

TITLE

Going Pro: Exploring Adult Triathletes' Transitions Into Elite Sport

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

159 **Method**

160 **Methodology**

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

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

175 **Participants**

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

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

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

205 **Interview Guide**

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

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

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

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

232 **Interview Procedure**

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

245 **Data Analysis**

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

264 **Trustworthiness**

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

296 Athletic Development

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

350 **Social Support (Sport Performance)**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

433 **Financial Resources**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

467

468 **Self-Identity**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

511 **Integrating Perceptions of the Transition**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

648 **Limitations and future research**

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

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

664 **Practical Implications**

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

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

678 **Conclusion**

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

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