder had shrunk the doctor said because I was dehydrated for 20 years". After years of worry, both participants were relieved that bulimia was not developed from the daily flipping. Lizzie was: "So relieved that he stopped puking the day he gave up riding". Richard's sobriety also continued despite the newfound pressure as Lizzie remarked:

The pressures he's had now makes me wonder why he's not turned to drink but he and I have found a great balance in life and since he's given up drinking, I can't remember the last time I drank either ... he gets a bit obsessed with things like golf but I think his obsessive behavior with the alcohol and stuff, he handles it really well.

Underpinning all the triumphs and challenges throughout the years, Lizzie reinforced the personal and shared growth experienced:

He kept it all together and kept us together, him and I, when I was pregnant ... We've both kind of sorted out our demons on our own if you like and we're in this journey together ... he's really sweet because he says he can't do it without me, so I have my part to play ... maybe it's by keeping the kids happy for him to come home to. (Lizzie)

Raising their children with a future around horses was also a priority, continuing the cycle of their past, with Richard linking his retirement decision with his sons potential future: "Probably was good timing ... let's get out on top, I wouldn't have enjoyed it anyway ... I can do this

now until I'm 70 or whenever I want if it's going okay and hand it to Harvey (oldest son) maybe". Lizzie reinforced this quotes significance: "I think he really wants the kids to grow up in an environment like he and I did, that's important to him". Similarly, Lizzie expressed hope for their future in training, considering Richard to be following in his and her father's footsteps: "He's very like his own Father, he's just a really good horseman, quiet, very kind, very kind to his horses ... We're just like sitting ducks waiting for the big time and I know it's coming".

3. Discussion

This study extends previous literature by exploring the career experiences and retirement transition of a retired Champion jockey as perceived by him and his female partner. Framed through the environment working model (Henriksen et al., 2024) and supported by the family systems theory (Broderick, 1993), this study found micro-level influences to be central in shaping transition experiences for Richard, ultimately impacting Lizzie too. Secondly, addiction and obsessive passion were found throughout transition experiences. Thirdly, despite being normative, the retirement transition process presented emotional and physical challenges to both jockey and partner.

The study found that micro-level relationships, particularly those with the jockey's father, father-in-law, friends, and partner were central to the success of Richard's transitions throughout his career, nurturing both his well-being and performance. These findings can be framed through the transition environment working model (Henriksen et al., 2024), highlighting the influence of related individuals (friends, peers) which make up the social settings (family, other areas of life) they engage in, creating an athlete's athletic and non-athletic domain. Interestingly, in this study, relationships spanned across both athletic and non-athletic domain as all meaningful reported relationships were deeply interrelated to the jockey culture. For example, both father figures were successful racehorse trainers and Richard's friends were either jockeys or racehorse owners who he trained horses for.

These key relationships were not only sources of emotional support such as calling to hear his father's opinion after races but also a trigger for personal and professional development. Richard reflected on how his father set his pathway and identity as a flat jockey from youth as well as being significant in his retirement decision. After his father's passing, he did not see satisfaction in continuing the fight for Champion jockey status and putting his mind-body through the races anymore. Seemingly, his micro-level environment (father and father-in-law) not only impacted his new context of racehorse training but also the temporal nature of when he was to begin this transition. Supporting the retirement transition as relational, mediated by partners and parents (Brown et al., 2019; Henriksen et al., 2024). The current findings are in line with retirement research which underscores the importance of developed awareness of existing and new environments before transitioning into them (Stambulova et al., 2021), along with highlighting the success factors necessary for supporting transition processes. Specifically links between social belonging, awareness of cultural practices and human resources (Henriksen et al., 2024).

Friends and peers influence appeared throughout pivotal moments too. Fundamental to the beginning of and navigation of sobriety and reconstruction of Richard's jockey career and subsequent achievements. Typically sport psychology researchers have looked at the influence of peers on youth or student athletes' identity and performance. Though the current study provides evidence for the influence of the microsystem with peers, family and friends found to be central to the sobriety transition for Richard, as an adult (Duffy et al., 2006; Stambulova et al., 2021). Furthermore, his sobriety transition demonstrates the interlinked nature of performance and well-being (Brady & Maynard, 2010), with sobriety bringing Richard as a whole person: refocus, enjoyment, relationship benefits, and enhanced performances, thus bridging the gap between his fundamental natural talent (nature) and the highly influential environmental factors (nurture; Baker et al., 2003).

