The Making and Unmaking of Elite Athletes: The Body Informed Transition out of Sport

by

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Abstract

While the athletic body is frequently conceptualized and gazed upon as a valourized and productive machine, there is often little consideration given to the fleshy sports body, or the body as a material representation of its temporal immersion in a sports context. Considering the body as a fabric woven deeply in/through sport allows for greater exploration into how one’s athletic corporeality is both formed by, and concurrently forms, the social fabric of the sports environment (Pink, 2011). Conceptualizing the body in this manner is particularly relevant when examining the retirement transition from elite sport, wherein athletes often have their social, psychological and corporeal history materially (re)written through the exiting process. Using sensory data gathered on the transition process of six retired elite sportspeople (Vannini, Waskul, & Gottschalk, 2012), I discuss how the retirement body provides insight into the ways in which our physicality is attached to the athletic sense of self and how the breakdown of our material self challenges our epistemic roots. The un-weaving or unbecoming of one’s athletic self, which ensues during re-socialization processes, has the capacity to destabilize the existential foundations upon which individuals are built and challenge the core ideological underpinnings of contemporary elite sport.
I will be forever grateful to my supervisory committee for their commitment to my intellectual pursuits and their on-going support and encouragement. Dr. Catherine Amara, you have been a consistent mentor on my graduate school journey, from beginning to end, and have always encouraged me to pursue my true interests, regardless of the discipline, or whether they aligned with your own passions. I remain in awe of your ability to create a “story” with the data, and I hope to emulate your positive, upbeat, and collegial mentorship qualities with students of my own one day.

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I proudly dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, Ella, and my future children. Ella - you expedited my writing process with your uncertain nap schedule and pushed me to find flexible, intellectual stimulation. I hope that you can have a joyful and fulfilled experience with physical activity and sport, and that it is a nourishing pursuit for you, both physically and emotionally. I promise to be your advocate as you progress in whatever interests you. You will surely be strong and capable, but I wish for joy and genuine satisfaction to be the primary outcomes of your athletic engagement.
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Chapter 1

“You must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine it and interpret it.” (C. Wright Mills 1959: 196)

1 Autobiographical Sketch

I began gymnastics in 1991, at the age of five, in my hometown of Kelowna, British Columbia. Though my parents had no interest in me being a competitive gymnast, they did want to expose me to the twists and tumbles which I would surely encounter in gymnastics. I was a natural from the start, learning skills quickly and easily, and thriving in the ordered and rigid environment that the gym provided. Outside of gymnastics, I was a normal kid, playing soccer, swimming, enjoying tennis and spending time with my friends. I maintained a relative degree of normalcy until I entered the national stream at the age of ten, at which point I began training longer hours, with greater frequency (upwards of thirty hours, with one day off per week). As I progressed and began to show more potential, my coaches encouraged me to spend more time in Vancouver at some of the higher level, more elite, gymnastics clubs, and there was some discussion as to whether moving to Vancouver would be an option for me. Instead, my mum committed herself to driving me to the coast for weekend trainings. I would often take my sleeping bag out to the car for my night’s rest and wake up almost in Vancouver, as my mum would have snuck in at 3:30am and begun the four hour drive while I slept. I qualified for the BC provincial team when I was 12 years old and competed at my first national championships that year. During that time, and the years which followed, I struggled with a chronic achilles injury
which inevitably led to my transition from gymnastics to trampoline. By the time I was 14, it was clear that the more laid-back and lower impact sport of trampoline was better suited for my stage of life and bodily capacities. From that point onwards, I dove head first into an exciting new chapter in my sporting life, which inevitably led me to Toronto for training and gave me the opportunity to travel around the world competing. In 2003, I qualified for the World Championships, my first major international event as a senior elite trampolinist. Much to my surprise and delight, I won the double mini trampoline event, which enlightened me to my capacities, which I had doubted prior to that point in time. I decided after the World Championships in 2003 that I would move to Toronto the following year to continue training with the Olympic coach while I attended university. Though my move was very fruitful in many respects and I improved significantly over the next few years, I was also thrust into a highly competitive training environment, a big city far from home and coming off the world championships in 2003, a new lingering weight of expectation. Over the next four years I trained, competed, traveled and grew into my role as an ‘elite’ athlete. In 2008, I qualified as the Olympic alternate after a year of trial events, and headed to Beijing with the expectation of not competing. Upon my return, while dealing with a serious back injury, I retired and shifted my focus towards my career interests, establishing deep and meaningful relationships in my life, and, more broadly, building a life outside of sport. I entered sport as a little girl and was catapulted out the other end as a woman with tremendous physical capabilities but with a great deal of uncertainty as to who I was at my core. The process of genuinely delving into ‘who I am’ and ‘what I want to be’ was catalyzed by my departure from sport, but will be a lifelong process of growth and discovery.

What follows are six vignettes which have been written to provide insight into how striking moments of my sporting life and retirement were experienced. I chose to write about six
particular instances, because I felt that if I attempted to include too many the events of my 15 year athletic career and sporting exit, in not enough detail, then the sense of the “lived experience” would be lost. I hope you will assess these narratives with a critical eye, questioning the significance of each chosen memory. As Andrew Sparkes would suggest, there will be “fact, factitude, and fiction” in what follows.

1994 – Kelowna, British Columbia

I remember the day when I ‘got it.’ The ‘it’ I am speaking about was the sense of complete control over my body, each part of me in its proper place. At that time I had already been doing gymnastics for three or four years, but all of the movements, skills and routines I had undertaken up until that point had felt somewhat laboured, heavy and slow. I didn’t realize that they had been so difficult until I experienced this new ease of movement. I was doing a skill called a “free-hip to handstand,” which in non-technical terms is a maneuver in which you swing your body around the bar, your hips roughly a foot from the apparatus, finishing the movement in a handstand. I had been practicing the skill for many months with assistance from my coach but it had not yet ‘clicked.’ On my first attempt, on this particular day, I hopped up on the bar feeling light and energetic, in typical eight year old fashion. I re-adjusted my chalk-covered hands as I gazed downwards at the blue mats and my own bruised, ghostly shins. I confidently cast my legs upwards and swung under the bar. As I hit the low point in the swing, I felt as though I was suspended in a hammock and when I transitioned towards the upside down portion of the skill, it was as if I was a bird that had just caught an upward draft of air. In an instant I found myself steadily balanced in a handstand position. My body was tight and strong, but light as a feather and filled with buoyancy. My legs were glued together, my toes pointed such that my
foot created a perfect arc, my arms were fully extended with elbows locked and armpits fully exposed, my belly button nearly touched my spine. Each component of my body was meticulously ‘correct,’ but it felt as smooth as silk. In that moment, my world expanded. My sense of what I was capable of changed forever. The energy, the airiness, the strength and power were vivifying. I was inspired and in awe of how my fragmented parts had just participated together in a moment of perfection and unity. I was immediately enthralled with the sensation of it all coming together and so I set out on a quest to achieve that degree of fluidity and grace in every movement I made.

At first, experiences of ease were few and far between, but soon enough my repertoire of previously mastered skills had that quality of incredible power, suppleness and strength, and each new skill acquisition marked an opportunity to expand my arsenal of explosive, and electrifying movements. I even watched gymnastics in a new way. After scouring the TV guide on Saturday mornings, I would record each and every event that was aired and created an extensive library of World Championship, World Cup, Commonwealth, and Olympic competitions, which filled our family living room. I could recognize when other gymnasts (including my idols on television) were experiencing their own easeful movement. From the outside it was as though they wouldn’t jump, but instead they would bound; or instead of reaching for the bar, they would float down to it. I could sometimes even feel little nerve twinges as I watched them perform their skills, as if I was mimicking their movements from my sedentary seat on my parent’s loveseat. The quest to recreate and re-experience the power of fluid motion was what drove me. I woke up early on weekends so I could spend from dawn to dusk perfecting my trampoline in my backyard, and when I would arrive home from school and practice I would often rush to finish my dinner so I could go downstairs and perfect my routine
on my miniature balance beam in the basement. Nothing filled me up more than the ecstatic joy I withdrew from my quest for physical perfection and light, powerful movement.

I learned to love the smell of the gym. It would hit me as I walked through the doors; microwave dinners, sweat, old mats, pine sol, and rubber, colliding in my nostrils. The chalk dust and foam particles lingered mid-air, making each breath feel a little thick. The feel of my synthetic leotard was a little itchy when I first put it on, and made my stomach sink a little, but it always eventually melded into my skin. When I was away from the gymnastics club I yearned to return, but also retained a subtle anxiety and dread in the moments and hours leading up to practice. My body was small and compact and I was never away from the gym long enough to fully rid my body of chalk dust, which collected in the creases of my hands and in my hair. The pads of my fingers and the palms of my hands were patterned with scars and still healing ripped calluses, which never managed to fully close over. My skin was always dry and bruised, and developed a thick quality as time passed. I had become an authentic gymnast.

1997 – Kelowna, British Columbia

I found myself staring at the beam for many hours that day. My cheeks were warm and my mouth was dry; my eyes were stinging from tears. I had taken a pretty bad fall about half way through my balance beam practice on a skill that had unnerved me for some time, back handspring connection, which was two backwards handspring “flips” connected together. Part of the problem was I had been nervous to attempt it, so I approached the skill with slight caution, as opposed to aggression. My first movement was smooth, but ever so slightly off on the right side of the apparatus, so when I went for the second trick, my hand suddenly slipped and my
cheekbone cracked into the hard upper edge of the beam. I don’t recall where the rest of my body ended up, other than on the ground. It didn’t really hurt, but I was horrified by how quickly it had all happened and how out of control my body had felt. I sat on the ground for a moment, feeling a strong pulse in my cheekbone and temple. My coach was standing a few meters away and had missed seeing me fall, but was quick to respond and crouched next to me on the floor. I continued to gaze at the floor even when she spoke to me. I didn’t cry or feel like I could cry, I just sat there, speaking softly to her as she asked if I was alright. I knew what was coming after her concern dissipated. I had to get back on the beam and do it again. That was the rule. It had been the rule forever. I remember watching the “big girls” protest this rule during their feisty adolescence, but I was the stoic, polite athlete. She didn’t need to tell me, I already knew what I was to do. So I stood up and walked to the end of the beam to resume the start position.

Three hours later I was still standing there, feeling scared, embarrassed, and vulnerable. The girls in my group, my best friends, had completed all of the other events, had a break, finished conditioning and were now stretching and preparing to leave. All the parents had arrived and were watching from the upper viewing area. I could feel eyes penetrating me, but I just stood there, eyes on the beam, as if preparing to complete my skill. I knew I wasn’t going to at that point. I was cold and stiff and terrified. I had been crying for an hour or so. My coach had walked by and uttered crushing words in my direction, “oh no, not you too Sarah,” as if I had just entered a subclass of defiant, rebellious, “never-going-to-make-it,” athletes. Though I considered one final attempt as some kind of redemptive act, I was too overcome by fear to follow through. I dismounted as my coach flipped off the huge florescent lights, and walked to the office. It was carpool night, so I was headed home with a friend’s mother. I didn’t speak to anyone, and they didn’t want to speak to me. I was a deadly disease that day, no one wanted to come near me or be associated with me. I understood.
October 19th, 2003 – Hannover, Germany

I had arrived at the World Championships in Hanover, Germany, the relatively unknown, young up-and-comer. After the preliminary competition, I was in second place behind a Russian gymnast whom I had admired for many years. This was a shock and thrill for me as I was delighted to be even competing with this caliber of competitors, I actually felt a little like an imposter. On the day of the finals, I arrived at the gym feeling very excited and curious about the outcome of the day. I didn’t feel any weight of pressure or expectation; I was simply pleased to have made it to the final day of competition. Our training took place in the auditorium behind the stadium, so in the hour preceding the competition I warmed up and prepared my routines, while listening to the faint applause and reaction from the crowd of spectators. Though I felt powerful and energetic that day, I was also eerily calm. I changed into the competitive leotard, which was red and black with an itchy maple leaf patch on the shoulder. As I pulled it over my hips it clung to my skin, cinching my tissue inwards. In a way, its restrictive pull made me feel safe. I slipped my tracksuit on to cover up and stood against the cold, bumpy concrete stone wall while I waited to be marshalled out. I put my earbuds in and looked down at my white slippers. On that day, and in that moment, I was at peace and completely in love with how I was spending my days. In the gym, I had found grounding and the centre-piece for my ambitions. My body could now complete incredible aerial movements, with dynamic power and graceful ease, after over a decade of gymnastics training. I got the chance to build on my skills each practice, which was very exciting and motivating. I didn’t feel confined by a pressure to win; I was free to explore the limits of my body and mind.
I walked out into the bright stadium and looked down the row of athletes and to the marshal, suddenly feeling my stomach tense up. It is customary to present yourself to the judging officials prior to the competition event, so as usual, we were ushered in front of the panel in the order in which we would be competing and introduced ourselves. My feet were sweating inside my slippers and my mind was on repeat visualizing my routines, one after the other. In my mind’s eye I was external to myself, an outsider watching each of my passes executed perfectly. I didn’t let my mind budge from this productive spot. Even when they called my name, I went through the motions of waving, but in truth I remained deeply entranced in the shell of my skull. We walked back to the athlete corral to prepare for our first routine. Because I was ranked 2nd going into the finals, I would compete 7th out of 8, in reverse order. I sat quietly, head downwards with my eyes closed softly. My legs were tingling and my stomach was feeling quite upset. I often felt this way before competing. I was sure that if I spoke I would vomit, so I remained very still and didn’t say a word. I never watched the other athletes compete, and this was no exception. I could hear the pounding steps down the runway and the ping of the trampoline springs hitting the metal frame as they took off. Then I would wait for the second ping and the thud of the landing on the mat. Half a second before the Russian athletes would land you would hear a loud “STOI” from their teammates, which meant “stick!” Then the audience would gasp or applaud and cheer, depending on the outcome of the routine. Once the fifth athlete competed, I began to get myself ready. I moved from my chair, took my track pants off, jumped and shook my legs and arms. At this point, my mind was calm but my body was electric. My eyes were flat and lips pursed, I couldn’t waste a fraction of energy on social display. As the sixth competitor landed, I stood at the end of the runway, finding my starting location and using the last few moments of time to imagine myself completing the routine flawlessly. I was aware of my name being announced over the loud speaker, but it only captured the periphery of my
attention. I lifted my arms, took one breath and stepped into my run. I was fixated on ensuring my foot placement allowed for the perfect distance between my take-off and the trampoline. I approached the trampoline, powered upwards through my take-off leg and bounded with energy. My first skill floated at the exact correct height and placed me in perfect position for my dismount. Up and out of the second bounce I felt explosive and light, landing solidly with no foot movement. The tension in my body soaked into the mat as I landed and I felt ecstatic relief. I revelled in a sense of joy and warmth for a few seconds, but then immediately shifted to the next routine I had to complete. I suddenly felt certain that it would go very well. I felt unrestricted and powerful, and the nerves I was feeling prior to my first pass had just been jolted out of me. As my second routine came up, I prepared at the end of the runway. As I began running, I felt so explosive that I concentrated on channelling my speed into height as soon as I angled into the trampoline bed. I don’t remember all the details clearly, but I do recall landing on the mat after having completed my routine as well as I ever had. The collision of my joyous relief, the loud applause of the audience and the intense energy, which seemed to be flowing into me from all angles, was overwhelming. I stood for a moment and then stepped off the mat to greet my coach. In those next few moments I felt an indescribable exhilaration.

I ended up winning the World Championships and in the following few hours I was bombarded by congratulations and warm wishes. I felt proud and special. I was adorned with flowers, a trophy, medals and gifts. Multiple photographers took my photo and young children in the audience reached for me and begged for my autograph. I was confused by their requests, but I also felt extremely flattered. It is only in retrospect that I can say that that day was a turning point in my life. For a number of years after that day, I chased the joyous intensity I had received a taste of. It was pure ecstatic joy and I assumed I wouldn’t ever come down from such a high.
August 16th, 2008 – Beijing, China

I arrived at the venue for the preliminary trampoline event at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. I knew before I arrived that I would not be competing that day as my designated “alternate” spot meant I would have only competed in the event of an injury during one of the many training days. The stadium was huge, but somehow still smelled like every other competition venue I had ever known. The synthetic plastic mat coverings and foam interiors have a universal scent which to this day makes my stomach turn and puts me on high alert. The competition floor looked pristine with brand new equipment, perfectly pressed table cloths on the judges’ podium, decorative floral arrangements, long hanging curtains, and twinkling clear lights illuminating the entire space. I displayed my lanyard at the entrance and found my way down the stadium steps to the athlete stands. While I took my seat in the firm plastic, fold-down chairs, I sighed out layers of pent-up emotion. Soft, ambient music and a low buzz from the spectators only partially filled the space. There was a heavy, nervous tension, which occupied the remainder of the arena. The flags of each country hung from the ceiling and the five Olympic rings and Beijing emblem flanked the equipment podiums. The clock ticked onwards and I was acutely aware that this event, one which I had been waiting for months to arrive, would come and go.

As I sat there waiting for the competition to begin I look downwards at the Canadian Olympic attire that I was cloaked in. It was light and soft on my skin, but carried its own layers of meaning which were hard to wear around. I was proud, but disappointed. I felt a little like a fraud, but wanted more than anything to hold on to the prestige of the red, white, ringed, maple-leafed garment. I wanted more than anything to be a part of such an epic event, but I realized that
my physical and mental state did not align with that dream. When my teammates finally marched out onto the competition floor, ushered in by an Olympic official, all I could think was “God, thank the lord I am not down there right now.” They looked so vulnerable in the high voltage lights, I just could not fathom feeling so exposed, when all I truly wanted was to feel sheltered. Sitting there I wished the back pain I had endured for the past two years was more intense so it could act as a more legitimate scapegoat for my intense gratitude for not competing. However, I acknowledged that placing the whole onus on my injury would feel more pathetic than safe. While I did have a throbbing heavy pain in the familiar location on my left lower back and radiating nerve sensations tingling down my leg, my attention was drawn towards the nervous buzz that engulfed my body. My mouth was dry and tasted salty, my palms sweaty and a heaviness sat in my throat and like a rock in my stomach. My ears were plugged, which made my nervousness and overwhelming bodily sensations feel that much more powerful as they remained entrapped within my skin. I sat in my discomfort silently while all sixteen athletes completed two routines one after the other. I don’t remember where Rosie and Karen came in the order of things, but I do recall the look on Rosie’s face as she stood out on the trampoline bed and saluted the judges. Perhaps I was projecting, but all I could see was terror in her face. The stadium was dead silent, the ping of the springs and the reverberation of the trampoline bed echoed through the space. While I watched, I felt almost nothing in my body, my back pain all but disappeared and my awareness of my sweating palms and heavy stomach left me. She sailed through her routine, her familiar style (hand placement, bodily shape and proportion, and the rhythm of her jumping) made the fact that this was the Olympic Games seem much less imposing and grand. Rosie was just Rosie, doing what I had seen her do hundreds of times before. She finished her routine and at that point I felt envious of the relief and ecstasy I knew she would be experiencing. I had always loved that sensation, when throat-closing nervousness was replaced
by blissful relief. And then it was over, both girls had made finals (which would follow two days later) and the event which I had been anticipating for months had passed. I could say that I had been there, but to not have experienced competing was devastating. Or was it? I wasn’t sure I had it in me. It felt like something I wanted to tell people I had done, but not something I actually wanted to do. I knew my career was over that day. The sport had lost every ounce of purity that had made me love it so deeply. The joy and bliss had been almost entirely replaced by crushing expectation, physical pain, fear, anxiety, and ego preservation.

For many months, even years, preceding that day, I had struggled to wrap my head around how I could fully commit to the goal of competing at the Games without risking being utterly shattered if my dreams didn’t come to fruition. There were three main roadblocks that stood imposingly in front of me, which validated my inevitable lack of commitment. Firstly, I knew Rosie or I would be competing at the Olympics, not both of us. For me, when I am competing there is only one gear, ferocious, which includes being aggressive almost to the point of being malicious and extremely intense. However, now my opponent was one of my best friends and I couldn’t manage to direct that sort of ruthless energy towards her. I didn’t know where or how to ground my efforts. Secondly, I had been suffering from a chronic back injury since 2006, which robbed me of the enjoyment I felt in both training and competition. By the time 2008 rolled around, I couldn’t make it through practice without prescription pain medication and 8-12 ibuprofen per training. I spent more time rehabilitating, stretching, icing, massaging, and strengthening than I did on the trampoline. I felt awful having other people ‘work on me,’ only to report that after months of their assistance, I felt no better from their treatments, maybe even worse. I kept being told that I was entitled to the care I was receiving, but all I truly felt was selfish and spoiled. Finally, and the most significant impediment to my wholehearted commitment to qualifying for and competing in the Games, was a fragility at my
core. The terror which surrounded putting my whole effort into something that may not work out was so anxiety provoking that I crumbled under its weight. I had always succeeded, and this was something I might very well not succeed at. I didn’t know if I was a good person, I didn’t actually know who I was, so if success was my main ‘selling feature,’ what would I be left with in defeat?

September 2012 - Toronto, Ontario

I was looking up at the fluorescent tube lighting and counting the ceiling tiles. I had a bit of a chill, and all of the hairs on my arms were sticking straight up. I had just worked out and was now laying on a massage table in the gym where the air conditioning relentlessly circulated. My sweat had cooled and my t-shirt was now wrapping me with damp discomfort. It was almost painful how many times I had lain here in the past six years. My friend and previous trainer, James, rounded the bend from the office and greeted me with enthusiasm. He had been “treating” my back injury for over five years on and off and retained such confidence in my inevitable healing that I felt shameful returning to him week after week. I had accepted, but not quite digested, the reality that I may live with my back pain forever. He asked how my workout had been and I think I said “great!” which was not true. I had basically hated workouts for the past four years since retiring because they consisted of “non-weight bearing” cardio activities, mostly the elliptical trainer or the stair climber, and some light weights. Though my back could not handle much more, I left almost every workout feeling as though I had merely scratched the surface of feeling fulfilled and satisfied by my effort and intensity for the day. I felt so confined in how I moved my body – up and down, up and down - in a very narrow plane. I couldn’t perfect anything, I couldn’t explode, it was all so mundane. I did extract some cathartic pleasure
from sweating and I always felt some sense of relief for having rid a sense of stagnation which always pervaded if I had been sedentary, but this type of exercise was not impassioned. I was (and still am) in the process of mourning the loss of my former body, which could do anything with hardly any pain or discomfort. I could push it to extremes, and only feel the muscles which were being called on, and then push it again the following day. Though I was often struck by the monotony of my workouts and by how much I disliked them, I hardly missed a day at the gym. I wasn’t uncritical about this paradox. I have always loved the way my body looks and feels when I am active, and though my 45-minute workouts inside an air conditioned gym were pretty awful at times, they were enough to make my life feel liveable.

After briefly discussing my workout, James continued on to perform muscle activation therapy (MAT), a modality and craft that he had been honing since he began as my personal trainer in 2007. The general concept is that in activating certain peripheral muscles, which stabilize the entire musculoskeletal chain, the body can begin “healing itself.” James had been using me as a guinea pig, to help him explore different issues and challenges he would confront in his practice. Because James and I were good friends, as well as him being my trainer, we often had honest discussions about the latest circumstances of our lives while he poked and prodded at me. On this particular day, we got to talking about the London Olympics, which had taken place just a few weeks earlier.

I had been avoiding thinking about the trampoline competition because I had felt a combination of shattered and elated while viewing the event, and truthfully I didn’t know what to make of those feelings. The guilt I felt for feeling anything but thrilled while watching one of my best friends perform magnificently and experience a joyous and proud moment in her life was awful. It made me question what type of a friend and person I was, if I couldn’t feel pure, selfless
delight for her accomplishment. Of course, it was nothing about her; I was still struggling to feel okay about myself four years later, and I had buried this feeling deep inside myself. But it flooded back to terrorize me as I sat there with my family watching the television that day. I could have tried harder, I could have done better, I could have pushed through. These were all things that inescapably flooded me. My body failed, my mind failed, I failed. I knew better than this self-defeatist talk. I knew that my worth should not be tied to my accomplishments, and that I should feel valuable in the absence of all material success, but in my cloud of emotionality, there was no sound logic. Further, look at how much it all mattered. Look at all the attention Rosie was receiving. Didn’t it matter? I resented all the hype. Like a vine choking a tree, the pressure to be more than what I was, was suffocating me. When I was enveloped by shame and guilt, on what should have been a happy day, I was reacquainted with my fragility. I wondered whether my family had noticed that I had to muster enthusiasm. I felt very self-conscious.

October 2013, Greenville, North Carolina

I rolled over in bed and my protruding belly halted my momentum. I was in the third trimester of my first pregnancy and had only just begun to accept the reality of what was to come. My skin was smooth and becoming almost translucent as the life inside me grew. I sat up too quickly and felt the blood drain from my head, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. Rather than stay seated for a few extra moments, I jumped to my feet and walked towards the washroom. I was alone in the room because Bill, my husband, had left many hours earlier to participate in his bike race, which was the reason for our trip to Greenville. It was strange to be staying in a hotel and to not have the looming anticipation of an early morning competition. Starchy hotel sheets still conjure a low level of anxiousness in me. I remember fighting sleep
with all my might as a child so I could prolong the inevitable fear and nervousness that would envelope me on the morning of a gymnastics competition. But on this morning I had nothing to do. I was along for the ride while everyone else participated in their physical activity. If only for a moment, I felt like one of the faceless mothers in the stands or viewing areas whom I had passed dismissively for the past 20 years of my life. I had been doing something special, while they trudged around with children hanging off them.

I carried my heavy body to the bathroom and enjoyed a prolonged shower. It was an almost out of body experience to see a protrusion off my stomach. I didn’t dislike it, which may have been due to the fact that it didn’t feel real. I was completely me, and not me at all. Certain things drew my attention to the life inside. I was almost always hungry in the evenings before bed, which I had rarely felt in my pre-pregnancy body. Large blue veins spread across my stomach; I could almost see them pulsating. Though it was hard to grasp this new sense of bodily utility (I was a vehicle for the creation of existence of another human?), in reflective moments, I appreciated my own humanity and significance in a new light.

