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

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## Abstract

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

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

### 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 & Lavalée, 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 Lavalée’s (2004) developmental model,  
72 which adopted a holistic lifespan perspective constituting four layers: athletic,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Participants**

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

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

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

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

### **Interview Procedure**

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

### **Data Analysis**

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

### **Trustworthiness**

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

**Bracketing.** Salmon (2003) suggested the results of psychological research reflect the researcher as much as the researched. Although IPA acknowledges the role of the researcher, this should be interpretative and avoid imposing views formed purely through their own experience (Nicholls et al., 2005; Winter & Collins, 2015). Therefore, the lead author maintained a reflexive journal to help “bracket” and consider the influence of personal views, values, and experiences on the data collection and analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The lead author also engaged in debrief discussions with the second author, who played the role of “critical friend” (e.g., Holt & Sparkes, 2001) by questioning to uncover any biases in the lead author’s analytic approach and decisions. Any disagreements were settled through a process of advocacy and discussion.

**Member checking.** Participants were sent a copy of their transcript, providing an opportunity for elaboration or clarification of any points (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). They were also provided with a summary of findings to assess whether the themes identified accurately captured their experiences (Cresswell, 2007). Through this process, all participants corroborated the accuracy of their transcript and the representation of their own experiences within the wider data set.

## Results

This section presents the emergent themes from the athletes’ accounts of their transition from amateur to professional triathlon. Five broad themes emerged: athletic development, social support (sport performance), social support (family and friends), financial resources, and self-identity. Each theme is presented here and supported by representative verbatim quotations. This section will conclude with an integration of these themes into a coherent picture of the transition into professional triathlon as an adult.

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)

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

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

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

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

### **Financial Resources**

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

517 learn new skills within a short career length, and adaptation of their existing self-  
518 identities and relationships.

## 535 Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

### **Limitations and future research**

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

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

### **Practical Implications**

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

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

## **Conclusion**

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

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