Active and consistent within all of Richard's transitions was the second participant, his partner, Lizzie. Her role being to balance Richard's weaknesses with her strengths, communicate effectively, empathize, go through parenthood and career highs and lows with Richard. This aligns with previous research into the sporting marriage whereby both individuals strive for the overarching goal and success of the athlete (Ortiz, 2021). Based on the premise of family systems theory (Broderick, 1993) Richard was influenced by Lizzie, and vice versa. It is said that successful communication, attention, and reciprocal social support leads to optimal functioning within the marital dyad and of individuals (Newhouse-Bailey et al., 2015). Conversely, significant challenges in Richard's career (wasting, alcoholism, depression, losing his dad and retirement) were also felt and endured by Lizzie. As an example, for Richard, methods such as 'flipping' were a strategic and practical approach to the demands of horse racing (Martin et al., 2017). While Lizzie accepted the necessity of wasting in the jockey context, she still struggled watching Richard waste daily. 'Flipping' was therefore found to be a critical concern as a partner, due to worry about physical and mental wellbeing and potential for unknown impacts and eating disorder development into retirement (Caulfield & Karageorghis, 2008). Moreover, it is hard to ignore the social impact of alcohol misuse, with Lizzie discussing the wavering trust in their relationship and calling off their wedding at one point. Individuals who struggle with alcohol misuse and dependency may act in ways that disrupt functioning and communication, while partners or other family members often compensate for the individual (Haverfield et al., 2016). Leading to a lack of trust, communication, and feelings of insecurity, guilt, shame, anger, fear, and isolation (Haverfield et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2016).

Despite the challenges, findings suggest an inability to have achieved what they have without each other, or mutual dependency (Ortiz, 2002). Both willing and reluctant sacrifices are said to be made by the partners of athletes within a sporting dyad, to ultimately prioritize sporting performance and success (Kent et al., 2025; Ortiz, 2021). It may be argued in this case, Lizzie's standalone awareness and immersion in horse racing from a young age facilitated her ability to support Richard, allowing her to intricately understand the sacrifices involved in jockey success. Indeed, researchers have highlighted both the impact onto partners and athletes in the process of providing and receiving support (Brown et al., 2018; 2019). Conceivably, this mutual understanding could have also encouraged Richard to perceive Lizzie's support more positively, rather than disregard it, framing the importance of the partner in an athlete's success (Righetti & Impett, 2017). Partners may also negatively impact athletes through lack of communication, relationship breakdowns, emotional intelligence, and mutual understanding (Brown et al., 2019; Kent et al., 2025). Together, these findings suggest that successful transitions for jockeys may be rooted in the social systems and relationships around them.

Richard's passion for horses intertwined with his successes as well as psychological strain and burnout. From youth to present day, he was described as "obsessive" which seems to weave its way into many of his experiences. The dualistic model of passion (Vallerand, 2015) states passion to be a strong affiliation to a self-defining interest, activity or concept which can either be obsessive or harmoniously linked to an individual's identity. Harmonious passion allows individuals to explore their passions mindfully and with flexibility, open to experiencing positive outcomes. Contrastingly, obsessive passion is controlling and rigid in nature, leading to a singular focus on one thing and potential for negative consequences such as burnout or fatigue (Hodgins & Knee, 2002). The most salient signs of Richard's obsessive passion was the sudden loss of meaning surrounding his racing career following his father's passing. Other signs were Richard's singular commitment to elite performance and subsequent impacts on addiction and burnout (Vallerand & Vermer-Fillon, 2020). Being in a defensive and all-consuming state may lead to coping through avoidance (Vallerand & Vermer-Fillon, 2020), for example, relying on alcohol, as Richard was found to. Few studies have attempted to explore alcohol misuse in

jockeys, despite higher reports of substance misuse in jockeys than in other elite athletes, with 61 % of jockeys meeting the clinical threshold for adverse alcohol use (King et al., 2020). These rates are concerning considering the impact alcohol has on general psychological functioning and athletic performance, increasing the already high risk to jockey's reaching up to 70 km/h on the track (O'Brien & Lyons, 2000; Ryan & Brodine, 2021). Richard exposed how he used his weight making and wasting to justify his alcohol intake, highlighting the potential complex and interrelated risk of alcohol misuse for jockeys, a potential area for future research. Indeed, from an applied psychology perspective, obsessive passion is detrimental to well-being. Though, identifying, adapting and moving towards constructive, supportive passion is key due to passion's pivotal influence on elite sports performance (Vallerand & Verneer-Fillon, 2020).

Perhaps we could be looking to the macro influence too, considering the sport and societal system of the transition environment working model (Henriksen et al., 2024) as the impact of obsessive passion may be further negotiated by the macro level. Amiot et al. (2006) found athletes to adapt successfully if their internalized type of passion matches their sporting environment. Richard discussed the importance of aligning with weights that previous great flat jockeys rode at and his practical approach to wasting which he was happy to do, despite being tough on his mind-body, and potential long-term impacts. Our findings mirror those reported by other jockeys, reinforcing the culture of rapid weight loss and normalized practices across the industry (McGuane et al., 2019; O'Neill et al., 2025).