I felt trapped in some respects. I occasionally wished to rip off my belly and sprint down the street. I yearned to bound, to feel powerful, light and agile. Somehow, my arms and legs even moved differently now. At other times, I was grateful to have an excuse for remaining sedentary. I enjoyed watching my shape evolve, and witnessing the creation inside of me flip, kick and tumble beneath my stretched skin. Internally, I felt a warmth and connectedness. I imagined a gentle little soul waiting for its time to arrive, and so, though I did not always feel perfectly comfortable, I took on any degree of discomfort with genuine resolve. I found grounding in the idea that I was creating something which would remain in my absence. For the preceding number
of years I had struggled to figure out why anything I did mattered, but this required no deeper inquiry; this felt profoundly meaningful.

These reflections on my experience express only a small piece of my sporting life (and retired life) narrative; however, they are important reflections about my past. I hope they provide a foundation from which you can critically assess the following work. There is no conclusion to these vignettes because I have not reached my end-point. Though I recognize that it creates a sense of discontinuity and a slight discomfort, I hope that you can accept that my story is not final.
Chapter 2

2 Introduction and Review of Literature

2.1 Introduction

In today’s highly competitive sporting climate, the financial stakes are high, with global marketability and exposure ensuring that athletes spend nearly every waking moment fixated on the pursuit of greatness. While this insular focus produces magical sporting moments and inspires us all to believe in the magnificent capacity of the human body and mind, those who participate often sacrifice role diversity and life balance to achieve such feats. Further, with the body as the centrepiece for superlative physical actions, athletes often become consumed by the training and the constant ‘bodily up-keep’ which is required for such a highly physical role. This dissertation will focus on sensorial data providing the athletes an opportunity to express what it feels like to be a whole athlete and human being. This emphasis on the sensorial body is meant to emphasize what a physical and visceral world we live in and to further our understandings of the complete physical, cognitive, emotional and social human experience of transition. In 1999, Debra Shogan wrote, “The Making of High Performance Athletes: Discipline, Diversity, and Ethics,” where she explored the complex production of high-performance athletes in modern sport. She explored the “making of” elite level athletes through technologies of training and
discussed the ethical issues which emerge when “the demands to improve performance envelop athletes, coaches, administrators, and scientists in decisions about how far to push the limits of performance” (Shogan, 1999, Preface). This dissertation will hope to extend what Dr. Shogan began, in discussing the exiting process from sport and how the rigidity and disciplined nature of athletics leaves athletes somewhat unprepared for a world beyond its confines. Further, while Shogan explores the ways in which “docile bodies” are produced through discipline and control, this dissertation will explore the body from a sensorial perspective, inquiring about how the body feels during and after sport, and will attempt to glean insight through an embodied lens (Shogan, 1999, p.11).

With such narrow and concentrated focus placed on one goal, it is little wonder that upon release from their sporting roles, athletes often struggle to identify alternative sources of self-worth and to find new avenues in which to direct their attention. This study will explore these phenomena with the aim of better understanding how athletes cope with this life-altering transition. Furthermore, it is hoped that this research will add to the extensive body of literature on human transitions which occur outside of athletics.

2.2 Review of Literature

This review will focus on the retirement transition out of elite athletics, with a secondary, though equally important, interest in the embodiment literature. Firstly, an examination of the research on life transitions will be undertaken, followed by a more narrowed focus on the exiting process. From there, the specifics of athletic retirement, including an in-depth understanding of the factors which make athletes unique, the characteristics which make the ease of adaptation to
retirement more or less seamless, and the physical/embodied aspects of athletic participation and retirement will be examined.

2.2.1 Psychosocial Transitions

Though transitions are inevitable at various points across the human lifespan, an understanding and characterization of these transitions had been the topic of relatively little research in the field of social psychology until the past few decades. Some scholars have suggested that, because in previous eras people spent their entire lives in one career, one marriage or one geographical locality, the study of human transitions only became relevant in more modern times (Ebaugh, 1988). Nonetheless, though human transitions may be more frequent in the 21st century, they are a fundamental aspect of the human condition. Births and deaths, for example, are inherent human experiences which have always required adaptive life transitions. It may be true, however, that the frequency and number of these life transitions have increased considerably in more recent times.

Life transitions encapsulate both the entry into and exit from various life roles. The transitions literature initially grew out of crisis theory, where an exploration of grief reactions following traumatic events was of primary interest (Hill, 1949; Lindemann, 1965; Moos & Tsu, 1976). The crisis literature asserts that people generally function in a state of equilibrium with their environment, making decisions and solving problems with relative ease. However, when a change occurs which inhibits one’s ability to adequately cope with the circumstances, the individual is said to experience feelings of guilt, anxiety, helplessness, and/or disorganization, which can lead to an “upset in a steady state” (Moos & Tsu, 1976, p.13). Moos and Tsu define a period of crisis as a “relatively short period of disequilibrium in which a person has to work out
new ways of handling a problem” (1976, p.13). While the crisis literature was a useful conceptual starting point, Parkes (1971) elaborated further by moving towards the idea of a psychosocial transition. The concept of the psychosocial transition described the idiosyncratic nature of transitions more completely than crisis theory, as the psychosocial transition highlighted transitions as periods of changes that could have both positive and negative outcomes for individuals. Levinson et al. (1977) furthered this construct, using the term developmental transition to describe “a turning point or boundary between two periods of greater stability” (p. 49-50). Each of these theorists contributed to the conception of transition which Schlossberg published as a theoretical model in 1981. Schlossberg made a significant contribution to the transitions literature by examining not only transitions but also further examining how individuals adapt to transitions. Her research specified that if “an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behaviour and relationships,” then a transition has occurred (1981, p.5). This definition was meant to encompass both obvious life changes (such as job entry, marriage, and bereavement) and subtle changes, or the non-occurrences of anticipated events (such as an expected job promotion which never materialized). Schlossberg delineated three categories: perception of the particular transition, characteristics of pre-transition and post-transition environments, and characteristics of the individual. These categories were used to highlight the various factors which could have a marked impact on the transition and the individual’s adaptation to that transition. For example, was the timing of transition on or off from a psychological and social perspective? Having a child at age 14 or 42 may be off timing, while having a child at 30 may be on timing. Characteristics of the environment and the individual included such things as family support, or support from the work place, and an individual’s socioeconomic status or state of health. Each of these factors were said to influence adaptation.
A transition which took place at a time of ill health for an individual would pose different challenges than those confronted by someone who is in perfectly good health.

Schlossberg (1981) followed this up by highlighting the adaptive process as one in which an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with the transition to integrating the transition into his or her life. An individual’s perceived or actual resources (including their sense of competency, well-being, and physical health) and the degree of similarity or difference in one’s pre and post transition environment are components which both contribute to the ease of adaptation. Schlossberg’s model for analyzing human adaptation to transitions is a useful starting point from which we can begin to understand the dynamics of change across the human lifespan. While this research lays the groundwork for future research, it fails to examine a transition as a process and instead looks at a transition as a more static concept. Furthermore, in the context of better understanding the process of retirement transition, this work focused on both entry and exit from various life roles as opposed to understanding the process of role exit.

### 2.2.2 Role Exit

Ebaugh (1988) was one of the first scholars to thoroughly investigate exit transitions in her book *Becoming an ex*, where she examines the process of role exit in a diverse cross section of individuals including ex-nuns, ex-alcoholics, transsexuals and ex-convicts. Ebaugh frames her theory around the idea that the one thing that all exes have in common is that they once identified with a social role which they no longer have. Additionally, she defines role exit as “the process
of disengagement from a role that is central to one’s self identity and the re-establishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one’s ex-role” (p.23).

This work suggests that there are a series of events or stages which inevitably lead to the final role disengagement: first doubts, seeking alternatives, the turning point, and creating the ex-role. First doubts is the initial definable stage in which individuals begin to question and experience doubts about their role commitment. Ebaugh (1988) suggests that though individuals may be dissatisfied with various facets of their role engagement, until their conscious awareness is attuned to these issues, they will not move into this doubting stage. Once their concerns enter the forefront of consciousness, individuals can begin to reinterpret meanings and normative expectations of their role. This initial period during which individuals experience doubts is followed by a stage during which individuals seek out and evaluate alternative roles, seeking alternatives. In most instances, once the person has admitted dissatisfaction with their current role, seeking alternatives becomes the next conscious step towards role exit. Alternative seeking behaviour is described by Ebaugh as “an essential comparative process in which alternative roles are evaluated in comparison with the costs and rewards of one’s current role” (p.55). After a period of weighing alternatives, contemplating pros and cons of leaving the current role and internally rehearsing new roles, there comes a point at which the individual makes a firm and definitive decision to exit; this is known as the turning point. Ebaugh suggests that this exiting process often occurs in conjunction with a turning point in the individual’s life, in which the individual becomes aware that old roles are either complete, have failed, have been disrupted, or are no longer personally satisfying. Old obligations are diminished, making way for new lines of action to be seen as possible. The turning point also includes a public declaration or external expression that the decision has been made, whether it takes the form of a letter of resignation or filing for divorce. The final stage of the exit process is creating (and adapting to) the ex-role.
One of the most novel contributions of this work was Ebaugh’s description of the “hangover identity,” which described the sociological phenomenon in which individuals grapple with tensions between the expectations, norms, and identities of their past and current roles. The challenge of disentangling oneself from societal perceptions and normative expectations of the previous role, while concurrently attempting to build a new sense of self, is of paramount significance. Ebaugh suggests that an important moment in the exit process occurs when one’s family, friends, and co-workers begin to think of the individual as something other than an ex.

In addition to identifying a transition as a process comprised of four stages, Ebaugh (1988) also identified characteristics that shape the role exit. These characteristics were divided into eleven categories: reversibility, duration, single vs. multiple exits, individual vs. group exits, degree of control, social desirability, degree of institutionalization, degree of awareness, sequentiality, centrality of the role, and voluntariness. Some of these characteristics are suggested to affect the ease of transition; for example, a role exit that is potentially reversible and voluntary is easier to negotiate than one which is irreversible and out of one’s control. Overall, Ebaugh advanced the study of role exit in emphasizing that role transitions should be viewed as processes, not discrete events, in creating a model which could be generalized across roles, and in identifying multiple factors which shape the nature and outcome of an individual’s role exit.

2.2.3 The Retirement Transition Out of Elite Athletics

Ideas from scholars such as Schlossberg and Ebaugh have been modified and applied to the study of retirement from elite athletics and been useful guidelines for understanding the
Exiting process in this unique population. Over the past three decades, a significant body of literature has emerged to examine this career transition process and has been instrumental in highlighting the unique challenges faced by this population and, more practically speaking, has pushed for the establishment of career transitions programs for retiring athletes.

2.2.4 Why Athletes are Unique and Important

Elite athletes are a unique group of individuals who, over thousands of hours of practice, have acquired an expertise in a particular sporting endeavour. Unlike experts in other realms, elite athletes spend the majority of their time living within the confines of their expert role, as they nourish themselves, hydrate, get adequate rest, practice their chosen sport, build strength through conditioning, travel and compete, all in alignment with their sporting goals. In this sense, their body is paramount to the formation of their primary life role. Further, this intense focus ensures that their physical, emotional, psychological, and social worlds are intimately tied to their participation in athletics. In most cases, the majority of the athlete’s day is consumed with focus on some aspect of performance optimization. For the elite athlete, “it is impossible for him [or her] to be much else” (Werthner & Orlick, 1986, p.337).

Another unique aspect of athletics is that it often requires a much earlier entry into elite participation than other expert realms. Some sports, like gymnastics, figure skating, swimming, and diving require that athletes begin intensive training before the age of ten, and demand that participants train upwards of 20 hrs/week during the crucial years of childhood and adolescence (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Warringer & Lavallee, 2006). Because adolescence is considered a
critical time for identity formation which requires experimentation with one’s body and appearance, with various roles and relationships, and their development of sense of self within social, cultural, and familial contexts, it is important to consider how participation in athletics during this critical growth period impacts the formation of a sense of self and further, how this then impacts the process of retirement. If a young person’s critical self-growth occurs simultaneously with intensive involvement in athletics, is it reasonable to assume that a strong and potentially recalcitrant athletic identity may take root?

Another unique and interesting aspect of elite athletics is that there is often some degree of social valour which accompanies sporting success. As described previously, elite sport has been transformed over the last number of years into an endeavour which has been highly commercialized, mediatised and globalized. This has fundamentally changed the nature of elite amateur sport, bringing money and international attention to young sportspeople. Peter Donnelly has gone as far as to coin the term “prolympism,” which deals with the “recent articulation” of professionalism and olympism (Donnelly, 1996). This change has meant a shift in how athletes are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves. Adler and Adler (1989), in their five year study which explored young male basketball players as they entered into a world of “celebrity and glory,” outlined the “concomitant processes of self-aggrandizment and self-diminishment” that took place during their athletic tenure with fame. They coined the term the “glorified self,” which they described as an identity shift whereby certain dimensions of one’s identity are expanded and then infuse the whole self, while others are cast aside to subordinate positions (Adler & Adler, 1989). Another feature of this shift towards commercialization and professionalization in amateur sport is what Carless and Douglas (2006) describe as the “performance narrative.” They describe the performance narrative as a story of “single-minded dedication to sport performance to the exclusion of other areas of life and self,” and express how
within this narrative framework athletes link their identity and self-worth to results and achievements (Douglas & Carless, 2009, p.6). Needless to say, the pervasive influence which sport can have on the lives and identities of young sportspeople makes athletes very interesting subjects for the study of human transition.

2.2.5 Retirement from Athletics

As discussed, there are many reasons why athletes are an interesting and important population to study with respect to the retirement transition. Over the past 30 years, a growing number of scholars have examined this group, mostly from sports psychology and sports sociology disciplinary perspectives. Investigators have focused on the quality of athlete transitions and the factors which lead to either positive or negative experiences (Kerr & Dacyszyn, 2000; Lally, 2007), the various types of transitions (Koukouris, 1994), and have aimed to develop appropriate models which describe athletes’ career transitions (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). This review will focus on athletes’ general response to retirement, how athletic identity is implicated in the adjustment process, and how the body is examined in relation to the retirement process. Of particular interest is the lack of research in relation to athletes’ bodily or corporeal physical experiences as they transition out of sport. This review will highlight those gaps and pull from sociological disciplines to exemplify how the physical body is of central importance if the complex bio-psycho-social phenomenon is to be truly understood.
2.2.6 Adjustment to Retirement

Athletes’ individual adaptations to retirement from sport appear to be highly idiosyncratic. While some research suggests that the transition is difficult and even traumatic for athletes, other research suggests that athletes have very positive experiences as they exit sport. A number of scholars have characterized the athletic retirement process as one of crisis, including Blinde and Stratta (1992), who used Kubler-Ross’s stages of death and dying to conceptualize the career transition. Their research illustrated that intercollegiate athletes who had their sporting program eliminated or had been cut from their sports team represented a group of individuals who struggled significantly with the career transition process. This research took a narrow focus in that it looked specifically at those athletes who had sport exits that were both unanticipated and involuntary. Other research has reported various negative repercussions associated with the retirement process, including lowered self confidence (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), depression and eating disorders (Ogilvie & Howe, 1982), substance abuse (Svoboda & Vanek, 1982) and even attempted suicide (Ogilvie, 1987). Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) reported that five of the seven elite gymnasts who participated in their study experienced difficult transitions which were characterized by feelings of disorientation, void, and frustration. Whethner and Orlick (1986) reported that 78% of high performance athletes in Canada experienced some degree of difficulty in their retirement transition and that 32% of those athletes described their transitions as “extremely difficult and traumatic” (p. 344).

While there are a number of studies which identify the retirement process as characterized by negative or distressing emotions, one of the earliest scholars to challenge this perspective was Coakley (1983). Coakley describes the transition from sport as a rebirth,
suggesting that retirement provides new opportunities for individual growth and development. Allison and Meyer (1988) echo this perspective in their examination of 20 retired professional tennis players. In general, the results of their study indicated that athletes did not find their disengagement traumatic, but rather an opportunity to re-establish more traditional societal roles and lifestyles. Many of the women identified that the end of their careers meant an end to the constant pressure to perform and an end to the intensive travel and competition schedule. Eighty-five percent of the athletes suggested that they would not want to return to their competitive years. Sinclair and Orlick (1993) identified that retirement had changed the lives of their participants, and mostly in a positive manner.

The diversity of experiences presented here accurately depicts what the greater body of literature demonstrates: while some athletes have significant challenges during the retirement process, others do not. While on the whole, athletes can likely distil their retirement process into discrete categories, such as difficult or seamless, that would do little justice to the complexity or phenomenology of such a dramatic life change. Many scholars attempt to exemplify the nuances of the transition process, describing both challenging and redeeming aspects of their retirement (Douglas & Carless, 2006; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Sparkes, 2009). Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) suggest that, although five of the seven elite gymnasts interviewed in their study had difficult transitions, all of the young women expressed a sense of relief and freedom, once removed from the confines of their rigid training schedules. Because of the great diversity in individual experiences, scholars have gone on to explore some of the precipitating factors which contribute to challenging or more seamless athletic transitions. One of the most highly studied and scrutinized factors has been athletic identity, which will be examined in detail next.
2.2.7 Athletic Identity

Identity is defined as a multidimensional view of oneself that is both enduring and dynamic (Lally, 2007). Identity, or self schemata, is said to be composed of multiple dimensions which are relatively stable in our identity hierarchy. Environmental and social factors can, however, alter the significance of certain facets of our identity through various experiences. While each individual’s identity is comprised of numerous components, there are circumstances in which people favour one aspect of identity more powerfully. While this can be beneficial and appropriate while that role is dominant, when an individual must exit that role, challenges may surface in defining oneself in the absence of one’s past selves. Further, while building a dominant sense of self in one narrow domain, the opportunities to explore other multifaceted roles may be lost. It is hypothesized that the loss of a dominant role may affect not only that dimension, but a person’s overall self concept (Stryker & Serpe, 1994).

Athletic identity has been the focus of numerous studies in the field of retirement from sport, as a result of the integral role that sport plays in the definition of self for many athletes. Athletic identity refers to the degree to which an individual defines him or herself in terms of his or her athlete role (Brewer, 1993; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Pepitas, 2000). The majority of the literature suggests that a strong athletic identity, and a high tendency towards identity foreclosure, are both risk factors for athletes facing career transition challenges. The research suggests that those athletes who experience difficulties defining themselves outside of sport, and especially those who identify exclusively with the athlete role, have greater challenges during the retirement process (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007) and also take longer to adjust to their new lives outside of sport (Grove et al., 1997; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008).
Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) examined the transition out of elite gymnastics and documented the athletes’ struggle for redefinition. This study reported that the young gymnasts experienced feelings of disorientation, identity loss, and confusion for months and years following their athletic career, a stage in the retirement process which the authors referred to as “Nowhere Land” (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Kerr and Dacyshyn describe this period as a time of existential questioning, where the young women asked themselves, “Who am I?”, “Where am I?”, and “What is next?” Four of the seven athletes in this study, even two years post retirement, had yet to adjust to their new lives outside of sport, suggesting that the adaptation process can be long and drawn out for many athletes.

Lavallee and Robinson (2007) conducted a similar study which examined the retirement transition out of elite gymnastics in five young women. Their study identifies that the demands of elite gymnastics precipitate an over-investment in the sport role, which subsequently causes athletes to pursue performance excellence at the expense of their own personal development. Lavallee and Robinson found that four of the five athletes developed a uni-dimensional self-concept, in which they prematurely adopted the sporting role, bypassing the time-consuming and important process of self-exploration in adolescence. After losing their role as gymnasts, participants in this study knew very little about who they were and what they wanted to do, and hence were catapulted into a period of discomfort in which they felt directionless and had to embark on a search for a new identity.

Sparkes (1998) explored the transition of one elite equestrian athlete as she adapted to life following a devastating career-ending illness. This paper suggested that her athletic identity had “emerged and ascended to a position of psychological centrality in her constellation of identities” while other identities had been relegated to a subordinate status. The young equestrian struggled
for years in what she felt was a fragmented self, with a body which had betrayed her. Sparkes (1998) illustrated that her attempts to move onward with her life were thwarted by her “phantom selves,” which drove her to attempt to regain her former self as opposed to focusing on and creating new, more realistic, identities. Much of what Sparkes (1998) identified in his study echoes Adler and Adler’s (previously introduced) study which examined the identity narrowing in young male basketball stars who were seduced by the celebrity and fame of their high profile college basketball personas. Adler and Adler argue that the glorified athlete-self dominates the multitude of other identity dimensions, hampering successful transitions, and preventing the athletes from considering their future selves: “The longer the gloried athletic self served as their master status, the harder the athletes found it to conceive of any other identity for themselves” (Adler & Adler, 1989, p. 308).

Lally (2006) explored the transition experience in six intercollegiate athletes (three swimmers, one basketball player, one volleyball player and one track and field athlete), prior to and after their retirement. This research suggests that while the career termination process did prompt the individuals to “explore neglected, abandoned and entirely novel identity dimensions,” the athletes flourished in this opportunity for self-exploration. In this research, all but one athlete pre-emptively prepared for their exit from sport by shifting their focus and identity onto other outlets. The athlete who did not make this pre-retirement shift had a more difficult transition, while those who prepared for their impending retirement had relatively smooth transitions, even flourishing in their new opportunities. This population was distinctive in that there was a specific end point to their career (their year of graduation), which enabled them to prepare for this life shift. Furthermore, because participation in intercollegiate sport requires that athletes are also participating in academic endeavours, the dimensionality of an individual’s identity is inherently expanded.
2.2.8 Mediating Factors in the Retirement Process

Numerous factors contribute to the ease with which athletes seem to adjust to retirement from athletics. From demographics, to injury and illness, to the voluntariness of the retirement, many issues have been examined in relation to an athlete’s career transition out of sport. Demographics features in the retirement literature include, gender, age, social status, sport, race, marital status, competitive level, and cultural or national factors. Much of the work on gender, age and social status is mixed, some studies suggesting that retiring older is more problematic (Cecic Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004; Leung, Carre, & Fu, 2005), others indicating that those who retire younger experience greater difficulties (Chow, 2001; Gilmore, 2008). Further, while it is clear that there are cultural differences which impact the age at which athletes retire, their degree of satisfaction with their career, and the coping strategies they employ during transition process, researchers have concluded that athletic identity and pre-retirement planning are far more influential than nationalities or cultural differences (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Schmidt & Hackfort, 2001; Stambulova, Stephan, & Japhag, 2007).

Another area of research interest has been the voluntariness of the career transition process. The majority of the studies completed in this area suggest that athletes who have less control over their retirement process exhibit more negative emotions, such as a fear of social death or dying (Blinde & Stratta, 1992), a sense of social exclusion or isolation (McKenna & Thomas, 2007) and a loss of identity (Sparke, 1998). While there are a multitude of factors which can result in an involuntary exit from sport, injuries and health problems frequently arise as the source of this unintended and abrupt exit from sport. Injury and health issues are
recognized as a major source of transitional difficulty for retired athletes (Gilmore, 2008; Muscat, 2010) particularly in reference to the impact physical pain has on an athlete’s post-life comfort (Gilmore, 2008). That said, Perna, Ahlgren, and Zaichkowsky (1999) did not report any correlation between collegiate athletes’ injuries and their long-term life satisfaction.

Career planning and personal development, sport career achievement, educational status, financial status, control over life, time passed since retirement, relationship with coaches, other concurrent life changes, sport/life balance, availability of resources during the career transition, pre-retirement planning, psychosocial support, and support programme involvement are the multitude of other factors which have been assessed in their connection with the sport retirement transition. Each of these factors has the potential to impact an athlete’s transition in an individual and influential manner. What this literature highlights is the complexity of each individual’s experience in sport and transition out of her or his sporting role. While there is a tremendous depth of literature focusing on the psychological, emotional, and social impacts of athletic retirement, there is a complete lack of literature in which the physical transition is a focus of analysis. While scholars have considered the impact that the changing body has on an athlete’s psycho-emotional being, there is yet to be a paper which conducts its analysis through a purely physical lens and describes its influence on the transition process out of elite sport. That literature will be highlighted.

2.2.9 The Transitioning Body
The body plays a key role in the identity construction of elite athletes, who are highly attuned to how they are perceived in relation to their physical competency and their physical aesthetic (Loland, 1999; Sparkes, 1998, Stephan, et al., 2007). The physical body is not only functionally important to athletes, but also symbolizes a degree of control which they have over their physical form. Bordo (1990) suggests that the sporting body can be seen as a “symbol of correct attitude; it means that one ‘cares’ about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse” (Bordo, 1990, p.94). This exemplifies the value that the athletic body holds, not only in its sporting realm, but in the context of greater society. Because the physical body plays such a critical role in athletes’ self definition, many scholars have outlined the impact of physical ‘deterioration’ in the process of retirement from elite sport. The literature as a whole tends to suggest that athletes who have to grapple with career ending injuries (Gilmore, 2008; Sparkes, 1998), and those who are pre-occupied with body size and shape (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), have a much more difficult time transitioning out of sport than those who deal with less body related issues.

Using a quantitative design, Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, and Delignieres (2003) assessed the relationship between the perception of bodily changes after retirement from elite sport and physical self and global self esteem, in retired athletes. Sixty-nine former elite athletes from a wide range of Olympic sports completed a 6-item Physical Self Inventory, and questions related to body difficulties experienced after retirement. Most notably, retired athletes presented lower global self-esteem, physical self-worth, perceived physical condition, sports competence, and physical attractiveness than active elite athletes, because of decreased training and social recognition of the “performing body.” This research provided a novel focus on the bodily
transition out of elite sport, and set the stage for subsequent work, which explores a more nuanced and complex understanding of the bodily transition.

Gymnastics is a sport in which physical competence and aesthetic success are closely correlated with body weight and shape. As a result, much of the literature focused on the retirement transition from elite gymnastics highlights body dissatisfaction and disordered eating as prominent issues in the career exit from sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). After years of intensive focus on body manipulation (through diet and rigorous training), the majority of individuals who participate in gymnastics carry away a sense of dissatisfaction as their bodies adapt to a new homeostasis. Both Kerr and Dacyshyn and Lavallee and Robinson report that to many of their participants, body issues were tremendously upsetting, as adjusting to increased body fat, a decreased muscular physique, a lack of physical competence, and in some cases painful injuries felt incongruent with a life history of leanness, ease of movement and control. Kerr and Dacyshyn suggest that throughout their careers many of the gymnasts were carefully monitored for their intake, attempting to “control” their bodies through various means, including daily weigh-ins, monthly “fat tests,” weight displays on the gym wall, or punishment for being deemed overweight by their coaches. While the athletes were liberated from external judgment and monitoring post-retirement, the struggle to overcome their own internalized dissatisfaction, which was deeply entrenched in their psyches, was a much more persistent problem. Kerr and Dacyshyn reported that five of the seven young gymnasts’ worries about weight and their disordered eating did not disappear upon retiring. In fact, in two of the individuals, the preoccupation worsened. While disordered eating was not the focus of Kerr and Dacyshyn’s study, Stirling, Cruz, and Kerr (2010) looked at retirement from elite rhythmic gymnastics as a precipitating factor for the development or worsening of disordered eating behaviours. Stirling et al. (2010) reported similar findings, suggesting that many retired athletes
actually experience increased body dissatisfaction upon retirement and feel incredible guilt about weight gain, loss of muscle mass, and their eating habits. Individuals in their study reported engaging in food restricting behaviours, calorie counting, the use of laxatives/diet pills, and excessive exercise. Furthermore, those who remained entrenched in the sporting environment, through coaching or judging, reported exacerbated weight control behaviours.

Lavallee and Robinson (2007) reported a unanimous emphasis on the extra-ordinary bodily control that the athletes had established through their athletic careers. While this was a necessary and inherent aspect of their development as athletes, each individual reported the immense challenges that this presented during their career termination process. Most of the participants suggested that they became extremely frightened of weight gain after their departure from sport and took up disordered eating behaviours and exercise addictions to help them maintain control of their physique. While Stephan et al. (2003) theorized a five month “crisis period” in which retiring athletes are disturbed by their awareness of their deteriorating physical capacities, Lavallee and Robinson (2007) and Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) highlighted a significantly longer period of adjustment. This may be due to the nature of competitive gymnastics, in which much of an individual’s self worth is derived from his or her ability to stay “thin, small and graceful” (Krane et al., 1997, p. 67), or potentially due to the compounded challenge which gymnasts face as they retire during adolescence. Some scholars have suggested that the concurrent post-sport and puberty-related body challenges could magnify the issues confronted by athletes as they transition out of the sporting realm (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). Additionally, while defining a five-month “crisis period” through the use of the Physical Self Inventory is a useful starting point, it misses the subtlety and nuance of the highly individual transition process. As illustrated by Kerr and Dacyshyn and Lavallee and Robinson, to truly capture the idiosyncratic nature of each individual’s experience, in-depth interviewing is often
ideal.

Lavallee and Robinson (2007) also address the idea that athletes miss the physical sensations of performing high-level complex bodily maneuvers, identifying “cravings” for these physical stimuli once removed from their sporting settings. Drahota and Eitzen (1998) report a similar finding from their study on retired professional athletes. They suggest that athletes experience a unique adjustment to the withdrawal from being a part of the game, including a physical withdrawal from conditioning, playing, running, weightlifting, hitting, and being hit, and a chemical withdrawal from the adrenaline rush, which athletes compared to a drug. While the idea of a withdrawal from physical movement is noted in this study, it is by no means a focus of their research. In a few papers, there is a mere mention of the adaptation to a life outside of intensive physical activity, which is a limitation of this literature.

Experiences of pain and discomfort in retirement have been highlighted by relatively few scholars (Gilmore, 2008; Loland, 1998). In spite of the reality that many athletes leave sport as a result of career ending injuries, or retire because their bodies can no longer handle the wear and tear of elite training and competition, it is curious that there is such dearth of this injury narrative within the literature. While Stephan and Bilard (2003) discuss the “suffering body” which is marked by weight gain, degradation of physical competencies, bodily tensions and pain and tiredness, the idea of a suffering body is relatively understudied in this field. Wylleman, De Knop, Menkehorst, Theebom and Annerel (1993) attribute this suffering to the drastic reduction of training and deregulation of eating habits that athletes experience during the transition out of competitive sport involvement. However, the true complexity of the psychosomatic response to the retirement process has been neglected in its entirety in the literature. Research built within the embodiment/emplacement paradigm is warranted, which illustrates the value of
understanding bodily wisdom and knowledge. Hockey and Collinson (2007) argue that there is a need to engage in the “phenomenology of the body, particularly the sensuous and sensing sporting body” to gain a more “fleshy perspective of sport” (Hockey & Collinson, 2007 p.116). While much of the scholarly literature in sport retirement aims to most accurately depict the true nature of the athletic experience and the transition process, it approaches it from a cognitive, emotive and social angle. The physical body, in its most “fleshy” form, is often left behind in the discussion.

2.2.10 Learning from ‘Elite Bodies’

Embodiment. The notion of embodiment has been widely used throughout the social science and humanities literatures over the past few decades. This work has encouraged scholars to view knowledge as not simply a function of the mind, but instead as a kind of knowing which is embedded within bodily practices, a knowing which cannot be expressed in spoken words. This concept has initiated the dissolution of mind-body dualism, which has long separated the experiences of the body from the rational mind. From the sociological discipline, Shillings (2003) argues that there is a need to move away from approaches which see the social as defining bodies and instead further conceptualize that ‘social relations may take up and transform our embodied capacities in all manner of ways, but they still have a basis in human bodies’ (p.12). The work of Loic Wacquant furthers this, suggesting that “social life rests on a bedrock of visceral know-how” and that a way of understanding human conduct is “as a mutual moulding and immediate ‘inhabiting’ of being and world, carnal entanglement with a mesh of forces pregnant with silent summons and invisible interdictions that elude the scholastic
distinction between subject and object” (Wacquant, 2005, as cited by Pink, 2010, p.346). The conceptualisation of sport in the absence of a more visceral know-how does not do justice to the true nature of athletics and does not do justice to the human lived experience.

Sparkes (1998) used an embodiment framework to approach an understanding of the transitioning athletic body. In his analysis of an elite equestrian faced with a career-ending illness, Sparkes delves into the loss of a previously taken-for-granted body-self relationship, which is no longer attainable for the young athlete. Sparkes draws on the work of Chamez (1983, 1987, 1991, 1994, 1995) and Frank (1991, 1995), using illness narrative to depict the challenges “Rachel” faced as she struggled to reconcile her former “elite” self with her new broken body. Most notably, Sparkes illustrates how the body becomes a disciplined and controlled body as a result of early participation in high level athletics. Rachel’s disciplined body functioned in a predictable manner while training and competing, even to the point where her body disappeared in her consciousness as she performed effortlessly. While her “unproblematic” body state was characterized by ease, her illness stripped her of perceived bodily control, leaving feelings of loss and fragmentation in its wake. Frank (1995) in his work on illness narratives suggests that “the disciplined body-self defines itself primarily in actions of self-regimentation; its most important action problems are those of control. The disciplined body experiences its gravest crisis in loss of control” (p. 41). Sparkes (1998) suggests that once the cultivated sense of bodily control is shattered, a reconstruction of the self is necessary. While Sparkes makes an important contribution to the retirement literature through his examination of a more embodied approach to the transition out of sport, there is still very little focus on the physical sensation and visceral know-how which is characteristic of the athletic experience. Sarah Pink’s concept of emplacement could provide a valuable lens through which to achieve a greater understanding of the centrality of the body to this life transition.
**Emplacement.** Pink (2011) highlights a more complex and integrative way of thinking about bodies and their central role in human experience. Three components of emplacement clarify a novel way of examining the body, a body within a wider ecology. Firstly, she illustrates the body as a biological entity which exists within an arena of other biological organisms. This is a useful theoretical starting point, which enables a recognition that the body is not simply “worked on” by psychological and social phenomenon, but that it is instead at the root of all human action. The engagement of the body in its environment means that it is physically transformed through each process in which it participates. Further, the body reciprocally acts on the environment to sculpt the greater ecological environment. Pink’s suggestion highlights the value of thinking of the athletic transition as a process, one which is founded in biological changes which are continuously occurring and are built on years of biological adaptation and enmeshment with the greater ecological world. Secondly, emplacement frames the body as the vehicle through which knowledge is gained. Mark Harris suggests that “knowing is always bound up in one way or another with the world. A person does not leave their environment to know… neither does she stop in order to know: she continues” (Harris, 2007, p.1). If all of human life is based in movement, then the body is central to our state of being (Harris, 2007). This idea helps delineate the athletic body as one which has been built from within a context of an athletic arena. An athlete’s knowledge and way of knowing has been learned from within a sporting context which fundamentally alters the biological, psychological and emotional know-how of the athlete him or herself. Finally, emplacement allows for a conceptualization of how we interact with our ecological placement. Pink (2011) argues that emplacement allows an understanding of the movement of the athlete through his or her sporting
context “as a process through which he/she comes to know in relation to the other elements of the environment” (p.348). A place does not exist as a discrete entity, but instead as a “constellation of processes’ (Massey, 2005, p.141) in movement. Emplacement is valuable to the retirement literature in its ability to conceptualize embodied knowing as contingent not simply on “power configurations, social structures and rational thoughts, but also on material, biological and sensual relations” (Pink, 2011, p. 354) in which the body is entangled as an organism. Sarah Pink’s emplacement highlights the need for a more visceral know-how based in the body’s knowledge and further, an approach which examines the complex and ever-evolving process of human life.

2.2.11 Summary

The existing literature on sport retirement provides insight and a useful framework for better understanding how athletes conceptualize their transition out of athletics. While the majority of the literature has focused on the psychological, emotional and sociological impact of such a transition, there is very little work that highlights the physical transition or uses corporeal ‘know-how’ to elucidate this phenomenon further. With the use of Sarah Pink’s emplacement theory and the collection of sensory data (Vannini, Waskul & Gottschalk, 2014), this study will aim to better understand the making and unmaking of elite athletes through the lens of embodied or “emplaced” knowledge. With the body as a tool, physical sensations, bodily competencies, and food and exercise behaviours will be examined to better understand the phenomenology of the bio-psycho-social aspects of elite athletes. While bodily sensations and visceral know-how
will be a focus of this work, in-depth life histories of these athletes will be explored to form a nuanced, holistic and idiographic illustration of transitioning athletes.

2.3 Research Objectives

This study will aim to address three main objectives. Firstly, there is a need to understand with far more operational specificity and empirical reference, the physical and embodied experience of athletes, through the process of becoming an elite athlete and into their retirement process; the “making and unmaking of elite athletes.” Secondly, there is a need to understand these embodied experiences from the empirical “ground up,” by exploring athletes’ own narratives and social constructions through IPA/life history interviews. Finally, there is a need to probe athletes’ lived experiences within sport and through their career transitions to understand how we might pedagogically re-work the ways in which we support athletes during their athletic careers and beyond.

From theoretical, practical and methodological perspectives, this research aims to fill a gap in the literature and provide a novel conceptualization of both the transition process and the body experiences of elite athletes. Understanding these phenomena is not simply about exploring the experiences of athletes alone, but will hopefully provide insight into the broader experiences which humans face as they move through various stages of life.
2.4 Clarifications and Definitions

2.4.1 Defining the Self

The concepts of “self” and “identity” are used quite extensively throughout this dissertation, and thus there is a need to conceptually unpack what is meant by those terms prior to deploying them throughout this work. I will first acknowledge that this brief summary will merely scratch the surface with regards to exploring issues related to the self and identity. The complexity and vast literature which surrounds ideas about the self are beyond the scope of this work, and as such, I will focus on clarifying and defining in a narrow and concise manner. Further, though I have spent much time contemplating this topic, my beliefs, and assumptions are in flux, evolving with me as I experience life and grow academically.

While there is general agreement amongst qualitative researchers that identities and selves are constructed (at least in part) through narrative, there is no clear unified understanding or perspective which clarifies an ‘exact’ definition or framework for understanding. As Smith and Sparkes (2008) report, “a close inspection reveals that scholars from assorted perspectives or traditions promote various ideas of what narrative identities and selves are and how they should be studied. That is, the concept of narrative identity or self can mean different things to different people” (p. 7). That being said, amongst the dense theorizing about this topic, it is worthwhile to briefly highlight the ontological assumptions regarding “self” and identity” which will be utilized throughout this work.

Firstly, when the term “self” is used, it will encompass both the “I” (subject knower) and the “me” (object that is known) forms of self. From a phenomenological perspective, the “self” is
that which experiences, as there is no experience without the experiencer. “Identity” refers to the conceptions and perceptions which we have regarding our individuality and affiliations. Thus “identity” will be used to describe and reflect on who one believes themselves to be. “Sense of self” and “identity” will be used interchangeably, to describe how an individual comes to understand their “me.” Further, while some may suggest that we each have one “identity” which is connected to one autonomous “self,” this work is situated in a commitment to a non-essentialist view, describing the self and identity as multidimensional. Hence, as opposed to one identity or one self, we are all composites of various, fluxing, dynamic selves and identities. Thus, though a “self” or an “identity” may be referenced throughout this work, it should be noted that these constructs are understood and conceptualized in the plural.

To better understand “self” and “identity” within narrative, qualitative work, Smith and Sparkes (2008) created a useful continuum which highlighted the various degrees of emphasis placed upon “personal/individual” and “socially relational” by various scholars. For example, they described a “performative perspective” which “places all emphasis on the social and cultural, and cuts all mooring from the individual,” and contrasted that to a “inter-subjective perspective” in which scholars are “seemingly attentive and give equal accent to both the personal and social” (p. 27). While they created five distinct categories to help build this typology, they emphasize the desire for their work to be “illuminative rather than definitive or exhaustive,” and further suggest that the boundaries between each perspective are far from “clean and sharp,” but instead “blurry and messy” (p. 28).

My current academic and personal worldview, and this work, are aligned with a perspective in the middle of the proposed continuum, between a conceptualization of self in which “the individual and their interiority is given primacy over the social” (Smith & Sparkes,
2008, p. 9), and an approach which “thrusts the social squarely into the spotlight and the individual into the shadows” (p. 24). This work is positioned from a “storied resource perspective,” one in which “narrative selves and identities are socio-cultural phenomena, realized within active relationships” while also being taken up, “modified and individualized” (p. 16). This suggests that while there is some emphasis placed on the individual mooring of self and identity, there is a strong emphasis placed on the idea that individuals draw from their cultural resources and assemble them into personal stories. As Smith and Sparkes suggest, “in the very act of telling, people engage in constructing certain kinds of selves and identities in specific social contexts, within the interactions of a single occasion of talk.” In short, identities and selves are both social and individual; a person uses the cultural resources at hand to construct an identity and sense of self which is both unique and personal. Smith and Sparkes suggest that “within the limits of relationally framed contexts, joint actions, narrative resources, body materiality and micro and macro structures, people may edit their stories, and have some ‘say’ as to which type of story gets told, what story they wish to live, whom the stories are about and to whom the stories are told.”

Within this work there is also a focus on the repetitive and the habitual nature of lived experience and how those rehearsed patterns form identity scripts. Taylor (2005) describes that the narrative resources that people cumulatively use, draw upon and weave, become their embodied biographies and hence, that the creation of a coherent and integrated self-narrative across time is something that people artfully ‘do’ (from Smith & Sparkes, 2008). With this view in mind, the methodology was catered towards understanding the longitudinal aspects of how individuals navigate their ‘selves’ and ‘identities’ and strive to find some continuity over time.
The storied resource perspective highlights the need to reflexively assess how these individual narratives are constructed. Smith and Sparkes use Somers concept of “public narrative” which suggests that narratives are “attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks of institutions, however local or grand” (1994, p. 619). These narratives act as available storylines for people to adopt and personalize. Hence, while individuals do come to hold unique and personalized views about themselves, those built selves and identities are a function of their cultural emersion in spaces which present available social scripts for the uptake. Sarah Pinks concept of emplacement aligns with this view and then extends it, suggesting that while the environment moulds and shapes the individual, the individual is concurrently moulding and shaping its world (Pink, 2009). This complex interplay highlights how individuals make the process dynamic. As they take up various cultural scripts, individualize them and redistribute them back into their environment, they subtly alter their own built environment.

Further, this work hopes to emphasize how the corporeal, the physical, the bodily experience, is not separate from this conception of self, but instead, that the body is an integral conduit through which we understand the world and ourselves. Through physical immersion, our complete selves capture the somatic, sensorial environmental cues, integrate them with our cognitive emotional understandings and moor them against the social backdrop of our lived worlds.
2.4.2 Exploring the Body as Part of a Whole

“Sensorimotor abilities are not merely a form of conception; they do not depend on explicit judgments, categories, or rules. Rather, they exhibit a more primordial intentionality, which must be accorded its own logic. However, to identify the lived body solely with this sensorimotor level to the exclusion of “higher” forms of cognition obscured the larger significance of what has been revealed. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, abstract cognition itself may sublimate but never fully escapes its inherence in a perceiving, acting body.” Leder (1990) p. 6

The body has been regarded as a primarily scientific object, one which can be characterized by general scientific law, since the seventeenth century. Cartesianism describes the body as “a part of res extensa,” in which it is “essentially no different from any other physical object” (Leder, 1990, p. 5). That notion was challenged by thinkers such as Husserl, Straus and Mearleau-Ponty, who explored the body not as an object in the world but as the “very medium whereby the world comes into being.” Leder (1990) describes how philosophers have utilized the German distinction between “Korper (physical body) and Leib (living body),” suggesting that “Cartesianism tends to entrap the human body in the image of Korper, treating it as one instance of the general class of physical things,” while “the body generally understood as Leib (or “lived body”) reveals the deeper significance of corporeality as a generative principle.”

In an effort to challenge Cartesianism, throughout this dissertation, descriptions of “the body,” “the physical self,” and, other inferences to a body as separate from a holistic mind-body-spirit, become problematic. The linguistic and conceptual “bodily” descriptions become inherent
points of contention within this work and must be addressed in order to clarify and acknowledge the challenges faced when exploring embodiment in the confines of the English language. Throughout this work I will use the term “body,” or “bodily” in a multitude of contexts and as a conceptual theme. This “body” refers to the “lived body,” the holistic human, the Leib. While I explore ideas related to sensorial experience and corporeal knowledge, this is by no way meant to reduce our complex beings to “just” bodies, but instead, as Drew Leder so eloquently wrote, “to progressively enrich our notion of the body by showing its influence throughout the human domain.” Sensorimotor descriptions will be explored alongside emotional, intellectual cognitive explanations as well as physiological contributions. Using such “disciplinary cross-fertilization” I hope to challenge the notion of dualism both ontologically and methodologically, and in doing so provide novel contributions to this retirement transitions literature.

3 Methodology, Participants, Narrative Component

3.1 Methodology

This study will aim to qualitatively explore athletes’ experiences during the retirement transition process. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003) will be used in an attempt to construct participants’ understandings of their experiences as transitioning athletes with a special focus on their bodily sensations and visceral know-how,
providing an alternative insight into the unmaking of elite athletes. I wanted to hear how it felt to be unwoven, and how it felt to exist in a very narrow world for an entire lifetime and then to be thrust from it. I wanted to know how it felt to live in a body which was layer upon layer built in sport, and to have that body change, sometimes quite dramatically. I wanted to give voice to athletes’ subjective perspectives on their successes, triumph’s and struggles with retirement. I hoped that this insight may improve coaches, therapists’ and sport practitioners’ understanding and sensitivity to what a unique experience athletic retirement is. I also hoped that regular people would want to listen to the stories of these athletes, to relate to them, and to feel connected to them.

3.1.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is a methodological approach which aims to explore, in great depth, how individuals make cognitive and cultural sense of their personal and social world and the embodied/emplaced experience of life. Smith and Osborn (2009) argue that the main “currency” for an IPA study is how participants construct meanings in relation to their particular experiences, events, or states. To this end, the IPA approach focuses on intense idiographic inspections of people’s experiences while placing less emphasis on number of participants. The interviewing approach is phenomenological in that it involves detailed examination of the participant’s lived experience and the emotional account of such lived experience. At the same time, IPA also emphasizes that the research exercise is a dynamic process in which the researcher plays an active role. One is trying to get close to the participant’s personal world, to take, in Conrad’s (1987) words, an “insider’s perspective”, but one cannot do this directly or completely. Thus, a two-stage interpretation process, or a double hermeneutic, is involved. Smith (2004) encapsulates these two
goals by stating that “the participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (p.40). IPA is therefore intellectually connected to hermeneutics and theories of interpretation.

Because of its phenomenological roots, the works of Husserl (1970) and Heidegger (1962) are foundational to IPA’s philosophical underpinnings. The phenomenological perspective refutes positivist theories of knowledge, opting for the view that ‘personal realities’ should be addressed through first-person accounts of the lived experience. Thus, rather than attempting to produce objective statements regarding an experience, IPA is grounded in the belief that an individual’s personal perception of a given experience is paramount. Heideggerian ‘hermeneutic phenomenology’ plays an integral role in IPA methodology, suggesting that we interpret experience based on our cultural and historical ‘pre-understandings,’ and cannot simply bracket out our biases.

Merriam-Webster defines experience, as “the process of doing and seeing things and of having things happen to you.” This dissertation, with its commitment to phenomenology and a subjectivist stance, is interested in how individuals come to understand their lived worlds and make sense of them, and less about exploring experience as something which passively “happens to you.” While this is a common objective amongst many qualitative methods, IPA is interested in unpacking the content of the stories which individuals tell about their experiences, while other methods, such as narrative analysis, are focused on form, and the ways in which the stories are shared. Thus, while IPA maintains an intense focus and interest in uprooting the gritty, idiographic, contingent data from participants, it also aims to highlight the content of experiential stories which individuals tell. This research will attempt to use IPA as a foundation to explore the
tensions and the contradictions which arise as individuals try to make sense of their complex and nuanced life experiences.

IPA has been chosen as the method for this research for a number of reasons. Firstly, elite athletes are true experts in the bio-psycho-social aspects of the making and unmaking of sportspeople. Not only have they spent years sculpting their minds and bodies in the athletic realm, but they have also watched their peers participate in a similar cultural experience. Reid et al. (2005) suggest that IPA not only provides a forum to “learn from the insights of experts,” (p.4) but also allows for top down interdisciplinary work in the field of social psychology. Secondly, while intervention attempts are being made in the field of athletic retirement, there is very little research founded in a phenomenological approach, which potentially inhibits the production of relevant, culturally sensitive programs. Listening to the voices of athlete experts, and the eventual users of such programs through IPA, is an opportunity to integrate research and practice (Duncan et al., 2001; Golsworthy & Coyle, 2001). Thirdly, the foundations of IPA are built on an understanding that the researcher becomes enmeshed in the deductive research process through the interpretive and collaborative nature of the interview and analysis. Because of my own personal experience as a retired elite athlete, I can act as both an understanding “insider” while also contributing the required academic rigour which is necessary for the successful collection, interpretation and synthesis of these data. Rapley (2001) reports the inherent non-neutrality of interviewing; as the participant attempts to make sense of his or her own lived experience, the interviewer uses his or her own history and subjectivities to make further sense of that account. Additionally, IPA is an excellent fit for this research due to the diversity of experiences, both ‘positive’ and ‘negative,’ which athletes experience as they transition out of sport. Reid et al. (2005) suggest that, “in keeping with the broad premise of positive psychology, there is scope for IPA research to become less disease- and deficit-focused,
and for participants to be given a chance to express their views about strength, wellness and quality of life” (p.5). While the transition from elite sport can be difficult, athletes tend to express the variability of experiences underlying the process, highlighting the complexity of the transition. Finally, IPA has a theoretical commitment to the person as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being, and assumes a chain of connection between people’s talk and their thinking, emotional, and embodied state(s). Given the focus of this study and its concerns for attending to the physical, emotional, psychological and social dimensions of the athletic retirement process, IPA makes tremendous methodological sense.

3.1.2 Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis in the Physical Activity and Sporting Literature

“There is an irreducible bodily dimension in experience and practice; the sweat cannot be excluded.” (Connell, 1995, p. 51)

The use of phenomenology as a means by which to deeply understand the lived experiences of sports people has become an increasingly valuable descriptive and useful research methodology. While there isn’t an abundance of “fleshy” phenomenological research in the sports psychology, sociology, philosophy literature, there are a number of powerful, descriptive works which provide an added depth to the field. Hughson and Inglis (2002) used a phenomenological approach to examine soccer, and described phenomenology as a “general approach which is a vital resource for sports philosophy.” They suggested that the “reconstruction of a performing subject’s consciousness, and its intertwined modes of perception and activity,” (p.7) is an important exercise for the philosopher of sport allowing them greater
access to “the subject’s forms of experiencing both regimes of time and modes of space,” which must be “subjected to scrutiny and empathetic interpretation by the investigator.” Their work used phenomenology to set out a framework for better understanding the experiences of star soccer players, as embodied subjects, for example, how does the player ‘feel’ the spatial contours of the pitch? They also attempted to capture the “complexes of interplay between the ‘subjective’ and objective’ moments of soccer movement and activity” (Hughson and Inglis, 2002, p. 13).

The specific use of IPA has been deployed within the realm of sports psychology and sociology across a broad range of topics. While Jones and Lavallee (2008) explored whether organized sport provide favourable conditions for positive psychological development, Gillison, Osborn, Standage, and Skevington (2008) investigated the experience of introjected regulation in relation to sport and exercise in mid adolescents.

More relevant to this study was Warriner and Lavallee (2008), which explored the retirement experience of seven elite female gymnasts. While each of these studies used an IPA framework, more “fleshy” sporting accounts were provided by Allen-Collinson & Hockey (2001) and Papathomas & Lavallee (2010). Allen-Collinson & Hockey (2001) used autoethnographic methods in conjunction with IPA in order to portray thick, descriptive data which reflected the experiences of runners as they staggered, wobbled and trotted through their strides. “Like drunks we stagger all over the place. No coordination, legs out of kilter with arms, unused to the effort so breathing is ragged, legs do not seem to fit with the torso, and head feels wobbly and heavy. Even these baby trots empty us, compounding the problem.” (Hockey, 2006, p. 188). The integration of autoethnographic work and rich IPA provided layers of depth and embodied understandings which added greatly to the body of phenomenological research which explores what sports truly feel, taste, look and smell like.
Papathomas & Lavallee (2010) used IPA to explore accounts of disordered eating in sport by “giving voices” to four young people, enabling them to shed critical insight into the impact of eating disturbances on the lives of athletes. Papathomas & Lavallee (2010) described the struggles the athletes faced in attempting to disclose their eating behaviours, their need for social support, and the identity challenges which accompanied their struggles. This study documented rich and deeply personal accounts which highlighted the power and value of listening to and attempting to understand athletes’ subjective experiences.