Despite a normative transition, retirement may still promote struggle for elite athletes during the first few months and years (Buckley et al., 2019; Chroni et al., 2020). For some, they may remain in the sport industry, exemplified through racehorse training in this study's context, though athletes may transition beyond the sports context. This decision may be influenced by all layers: personal (e.g., preferences or personality); micro (e.g., social domain), and macro, the sociocultural context (e.g., availability of well-paid jobs or resources). As such, retirement planning is influenced by the culture and support services provided (Stambulova & Henriksen, 2025). With 60 % of jockeys perceiving inadequate support from the industry, as a population they are considered at risk of poor retirement transitions with career dissatisfaction, burnout, and poor help-seeking behaviors identified as risk factors for mental health difficulties (King et al., 2021b; McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2019; O'Neill et al., 2025). This study also highlights the phase like transitions within the retirement transition and the importance of different resources across the weeks, months, and years (Stambulova et al., 2021). Though it is key to reinforce that each athlete's transition will be unique to them.

The retirement transition also proved to have an emotional impact on Lizzie, supporting Richard through burnout, depression, and subsequent changes in mood. Partners of athletes experience their own parallel transitions and adjustments to life after sport, including challenges around identity and managing how to support the athlete through their transition (Brown et al., 2019). Arguably, for Richard and Lizzie, even with a clear purpose and plan to directly transition into training, challenges and adjustment were inevitable for athlete and partner, as such, the focus should be on managing them together and making better links between factors (Henriksen et al., 2024). Partners have reported concerns over the uncertainty around the impacts of the transition will have on the relationship, highlighting the importance of time, trust, open communication and shared dependency in the process (Brown et al., 2019; Kent et al., 2025).

Several applied implications derive from the current study, including highlighting the need for developing the micro and macro level of athlete's environments to better structure and integrate resources throughout jockey career transitions (Henriksen et al., 2024). Fundamentally, this study showed how crucial microsystems were throughout Richard's jockey career development and transitions (youth, middle, and retirement). Even with financial and human resources, the sporting

retirement process inevitably produced mind-body adjustments in the weeks, months, and years after the initial career termination decision (Henriksen et al., 2024; Stambulova et al., 2021). Jockey associations should recruit retired jockeys to educate and support current jockeys since findings indicate that they are more receptive to advice from senior jockeys than external professionals (Martin et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2002). Meanwhile, sport psychologists should certainly focus on developing awareness of the environments and systems jockeys may transition to and from to support the preparation, orientation, and acclimation phases (Henriksen et al., 2024; Stambulova et al., 2021). To further optimize athlete environments, development of resources and strategies involving partners of jockeys would have a two-fold benefit. Firstly, by opening lines of communication and nurturing these important connections, it would ensure partners are directly supported with their experiences (impacted by the jockey experience) and reinforce their value within the organization (Kent et al., 2025). Secondly, developing awareness of their significant impact, transition environments and jockey specific demands would position the partners to support the jockeys further, managing the transitions together. While we focused on the professional horse racing context, it is important to consider representational generalizability (Smith, 2018). For example, the current study's findings may resonate with others in high-performance contexts who encounter similar transitions, pressures, and experiences, as identities and perceptions are inevitably influenced by the relational and micro-level surrounding them (Henriksen et al., 2024).

Naturally, this study may have been limited through only exploring two participants perspectives, therefore, to promote the family systems, additional family members could have been recruited to go beyond the athlete-partner lens (Haefner, 2014). Collecting data from parents, children, and siblings of the participants would have provided supplementary perspectives to their lived experiences and relational impacts beyond jockey and partner. In terms of future research, longitudinal studies are recommended to further examine horse racing's unique culture and its members (jockeys, partners, and family) experiences (King et al., 2021b; King, Cullen, McGoldrick, et al., 2021). Researchers should continue to explore the lived experiences of jockey's partner's, parents, and children to highlight areas where additional support is necessary from a practitioner perspective. This would encourage well-being and efficient functioning at a family level, which would naturally benefit the athletes, according to family systems theory (Newhouse-Bailey et al., 2015). Perhaps the concept of passion may be explored within the horseracing context to further investigate the interrelated experiences between well-being and performance of elite sport.

In conclusion, this study revealed how the career development as a jockey and retirement into racehorse training produced a roller-coaster of highs and lows for its athlete and their partner. Though, ultimately, the lows were perceived as worth it and for the most part, an accepted part of horse racing culture. For Richard, framed through the transition environment working model, the microenvironment (partner, family and friends) was a significant influence on the transition processes. While Lizzie was emotionally impacted throughout the career lifespan, providing support for the family systems core principles in the context of athlete-partner, highlighting the complex and dynamic individual and shared experiences for those within professional horse racing.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Erin Reddington: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Stacy Winter:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial

interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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