3.1.3 Sample Characteristics

To appropriately assess the depth and quality of the embodied retirement transition from sport, six retired elite athletes were interviewed over eighteen months. IPA challenges the traditional linear relationship between the number of participants and the value of research, rooting its epistemological philosophy in an idiographic paradigm. In essence, the value of knowledge is not tied to the number of participants, but instead to the depth of contingent, unique and subjective phenomena illuminated from a few individuals. In this study, I sat with the participants for hours at coffee shops, in their places of work and in my office. We got to know each other, we grew comfortable with one another, and I began to feel a deep sense of attachment with all six of them. We journeyed down discussion paths which lead to their childhood, their parental relationships, their experiences with injury, their enduring love for sport, and their fear for their children growing up in a competitive sporting climate. Though I did not know any of the participants prior to the initiation of the study (each of the athletes were
recruited through athlete acquaintances, or through the Canadian Sports Institute Ontario), by the end of our eighteen month tenure I wished I could call them the following month for a chat.

3.1.4 Data Collection

This study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews which were used to elicit verbal accounts (Cottee-Lane et al., 2004). While there was limited interview structure, thus enabling unforeseen topics to emerge (Smith, 1995), thematic categories were prepared to ensure that a complete and historical account of events was reflected upon. A broad opening question was asked with each of the participants – “Can you tell me about your experience as an elite athlete?” From there, an organic flow was established in which we spoke to a general theme or topic for the day. Each interview was completely unique while maintaining focus on certain areas of interest. With numerous interviews planned, flexibility and structure were able to seamlessly co-exist. For example, if I had a question that I wanted to ask, but we were diverted down a different but interesting new line of discussion, I felt assured that we could get to my question during the next time we spoke. While interviews were set to last no longer than 90 minutes, I was cognizant of the participants other life commitments, each individual interview followed its own course and duration. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.1.5 Personal Sociology
The impetus for this research grew out of my desire to more thoroughly understand and articulate how athletes form a conceptualization of themselves and their social world through sport, and how that understanding of self impacts their transition into athletic retirement. Exemplifying that the body is central to all human experience was a key component of this work. Elite athletes are so highly physical that emplacement was an incredible vehicle for better fleshing out this very important step in their lives – departure from athletics. Through this process the participants, who shared their stories with me, wanted to better understand who they were (and are) and how their experiences transcended their own personal lives and shed light onto other aspects of our society. Further, by openly and honestly discussing their experiences we hoped to make our stories and knowledge available for all to read and interpret – and we hoped that these contributions might make some small difference in the world. While elite athletics may seem like an obscure population to study, it proved to be a fine vehicle for interpreting human motive and action.

In order to answer these questions, I used my own insider experiences as an elite gymnast and trampolinist to help inform both the question formulation and the analysis of data. As I am the author of this dissertation, my interpretation of my own and others experiences in sport, has formed this work. That being said, my arguments and conclusions are not completely my own, since the input of six insightful athletes was thoughtfully considered and contributed depthful insights to this work. Therefore, this portion of the Methodology section is dedicated to exploring the research process which allowed me to form this piece of work, through the use of participant engagement. Critically, I will discuss: who these athletes are, how they came into my life to inform this research, what types of questions they were asked (and what questions they asked of me), how we influenced each other through our multiple interactions, and finally what knowledge emerged from these interactions.
I have written my own autobiographical account (which is the preface to this dissertation) and included it in order to avoid projecting my own experiences onto the participant’s unique narratives. That being said, some of the effort in teasing out this bias must be done by the third party reader of this work, as in spite of my constant examination and critique of my influence over this work, my life history has influenced my findings and interpretations in ways that I am unable to fully unpack. My story is not the model against which all the others were measured, but instead a starting point for discovery. In examining the similarities and differences between each of our stories, a greater examination of the social processes which mould us has been endeavoured.

3.1.6 The Six Athletes

For this work, I wanted to meet and discuss the retirement transition with a small, but diverse group of athletes who had recently experienced a departure from sport. I wanted to grasp the unique and subjective experiences of these athletes, while understanding them in the broader context of elite sport and Western society. For this I reached out through various avenues to attempt to engage with individuals I had not had personal contact with, even though the elite sports world is a very tight-knit community. Using the Ontario Sports Institute performance enhancement team, four athletes were recruited, while another four were distant acquaintances of mine from my athletic involvement, but were not friends or competitors. Of these potential eight participants, I eventually interviewed six of them (three males and three females). One athlete declined participation because of the length of the study, citing that it was too much of a commitment for her to take on at that point in her life. Another athlete declined because she was
considering coming out of retirement and had not made a decision at the time of recruitment. All six athletes agreed to participate in the eighteen-month study, during which time they were interviewed between six and eight times.

During the time of interview, three of the athletes lived in Toronto, Ontario, one in Edmonton, Alberta, one in Kelowna, British Columbia and one was living, temporarily, in New York City. Roughly one half of the interviews were done in person, while the other half were done over the telephone. Every effort was made to meet each of the participants in person at least once; however, due to life circumstances, one of the participants did not make it to Toronto, where I am located, during the duration of the study. All of the athletes had at one point lived elsewhere for training, competition or intercollegiate involvement, but for the most part the athletes had trained in Canada, especially during their early years, and competed for the Canadian team.

The participants ranged in age from 25 to 43 years old and had all retired within the past five years at the time of initial interview. Four of the participants were only one to two years post-retirement, while the other two had been retired for three and five years respectively. Interviewing individuals at various stages of their retirement transition allowed for a spectrum of responses and varying degrees of insight into their exiting process. For some, the retirement process had been long and drawn out; one of the athletes had even come out of retirement for a final Olympics in 2012 after a short time off after the 2008 Beijing games. Athletes noted that their careers had “peaked” a number of years prior to their retirement, and that they experienced a sort of fizzle out, while others felt that they retired shortly after or even in the midst of a peak. One athlete retired as a direct result of an injury, while three others noted that injuries contributed to their leaving sport, but that injuries weren’t the only reason for their decision.
All but two of the athletes had a post-secondary education, three having obtained master’s degrees. Three of the athletes had competed during their university years, each having been awarded full ride scholarships to prestigious American universities. At the time of interview, all six individuals had moved onto careers and were working full-time. One was working in real estate development, one as a teacher, one as a counsellor, one as an author/entrepreneur, and two as coaches in the sport they had competed in. Two of the participants had children, both having two children each, and both were married. One of the participants became pregnant and had a child during the course of the study. Having a child had been a hope of her and her husband for many years prior to this dream coming to fruition. One participant was engaged and married during the course of his involvement with the study, while the other two were single or dating.

With respect to socioeconomic class, the group was relatively homogeneous, as all of the participants were middle to upper class. That being said, three of the six participants noted that their upbringings had been “modest” and that though they didn’t do without anything, there were no “extras.” Interestingly, all three of these participants also made reference to the fact that their modest upbringing contributed to their involvement in athletics from a young age. They recounted stories of riding their bicycles, playing road hockey and skating on nearby ponds instead of playing indoors with expensive toys. With respect to ethnicity, four of the six are Caucasian of European descent, one is Japanese-Ukranian, while another is Chinese-German.

All of the athletes were very high level performers, five of the six having competed at the Olympic games and all of them having competed for Team Canada at a minimum of one World Championship. For almost all of the athletes, their involvement in sport spanned more than two decades. Most of the athletes initially got involved in sport at a very young age as a result of their
parents’ influence (parents signed them up or parent was heavily involved in sport themselves) or because their sibling was already participating and they wanted to join too. For two of the athletes (gymnast and swimmer), their intense and sole focus became their sport at a very young age (early sport specialization), while the other four continued to enjoy a variety of sports into their teenage years. At that point, many of them began to realize that they had a particular talent for their sport and began focusing more of their time and energy onto more structured training.

3.1.7 Participant Biographies

Each of the athletes in this study were truly unique characters who provided tremendous insight and depth to my understanding of the process of transitioning out of elite sport. Their narratives ranged from simple and straightforward to highly critical and reflexive, sometimes proud and joyous, and occasionally painful and tortured. These brief biographies are intended to give a sliver of insight into the personalities and stories which I encountered through this process. I could have written a dissertation on each of them, so these short biographies are meant to introduce to the people who made this research possible.

3.1.7.1 Tanner

Tanner, at the time of interview was 29 and 30 years old, living in New York City, recently engaged and embarking on a career in real estate development. Born to a Chinese mother and a German father, he described them as “strict” and “unreasonable” at times; “they are
very organized, they are very clean, but they can be surprisingly easy-going about some things.” He also suggested that while their relationship was somewhat cold, it was founded in a deep and enduring love: “they are also extremely loving... I’m an only child... they care very much about me in their special ways.” Over the course of the interviews it became evident that Tanner was extremely organized and reliable, as he did not miss one of our planned phone calls over the course of almost eighteen months. He described himself as hard working, diligent, and honest, and suggested that at times (particularly in work and training environments) that these qualities were correlated with him “not being super fun or being a little serious.” Methodical and thorough, Tanner suggested that he felt “swimming revealed, more than school, my desire to do things thoroughly and fully and correctly.”

I was more thorough and thoughtful in completing what I was doing and completing it to the end... I don’t know if you know much about swimming practices, but there is always opportunities to not do an entire set... the coach is not always counting the whole thing... or the easy thing it gets confusing, so you can just chop off a few hundred meters at the end... and I was always into finishing it and even doing more and if other people didn’t finish it I would be upset and I would give them a piece of my mind about it... I thought that if anyone was actually serious about doing anything with swimming, then they needed to have that mentality of doing extra.

After retiring once in 2008, he decided he had to give the Olympics one more shot as he was underwhelmed with his 2008 performance. Though his work ethic was undeniable, he described, on more than a few occasions, some of the mental struggles he encountered under pressure:
“I am a head case in that I only really did well when I didn’t have any pressure and things weren’t on the line… when things really were on the line I really didn’t do as well as I should have or could have.”

Though he attempted to reconcile this challenge during his career, he suggested that it remained a road-block until his retirement. Tanner officially retired from swimming in 2012 after his second Olympic Games and over 20 years of sport participation. He spoke very matter-of-factly about his years in sport and transition out of athletics, recalling the necessity for him to move on with his life:

“I think I have done it pretty well… I have been realistic about things… but I don’t even want to say it was an adjustment… it was just what happened… I always had an end date… I always had a planned exit.”

Tanner completed a four year undergraduate degree at a prestigious American Ivy League school, which he then followed up with a graduate degree in urban planning. Following his departure from sport, he dove into his newly minted professional career which he undertook in a fashion similar to that which made him successful in sport:

“The desire to be better than everyone else who is also trying to be good at that thing is really important.”

Tanner was married in September 2014, and will continue to pursue his development career in New York City:

“I think I am an honest and reliable and nice… and I try to treat people fairly… and I think that I am a funny guy… I guess those are the things that make me a valuable person.”
Tanner personified the stereotypic male athletic image. He was extremely hard working and disciplined, stoic, and displayed high levels of emotional control. Though he embodied these characteristics, he was also approachable and light-hearted. His narrative provided a pragmatic and uncomplicated foundation from which I could build an understanding of his experience in sport and into retirement. While some of the athletes in this study were highly emotional, reflexive and analytical about their sporting process, Tanner was not so. He was direct and achievement oriented, both qualities which appeared to help him in swift decision-making and allowed him to remain steadfast and unwavering along his life path.

3.1.7.2 Melanie

Melanie was 34 and 35 years old at the time of interview and experienced the pregnancy and birth of her first child over the course of our almost 18-month interaction. While this additional life change added complexity to her participation in the study, it also added a great layer of depth and exemplified the variety of ways in which athletes come to understand their exit from sport in the greater context of their lives. Melanie retired from middle distance running in 2012 after a very long career which started when she was attending high school in her hometown in Kelowna, British Columbia. Melanie described the innocence of her early career with a sense of nostalgia, recollecting:

Well I guess I just think of myself as a kid and I was super feisty and I just go out and run as fast as I could and I wouldn’t care… and even earlier in my career when I had a lot of break-through moments, it was just this burning desire to go for it… and I didn’t care about
the consequences, whether I went too hard and I failed or if I went so hard... because the outcome... it was lower stakes... I wasn’t trying to make a career of it, I wasn’t trying to make a team... it just gave me the freedom to push myself as hard as I could... I had less to lose and more to gain... I just felt like I had this burning desire to push myself.

Similarly to Hilary and Tanner, Melanie received her undergraduate degree from an Ivy League American university, spending her time split between school and athletics, although she was plagued by injury for the majority of her time at school. A lively and spirited personality, Melanie shared in great depth the pertinent moments of her career and described her exit from sport and into motherhood poetically. Though she officially retired from middle distance competition after attempting to qualify for the 2012 Olympic Games (Melanie competed in Athens in 2004), she remained very active in endurance sport, competing in a number of Ironman and sprint triathlons. Motherhood inevitably altered the intensity of her “post-career” training, solidifying her departure from highly competitive sport more concretely. Melanie described a very positive sporting experience, which she attributed largely to her relationship with her lifelong coach, stating, “he has been with me my whole life, and been really a model of how I want to live my life and the type of person I want to be.”

While Melanie shifted into motherhood fairly shortly after retiring, she described a sense of ease and normalcy which accompanied her new role. Though there were aspects of her sporting self which remained very important to her, she identified her willingness to explore other aspects of life. In describing her insights from new motherhood she suggested:

I guess, like, I just feel entirely like myself still... like, I love having him (her son) and it is such a relief to have him, but I am still as motivated to do my other things as I always have been. So more or less, keep my life the way it was with him in there as an important
factor... but it’s not like I am so overwhelmed that all I want to do is hang out with my baby all the time now… like I would never say, like “oh, nothing else matters anymore.

Melanie’s enthusiasm was contagious and she enlivened our interviews with her big laugh and dynamic character. She remained light in tone, even when discussing hardship or struggle. Her buoyancy suggested that she had never been brought too low by her past challenges. She was empathetic and engaging, and at times startlingly honest, recollecting her history like an impassioned story-teller.

3.1.7.3 Mitch

Mitch was born and raised in Toronto, Ontario, and though he described himself as somewhat of a nomad during his competitive career, he had settled back in Toronto with his family at the time of our interviews. Over the course of the study, Mitch, who was 37 and 38 years old at the time, was attempting to re-build himself after spending nearly three decades riding his bicycle all over the world. Quiet and thoughtful, his disillusionment with regards to his career and sport in general enveloped our interaction. Though he told a story of hardship and struggle, he also had an endearing youthfulness. While he had struggled in more recent years, he spoke of his childhood on his bike with fondness:

Yeah I… I had posters of cyclists on my wall. Most kids dream of being a hockey player in Canada, and most kids have these… Most of my friends wanted to be Wayne Gretsky and I wanted to be Eddie Merckx and Relyon Minoux... and that sort of thing… I was constantly
on my bike, I rode everywhere and I loved being on my bike… most of my friends rode bikes a lot and we would play around in the park.

Over the duration of our interviews, Mitch was in the process of solidifying employment and was exploring various facets of the elite sport industry, including athlete retirement consulting, bicycle manufacturing and biographical writing. Mitch’s career was long, as he began cycling seriously in his early teens, qualifying for the junior national program by the time he was 14. He described a shift towards a more regimented and rigorous training program, which began to limit his autonomy and reduced his internal motivation:

We went to a lot of training camps… the first training camp I went to was when I was 16… we spent Christmas and New Years in Florida training… that was a little bit weird, it was my first time away with the team… and to spend Christmas with the team... it was fun you know... certainly it was an adventure… but we were also on our bikes every single day…and there was definitely an obligation to ride, before that was something that I wanted to do and I never felt that I had to… suddenly I felt like I had to.

His ascent into elite cycling was rapid and he began training and racing virtually all year around. Inevitably, he spent his life traveling the world (over 200 days/year), married an accomplished female cyclist, and raised his two children in Europe where he lived and trained. For Mitch, he knew little else aside from cycling, and thus the process of adjusting to life outside of sport required significant adaptation. Mitch had also endured many serious injuries, rigid exercise and dietary habits, and pressure to use performance enhancing drugs, which all significantly impacted his experience in sport and his physical, emotional, psychological, and social transition out of sport.
While his narrative was somewhat somber and his sporting story disheartening, Mitch did not seek pity. He described his love for “his sport” and managed to direct his hardship towards empathetic understanding for others’ struggles:

The one thing is that when you put it all together... I guess it sounds kind of crazy, but my story is not that unique... I guess even with all of these issues, I still love riding my bike.

Mitch had spent the past number of years deeply invested in uncovering the ‘why’s’ and ‘how’s’ of his athletic career, and it was evident in each of our discussions. At times it was as though he had already answered a version of my questions internally many times before he spoke them out loud to me. Mitch is a writer and a deep thinker and thus it was a constant challenge to direct discussion towards less rehearsed and more organic dialogue. A focus on the corporeal-self assisted in this challenge and allowed for new reflections and collaborative insights.

3.1.7.4 Veronica

Veronica had been retired from hockey for over five years at the time of our initial interview. She described her father’s passion for hockey and his eagerness for one of his children to take to the sport with great interest. Inevitably, Veronica was the one who fulfilled his dream and took the game on with enthusiasm:

I was always waiting for my dad to get home from work and taking him down to the basement to play hockey… I have cassette tapes and photos of before I was two, of me and skating when I was just two and a half in the back rink… all I remember is wanting to play hockey.
Though her father passed away when she was seven years old, Veronica continued to pursue the game and also took up a plethora of other activities. By the time she was in high school, she was playing elite level soccer, football, and hockey and was on the provincial bowling team. She inevitably quit her other sports to focus on hockey when she was in her early twenties and the opportunity to play on a world championship team arose. Veronica’s sense of adventure and vigour was evident in our interactions, though time away from sport, and a busy stressful life had muted some of the zeal I imagined she had in her youth.

A highly decorated athlete, Veronica was an integral member of multiple Olympic and World Championship medal winning teams. Veronica had begun a career in coaching and was a mother of two children at the time of our interviews, having spent the past number of years building a life outside of elite hockey. Veronica was calm and kind, but very matter-of-fact. She articulated that she felt she was lucky because she was of a generation “before it got crazy,” where she simply “played for fun and for the love of the game.” Despite that reflection, she also described playing through serious injury and misusing painkillers, both which seemed to imply that there were challenges during her time which she had simply accepted as normal.

3.1.7.5 Anthony

Anthony, 26, began playing squash as a boy and described how “I never really knew at a young age that I was going to do this.” While he had natural ability, he described that it was his “good work ethic” which truly propelled him up through the ranks. He described a number of
influential coaches who encouraged his progress, but also explained that the lack of structure and direction he received during his career was a big challenge for him:

That was the tough part with squash... it was very much haphazard and so it always felt like it was on me for what to do, where to go... and so I always felt overwhelmed... almost always... and about where should my training go, what should I concentrate on... like I talked to people, but it still felt like it was all on me.

Anthony had retired from sport just over a year prior to our initial interview, in the summer of 2013. When I initially met him he was in the midst of a challenging time, trying to find some direction and purpose outside of squash. Anthony was incredibly introspective and thoughtful, especially for such a young man, describing in great detail his emotional struggles. The preceding year or two had been extremely difficult for him, as he suffered from chronic back pain which had precipitated a “deep depression” that lasted a number of months. Anthony’s battle with injury had been incredibly trying and led to his official retirement from squash. Though he had had an amazingly successful career, there was a sense that he was unhappy and even slightly insecure about the level and ranking he achieved.

Over the course of our interviews, Anthony was in the process of solidifying a career path and had landed on work as a squash professional. He described that he “still really like[d] the game,” and appreciated the stability and safety which his squash provided for him:

I just happen to have a skill that I have developed over the past fifteen years... that is actually lucrative... I didn’t really have that in mind but that is just there now... with the flip of a switch I went from having no commitment to having a full time job.
While Anthony’s transition was (and continues to be) a challenging life event for him, he believed that facing suffering head-on would inevitably give him strength and provide him a platform for growth, a sort of “quest narrative” (Frank, 1997). While his introspective nature and reflexivity have made him a deeply empathic individual, those qualities have also caused him great distress in his own life. When asked about what he feared in retirement he said:

Being okay with truly being seen... all of yourself... and that is the scary part. Letting people in or letting yourself in to all of yourself... and that is where it comes in... that is where the performing and controlling comes in, because you want to control how you are perceived or how you think you are being perceived... and you just try to hold onto it.

3.1.7.6 Hilary

Hilary had been retired for a number of years by the time we spoke during our initial interview. Though she had hoped to roll her gymnastics career into a contract with Cirque du Soleil, a serious knee injury forced her to commit to a master’s program in clinical counselling instead. Hilary grew up in an athletic family, her father playing in the CFL as a young man, and her sister was an international track and field athlete. She began gymnastics at the age of seven and quickly advanced, as she was naturally very strong and agile. She also described her kamikaze nature:

“I was fearless and I just wanted to do the biggest, most fun tricks that I could… and they would teach me a trick on the floor and I would jump up on the beam and try it.”
Hilary’s early career was marked by incredible skill development and confidence in the athletic realm, but also challenging coach and peer relationships. While she suggested that her coach was quite technically competent, her temper and moodiness made for tenuous and unstable interactions. Hilary described how this relationship along with a tough relationship with a fellow athlete made her “grow up quickly”:

“I think I have learned to deal with people… I had a coach, well I had a couple coaches who were hard to deal with sometimes… And I would never know if they were going to be happy or sad coming into the gym or angry. And I had one teammate in particular who had very intense mood changes, and I spent a lot of time with her… So I think I learned how to interact with people a lot in the gym, which sounds weird because it is not in normal society… but yeah, I definitely learned how to be a person in the gym.”

Hilary described a “love, hate” relationship with gymnastics, explaining that she cried after almost every practice:

Ummm so I enjoyed it… it was not easy… it was hard… I hated it a lot of the time. But I think it built a lot of character in me and yeah, just taught me that I could do things, and just set out and do them.

I got the sense that she was still coming to terms with what her gymnastics career had meant to her and how her life in the gym molded her into the woman she was:

I was always the joking person, but would also just get down to work and get the job done.

While she described significant struggles following her departure from sport in 2009, she expressed that she felt “settled” in her new life, and attributed that to finding a new passion in
her career as a clinical counselor. Though body, food and exercise issues followed her into retirement, she expressed that her transition had gone well and that she felt that she had moved on to a “new chapter.”

Hilary has incredible interpersonal skills and was extremely easy to get along with. She laughed frequently and lightened the tone of our conversations with honesty, benign self-deprecation and funny stories. Hilary described her mother as a “what you see is what you get” kind of woman, and through our interactions I established that she adopted the same redeeming quality.

3.2 Narrative Contribution

In drawing this methodological section to a close, there is one last inclusion to be made. One of the great challenges of this work was to emphasise the continuous nature of human experience, as opposed to reducing it to discrete events or stages. For the athletes in this study, their departure from sport began long before their “official” retirement, and the social, psychological and physical inscriptions which sport embossed on them will be carried with them forever in some capacity. I had the pleasure of discussing my research with a close confidante and athlete-scholar, who has now been “retired” from sport for over 35 years. Her rich, descriptive narrative was so inspiring that I wished to include it here in order to emphasize how athletics are woven in those who have the pleasure of enjoying the pain, pleasure, joy, frustration, and triumph of elite sport.
3.2.1 Sport from an Early Age

From an early age I was blessed with a strong and able body. It seemed as though I could run faster, jump higher, and score more goals than my peers, and yet, in the context of my family, this wasn't unusual as my brothers and sister had similar experiences. We came from a family with a distinguished sporting history so athletic prowess was a given. In elementary school my siblings would have contests to see who could complete their school year without missing a single day due to illness. It wasn't unusual for us to go for years without missing any school days. Our bodies were strong and our constitutions were stronger still. These were such givens in our household, that very little attention was focused on the physical. We were never asked how we were feeling, and hence, we didn't give much consideration to it either. During our childhood we spent endless hours running freely in the Lynn Valley canyon forest and consequently from a very early age experiencing nature was inseparable from my athletic experiences. Forest games of Hide and Seek were infused with the dank moist smell of mosses. I can still recall the soft feel of it against my cheek as I huddled under massive rotting fallen cedar trunks to escape detection. These same fallen trunks would crumble when we used them as steeplechase barriers. The memories of dappled sunlight flooding the forest with a cathedral-like grace and the moist mist rising from the ancient forest floor remain with me still.

I started training for track and field seriously by the time I was 12 years old. Throughout high school we trained at Brockton Oval in Stanley Park and we regularly forsook the track to train in the forest trails. Surrounded by the moody ocean and mountain vistas we trained outdoors all year round in all kinds of weather: running the seawall with the waves rhythmically.
crashing over the barriers and soaking us in its saltiness, or taking to the trails to run "repeat hills" (my earliest weight training sessions were sprinting up these hills with logs on my shoulders). Some of these hills became legendary and were christened after the athlete that had conquered them most convincingly. We always trained in a large group and the camaraderie was strong, jovial, and competitive. Our coach, John Freeman, was a wise man and his mantra was always, "Place track and field around your life, not your life around track and field." He had tremendous success coaching some of Canada's finest female athletes in the 1970s. He instinctively knew that he was dealing with extremely hard working competitive young women and his approach was always nurturing and supportive. There was never a need to put any pressure on us to perform and many of us gave our best performances under his tutelage.

During those childhood years I also competed in swimming (provincial level) and field hockey (provincial and national level). The swim team trained in the ocean at Crescent Beach. A wooden framed tank secured by anchors to the sea floor served as our "pool." Once again, hard physical effort was inseparable from experiencing the various moods of nature: we trained rain or shine! Hours were spent in the salty slimy reality of the ocean that we shared with jellyfish, barnacles, and starfish.

Field hockey was played outdoors on grassy pitches in every kind of weather and we usually finished the game wet, muddy, grassed stained, and filthy...I loved it!

As the years went by I specialized in Track and Field. In many ways this sport is more "forgiving" in terms of "ideal body type" since there was simply no ideal to strive for. A team would consist of tall lanky high jumpers, bulky shot putters, mal nourished looking distance runners, and mesomorphic explosive sprinters, and even within these categories it wasn't unusual to find exceptions to the rule. The focus of both athletes and coaches was always on
performance, not physique. My body always responded well to hard work; the heavier the work load the happier I was and the better I performed. In my competitive years, the more events I competed in at a track meet the better I performed. I had tremendous confidence in a body that rarely let me down.

3.2.2 Departure from Sport

As I became more of an elite athlete much changed: very little training was done in natural surroundings, the work out regimes became more technical and less strenuous, and much of the training was solo. I didn't thrive in this context. My retirement from sport wasn't so much due to body breakdown as a re-evaluation of what was meaningful in my life. Although my body didn't break down physically, I had a sense that I had reached my athletic peak and was stalled performance wise. Competing at international events against East German sprinters (who had remarkably male physiques) it didn't take much figuring to realize that without the use of performance enhancing drugs my track and field career wasn't going to go much further. Also, my approach to competition had altered, emotionally, my desire to win had been replaced with a fear of losing. This was an unhealthy approach to competition for me. Spiritually, I was concerned that so much focus on my physical self was narcissistic and a roadblock to healthy maturation. I had had a chronic hamstring injury since my early years in track, but I had always managed it well. It was during these treatment sessions that I witnessed truly "injured" people. My chronic injury hardly seemed to qualify as a serious concern in this context. I was focused on .01 seconds of improvement whereas others were learning to walk again. The decision to retire from Track and Field was liberating and gave me the opportunity to recover the simple physical
3.2.3 Reflections on Most Recent Sporting Experiences

Fortunately, I retired from competition without any chronic injury and, therefore, was able to apply myself fully to mastering a new sport, Squash, at the age of 30. To continue to improve my Squash game as well as satisfy my desire for competition over the past 30 years has been particularly gratifying. The mental, physical, and technical skill required to master the game continues to captivate me and I feel fortunate to still be "playing" on the eve of my 60th birthday.

4 Theoretical Contribution

“We do not ‘have’ a body; rather, we ‘are’ bodily.” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 99-100)

4.1.1 The Body in Focus

In order to better understand the retirement process from sport and to conceptualize it in a way which highlights the lived experience, the body and the athletes’ relationships with their bodies will be used as a predominant vehicle for interpretation. While the primary emphasis will be placed on bodily experience, this study will also draw on the existing literature in the biophysical, sport psychology and sociology disciplines in order to clarify and act in concert with these data, and to construct a “holistic-being” vantage point from which the most complete
illustration of what this life altering transition means to athletes can be drawn. The objective of this work is not to be reductionistic or dualistic in its central focus on emplacement, but instead to infuse a thoroughly fleshed out examination of the corporeal experience into the greater interdisciplinary body of work which explores retirement from sport.

Data collected on the six retired elite athletes who participated in this study highlighted the centrality of the body in the disengagement process from sport and the interrelationship between the body-mind-environment. From these data the body was theoretically re-conceptualized as a fluxing, biological entity which is fabricated in its environment, while concurrently building its environment. This expanded view of the body was applied to the existing literature on retirement and role exit to, hopefully, strengthen the phenomenological understanding of what these life transitions mean to those who experience them.

According to Ebaugh’s definition, those who have “once identified with a social role which they no longer have,” share the common experience of having undergone a role exit (Ebaugh, 1988, p.1). Using the theory of emplacement, I hope to reconfigure this definition to include the body and its central role in human experience. Further, to consider how a body is built and woven through every moment of life experience and thus becomes a physical manifestation of one’s history, passions, expertise, locality, and relationships. An athlete whose physical form and preference for various aesthetic, sensory, and corporeal “ways of knowing” has been created in sport and does not simply “disengage from a role,” but experiences new predominant environments while still living in a body which was fabricated layer by layer in its previous environments, in this case athletics. The following results will exemplify how the relationships the athletes had with their bodies were paramount in how they experienced their transitions out of sport. These data will outline a theoretical shift, which will attempt to configure
the fluxing, woven body as an organic, nuanced entity that needs to be given attention in phenomenological research. It will further exemplify how exploring sensory data can be used to better understand this bodily transition. Section III, which follows this Chapter, will make empirical reference to the ways in which the emplaced body provides sensory, corporeal ‘strokes of insight’ during periods of liminality. While there will be considerable focus placed on the descriptive, there will also be a great deal of attention granted to conceptual and analytical reflection. Vannini, Waskul, and Gottshchalk (2012) suggest that “sensuous scholarship” runs the risk of “missing the point” and becoming theoretically and substantively irrelevant. Stoller (1997) echoes that sentiment, suggesting that “discussions of the sensuous body require sensuous scholarship in which writers tack between the analytical and the sensible, in which embodied form as well as disembodied logic constitute scholarly argument.”

I challenge the reader to engage with this material by attempting to imagine themselves in the body of the athlete who is describing their physical experience. I wish for those who engage with this material to not only ‘think’ about what I am articulating, but to also ‘feel’ it, in a corporeal sense. To be an athlete, or ‘former’ athlete, is so much about the physical, bodily, visceral, somatic, sensual experience, that one must engage their own physicality in order to truly and completely understand the phenomenon that I attempt to flesh out. As Pink (2011) suggests, “the very idea that one is to ‘feel’ the bullfight, to ‘know’ it by having experienced it oneself… if done correctly involve not the verbalization of a critical commentary of the performance, but the process of imagining oneself into the body of the bullfighter… within the specific context of that arena at that moment” (Pink, 2011, p.351). There are, of course, limitations to this imagining oneself in the place of another. As Brett Smith suggests, “our imagination and ability to put ourselves in the place of others is constrained partly by embodied experience and otherness” (Smith, 2013, p.56). While it may be impossible to truly comprehend how elite athletes
experience their expert physical actions, refined skills and movements, lingering pain or
attachment to various physical and aesthetic embodiments, there are also many aspects of their
transitions which are quite relatable in varying capacities. The ecstatic thrill of performing
explosive and exhaustive movements under the gaze of thousands (even millions) of viewers, the
euphoric victory of success and the crushing agony of failure, and the social and psychological
valour which surrounds such an experience, is perhaps a circumstance which is difficult to
empathetically embody. However, many readers will have at one time or another experienced the
sensation of extreme nervousness in a competitive environment which was only diffused upon
the completion of their actions. Therefore, while the experience may be exaggerated in the case
of elite athletics, there is still the opportunity to relate and empathize with how others have felt
their experiences through the use of sensory data and the imagining of oneself in those
circumstances.

4.1.2 A Body Woven In Sport

The fact that the human body is fabricated should come as no surprise to sociology, but look at
this word ‘fabric’. Medieval writers typically used architectural metaphors to describe the
structure of the body, while the membrane was described in Old French as panicle (panniculs)
from the word pan for piece of cloth. Thus the membrane was seen as the cloth of a body

The body of an athlete is physically built within the sporting context. Cells are
remoulded, organs adapted, bones hardened, as a result of being raised in the gym, pool, arena
Athletes ‘are’ their sport, because they are a physical manifestation of the hours they spent sweating, training, perfecting, pounding. Their bodies are externally marked with calluses, scars and muscle definition, but that is just the surface. Layer upon layer, the fabric of their being has been woven in sport. The whole history of their body has been constructed by its time in athletics. Athletes do not merely “identify” themselves as athletes, psychologically speaking, but instead, they physically ‘are’ athletes. Thus, in the context of transitions literature, the displacement of an athlete’s dynamic structural form into a new environment requires significant adaptation, and has the potential to cause some degree of distress.

Across the six participants and from personal experience, the act of experiencing a particular physical form as a result of controlled, repetitive, athletic practice led to a knowledge of body which was unique. While the more superficial adaptations were easier to quantify, the more intangible bodily know-how was more difficult to articulate. Anthony described the significant muscle mass which had accumulated on the right side of his body as a result of his right-sided dominance as he played squash. His “squash bum,” or “over-developed” gluts and quadriceps, were a stand-out feature of his athletic built form, features which are common to high level squash players. Tanner described his physical presence as a swimmer prior to his transition out of sport:

I was very concerned, or aware, of posture and tension in my shoulders and just moving correctly out of the water and so I wasn’t causing my self and physical disservices in everyday life… I just stood really straight and carried myself with this confidence… so when I walked into a doorway like I am pretty tall, so I filled up the doorway vertically
and I felt that I filled it up horizontally as well... I walked very straight and I felt really strong. - Tanner

The idea that there are cellular, muscular, boney adaptations occurring in every moment and every environment, helps to emphasize the athletic body as a fabric woven in sport. Pink (2011) suggests that we start thinking of the body as “an organism that changes biologically in relation to diverse components of its environment,” an assertion which leads us to explore the somatic, sensory, physiological, and neurological adaptations that athletes encounter in their sporting realms. Wainwright and Turner (2006) describe how elite ballerinas speak of ‘muscle memory,’ stating that particular dance steps and intricate movements are “literally ‘in their body.’” This emphasizes the sense that one’s physicality harnesses the capacity for movement, which is inscribed in layers of nerves, muscles, tendons, and cells within the structural form.

From a neuroscience perspective, the brain is another example of an embodied “knower,” as it takes up its role as a manager of physical movement and interaction, which is contingent upon and embedded in the structural environment (Clark, 1997). As Downey (2007) summarized, the body is malleable and plastic. For example, research has shown that “patterns of use and behaviour shape the brain’s architecture; part of learning, then, is a material reallocation of neural resources” (Downey, 2007). Peter Huttenlocher, a pediatric neurologist and neuroscientist, describes how there is plasticity in sensory systems, the motor cortex, higher cortical functions, and language development (Huttenlocher, 2002). Using examples including the capacity to increase one’s IQ, the ability for stroke patients to learn how to walk and talk again, or the learning of complex finger movements in classical pianists, all lead to measurable adaptations and physical alterations in the body, including observable differences in brain regions dedicated to particular tasks (Doidge, 2007; Hutterlocher, 2002). As Nobel laureate and
neuro-anatomist Santiago Roman y Cajal described, “the work of a pianist… is inaccessible for the untrained human, as the acquisition of new abilities requires many years of mental and physical practice…. Such a development takes place in response to exercise, while it stops and may be reversed in brain spheres that are not cultivated” (S. Ramon y Cajal, 1904, as cited in A. Pascual-Leone, 2001). Along with physical changes to brain structure, there are also innumerable changes which occur throughout the entire physical lattice. Thompson (1991) said, “the body is the site of incorporated history,” a road map which exemplifies the journey each physical form has taken to reach its current embodiment (p. 13). While a neuroscientific perspective has relevance in this work, describing the ways in which the body is internally molded by its physical environment, there are critiques of this discipline which must also be considered. Tensions arise when attempts are made to assert causality or even a correlation between various neural or structural adaptations and how those adaptations manifest in behavioural change. This dissertation explores how individuals make sense of their personal worlds, a phenomenon that cannot be understood through brain imaging, or any other neuroscientific pathways, however, the addition of neuroscientific data in this section provides relevant and compelling food for thought within this qualitative work.

As observed in this group of elite athletes, their bodies were a physical manifestation of the hours they spent honing their craft; they physically became their sport. As they moved out of sport, many aspects of their athletic forms remained (while perhaps slowly adapting to their new environments), which became powerful reminders of their past. Through the interview process, I met with retired cyclist, Mitch, on numerous occasions. He was a tall, lean man, whose sunken cheeks and veined forearms gave him a weathered appearance. His muscular composition was hard to detect, as he was quite thin, but there was a sense that his skin, and underlying muscle and bone were quite dense. Mitch, though he had been retired from elite cycling for a number of
years, still wore the bodily inscriptions of his past. Pink (2011) described the physical transformation of the bullfighter’s body, describing the obvious “scars of previous gore wounds,” and the more subtle “musculatures” which had developed through rigorous training and frequent performances. Even once an athlete has left sport, the story of their experience is still worn on their bodies. While some musculature may be degraded, scars may fade and more fat tissue may accumulate, the body retains many aspects of its life history, in both the aesthetic sense and in the ways in which the athlete ‘knows’ their physicality.

Anthropologist Greg Downey (2007) studied the Brazilian martial arts form, capoeira, to explore the biological and physiological bodily adaptations and perceptual plasticity which occur in skill acquisition. He suggests that cultural anthropologists “underestimate the malleability of human physicality, how repeat behaviours and intentional physical projects of self-making might make up physically.” Downey (2007) describes the “sideways glance,” which is the capacity for capoeiristas to keep the entire field of vision as sensitive as possible, while not focusing on one single item in their view. “The ‘knowing how’ that we might call capoeiristas’ visual techniques includes behavioural change to find task-relevant information and suppress attention to distractions: manipulation of the non-conscious visual motion control system for heightened responsiveness; and likely even change to the neurological ‘wiring’ of vision.”

While a small body of existing literature does address the “bodily transition” in retirement from elite sport (Stephan, Torregrosa, & Sanchez, 2007), the phenomenological experiences of the athletes from biological, physiological, neurological, visceral, and sensory perspectives have not been fleshed out. The emphasis in the existing literature, using quantitative metrics (including the Physical Self Inventory), has been on how the body impacts various psycho-emotional parameters, such as global self-esteem (Stephan et al., 2007), without
additionally exploring what the body transition means from a more fleshy, qualitative angle. The numerous ways in which the body is built in sport provide clarity into the reasons why retirement or a departure from athletics can become such a challenging life event for athletes. While the existing literature almost exclusively focuses on the psycho-social ramifications of this departure from sport, the emplaced experience of athletes, whose bodily forms are the vehicle for this retirement transition, are largely ignored. To privilege the psychological, emotional or cognitive ‘meaning’ over that of the visceral and physical is to miss a fundamental component of how this transition is truly experienced. The body has its own “knowledge” which is physically built into its flesh. Though this aspect of the lived experience is challenging to articulate, all six athletes in this study expressed the intangible “feel” or “sense” they had in their bodies. Further, they were able to discuss how their immersion in sport changed their physicality. This focus on the physical is not to de-emphasize the psycho-social, but instead to highlight the “fleshy” experiential aspects of the lived experience which is meant to compliment a greater understanding of how the holistic-self can be made and unmade. To more thoroughly and completely describe this phenomenon, what follows is a case study which focuses on how Mitch wove the fabric of his body through cycling. While his relationship with food and body is only one aspect of his body woven in sport, I chose to highlight this aspect of his experience to ensure that adequate detail and descriptions could be presented.

4.1.3 Case Study – Elite Cyclist, Mitch

Mitch’s story exemplifies a body which was layer upon layer fabricated in sport, as it was built up and broken down over hours on his bicycle. His body and how he felt about his body were constantly in motion and flux. Mitch described his falling in love with cycling and how his
quick ascent into the competitive realm was both exhilarating and unnerving. He was a very young man, a boy really, when he was catapulted into the cutthroat, adult world of competitive cycling. He took on every aspect of the sport with enthusiasm and a stubborn will. As he described, “when I was younger I would pretty much do anything to be better at what I was passionate about, without thinking too much about the consequences. I mean, that is what I was like.”

So, enthralled with the momentum and excitement of his endeavours, he built a strong, lean body. Day after day, on his bike, he crafted his physical embodiment. He began to ride in the winter and go on intensive training camps, which further exaggerated the capacity of his lungs, the veins and arteries which protruded, the thickness of his skin, and his tolerance for pain and discomfort. These changes had a sort of corporeal value in themselves and also solidified his sense of attachment and belonging to his cycling self and cycling family. He rode even on the coldest of days, the air stinging his lungs when he began to breathe heavily and the frigid wind cutting up any slivers of exposed skin. Being on the bike gave him power and freedom.

Parts of his body began taking on greater meaning than they had before. He described his preference for thinness and an aesthetic and sensual fondness for visible vasculature and boney protrusions. Mitch reported, “If I like, saw veins, I would think I was fit and then I thought I could win races… when you are fit then you are going to win.” So, day after day, he grew into a preference for a particular physicality. “Oh yeah, having vascular legs... I think that is a goal of every amateur cyclist… it’s a sign of fitness and just being lean…. so that was something I definitely paid attention to… and then just through my whole body… like the veins I could see, or the bones I could see, or the ribs I could see.” His hours were spent in the saddle, thinking
about biking, or preparing to bike, and inevitably his material self morphed. His long, sinewy legs pushed heavy resistance with ease and his body began to represent who he was.

Mitch and his cycling family passed their beliefs amongst each other. He infused his environment with a determined will to be a “true cyclist” and the others reciprocated. Their lean bodies worked in synergy. They were competitive and supportive, they bolstered each other, reinforcing how special and unique they were for engaging in such an endeavour. There was an energetic flow between them. As one looked at the other’s emaciated body, he had something to work towards, and was reminded that he belonged:

It kind of reinforced what I was doing... it made me kind of aware of how it was a bit weird… but at the same time that is what bike racers do, that is what makes us different than other people… I remember riding with three teammates over three mountains in the alps and like a LONG ride and we were riding really fast… and I had an apple in my pocket and we split it and that is what we ate for the whole ride and we just drank water… I was certainly impacted by my teammates, so I am sure I impacted them.

They lived and trained within stifling proximity of one another, which ensured that their solitary focus on cycling persisted. “Yeah I mean every meal… it was a competition who could eat the least… but everybody was watching every other person at every meal.” There was always someone watching and someone to watch. Their eyes nervously danced from plate to plate at each mealtime.

In each moment, new flesh was formed, greater limits to his physical capacity were established, and new understandings of his body were forged. Similarly to how Mitch
internalized new technical skills on the bike, or gained greater confidence in his fitness, he also learned how to view food and his body in a new way each day:

So I can remember quite distinctly the national team coach coming down and yelling at us for eating too much cheese with our dinners… and so shortly after that I decided I just wouldn’t eat cheese at all and cut it right out of my diet.

These moments contributed to a sort of dietary orthodoxy. They began to feel an exclusive attachment to a doctrine of insider nutritional knowledge, which was built within, and passed among, members of their elite group. There was pride associated with being a part of this group, but there was also shame and indignity. “It was just really demeaning the way we were spoken to… and that happened many times in my career. I mean it really was like this was our job and eating was a part of our job, and if we didn’t eat properly we were going to be reprimanded or scolded for it…. I felt exactly like I did in grade 1 when I got in trouble for colouring outside the lines, or whatever it was… it basically excited the exact same sensation… I can’t remember how many times my coach would say, “what the fuck are you guys eating”… it was just part of the way I lived.” Mitch existed in a narrow world with all of his energy and attention directed towards building a more competent, efficient bodily fabric.

Mitch began to live in a physical form which felt light and strong on the bicycle, but depleted when he wasn’t training. “I passed out a couple times… like I would fall down and shake… never ever when I was riding… I always felt totally fine when I was riding… but when I got back and I would be resting and I would get up off the couch and fall over. At my thinnest I could ride really well… like I felt great on my bike, but off my bike I just felt lethargic and overall lazy… like walking across town just felt lazy and like I wanted to go to sleep and put my legs up and go to sleep.” The ways in which Mitch related to his bodily cues slowly changed.
While there was often discomfort, there was also some pride, some sense of accomplishment which came with his depleted body. “I felt, well my stomach felt empty… it was growling, I couldn’t sleep… I was uncomfortable… I wouldn’t call it painful, just a sense of emptiness, no but it is uncomfortable… I mean I have had a lot of pain, so I wouldn’t call it painful, but it was enough to keep me awake… On some level I liked the fact that I was getting skinnier.”

There were also fighting sensations. There was the intense desire to be lean, which overlapped with an overwhelming physical drive to eat and satiate. “Like after the races I always craved a ton of sugar. Like physically you just were frantic to satiate it… and when you taste, it is amazing… from a young age I was riding my bike and I was riding a lot and I knew I had to eat, so as soon as I got home I craved sugar… I mean, usually I have a real sweet tooth… so I knew I had to fuel… so I had to have that empty feeling… my legs would feel empty… I would get head-rushes.” These conflicting sensations became consuming as it was unclear what it took to be “fit,” and how lean one could get before their behaviours became seriously health compromising. Balancing performance goals, aesthetic preferences, and general health and well-being, became a tremendous burden and preoccupation for Mitch.

There was no simple formula which created his dynamic relationship with food, body, and exercise, but instead innumerable intersecting factors that were in constant flux. Mitch’s tunnel vision dissolved in certain defining moments. He described how some serious crashes gave him new insight into the punishment and rigidity of his routine: “I just started introducing other foods and realizing that I needed more balance in my life. That was brought on by crashes and injuries… there wasn’t anyone who told me that I needed to change the way I was eating.” While he gradually adopted this new attitude, his history was not erased, and he retained a sense
of vigilance and a preference for thinness and vascularity. There was a sense that the tunnel opening widened, but there still remained a confining rigidity.

Mitch’s transition into retirement was a continuation of his attitudes and behaviours towards body and food, as retirement from sport is not a discrete end point. What he demonstrated so clearly was the enduring and dynamic relationship with his body which would persist for the rest of his life. His body, marked by years on his bicycle in the outdoors or on a trainer, carried the inscription of his history. Meanwhile, his body continued to change. It was now in a new environment, one which required him to work in a ‘normal’ job, and one which was not centered around optimizing his body for performance purposes. He described the body he has carried from his cycling world into his retirement:

I have scars on my hips, knees and elbows from crashes… calluses on my thumbs from shifting and braking… stretch marks on my bum and hips from weight fluctuations… scars from broken bones and surgeries (some which required the insertion of metal plates)… hunched back or curved spine from consistent riding… damaged skin from the sun… and damaged teeth from energy drinks and bars.

He lived with some lingering aches and pains, but found comfort in the sense of nostalgia which arrived with those sensations.

What Mitch failed to describe, but was glaringly obvious to me as an outsider, was the incredible athletic capacity which his body retained. When he arrived to meet for our first interview, he was riding his commuter bicycle and everything about his demeanour on the bike was effortless. The bike looked like an extension of his body, the curvature of his back matched the lines of the bicycle and his steady but relaxed grip made me think if the handlebars were
made of egg-shells they would not break under the pressure of his hands. He swung his leg over, while standing on the opposite pedal with his foot and dismounted. Standing on the ground, his hands tapped the breaks ever so slightly, as he gently rocked the bike. He picked the bicycle up gracefully and swung it around, quickly locking it to the fence. While Mitch mourned the loss of his incredible fitness and world class capacities, outsiders could be witness to an incredible artistic display, his oneness with his bicycle was like a perfectly choreographed ballet.

At the time of our interviews, Mitch reported feeling much more relaxed about his eating habits and bodily form, but he did not apologize for his bodily preferences which remained deeply rooted in a cyclist aesthetic. He lived in a corporeal space which had endured relentless training, torn flesh, broken bones, extreme hunger, glutted fullness, his own critical gaze and the dissecting gaze of others. His body was also extremely capable. He could turn a pedal with maximum efficiency, scale mountain ranges and manoeuvre a bicycle as if it were an additional appendage. The story of his life was written on and in his body. He did not relinquish the pleasure he extracted from thinness, lean muscularity, or vascular legs. He was the same man, living in an ever-changing body, with a preference for the physicality that made him feel invincible on the bike.

4.1.4 Using Sensory Data to Unpack the Lived Body

The last decade has given rise to somatic and sensory body work within the social sciences, with sociology and anthropology leading the charge. I chose to use “sensuousness as a paradigm” through which to examine the transition from elite sport into retirement because, like
all human experience, phenomenology is experienced in and through the body (Vannini, Waskul, & Gottschalk, 2012). As Vallini et al. (2012) explain, “sensing and sense making are necessarily conjoined, co-determined and mutually emergent in active and reflexive practice in which we are both the subject and the object of sensations we perceive or for that matter, fail to recognize.” Thus, the sensing body and somatic experience have the capacity to teach us great lessons about the self, transitions, and society, all topics of great interest in this dissertation.

The sensing, somatic body has been explored in sporting literature as scholars have recognized movement, or locomotion, as an important sense in of itself. The vestibular sense and the kinesthetic sense have both been identified as additional senses that participate in concert with the more traditional “five senses,” which have now been expanded to include temperature regulation, itch, tickle, hunger, thirst, etc. (Craig, 2002). The vestibular sense allows us to “perceive direction, acceleration and movement in space”; the kinesthetic sense allows for us to “perceive the relative position and movement of different parts of the body” (Vannini et al., 2012, p. 26-27). Thus, because most human engagement with the world is undertaken through movement, these senses play a significant role in how we understand our environment. Ingold (2000) wrote, “locomotion not cognition must be the starting point for the study of perceptual activity” (p.166). Athletes retain a sort of institutional corporeality and aesthetic, which is deeply enmeshed with their social, psychological and physical worlds. As they float through space, stride down the track, force the pedals into perfectly concentric circles, they are engaging in acts that are shaping their physicality and their external environment. Vannini et al. (2012) describe how “people constantly move to achieve sensations that feel “just right,” and that feeling is “deeply shaped by socialization to what is socially desirable.” Hockey and Collinson (2007), Kleiner (2009), and Potter (2008) all report how the physical actions built into each sporting
While some work has been done on the sensuous experiences related to sporting locomotor activity, Vannini et al. (2012) suggest that “body movement cannot be easily confined to one sensorial dimension alone” (p. 27). They suggest that above and beyond the vestibular, the kinesthetic, taste, sight, sound, touch and smell, the dimensions of such senses as nociception (sense of pain), account for much of the complex understandings which emerge from sensorial investigations in sport. While I certainly agree, I would go further, suggesting that there are many aspects of ‘being’ an athlete that require exploration and investigation above and beyond the sporting (locomotor) act. How athletes eat, how they experience food in their mouths and stomachs, how they smell food, how their body looks in the mirror and how they perceive others’ bodies, how the act of stepping out of bed feels after years of rigorous training or chronic injury or at the end of a three week bicycle race. Each of these sensorial experiences is not only deeply related to the athletes holistic experience in sport, but also connected to how they come to understand the world in a greater sense. Further, while Vannini et al., categorize health and illness as separate from movement in their preeminent work on senses (these categories were likely created to establish coherence and order), there is much about sensations related to health and illness which can also be explored through athletic, moving bodies. Though athletes are not always immediately attuned to their physical sensory experiences, they have experienced great ranges of intense feeling, from great suffering to ecstatic euphoria, from lethargy to energetic flow, and from light and lean, to heavy and slow, which inevitably help them articulate their somatic experiences. Further, athletes often attach greater meaning to these sensations because their bodily investments are tied to their ‘social capital,’ and their self worth.
Eighteen months of interviews produced hours of commentary about how the athletic body felt both prior to, and after, retirement. I was amazed by how I could be transported into their worlds. The taste of their sweat and the crust it formed on their skin, the scent of their sandwich lunches which permeated through the Ziploc plastic and filled their bags with the smell of soggy cheese, the pin pricks which enveloped their lungs as they pushed into physical discomfort, the sense of being alive as they felt their lungs wide open, the deep aches and stabbing pains which kept them up at night or appeared when they attempted to engage in physical activity. There are, of course, too many to name, but each of their illustrations painted a picture in my mind of how they felt and situated me closer to their phenomenology. The following chapters will address how the use of sensory data enabled new and novel thoughts about the weaving and unweaving of elite sportspeople.
Part II

The body has been used throughout this dissertation as a means to explore life-altering periods of transition. At this point I have attempted to provide a comprehensive introduction and review of the literature, a cohesive methodological framework, descriptive and narrative entries, and a theoretical foundation upon which empirical contributions can be built. These next three chapters will highlight the ways in which the body is useful in understanding the bodily transition out of sport and will emphasize why the body matters. Chapter 4 will explore how our sensorial experiences interact with our social and psychological worlds to provide us a medium through which we can better examine our own lives. In essence, it will highlight how the bodily sensations, which arise in the liminal space of athletic retirement, provide opportunities for growth and existential inquiry. Chapter 5 will then investigate how corporeal preferences and habituations, which are established in sport, can be both redeeming while also making periods of transition challenging. Finally, Chapter 6 will conclude and summarize by describing the ways in which using the body can provide a conduit for better understanding and empathizing with others and their lived experiences.
5 Liminality and Existentialism

5.1 Emplacement as a Catalyst to the Insights of Liminality

In 1967, Victor Turner published an essay entitled “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage,” which extended the previous work of Arnold van Gennep, who first coined the term liminality in 1909. Liminality, from the Latin word *limen*, means “a threshold,” and is used to describe the middle stage of rituals, a transition, if you will. Turner describes that while the individuals are “temporarily defined by the ritual context, they are beings-in-transition, no longer what they were, nor yet what they will be” (Rowe, 2008, p. 128). The transition out of elite sport could be considered a liminal experience in that the day-to-day processes and rigidity associated with athletics, including regimented dietary practices, technical training, strength and conditioning, sleep regimes, physiotherapy, massage and other body techniques, become part of the daily ritual, which is not questioned until the athlete leaves sport and enters an in-between space where there is room for reflexivity. Anthony articulated the “narrow and insular focus” that he maintained over the course of his athletic career, while Veronica described her preoccupation with the minutia of everyday training and body work, which consumed her life for over ten years:

I need to be in the gym, I need to be eating properly, I need to be sleeping, because people are looking at me to perform on the ice, people are looking at me to be training, people are
looking at me to be lift this much, people are looking at me to be able to keep my speed up… - Veronica

The release from this lifestyle was then an opportunity for reflection about what that period in her life had meant and where she was to “go from here.” The “essence of liminality” is “its release from normal constraints, making possible the deconstruction of… the meaninglessness of ordinary life” (Turner, 1985, p. 160). The athletic transitions literature has addressed this liminal phase, describing the sense of confusion and disorientation which accompanies it. Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) examined the transition out of elite gymnastics in seven young women, describing a phase after retirement (referred to as “Nowhere Land”), during which the athletes lost their sense of meaning and felt “out of control” due to the uncertainty of their future endeavors.

The constant sensory and corporeal embodiments that exist in the retired body, in particular in those who experience chronic pain and a strong sense of a ‘degrading body,’ act as catalysts for the reflexivity and at times existential questioning which accompanies the liminal transition out of elite sport. While the psycho-social variables are foundational to the process of critical thought and self reflection, the body is the home for that questioning and the vehicle through which individuals live those experiences. A constant nagging embodied pain, or the sensory attention drawn to areas of physicality which are uncomfortable (i.e., “excess” fat, sagging skin, lethargy, and uncoordinated physical movement) can powerfully ground the individual in their sense of fallibility and act as a reminder of the sacrifices they made for rather ‘meaningless’ sporting rituals and their corresponding social rewards.

This realization aligns with Pronger’s (2002) assertion that “the technology of physical fitness unites a relatively coherent script for the body, suggesting limited and productive
directions for desire” (p.225). The tunnel vision of ritualistic athletic training ensures that those who engage have little time to question the greater objectives, purpose, and meaning in their lives, getting swept up in the momentum of their self-centered quest for improved physical performance, aesthetic goals, body sculpting and social reward. Pronger (2002) suggests that the false belief that salvation can be found in these “scripts of the body” contributes to “a life described as essentially lacking” (p.225).

From the data collected in this study, two aspects of the bodily experience through the retirement process enabled greater reflexivity and critical appraisal during the liminal period of sport exit. The degradation of the physical form (the alteration of shape, physical competence, and sensory joy) and the sense of a broken body (through injury, illness, and chronic pain), uprooted the athletes’ sense of stability, organization, and purpose in life, calling into question the value and meaning of all that was valorized. The “absurdity” of their time in sport was highlighted by the breakdown of the bodies they built so tirelessly, and magnified the fragility of their built sense of self. The liminal space of athletic retirement was, to some, shattering to the self, or the self as it was understood. The breakdown of their bodies and their loss of competence had the capacity to make them acknowledge the fragility of what they had built themselves on. The valorization, sense of uniqueness and specialness, and fundamental sense of worth which was built on these externalized physical actions become glaringly obvious in the bright lights of a post-sport body which was less agile, weaker, fatter and “broken” in some respects.

Scott Tinley, in his book, “Racing the Sunset: A quest for life after sport,” brings to light the social challenge of disentangling the interpersonal prestige and fame which comes with athletics, from one’s sense of self. He describes how the social reward of elite athletics “grabs hold of many athletes both as this emblem of success and as a kind of self-sustaining drug,”
leading to both symbolic and existential inquiry in the face of post-sport self-doubt. The social
prestige which accompanies participation in elite athletics is a direct result of physical
competencies, a sculpted bodily form, and expert sporting action, so as the physical capacity
disappears, what then happens to the bedrock which supports this heightened sense of self-
importance?

Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) also describe this period of existential questioning during
which time the athletes examined the meaning and purpose of their lives and their personal
worth. Further, they describe how many of the young women began to examine and question the
“doctrines of elite sport that they had thoroughly internalized and accepted as truth” (p. 123).
While the work of Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) focused on the psycho-social aspects of the liminal
phase, we extended their finding, identifying the body as an incredibly powerful tool in bringing
existential questions and critical inquiry regarding the nature of elite sport to light. The almost
immediate degradation of certain physical features, juxtaposed against bodily reminders of a
body woven in sport, necessitated an acknowledgement of the fleetingness and fragility of a built
body. Furthermore, as referenced in Chapter 3, people “know as they go”; thus, the constant flux
of bodily sensation provides a constant ‘sensory dwelling’ for individuals to experience these
moments of self-exploration. For some, this encouraged critical dialogue about the fundamental
nature of elite sport and life, while for others, it was simply another way for them to re-
individualize and perpetuate a sense of personal responsibility for bodily management.

Pursuits in elite sport have a long history of being framed in technological, body-as-
machine terms, while concurrently de-emphasizing the personhood of the athlete, and their
unique human experiences within athletics. A strong “performance narrative” has pervaded the
culture of sport, and athletes have been entrenched in a world of quantifiable physiological data,
which has discounted and undermined their personal, somatic, corporeal experiences. Thus, while the fabric of the body is woven in sport, so too is the self. When that physical form degrades there is an inevitable sense that one is losing themselves, because in essence, they materially are. Turning to the literature on illness and disease, Oliver Sacks (1986) provides insight into how the intuitive sense of body that we each possess is indispensable for our sense of ourselves. Sacks articulates the very basis of the self as being in one’s “corporeal identity,” and thus, the loss of one’s corporeal identity has the potential to leave one “deprived” of their “existential, epistemic, basis.” If the “fundamental, organic mooring of identity” is founded in the fabric of our being, our bodies, then how does one re-conceptualize that sense of identity in a “new” physical form? Toombs (1988) suggests that the “lived body (my embodiment) is not extrinsic to the self. In fundamental ways I AM my body. A threat to the body necessarily incorporates a threat to my very self; a change in my body functioning represents a concurrent change in my world (my being-in-the-world)” (p.207).

This sense of loss due to changes in physicality was expressed in various ways. Some discussed the ways in which their new physicality felt limited, others expressed vulnerability in their new found realization that they had less control over their physical functioning than they had once believed. While the liminal phase created space for critical inquiry, all of the participants did inevitably find some restitution in their sporting bodies. In time, they were able to acknowledge the great strength and power which physical activity had granted them, their bodies woven in sport. Thus, the essence of their sporting bodies did not disappear in their retirement, but instead, through the dissolution of their glorified personae’s, they were able to recognize the purity and magnificence of their body’s strength and capacity. I will begin by exploring the body’s degradation, describing how the participants attempted to come to terms with this ‘new’ reality. An exploration into how this breakdown impacted the athlete’s sense of
self will then be forged. Finally, a look at how the destruction of the glorified personae from sport resulted in a new recognition of the strength and power that the body held will conclude this chapter. While I will explore each of these ideas in turn, I hope to emphasize the idea that these reflections were experienced and expressed in a non-linear fashion. Ideas, feelings, reflections, emotions, and thoughts were transient. In one breath, a participant would articulate a new found sense of freedom and relief as a result of their retirement, which would then be followed by a sense of loss and sadness, a crumbling of their former selves that may then be followed by a sense of pride in what sport had made of them. These fragmented, and often contradictory, sentiments were not dishonest or lapses in memory; they instead represent the ways in which humans come to terms with themselves in this world, a journey of paradox and nuance. In “The Fatal Flaw,” Andrew Sparkes described his own fragmented reconciliation with self as his body degraded in injury, writing, “At different times I can locate bits of myself in all the categories that have just been described. I am sometimes each of all of these, and more, as change and sameness mix in the same breath (1996, p. 489).”

### 5.1.1 The Degrading Body

Toombs (1988) suggests that in illness “the possibilities for action shrink,” such that “whether I like it or not, there are certain activities, postures, gestures, and so forth, which are no longer within my bodily scope” (p.208). Similarly, the scope of bodily movement and action is narrowed within the scope of athletic retirement. Even in those athletes who do not suffer from career-ending injuries, or chronic pain, or a significantly altered physical form, there is still to some degree a narrowing of physical possibility. Transitioning out of sport means that an athlete
must come to terms with the fact that though “I could once dance up mountains on my bicycle,” or “perform a triple flip with a half twist,” those physical spaces are no longer available:

I think I probably notice it the most when I am trying to go for a run now… and yeah it is kind of sad because I can only go for like 25 or 30 minutes at the most... I am not so good at longer endurance stuff. I guess I am just so limited in my range of motion is so limited and because I am trying to go longer I am not going fast and hard... I feel almost sad for my body that it doesn’t get to do those things anymore… um, like I barely use my arms to do anything, like my arms are just by my side when I am running… so I definitely miss it when I am doing that, or when I have been sitting at my desk studying, or seeing clients… so I miss it. - Hilary

In the athletic context, this shift out of sport is particularly jarring because a sense of ease has long accompanied physical movement:

I miss using my body and doing crazy things all the time… I can’t do it much anymore because it hurts so much more… so I don’t do it as much as I used to but I really miss it. - Hilary

While athletes do experience a range of physical embodiments including feeling very sore, tired, and lethargic, at times, they are also perhaps the closest to the upper limits of human capacity when they are performing at their best. All of the participants described fleeting sensations of “ecstasy,” some even reporting “invincibility” which accompanied their most fluid and competent movements.

Like if I decide I am going to kick and suddenly, you can go from one pace to just snap your fingers and BOOM! And then the confidence that comes with that. Like, you are
racing someone down the last fifty meters of the track and you know that you are going to beat them... you just know it is going to happen... because you know that you can just make your body go that much harder and that much faster... at that point it is effortless...
everything is in-sync, everything is in-tune, everything is super hyper focused... the flip side of that is you can also feel... if you are not really fit or really sharp or really focused… um you can feel a significant amount of pain and agony... but I suppose that is what you do to get to that point of feeling almost invincible… - Melanie

For all of the six athletes, there was a sense that this loss of competence was something that needed to be reconciled. Melanie described how she had come to terms with her ‘new’ level of ability, and felt contented knowing that her memory of those experiences would always be a part of her. That being said, she referenced her “early days” with a sense of nostalgia for her “light and bouncy” frame. For the other five, there was an acknowledgment that they longed to return to their “old” body. Tanner described his unwillingness to get into a pool, because if he “couldn’t swim like I used to, what was the point?”

What these limitations exemplified to the participants in this study was that the scope of bodily capacity is finite. This realization was powerful and incredibly destabilizing to some. The liminal space which they had entered upon retirement, created a sever in their understanding of the world and their bodies, which had previously followed a constant and comfortable script. Pheonix and Sparkes (2007) describe the ways in which self-aging is perceived and phenomenologically experienced through various narrative maps. They emphasize that the “high performance body,” which is “often extremely disciplined and shaped by various regimes and technologies designed to ensure corporeal control and predictable performance outcomes,” must inevitably create new conceptualizations of the aging body-self. Our data emphasized the
athletes despair as they struggled to come to terms with their changing forms. Year upon year they had built their bodies, fixed them, and moulded them, and their social and psychological worlds had emphasized the control and power they had over those processes. Thus, as their bodily breakdown and aging was brought to light, so too was their mortality and human fragility. This realization not only impacted them as athletes, but also shattered their stability on the most fundamental human level. Tinley (2003) asserts that elite athletics does not provide an antidote to human frailty, despite what outsiders, non athletes, fans, and even athletes themselves begin to believe. Thus, though the athletes had been woven in a social milieu that touted the body as a “machine,” which could be “serviced and repaired” through active living, the degradation of their physical form enlightened them to their human frailty (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995, p. 44).

Just as the physical form was constantly in-flux, growing, changing, adapting and degrading, the reflections on self and the moments of insight during the liminal period of retirement were also in-flux. Moments of reflexivity and existential questioning began to emerge more frequently, sharing ‘psycho-emotional space’ with a range of on-going mental dialogues. For two of the athletes, their initial recollections of questioning their worth and the value of their athletic endeavours began well before their actual departure from sport. Both individuals reported suffering from severe injuries which resulted in their initial critical dialogue surrounding their involvement in sport, their reflections on the self, and their general sense of worthiness:

I was injured, so that was kind of the start of things because that opened my mind to what was outside of squash. Because before I was kind of tunnel vision and this is what I’m going to do for ten years... and then I got a back injury... and that was September of
2011… and so I was out of competition for about 7 months and I could still kind of and train a little bit um... But those first couple months actually stopped playing… like the first two months... those were the depression months... like just full on… cause I was in pain as well, so the more pain I was in the more depressed I was… - Anthony

Anthony articulated that his back injury was a catalyst to a deep depression, in which he began to truly reflect on all that he had done in his career and look forward to who and what he wanted to be. While he described this time as one of immense pain and suffering, he also suggested that he was able to grow and learn from his experiences, and re-assess his position in sport:

It was the first time that I was stopped in my tracks… and like “oh, my body is fallible”… I think it is just a fear of being in this society and being in this world… but I think it is a fear that this body will break down and this body will eventually die… but I think it is a defense mechanism of wanting that security and wanting that control. -Anthony

Inevitably, less than a year following his injury, he retired and moved on to a career as a squash professional. Mitch told a similar story in that after a few serious injuries, which left him with a broken femur and back, he took a long break from cycling to assess whether he was interested in continuing. In Mitch’s words, “I hit the reset button, while I was recovering from those injuries.” By the time our interviews came to be Mitch had formed a highly critical view with regards to the pitfalls of elite sport. While he expressed his deep love for cycling he articulated his clear disillusionment with the institution of sport:

I think sport damages a lot of lives… its not healthy for a 6 year old kid to be in an arena at 5 am in the morning… I think a lot of those kids would rather be playing in the street with their buddies. – Mitch
For Hilary, Veronica and Mitch in particular, the severity (and the chronic nature) of their injuries provided a platform for critical inquiry:

I am not sure I would ever put my kid in gymnastics, just based on what my body feels like now. – Hilary

5.1.2 The Body’s Autonomy

While one can experience the body as under their ownership, “my body,” there is also a sense, particularly when the body begins to ‘break down,’ that individuals are at the mercy of their bodies. Richard Zaner (1981) describes “corporeal implicatedness,” which refers to the idea that the body’s experiences invariably impact the self. Thus, human beings are at the disposal and the mercy of their bodily trajectories, such that if the body suffers, so too does the self. While this concept appears to be somewhat obvious, there is a tendency, in elite athletics in particular, to feel that one is asserting a tremendous amount of control ‘over their body’:

“Like, I just had some minor injuries and it just made me think of future... I never really thought of my body failing me, but it has been… and it will continue to I guess.” - Anthony

Toombs (1988) describes how in illness the patient becomes “chillingly aware” of the fact that “he has only a limited ability to effectively control the workings of the biological organism which is his body” (p.219). For example, we go about our lives with very little awareness about true inner workings of our heart, lungs and other organs, which continue functioning while we participate in the world. Zaner (1981) suggests that ““Whatever I want, wish or plan for, I irrevocably ‘grow older,’ ‘become tired,’ ‘feel ill,’” which are embodiments which occur
whether ‘we’ acknowledge, accept or approve of such bodily changes (p.54). Toombs goes on to suggest that “the body is experienced as essentially out of the control of the self.” This reality is perhaps more harshly felt by elite athletes as the bodies they wove in sport have been constructed to feel very much a result of their concrete physical efforts. Control, within the realm of athletics, is something which is highly valorized, including control over one’s physical weight and shape, food intake, training regimes, performance outcomes, and general physical abilities. Therefore, the realization that we are not, in fact, in as much control of our physical forms as we once thought, or would like, can be destabilizing:

> It feels so frustrating sometimes. I spent my whole life… literally my whole life working out and training and then I retire and within like six months I am just an ordinary person. Like, I have a muffin top! It seems totally unfair. – Melanie

Many of the athletes expressed this frustration, as they watched their physical forms change before their eyes, and as they felt their competency diminish:

> I think posture is something that I like to be aware of... but I feel like... I feel kind of like a shrimp now... I lost weight and I didn’t just lose the muscle that I had, but it has redistributed across my body... like if me and my friends are screwing around and try and do a pull-up. I can’t do a pull-up to save my life anymore… I feel like a shrimp... like I am noticeably skinnier… but everything... like lifting things… pushing things. I don’t have the kind of strength and physical confidence I had when I was swimming… and then all of those things are extremely apparent when I go to the gym or the pool… obviously I am not at that point anymore but it is especially discouraging and apparent, how different my body is, when I am doing exercise. - Tanner
Hilary discussed how this sense of control over one’s physicality and the ‘building of their bodies,’ was established at a very young age:

It was always drilled in that if you take a day off or two days off, then you have lost two days of work then you have lost two days of body memory and it was just not an option to take time off… I think we always trained all summer, we had maybe one week off… I remember there is one home video of me when I was younger and I was like “this is the first day I have seen the sun in a week” and I was like thirteen… like come on... so it was just not acceptable to take a break, from myself or my coach. - Hilary

The ‘creation’ of the athletic body became a work in progress, one in which the athlete took control and worked diligently, feeling that their efforts were somewhat fragile and malleable. Hilary alluded to an internal force, which she referred to as “body memory.” Though the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of this “body memory” remained elusive, there was an awareness that it was a force which could be overcome through consistent training efforts. She realized if she worked harder, she could ensure that the body work and molding she had done would be maintained, and not be overtaken by natural bodily forces. To some degree the rigidity and ritualistic nature of elite practice was driven by the fear that this internal power could overcome. As the control which Hilary assumed over her body became apparently fallible in retirement, this new realization led her to question whether “controlling her body” should be something which she grounded her sense of stability and personhood in:

“But you know that had been my life for fifteen years, training for gymnastics, and establishing really close relationships with people, and feeling successful and accomplishing things and winning Canadian championships... that kind of stuff and then having sit top and having it be like, “okay, now what?” I can’t do this anymore, I don’t
have that feeling of success… that you get day to day, its not just at the end of the year winning championships… it is when you get a new skill… so I guess you don’t have that reassurance, I guess anymore… so its like “what do I do with my life?.. my body is old, it hurts a lot, ALL the time… at this point I had had three knee surgeries, umm and like any other retired athlete, it hurts to do a lot of things… so it was kind of that… I can maybe continue to push and put my life a little bit longer and continue to ruin my body, or decide to stop and move on with my life… It was tough.” - Hilary

As Wainwright and Turner (2006) argue, “It also seems likely that the inevitable decline of physical capital of the ageing body may be more difficult for athletes, such as dancers, to accept than people where the body is less important in the formation of their self-identity (like, say, academics)” (p.243). Interestingly, this statement could be expanded to suggest that while the ‘body-centric’ nature of elite sport may incur greater challenges during the aging process, through injuries or in a retirement transition, those gut-wrenching realities help provide strokes of insight into the fragility of the body, the safety of our menial daily rituals and how a self built on the ever-degrading physical body is unstable and vulnerable. This may inevitably lead to greater reflexivity and growth in athletes as they come to realize that the true meaning and value of oneself is not tied to the material and external.

5.1.3 The Inextricable Relationship Between Body and Self

“Bodies, in their own right as bodies, do matter. They age, get sick, enjoy, engender, give birth. There is an irreducible bodily dimension in experience and practice; the sweat cannot be excluded…. Bodily experiences are often central in memories of our lives, and thus our understanding of who and what we are” (Connell, 1995, p. 51).
In Western culture the body symbolizes the self and interacts with our intimate views of the self in complex ways. Not only do we experience the world through our bodies, but our bodies are seen as a physical product, or manifestation, of ‘us,’ who we are to others, and who we are to ourselves. Giddens suggests that the body and the self become enmeshed within one’s sense of self-identity, the body becoming highly relevant to the identity which the individual promotes. The degree to which the body impacts one’s sense of who they are is perhaps never as significant as it is in the case of elite athletes. With a body woven in sport and the psycho-social lattice formed within the athletic context, the body becomes foundational to whom athletes view themselves to be. The athletes in this study, particularly those who perceived their exterior physical shapes to have changed somewhat significantly since they were training and competing, expressed this sense of a lost knowledge of who they were in the presence of a changed corporeality. Leder (1990) describes how the “absent presence,” of the normal, taken-for-granted body, is replaced in chronic illness or after a serious injury by a body which feels alien. These events have the capacity to uproot and magnify how intricately connected the body and self truly are. Veronica described her struggle to reconcile with her ‘new’ physical form:

   And now to be like, oh my gosh, I’m 30 pounds overweight and what are people going to think? Like, I’m an ex-Olympic athlete and I’m carrying so much weight… and I’m coaching these athletes and I should be in shape just like they are. – Veronica

Hilary described a similar fear of social judgment in the wake of a changed body post-retirement:

   There are things, like, I look at myself in the mirror and not like it, or think that my boyfriend is going to look at me and not like it… or especially like going back to Stanford… like I am going back in July for a wedding and like I cannot go back fat… like
people will see me and judge me... or like going home I have to look better going home, so my parents think that I am taking care of myself. - Hilary

Veronica went on to express her sense of lost personhood, as a result of her changed physical form. She articulated a sense of shame around this loss of self, suggesting that how in the absence of her once-held physical capacities and in living in a new bodily form she was no longer the Olympic athlete that everyone expected her to be and she was no longer the women she wanted to be:

You know, you are that role model for a lot of kids... and you know when I’ve run a hockey school or a camp… or you go on to speak at banquets and things like that… and people... I show my medals... and they ask me “oh my gosh you were part of that team? What was your favourite Olympics?” and signing my hockey cards... I feel like it is kind of a responsibility to stay that person I was… I mean I will always be that person… but yes I’ve retired, you’re not training you’re not competing, you’ve had twins... but when I talk to people and coach, I feel like I should be that person I was… I feel like I can talk about my experiences, but I feel like I can’t show what I was... like I can’t hop on the ice and show what I was in 2006, and 2007… um… so it is hard… it’s hard to accept. I think it is sometimes what I owe people… oh these people want my autograph, or they want me to teach them… I should be the person I was. – Veronica

The shattering of Veronica’s former physical form exemplified the degree to which her sense of self was rooted in her bodily exterior. Sparkes (2005) described how a male bodybuilder he studied, Jessenka, had built a “hard muscular exterior” which “encased a fragile and vulnerable self” (p. 155). He described that Jessenka had attempted to build a body which would help him “transcend” his former self, but found that as his muscle disappeared, the illusion of the
“powerful, transformed, new self” was greeted by the old fragile and feared self. Somewhat similarly, the degradation of the physical form through injury, and the loss of physical competence and aesthetic comfort, was a trigger for the athletes to feel exposed to their fallibility and unsure of their existential foundations. Over many years of immersion in sport the athletes were able to rely on their built physicality and their athletic personae to bolster their confidence in times of uncertainty. In the absence of their personal and social “athletic identity,” and in the wake of their crumbling physical form, the participants had to reach for something other than their ‘past’ lives and bodies to secure themselves comfortably in their ‘new’ worlds.

Shillings (2002) suggests that, “In the affluent West, there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of becoming; a project which should be worked at and accomplished as a part of the individual’s self-identity” (p. 5). This view becomes highly problematic and threatening to our epistemic roots when we acknowledge the impermanence of our bodies and our world. Perhaps the mere fact that we look to our ever-changing external form to solidify our sense of self illustrates our fate, a fate which is doomed to experience a fragile sense of who we are unless we reject our cultural resistance to aging, decay and inevitable death. As Brian Pronger (2002) asserts, “grasping for permanence, rather than moving with the flow of life, the technology of physical fitness is ultimately a nihilistic way of passing through life” (p.24).

While other scholars have identified the liminal period of athletic retirement as one accompanied by existential crises or deep self-investigation, this study demonstrated the capacity of the body’s sensations to call to the forefront those reflective insights. A focus on the body’s sensations highlighted the capacity for deep introspective analysis to arise from the combined social, psychological and corporeal events which culminated in retirement. We experience life
through our own unique sensory dwellings (our bodies), which are not simply shells that encase our thoughts, but instead richly woven fabrics, which become our thoughts, ideas, actions and worldviews. When we live in a body that is breaking down or in constant pain, that changes the way in which we experience and make sense of our world. Thus, the body and its rich sensory inputs catalyze moments of existential questioning and highlight our fragility and mortality.

6 Habituated Bodies

6.1 Corporeal Preferences in Sport and Beyond

“The body is man’s first and most natural instrument. Or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man’s first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means, is his body.” (Mauss, 1973)

As athletes grow and morph into their athletic form, they concurrently begin to form preferences for both aesthetic and corporeal ways of living in their bodies. These preferences are not only attached to psycho-emotional meaning as a result of interactions with their social environments, but also retain a sort of bodily knowledge. This body knowledge is a subconscious predilection towards the physicality which was woven in sport. Weiss (1999) references Paul Schilder’s (1950:270) work, articulating how the body establishes a preference to its comfortable, habituated body, “These habitual or ‘primary’ postures, for Schilder, not only tend to be those which are physiologically most comfortable and maximally effective in achieving
perceptual goals… but they also provide a certain degree of psychological (and certainly social) stability insofar as the body tends to be more “relaxed” in a familiar position” (Weiss, 1999, p.18). For the athletes, an example of this was the paralyzing anxiety and nervousness prior to a competition, followed up by the post-competitive, blissful relief, which made the athletes feel alive in their bodies. The participants described the ecstatic thrill of feeling so alive in their bodies, not strictly as a result of the social or psychological attachments to those sensations, but also as a result of their sensorial preference for living in a body which felt such a gush of sensation:

During stage races there would always be this period of time right after you finished your day where you would just be overwhelmed with relief… and joy… and just ecstasy. It was a very peaceful feeling. I would always just sit in that feeling for a while. Yeah, it is really hard to explain how good that feeling is. – Mitch

The athletes in this study described growing accustomed to these types of bodily experiences and began to enjoy and relish in the satisfaction and comfort which it brought them. The quote above from Mitch describes the sense of calm and relief he felt in his body. These experiences of feeling comfort and peace were, of course, connected to psychological and social phenomena, such as the pressure to succeed and win from his teammate, coaches, fans and himself and the release of that pressure following the commencement of his race, but they were also physical, somatic and sensorial. Asking and learning about the sensations they felt and the physical experiences they went through, allowed for new insights into the phenomenology of the making and unmaking of sports people. While the corporeal, environmental and psycho-emotional act in concert at all times, a focus on the somatic helped to make sense of the transitioning body.
Over years and years of immersion in sport, the athletic body adapts to its physical surroundings, becoming a body woven in sport. Athletes establish preferences for various somatic and sensory ways of being and also begin to attach social and psychological meaning to those sensations. From these data, there were many examples of this which emerged, including the euphoria of competent physical movements, a sense of emptiness in their stomachs, a feeling of lightness or leanness, their sensations of suffering and discomfort while training, and the constant soreness and fatigue that they experienced as a result of intensive workouts. The case study presented on Mitch (in Chapter 3) was a good example of how he adopted very strong preference for a particular aesthetic and corporeality, which he built through his environmental interaction in sport. Despite acknowledging that some of these sensations were not sustainable outside of the elite sporting arena, Mitch, along with many of the other athletes, yearned for their ‘old’ sense of body back or attempted to retain their sporting bodies, once they began their transition out of sport.

What the athletes in this study demonstrated was that upon their exit from sport, their will and desire to maintain their former physicality and their preferred sensory embodiments translated into various behaviours related to body and health. Firstly, many of the athletes remained active following their retirement. This was positive in the sense that they had adopted a propensity towards exercise and activity which has been shown time and time again to engender significant health benefits. Further, many had adopted a deep love and attachment to the sensations which they experienced in movement, and thus worked to retain the physical skills which enabled them to experience those feelings. This was both psycho-emotionally and physically rewarding to them, even in the absence of the social reward attached to winning or the competition of elite sport. There was, however, a very fine line between participation which was rewarding, and redeeming, and that which was health-compromising. Many of the athletes had
adopted attitudes towards exercise which supported activity even when injured, or sick, and which served a more a self-destructive purpose as opposed to one which promoted self-care. Additionally, our findings showed that the relationships that athletes established with food and eating during their careers translated into the behaviours they carried out in retirement. Each of these issues will be discussed in turn, and in relation to how a body woven in sport maintains both aesthetic and corporeal preferences into retirement.

6.1.1 Exercise in Sport and Retirement

The relationships the athletes established with their bodies in exercise and sport were complex. The physical exertion, technical competence, and ease of movement which they experienced every single day as they participated in their sport, became a way of life and way of feeling their bodies. When articulating these sensations, I was overwhelmed by the joyfulness and authentic pleasure that recounting such calculated and perfected movement brought to their narratives. They spoke of the “power,” “flow,” “strength,” “energy,” “ecstasy,” and “bliss” which they experienced in everyday moments at training, and certainly in competitive settings. They concurrently described a constant ache and soreness from repetitive tough workouts, a sense of “fullness” in their legs, and the sensation of being physically “depleted” or “emptied out” at the end of the day. They were not naïve to the idea that the ecstatic bliss and ease of movement they felt were not possible without the struggle, the discomfort and the depletion. For all of the participants in this study, this state of physicality was completely normal. Extremely high physical high’s and extremely low low’s. Their bodies where alive and abuzz with movement, their blood was flowing and their cells were breaking down and rebuilding.
I am not sure how to describe it, but I guess it was just like there was always blood gushing through my veins. I had always just sweat, so my pores were open, my skin kind of tight with encrusted salt… I could almost imagine all the little vessels in my lungs wide open. It was just a feeling of being alive. I guess it felt like the opposite of death - Melanie

The athletes began by reliving what their bodies felt like during exercise and the role that it played in their lives throughout their athletic career and then moved on to share with me what their “new bodies” felt like. For all of the participants, the transition meant a significant decrease in the quantity of physical activity they were participating in on a daily basis. One of the six athletes (Veronica) was barely active, another (Tanner) moderately active, while the other four (Anthony, Hilary, Melanie and Mitch) remained very active, working out most days (if not all days) of the week. Even for those who remained very active the quantity of activity which they participated in was significantly reduced:

I was training for a triathlon a while back and I would sometimes get frustrated if I couldn’t do two-a-day workouts… and I had to say to myself, “look, you are a normal person now, its okay.” But sometimes I feel guilty for not being active in the way I used to be. I know… It is illogical. - Melanie

The participants each spent time discussing the wonderment and joy that they felt for their sport in its most pure form. All of them described the sense of elation that they felt as their bodies moved through space. Melanie described “exploding” as she pushed through the track and felt overwhelmed with the simultaneous ease and power. Mitch described the feeling of total freedom as his hair and skin were enveloped with cool air while he descended down the mountain face, like he was “getting away with something.” Hilary described enjoying a sense of exhilaration as she “floated” above the bars before “dropping back down to earth” with complete
control. Anthony spoke of the effortless flow he felt as his racquet connected with the ball with precision.

There is nothing better than just being out on my bike. I have always loved it. I feel like a little kid getting away with something when I am out riding. It is such a sense of freedom.
– Mitch

Sometimes I felt like I was flying… Just for a split second, I would be weightless and completely in control. I could see the ground traveling underneath me and the bar coming towards me. My body felt tight and strong, but not rigid. It was like there was a nice balance between being very precise and in-control, but also loose. – Hilary

When things are really really clicking, you can tell your body to do something and it is able to just do it… without forcing it or pushing it… it’s just there… like if I decide I am going to kick and suddenly, you can go from one pace to just snap your fingers and boom… and then the confidence that comes with that… like you are racing someone down the last fifty meters of the track and you know that you are going to beat them… you just know it is going to happen… because you know that you can just make your body go that much harder and that much faster… at that point it is effortless… everything is in-sync, everything is in-tune, everything is super hyper focused… the flip side of that is you can also feel… if you are not really fit or really sharp or really focused… umm you can feel a significant amount of pain and agony… but I suppose that is what you do to get to that point of feeling almost invincible… - Melanie

Each of the participants recounted the pleasure they gained from having such control and confidence in their bodies, and how it became just a normal way of life. Though every day was
not easy and every manoeuvre was not always seamlessly executed, overall, there was a sense that the physicality, or the actual ‘doing’ of the sport was the most redeeming aspect of their participation. Wainwright and Turner (2006) allude to this competence, describing the “attack” that ballet dancers must achieve through “sharp, clean and incisive” movements, and how the embodiment of those sensations was a fundamental part of the balletic experience. The six athletes in this study described both the ecstatic joy of feeling so “zoned-in” during a race or competition, and the incredible suffering that they endured through hours of training. The pain and pleasure which they extracted from intense physical engagement was a huge part of their sporting experiences, which they described in great detail and with fondness:

In a workout I will often do hills or some type of sprint exercises and occasionally I will do bike sprints… so you feel the legs… they would start to burn, like little pricks… I kind of liked that sensation… there was some enjoyment in the suffering of physical training… and then in the last two years of my training. I knew when I hit the point that I wanted to stop and then I would say, this is when it really matters... and at that point, usually thoughts would come in trying to get out of it and my body… my breathing would be very hard... very fast breathing... lots of burning in my lungs, like pin pricks, I can feel it, but its hard to put words to it. I guess burning isn’t the word, but it’s the only one that comes to mind… nearing the end the legs are so heavy, my skin was hot and wet, moist… umm. There would be a tingling on my skin almost… like it was like a lot of energy being put out... a very dry mouth, maybe metallic taste is the closest… my ears would pop and when I would breath I could feel my ears in my head. Blurry vision. Less coordination... I really had to fight to keep a proper running pattern, but I always felt that when I got tired my vision would go and I would go inward... when I would get tired I would try to focus even harder… vision is a big thing in squash because even when you are really, really tired, you
need an acute focus on the ball. So I would have to try and prevent myself from going to the internal and stay with the external. - Anthony

Villella (1992) voiced a similarly ecstatic experience, articulating the embodiment of being a dancer as one of “dancing in a world of pain and magic,” an experience that is inevitably lost once a ballerina leaves the stage (Hamilton, 1998). The athletes recounted these sensations in great detail and were fully enveloped by the memories of their participation as we discussed their experiences. To be awash in so much corporeal feeling was something that became a daily event, and the marker of a successful, accomplished day. Articulating these sensory experiences led to significant commonality in the discussions with the athletes. Aside from one participant, all of them verbalized very similar experiences with intense physical exercise. They spoke of the incredible discomfort, the overwhelming body-wide sensation, the emotional battle which they undertook to overcome their suffering, the accomplishment and contentedness they gained from their most epic efforts, and the pleasure, ecstasy and bliss which accompanied their efforts:

I would be shaking, my skin would be on fire with heat and sweat, my hair standing on end, my lungs would feel like they had rocks in them… But the joy of surviving it… The pleasure of enduring… At first it was only a few days after a tough effort that I started to feel that pleasure or the urge to do it again… but soon enough the effort itself and enjoyable sensations sort of merged. – Melanie

The athletes also spoke about how these sensations became incredibly addictive. Wainwright and Turner (2004) discuss the “addictive qualities” that elite ballerinas derived from “the sheer physicality of their working lives – of feeling exhausted, sweaty and out of breath.” This finding was extended in this work as the athletes discussed that even though they didn’t
want to ride or swim or train some days, the resultant outcome, the blissful after-effect, was worth it and always drove them back for more:

Everyone talks about the “runner’s high”… and yeah, I mean that is a real thing. But honestly I think it goes beyond that. The sense of euphoria or ecstasy that I felt after epic efforts… I can’t even describe it in words. It fills you up, it is a warmth, an energy, like you are the lightest person in the world… I just love those moments in a race whether it is a two minute race, like an 800 on the track, or a 4 and a half hour race like a half Ironman, where you are just in this zone of being so focused on what you are doing that nothing else matters in the world or in your life and just the energy you get from digging deep and pushing yourself as hard as you can go and the pain that come with it… and the pain and the doubt that might be at times during the race, but then when it is all done, it is all worth it, and the highs that you got from giving it all you have got. I think it is just a really special feeling that I haven’t really had in anything else that I have pursued… it is very addictive… –Melanie

On multiple occasions the athletes noted that during exercise, the body felt so much and experienced sensation so powerfully that there was no room left in their minds for other thoughts, worries or concerns. Four of the athletes described their training experiences as so intense that they could escape the rest of the world. For some, that was due to the overwhelming discomfort they felt; for others, it was a function of the focus and precision they needed in order to safely and successfully execute the actions of their sport:

In some ways it was the opposite of escapism… Well, I mean I guess I was escaping all of those thoughts that float around in my mind… but at the same time I was so focused. It was
like I was completely zoned in on exactly what I was doing and feeling. I guess it was the ultimate example of ‘being present’ in a way. - Melanie

That internal body, when I was physically hurting… it is a not wanting to be there but enjoying it at the same time… what came to mind was doing wall sits… and that was euphoric… there was some euphoria in there… it would shift between pain and euphoria… I would do it for like a half an hour, so there would be a lot of time to feel different things… it was like a meditation in a sense and I would just feel things as they came up… it would literally be the exact same sensation that would be painful would be euphoric at the same time… I would be in suffering pain and my body being like “what are you doing?” but then there would be a shift with the burning in the legs, and the shaking and the breathing and the extreme effort… within all of those sensations there was just a rush of energy through my whole body that was just… it was a rush of positive feeling… but it was pain… there was a euphoria about the pain… it was like “this is what I am feeling” and I am still choosing to not move… and that was euphoria. – Anthony

Experimental studies have shown that when individuals feel they are in control of their pain, the intensity is reduced (Weich et al., 2006), some concluding that when it is perceived that enduring the pain was your own decision, the reward-related neural mechanisms may be activated (Sharot et al., 2009). As Leknes and Batian (2014) suggest, “engaging with challenges that can be mastered and overcome is an important component of living a satisfying life. Pain represents a particularly visceral challenge” (p.61). Further, researchers have found that the relief which follows pain or other aversive experiences can be conflated with a sense of pleasure, or primary rewards following the painful event can be intensified by the sense of relief (Leknes & Batian, 2014). For example, neuroscientists show that food and drink are perceived as more
pleasurable when they are providing relief from hunger or thirst (Kringelbach, 2004). Further, the close link between pain and pleasure, suffering and euphoria, has been physiologically characterized through brain mapping, as researchers have illustrated the intimate link between various (seemingly opposing) physical sensations, especially in the context of positive psychosocial reward. Benedetti et al. (2013) found that individuals who linked pain with achievement noted less aversive responses to pain stimuli, which they concluded was a result of opioid and cannabinoid system co-activation in the brain.

In addition to the physical reward of training and pushing the body to its limits, there was also the social reward of doing so. Within the sporting context, extremely intense physical efforts are expected; they are not valorized, they are just the norm. Athletes, coaches, officials and support teams get used to training at their limits and thus even a day of intense effort that doesn’t match an expected output can be seen as underwhelming. The fans and outsiders, however, are often in awe of the performances of athletes and treat athletic feats as super-human accomplishments. For all of the athletes, this interest and awe from others was both flattering and motivating:

People always say to me, “what motivates you to work so hard? I could never do that!” and I guess I like feeling like what I am doing is special. It is extreme, of course, I usually go to the point of almost making myself sick in practice, but I don’t think people who have never pushed themselves as hard as I did really get it. I have to admit, I like that I am more intense than the average person. I think that is part of what drives me. – Melanie

Mitch discussed how fanatical exercise is valorized by our culture and that people love seeing athletes take extreme risk and punish themselves. He enjoyed being a part of the in-group and
engaging in the behaviours while he was involved, though he has some apprehensions and
criticisms now that he is a few years removed:

It is almost like people want to watch other people explode. Like, look at the Tour de
France. It continues to get more and more dangerous, there are more and more crashes,
guys are dying to get up those mountains day after day. Then you are a hero when you do it. It is fully endorsed. Being a fanatical exerciser is absolutely embraced, it simply means you are a harder worker, more dedicated, and want to win more than the next guy. – Mitch

Melanie described the bond that forms between teammates as a result of the shared experience of
daily intense physical exertion. She discussed the challenge of articulating her pain and pleasure
and noted the special unspoken bond that she had with her teammates as a result of experiencing this with them day in and day out:

Your teammates are really the only ones who get it. Its like, we all turn ourselves inside out
everyday. We go to very dark places, internally I mean. I guess it is like we truly explore
the depths of ourselves, our souls in a way. Truthfully, I can’t explain what that means to
other people in words. – Melanie

Though rarely discussed in their day-to-day lives and though they noted the challenge of articulating their experiences into words, the athletes described their love for the physicality of their sport. Turner and Wainwright (2003) describe how elite runners enjoyed “the strength and light muscularity” of their running bodies, “the cardiovascular conditioning, and also the lightness afforded by a relatively lean body” (p.390). They also describe the valorization and social prestige which “flowed” from their “bodily ‘investments’” (p.274). The athletes in this study discussed the pain and pleasure which they drew from intensive workouts, the ecstasy they
felt as they performed skills effortlessly or powered through a challenging feat. They spoke of the bond that it built between them and their teammates and the confidence and pride they gained from doing (and being) something extraordinary. While the literature has very little content which discusses these aspects as athletes transition into retirement, as I spoke with the participants, they described how foundational their loss of competence and physical exertion was to their retirement experiences.

Mitch, Melanie, Hilary and Anthony were all highly active into their retirement and discussed the various reasons for their maintained physicality. Melanie described the aesthetic and embodied sense of comfort in maintaining a very active lifestyle:

I will never stop exercising. It is in my blood. I absolutely love how it makes my body feel and look and I am just not comfortable living any other way. I exist in a powerful body… Like a body that has force. I think that would disappear if I didn’t exercise. –Melanie

In many ways, this love and passion for athletics is a redeeming aspect of being an elite competitor. The majority of the athletes remained active because they felt that athletics and sport was “in their blood.” Culturally, and scientifically, physical activity is promoted as a health-engendering pursuit. There is a significant body of literature which focuses on the psycho-social determinants which are associated with exercise adherence, and there is significant social and political investment in encouraging physical activity among the masses (Sharratt & Hearst, 2007). In this group of athletes, their early and intensive involvement in elite sport and their preference for a moving body translated into a strong commitment to daily activity, or at least a highly active lifestyle:
I love sport and I am totally committed to being healthy and active for the rest of my life. I want my kids to play sports, probably not as competitively as I did, but I still want them out there. Yeah, I will never be sedentary, that is just not who I am. - Mitch

Hence, there were perceived benefits to having such a powerful connection to physical activity and their bodies for many of the athletes. They were able to use activity as a coping strategy at times when they felt that they needed a mental escape from life and they could use exercise to bolster their mood in times of struggle. For a number of the athletes, there were aspects of their careers which were related to sport, including Anthony and Veronica, who were full time coaches, and Mitch, who was working in the cycling industry and remained heavily involved in athlete advocacy. Socially, many of the participants attributed their ability to work well with others to their years training and competing closely with their teammates, and then used sport in their retirement as a way of remaining active in their communities and connecting with friends. Thus, it appears that similar to the benefits which have been illustrated in youth sport research (which cite improved physical health, and increased psychosocial development including leadership skills and responsibility), and enhanced developmental of motor skills (Cote & Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Mulholland, 2008)), elite athletics has the potential to confer beneficial qualities as a result of having been socialized, and physically woven in the realm of athletics. Of course, there is nuance and complexity which must be addressed in relation to how the body takes up these physical and aesthetic preferences in sport. The following sub-sections will address the challenges athletes face with regards to relinquishing certain aspects of the preferred athletic form in the face of retirement, including struggles with pain, injury and eating habits.
6.1.2 The Exercise Double Bind

One of the greatest challenges confronted by the athletes in this study was the desire and impulse to exercise in order to feel like oneself, but the incapacity to do so as a result of physical limitations, pain or injury. They were left in the terrible predicament of not feeling well if they did exercise, because they would suffer through great discomfort during and after their physical effort, yet feeling equally unwell if they did not exercise. For the most part, the athletes felt so drawn to the sensation of having exercised that they sacrificed their bodily comfort. Melanie was a unique example of this, having just given birth to her first child. While she “swam up until the day he was born,” she was anxious to get back to exercise as quickly as possible once her son had arrived:

It just does not feel right to not be active everyday… I just feel so antsy and restless if I haven’t burnt off some steam and moved and moved vigorously. Like not just taking the dog and baby for a walk. Done it on my own, on the bike or in the pool… like I just feel blah and lethargic until I have done that… And then that little bit of the obsessive athlete starts to come back. Like I have to get out… I haven’t got my workout in. - Melanie

Melanie’s discomfort at not working out was so powerful that she began running again three weeks postpartum, a premature re-entry into activity which led to a significant pelvic floor injury:

Like the first few weeks are a bit painful as you adapt to everything, but I felt like within three weeks I was back to feeling pretty much myself… like I was back pretty much fit-ish… and could do activity and was eager and keen to do activity… unfortunately I started
too aggressively because I started right away now I can’t run because… I don’t know what is the matter, my ligaments and tendons… my SI and pelvic area – they just don’t feel right. - Melanie

Melanie’s desire to ‘get back to normal’ and to rid herself of the overwhelming lethargy and sluggishness she was experiencing overpowered the need for her to rest following the birth of her son. This example illustrates the bind which many of these athletes find themselves in. They have become accustomed to a body which is most comfortable in movement, drained from a tough workout, and free from the overwhelming sense that something is missing if the body hasn’t been vigorously challenged. This becomes problematic when these sensations are in a tug-of-war with other aspects of their health and wellbeing. Hilary described the challenges she confronts when trying to balance her desire to complete her workouts in a body which feels “broken”:

So my back hurts all the time… and I have a couple herniated disks in my back… it is just from over-use and it just aches. Always… and if I stand for a really long time or sit for a really long time it just hurts a lot... and that is pretty constant… I had a rib that pops out in the back, so the muscles around that tighten a lot… so depending on the day I will get sharp pains in my back throughout the day… and my workouts kind of consist of yoga, pilates and running… umm... and when I run, my knees hurt all the time and sometimes my shins hurt, I used to get shin splints all the time in training… I can’t do some yoga things because of knee surgery… I have a couple bone fragments in my ankle and sometimes they move around and they haven’t very much recently, but a couple months ago it was happening every week pretty much and the bone chips would get in there and I couldn’t walk for a week… and that was from gymnastics. - Hilary
Hilary articulated that abstaining from working out was associated with both corporeal and psychological discomfort and thus, she was willing to struggle though her pain:

Yeah… my injuries bother me, but I often ignore them, because that is what we did as gymnasts, ignoring everything… so unless it is really bad, I am going to go for a run or do some kind of exercise… I don’t often modify what I am doing unless I have just had surgery… The psychological guilt is worse than the physical pain, which is bad to say… but I do not feel good if I haven’t done something that day. – Hilary

While the athletes no longer felt ‘required’ to workout or stay in shape from an external source, the ways their bodies had been woven in sport, and grown accustomed to the corporeal, psychological, and social comforts of living in an active and vigorously moving body, became the only way that they could live comfortably. Thus, while they experienced initial excitement at the thought that they may be ‘free’ from the expectations, the rigidity, and the constant training, they were actually constrained by their own desire to remain living in a body which was built in movement. While some of what was constraining was the psycho-social bolstering they attached to their previous role as elite athlete, including their sculpted bodies and regimented schedules, they were also attached to a corporeal way of being which felt fundamentally good and “right” to them. As described previously, a sense of mental lightness, or “being emptied out,” and exhaustion at the end of a hard workout all felt fundamentally good in a bodily sense.

As described in the preceeding sub-section, there are many ways in which this sense of ‘at-homeness’ in a vigorously moving body ensures lifelong physical activity, which is a public health goal in the western world. Many of the athletes described how they will never be “out of shape,” and that they are proud of their commitment to fitness and ‘health.’ Their dedication and persistence as it is related to physical activity is socially rewarded, as those traits are associated
with willpower and control, both highly valued characteristics in our culture. While physical activity does have its numerous benefits, it is also important to highlight the potentially detrimental impact of exercising through chronic injury and pain and when the body is in need of rest.

The injury in sport literature has, for many years, described how athletes, both male and female, subject themselves to risk even while injured and suffering from pain (Young, McTeer, & White, 1994). In what Young and White (1995) describe as “a central ideological component of masculinist sport,” the “no pain-no gain” mentality becomes readily available to athletes (p.51). They describe how both female and male discourses of sport are “replete with the language of conquest (performance orientations and achievement principles)” (p.52). Hughes and Coakley (1991) describe “positive deviance,” in which athletes who have wholeheartedly and uncritically accepted their sporting goals (most notably winning as the primary goal) will risk their health for their greater sporting aspirations. It is important to examine these assertions within the context of this study, where the sporting goals have been removed yet the desire and will to “push through” injuries remains. The findings of this study demonstrate that even in the absence of specific sporting goals, the desire for physical movement and the positive rewards of activity outweigh the potentially detrimental impacts of continued participation. While it is clear that the athletes retain an embeddedness in their socialized sporting mentalities (e.g., “no pain, no gain”) and thus have difficulties letting go of their learned behaviours upon their departure from sport, the desire to live within their physically active bodies is also so powerful that they are willing to engage in health-compromising behaviours to retain their default, ‘comforting,’ corporeality. These data identify that both of these motives act in synergy. While Hilary reported, “I ignore injuries, because that is what gymnasts do,” she also emphasized that “being active is just part of who I am, if I’m not active, I am not happy.” The liminal space of sport
retirement allows the athletes to be “temporarily separated from all that identifies and constrains them within a normative reality” (Rowe, 2008, p.128). While their “normative reality” in sport was one which emphasized the internalization of a performance narrative, the liminal space of retirement reveals that the emplaced sense of ‘a body in movement’ is an equally powerful driver.

6.1.3 Relationship with Body and Eating

The habituated physical and aesthetic preferences that athletes retained into retirement were a result of deeply layered knowledge which grew out of social interactions, physical/visceral sensations, aesthetic appeal, performance objectives and psycho-emotional attachments. The athletes’ experiences became interwoven and assisted in building complex affinities for various ways of knowing and feeling most comfortable in one’s own body. Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2006) described how body image and running identity, functionality and aesthetics were inseparably intertwined in their study on elite runners. The relationships that the athletes in this study developed with food and eating were fostered over a number of years and various environmental networks, becoming increasingly complex as the bodily, psychological and social aspects of eating in sport became enmeshed. We found that upon retirement, the attitudes and behaviours that the athlete’s had adopted were so deeply rooted that learning (or relearning) to eat “normally” was no longer viable or even preferred. How they experienced food in their bodies had become very familiar, a constant friend.
Mitch, an elite cyclist, described his complex relationship with food, which evolved day-by-day as he was immersed in sport (see Case Study). It was clear that there were numerous interactions which formed his body and food preferences and that those habituations were not easily relinquished. He began by describing his lack of consciousness surrounding eating as a boy and how, as he became entrenched in cycling culture, the attitudes surrounding eating changed drastically. He recalled his preference for a very thin physique, describing the aesthetic attachment or appeal he felt towards visible vasculature and boney protrusions. He described how this thin frame allowed him to soar up mountains and how the physical sensations associated with a very light and lean body inevitably led to adjustments in his eating habits to facilitate that physical form:

Like when I was living as an amateur in France, I was hungry a lot of the time and I would basically try and starve myself… I would wake up in the middle of the night and eat like half of banana… I was always limiting what I was eating… I felt, well my stomach felt empty… it was growling, I couldn’t sleep… I was uncomfortable… I wouldn’t call it painful, just a sense of emptiness, no but it is uncomfortable… I mean I have had a lot of pain, so I wouldn’t call it painful, but it was enough to keep me awake… On some level I liked the fact that I was getting skinnier, and I was certainly obsessed with my weight… But I felt healthy. I mean, I think I was physically super fit, and at the time I thought of that as being healthy… I became extremely mechanically efficient. Like, my mechanical efficiency was always extremely good I think it as a result of doing that. –Mitch

Not only did a highly rigid and preoccupied relationship with food become the norm for him, but he shared his life with others who held similar views. They acted together to encourage and
perpetuate the nutrition ‘knowledge’ and insider bond which gave each of them a sense of camaraderie through their common willpower and diligence:

It was a bit eye opening watching my teammates. I didn’t realize how screwed up my behaviours were until I saw it in my teammates, but at the same time it kind of reinforced what I was doing. It made me kind of aware of how it was a bit weird, but at the same time that is what bike racers do, that is what makes us different than other people. One of my teammates would only eat dessert with the back of his spoon… his dad (who was a pro cyclist) would tell me that when his dad wasn’t around he would just go to the fridge and just eat as much as he could cause he was starving, and his dad would reprimand him if he caught him… then just eating food and spitting it out… and yeah, just not eating… I remember riding with three teammates over three mountains in the alps and like a long ride and we were riding really fast, and I had an apple in my pocket and we split it and that is what we ate for the whole ride and we just drank water. – Mitch

Mitch went on to describe that his shift into retirement didn’t suddenly release or reset the attitudes and behaviours which had become deeply entrenched over his lifetime in sport, and how he retained many of the preferences for bodily aesthetic and corporeality, and a way of eating which felt comfortable:

When I was younger I was pretty obsessive about what I was eating at that time I can remember thinking, “god when I am done with cycling, I just want to get really fat, and I can eat anything” and I was... I thought that would be really awesome to not have to worry about all of this and eat whatever I wanted and I really truly thought that when I stopped I’d get a big pot belly and never ride my bike again and here I am. – Mitch
Mitch expressed his sense of comfort in a thin and fit physique, and described how, while he may have at one time wished to be released from certain external pressures surrounding food and body, by the time he retired he had come to prefer the way his body had come to be. He found some pleasure in seeing veins and vasculature, and in a thinness which meant he could see visible bones. Those physical attributes were externalized symbols of his competence on his bicycle and they became a comfortable habitat for him. This finding resonates with Atkinson’s (2011) discussion of how thinness becomes the preferred “physical and emotional habit” in male athletes, where he suggests that individuals take on “feelings of emotional and identity stability related to being thin” (p.241). Atkinson goes on to describe the “risky” slimming behaviours that these male athletes were willing to partake in, in order to maintain certain “pleasant, comforting and habituated feelings” associated with thinness. Turner and Wainwright (2003) also described how feelings of lightness and leanness provide a particular way of knowing one’s own body, reporting that female runners were both valorized for and “enjoyed the strength and light muscularity” of their running bodies. They described the “physical capital” and “prestige” which flowed from their “bodily investments” (p.274). Our findings extend what Atkinson (2011) and Turner and Wainwright (2003) argue, identifying that those physical preferences did not simply disappear once the athlete had left their intensive involvement in elite sport behind, and in some cases even strengthened those desires as the athletes worked to retain some sense of normalcy.

While Mitch identified his sense of attachment to a lean frame, Melanie shared that propensity. She described the challenges she faced after years of comfort in a sculpted bodily shell, which acted to bolster her sense of superiority:

There is something about not eating much that is very empowering. I loved feeling like I was working towards a goal when I was in sport… but yeah. Like once I retired… just the
grumble in my stomach, that aching, burning… the fatigue and lethargy… the heightened senses… um yeah. It was just comforting to me. – Melanie

Veronica also shared a desire for leanness but struggled with a new corporeal form which felt “unhealthy” and “sluggish.” This struggle was stable from within sport and into retirement as she constantly attributed her “heavy” physicality to her lack of self control and regimentation. Though her high level of physical activity within sport allowed her to maintain a comfortable bodily shape, her exit from sport was filled with disillusionment regarding her “new body.” Sparkes (2005) describes how a deteriorating physicality can bring about a sense of “bodily betrayal and heightened feelings to corporeal alienation” (p. 150). Mitch, Melanie, Veronica and Hilary all described this sense of an alien body and the desire to maintain their pre-existing form.

Anthony also described a complex relationship with food and body, explaining that his habituated behaviours were tied to his will to perform well and the connection that food had with energy levels. He began by expressing that as a young squash player, he was not conscious about the food which he put in his body and the impact that food would have on his bodily form or capacities. He described a shift towards a more regimented style of eating which began when he was injured and saw a nutritionist who directed him to eat in a more rigid fashion, quantifying the amount and types of food he was to eat in order to “recover properly” and “most effectively re-build muscle.” He took on his eating habits with perseverance and dedication, but found that the recommended dietary suggestions neglected his body’s own cues, and thus he became accustomed to forcing himself to eat more than he was comfortable with. He described feeling that though he was physically uncomfortable eating so much, that the act of “fueling” his body properly brought him a great sense of satisfaction and a feeling of control over his performance and bodily needs:
After or during my injury – that is when my eating shifted because I had a lot of time on my hands and I wasn’t as active… I also saw a nutritionist… I was working with a nutritionist and there was a naturopath who was also at the club. I was very anxious about changing my diet after I saw the nutritionist. I was eating around my training, it was on my mind, it was definitely on my mind. I had a very specific idea of when I should eat and how much I should eat. Even social things, I planned around what and how I should eat and when I started to work with the nutritionist I started to plan out my meals, when I am going to eat, what I’m going to eat… but yeah, I spent a lot of time.. I think it became such a habit… training, eating, training, eating… the biggest thing was eating before, eating between and eating after, and eating right away. No one ever says eat when you are hungry… they say this is how many proteins and carbohydrates and fats you should eat… I found it very difficult to eat so much food.. like 5000 calories per day was a lot.. that was what I was supposed to eat and I just went along with that.

Anthony went on to describe that though he would often feel “repulsed” by the food he was eating or he would feel like “gagging,” he would continue to eat because he felt confident that his perseverance was required to optimize his performance:

My body wasn’t really looking forward to eating it… I felt an urge that I should do this… and… smell was a trigger… I can’t remember a specific smell, but like opening a bag of a sandwich and that triggered more of… and usually the first half of the meal went down without thinking about it as much… but then it would slowly, each bite really…like there was like a repulsion… like the gag reflex would start to turn on and get more and more and more… I would just try and eat through it… and I didn’t want it no, it was repulsive to me, but I just kept forcing it in. Like it was a mini competition. Like two more bites… you can
Anthony described that though his physical sensations related to his eating were not particularly pleasurable, ignoring his bodily cues became deeply ingrained. He described how he derived great satisfaction from the control he felt over his physicality and that his eating was deeply rooted in his striving for excellence in all aspects of his training. While he assumed that he would resume somewhat “normal” eating habits upon his retirement, like many others, he noted that doing so did not come to him naturally. He had adapted to a particular way of eating and feeling within his body and thus his old habits crept into his post-sport body:

Like the first couple bites… and then and then… the feeling comes when my body is like, that is as much as I will eat. I am pulled to eat more still though… it comes back… the closest thing to that feeling is that I sometimes will eat when I am not hungry and I know that I will not enjoy it… but I know that I want to stay energetic… it comes back to feeling of wanting my energy to stay high.

Anthony, though not engaging in restrictive eating habits, was still rigid and manipulative with regards to what he was eating. He described how his eating habits were both upsetting and gratifying. He enjoyed the sense that he was in complete control of his physicality, but concurrently felt trapped by the pressure he felt to eat past full or when he wasn’t hungry.

Hilary’s relationship with eating and food was also unique and complex. She began by explaining that as a young girl, she had been a very picky eater and mostly ate “junk food.” She
described how her relationship with food evolved as she climbed the ranks of the sport and her coaches began to influence her choices more strongly. She explained that at such a young age, she was not particularly aware of or focused on her body or her eating, but did feel shameful and tightly controlled by those around her. She recollected a few particular instances during which she was reprimanded or where she was deceitful with food in order to avoid being scorned:

I remember going to competitions and we would stay in apartment like things or just stay in hotels and go to the grocery store… and my teammate and I would get a whole carton of icing, and we would hide it under our other groceries so our coaches couldn’t see, but we would just eat straight icing… just horrible things… I remember when we were in France like two weeks before Olympics… we had no options, like no choice… we had Gatorade powder, and we would just eat Gatorade powder straight... we knew it was bad because we were hiding it, but we didn’t care. The fact that it was forbidden made it more alluring... it was a game… it was how many things can I sneak here and hide in my room without them finding… I remember them… I remember I ordered breakfast one time, and eggs came with bacon, as it does in restaurants, and my coach, it was an open concept hotel, and my coach yelled down from the fourth floor at me because I had bacon on my plate. She made me come up to her room and have a conversation about bacon. I was like “I didn’t even order it, I wasn’t even going to eat it.”… I probably would have… but, yeah, just like outright embarrassing, in front of the whole hotel.

Hilary described how this type of deviance became a norm for her during her gymnastics career and that she came to accept and internalize a sense of shame for her misbehaving. She had learned to tie her body shape to her dietary habits and inevitably took up the rigidity which had been imposed upon her for herself:
I always felt bad about my body, because I always got in trouble for being too over-weight… I remember having a conversation with one of my teammates about like “what do I do, I don’t know how to stop eating like this.”

Though she retired in her twenties and left the controlled environment of her athletic life behind, she spoke of the dietary self-monitoring she took up once she had left sport:

Like I definitely feel guilty. The other day I wanted cake and we got cake and I felt super guilty eating it… I am not going to limit my intake and be starving... I have an app for eating, so if it is getting out of hand I will keep track of what I am eating sometimes… I won’t go over the number.

Though Hilary did not overtly acknowledge her desire to control her intake, her discussions surrounding food exemplified her efforts to moderate her eating. It was evident that though she had left the sporting environment, that her habits had remained entrenched.

Tanner was the only athlete to describe very little challenge associated with his eating habits in sport and into retirement. He described a very stable, unwavering relationship with food in which he unconsciously ate foods which made him feel well and nourished. He did however express his desire to maintain a physical form which aligned with his bodily comfort levels:

I am cognizant of my physical well being for my general well-being and health purposes and then for vanity purposes… and I do enough, whether it is through diet and exercise to get me to a point where I am satisfied. – Mitch

All of the athletes retained a sort of bodily preference or habituations with regards to their eating habits following retirement. Over many years of eating and living in their bodies in particular
ways, their post-sport habits reflected their emplaced time with their athletic worlds. While each of the athletes noted their propensity towards “healthy” eating as a result of their sporting involvement, Mitch, Anthony, Hilary, Melanie and Veronica noted particular challenges they confronted as they tried to adapt to new bodies and reconcile their habituated, and sometimes preferred eating habits with their post-sport lives.

While there is literature which describes athletic retirement as a risk factor or predisposing factor to disordered eating (Stirling, Cruz, & Kerr, 2012), our data complements that work by suggesting that regardless of whether the eating habits are “clinically significant” or pathological, individuals grow very attached to their comfort of their sporting bodies and develop deeply entrenched habits regarding eating. Jacques Lacan, the preeminent psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, after studying Anorexia nervosa, described the immense challenge which we all face in writing a coherent bodily script: “This illusion of unity, in which a human being is always looking forward to self-mastery, entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which he started; it hangs over the abyss of dizzy Assent in which one can perhaps see the very essence of Anxiety” (Lacan, 1953, p.15). Weiss (1999) summarized his sentiment noting, “the attainment of a unified sense of self is extremely difficult for each and everyone of us, not only for anorexics or for others who are deemed “abnormal” in some way or another (p.89).”

Our data demonstrate that the habituations which the athletes adopted and retained into retirement exist across a variety of unique and complex food relationships. For example, Anthony articulated a sort of urgency or impulse to eat beyond comfort, while Mitch described the enjoyment he derived from feeling empty, light and lean. Regardless of how their somatic preferences or habituations manifested themselves, it was evident that their bodies, woven in sport, created predilections for their future ways of living.
Whether it was restrictive, covert, or over-eating, the participants’ relationships with food were somewhat stressful. Though many of the athletes assumed their eating habits would fully normalize upon retirement, what many of them noted was that there was a carry-over effect, in that they could not simply let go of the food and eating challenges that they had once experienced and naturally adopt a more relaxed relationship with food. Some enjoyed the sense of hunger in their stomachs; others had become so used to manipulating what they ate that it was second nature, and thus eating ‘normally’ would take significant effort and focus. Over years of living in their athletically woven bodies, Mitch, Anthony, Melanie, Veronica, Tanner and Hilary adopted preferences for the ways in which they wanted their bodies to feel and look. Their attitudes and behaviours surrounding food, body and eating were no exception, and thus as they attempted to adapt to retirement, they were met with challenges.

This chapter has outlined the ways in which individuals develop sensory and aesthetic preferences towards certain physical embodiments. In the case of exercise habits, athletes establish deep and complex relationships with their bodies in motion, experiencing incredible highs from the competence and ease of motion which they feel during athletic movement. Living in a body which is constantly in motion, maxed out, exhausted, and enlivened by the thrill of expert physical movement has both positive and negative ramifications for athletes during their transition into retirement. While the comfort of living in an active body often results in retired athletes participating in lifelong, physical activity, the ways in which they participate are not always health conferring. The necessity of participation, especially when athletes feel that they “cannot live without activity,” inevitably leads to engagement in sport even when injured, in chronic pain or when struggling with illness. Furthermore, when athletes adapt to eating habits and bodies which have been woven in sport for many years in very rigid and regimented ways, there is little wonder that adjusting to new ways of living in their bodies presents a number of
challenges. The final chapter in this section will conclude by exemplifying the ways in which a focus on the body and physical sensation allows for a deeper understanding of how and why transitions are challenging, encouraging greater empathetic understanding and empirical and substantive progress in sport social-psychological theorizing.

7 Using the Body to Unearth Phenomenological Processes

This dissertation has used the body as a vehicle to better understand the process of retirement from elite athletics. Two central observations were made during the data collection and analysis process, which exemplified the power of using the somatic, sensing body to examine human experience. Firstly, the data exemplified the willingness for individuals to share deeply personal stories and information when it pertained to the body’s sensations. Secondly, it became apparent that understanding the body from a somatic or sensory point of view allowed for greater insights into the experiences of others and a more thorough capacity to empathize with their phenomenological accounts.

Firstly, there was a notable willingness to share and a comfort in explaining experiences using sensory data. The interview process in this study spanned 18 months and allowed for hours of interaction between the athletes and me. Frequently, we discussed topics which were not only personal but also carried social stigma, especially those pertaining to body, food and eating, exercise behaviours, and mental health. What became apparent was that the dialogue surrounding these issues was much easier when the participants spoke about their emplaced, sensorial experiences. Describing a preference towards lightness and leanness, or the sensations related to pain and suffering, felt less like a “disorder” and more relatable when described as palpable
physical experiences. There was also a sense that their somatic processes were somewhat logical based on the environmental circumstances and the daily rituals which they engaged in. A mutual realization was born, as the participants and I recognized that bodies are formed within their environment and layer by layer inscribed with history. They had been woven in sport, the muscular, cellular, boney tissue laid down during hours of participation, and they had learned to love their bodily home. This recognition made them feel less shameful about their habits, and more understanding of their attachments to their bodily preferences. Mitch, after speaking in detail about his bodily exercise and eating preferences, came to show some compassion and understanding towards himself and his teammates:

Yeah I mean I can see it... in the guys that are my age who are retired... or the guys who are close to retirement... they have the same hang-ups that they had dealt with in their careers. It makes sense though. Of course they would. – Mitch

I got a little teary at one point. I think we were talking about body and how I felt about my body. I think I understand a little more about how and why I am the way I am. I was kind of outraged by what I told you on a few occasions, but not about my behaviour, more about the adults who were around me. I guess some of the pieces sort of fell into place for me. - Hilary

The focus on the sensorial also allowed for new insights and reflections into how and why the athletes felt the way they did in sport and upon retirement. These insights were communicated so the reader could use the sensory data presented and attempt to better understand the experiences of others, through empathetically and “imaginatively projecting” oneself into the embodied experiences reflected by the participants (Smith, 2008, p.144). Understanding the unified whole of a person, not just their emotions or reflections on their social
interactions with the world, allows for more rich and depthful understandings of their lived experiences. It also allows the reader to delve into their own history and extract experiences in which they felt similar sensory inputs and extract some level of understanding from that mutual experience. Though Smith (2008) argues, “I cannot… transcend my flesh and bones to entirely imaginatively put myself in another’s embodied place and experience their pain,” and further problematizes reducing “the alterity of the other’s suffering” (p. 146), there is still value in attempting to comprehend the lived bodily experiences of others through sensory data. What must be asserted and considered by the reader is that the experience of each individual will be unique and nuanced, and while those differences must be respected, the opportunity to learn more about common human experience through sensory data must be seized.

8 General Conclusions

This dissertation used the body as a conduit to explore the life altering transition of athletic retirement from elite sport. The body was first reconceptualised as a body woven in sport, a fluxing, biological entity which is both built within its environment and concurrently builds its environment. Then, using data which focused on the senses, a more thorough understanding of how transitions are experienced was explored. Elite sports people are woven within sport and must reconcile, not only a new physical form, but a new soma-psycho-social form upon their exit from athletics. The data from this study identified the challenges which athletes undertook in an effort to come to terms with a body which was breaking down, changing or in pain. The degrading body brought to light the fragility and impermanence of the physical form and life itself. These destabilizing insights inevitably led to existential questioning and
greater critical inquiry into the fundamental nature of elite sport. Why did I participate in sport in the first place? Was all of that time and energy worth it? Did I compromise my health and wellbeing for my pursuits? Who am I in the absence of sport and my sporting body?

The struggle to reconcile a new bodily form in retirement also shed light on the ways in which the athletes came to prefer their bodies feeling a particular way within sport, which became deeply entrenched. The ease and competence of movement, the exhaustion and depletion, the light agility which propelled them up mountains or into the air or down a track, the sense of feeling food in their stomachs in a particular way, and the range of sensations from pain and suffering to euphoria, were all somatic experiences which tied athletes to their sporting lives and bodies. Upon retirement, there were aspects of their sporting habits that were of benefit to the athletes, such as their lifelong love for athletics and continued participation in sport for the health and social benefits. Many of them also described the confidence they drew from knowing their body was capable of great physical feats. Conversely, many of them struggled to relinquish some of the sensations which they had become accustomed to but were no longer available to them, or which were challenging to maintain. They described their retention of various aesthetic and corporeal preferences, including the desire to be muscular, lean or thin, the drive to exercise vigorously, and the impulse to eat in ways which matched their eating habits in sport. Though they had been physically removed from their sporting environments, they were still deeply attached to their bodies which had been woven in sport, and struggled to understand why they remained so attached to their previous ways of being.

Finally, I summarized, by exemplifying the power and value of using the sensing body as a vehicle for better understanding and empathizing with other’s experiences. Interestingly, many of the athletes made reference to their own capacity to make sense of their past experiences
through the use of embodied, sensory data, which allowed them to feel less shameful and more understanding of their own, deeply layered relationships with body and self in the greater context of their environment. Further, as the data emerged, it provided descriptive pathways for the reader to better examine how these experiences make sense in the context of their own lives and to better ‘feel’ and appreciate how retirement from sport is relevant to human transitions.

Much of the previous retirement literature describes a sort of ‘unravelling’ of athletes as a result of their transition into retirement. While I did hear stories of post-retirement struggle, I hope to emphasize an alternative narrative which was gleaned from these data. What I witnessed, more than an unravelling as a result of retirement, was the emergence of shattered souls from elite sport, who had to then reconcile their broken bodies and selves once they left the confines of their athletic lives. This study is entitled “The Making and Unmaking of Elite Athletes,” and while the term “making” may imply a positive growth process and “unmaking” a destructive, negative process, I hope this paper emphasized a much more nuanced message than that. In the process of building a strong and competent exterior, worth and self became deeply interwoven with the external, both in regards to the physical, bodily shell and how one was socially rewarded and valourized for success in sport. The unmaking of those deeply held attachments and beliefs only began in the absence of their sporting worlds. The transition from “I am worthy because I am fast on my bicycle,” or “I am worthy because I am fit and thin and muscular,” only grew to encompass more stable and enduring qualities when the body broke down and the bolstering from sport faded. So, in a sense, while the athlete self was being “unmade,” retirement allowed for the complex, nuanced, post-sport self to emerge.

In 1999, Debra Shogan’s book, “The Making of High Performance Athletes” emerged as a highly critical look at the world of elite sport, exploring issues related to diversity and ethics in
sport and the ways in which elite sport uses disciplinary power to “relentlessly” prepare skilled athletes. She explored the tensions and “failures” that athletes face as they attempt to reconcile their multiple, intersecting roles.

9 Methodological Reflections

The individuals who chose to participate did so partially for their own benefit, as they saw the study as an opportunity to engage in discussion about their athletic endeavours and retirement transitions, and as a chance to create a deeper understanding of their own lives. Many of them discussed how they spent time outside of our interviews looking back at photos, re-reading journals, and discussing their experiences with their significant others. On numerous occasions, they would mention that they had thought of the study in their daily interactions and that they had attempted to remember certain points they wanted to share with me from those reflective moments. For better or worse, their participation in the study changed how they experienced their retirement transition and how they viewed their athletic career. Without our interaction, they would have lived a different experience, however subtle that difference may have been.

Beyond participating for their own benefit, the athletes wanted their experiences to be of value to others. In telling their stories, they hoped that they could shed light onto some of the issues that athletes encounter as they retire from sport and, perhaps even more importantly, highlight what it means to be an elite athlete. As a result of this strong intention to share (and be of value), the knowledge that was created in this paper, though significantly imprinted with my own voice and understanding, was a collaborative effort. As in most research (even though it is often unacknowledged), my questions altered the participants’ responses and their answers.
altered my perceptions and future questions. With the phenomenological objective of exploring “the social construction of reality” in everyday situations, I inevitably used my insider knowledge and our shared athletic history to explore this sub-society of elite athletes, and in some small way chip away at the greater sociological desire to better understand human nature within the greater social context.

My first interaction with each participant was a sort of “stage setting” discussion, where I highlighted the goals and objectives of the research, gave them each a summary of my own athletic history, and encouraged them to share a few important stories from their careers with me. Four of the six initial interviews were held in person, at a location of their choosing. From there, roughly half of the total interviews I conducted (over 20 in total) were face-to-face, while the other half were carried out over the telephone. Each encounter was unique and formed the fabric of my research. For our first meeting, the cyclist arrived on bicycle to a quaint coffee shop, where he ordered an organic lemonade and expressed his preference for sitting on the patio in the fresh air. On multiple occasions, I met the hockey player at her office in the ice rink, which smelled of sweat and rubber. She had photos of her children sitting behind her desk and a few pieces of memorabilia from her own athletic career. During phone conversations with the participants, they would periodically be multi-tasking – making breakfast, eating or cleaning the kitchen. On a few occasions, our calls were interrupted when children needed to be attended to, or their significant other arrived home. All of these features gave me new insights into their lives and helped me feel a sense of ease with the data collection process. As time went on, our discussions became relaxed conversations as opposed to rigid interviews.

From the beginning, the participants knew that a strong focus of my work was a look at the body and various visceral sensations. In a sense, I needed them to know this so that they
could spend time reflecting on how they felt and their embodied experiences in sport. This brought about a methodological and an ethical concern for me, which was, to what degree was I encouraging them to think about an aspect of their experience that they may not have thought about if I had not brought it up to them? In other words, would they have ever had the cognitive experience of exploring what their body meant to them during their career and into their retirement had I not probed them to think about it? I will provide one particular example of this, which was in my interaction with “Veronica,” the ice hockey player, though there were numerous similar encounters throughout the data collection process. Veronica and I had explored the centrality of the body to experience in sport in our first discussion, but the emphasis on body had come from my probing questions including, “how did your body feel when you were playing hockey at your highest level – when you stepped on the ice, what did that sensation feel like, smell like, taste like, look like?” She laughed and said, “what do you mean, what did it taste like?” We explored the challenge of taking ourselves back to a time and place and how using various sensations to capture memories was an effective tool to do so. After she gave a relatively brief depiction, which included descriptive words such as “good,” “fast,” “quick,” we moved on to other aspects of our discussion unrelated to bodily sensations. I circled back to this same question in our fourth interview and the response I received was significantly different. She spoke about a “dry, metallic tasting mouth,” a sense of being “so light” that she was “invincible,” and the experience of feeling her “quads explode” and hearing her skates “cut the ice” so definitively that it “took a moment to realize that it was me carving the ice-surface.” She spoke about “stopping on a dime,” and having a subtle sense that her “legs were on fire” but that she had the capacity to speed-up and push more powerfully as that sensation built. When I asked her about the discrepancy between her initial comments and her shift to much more palpable and rich descriptions, she stressed that those experiences had always existed for her, but that our focus on
the body had encouraged her to try and articulate what that truly felt like: “I just had to think about it a little bit more. How my body felt on the ice was never something I had to describe in words. I lived it, but I never explained it to anyone.” Though I was a catalyst to her articulating her experiences in this new way, all of the elements of her description were present long before I entered her life.

A similar and perhaps more complex challenge presented itself as I began to observe the athletes becoming more critical of elite sport culture as the study progressed. While I love sport and have many wonderful memories from my athletic career, I am also critical of certain aspects of elite amateur sport culture. This made me nervous because I feared that I may have had some persuasive power over their opinions and beliefs. While I was never overtly expressive about my objections towards certain aspects of sport, my lines of questioning did allude to my desire to think critically about various ideologies that pervade the culture of elite athletics. We spoke about playing through injury, the complex relationships we had with coaches and officials, the pressures surrounding food and body, and the win at all costs mentality. A very common sentiment was that though they felt privileged or lucky to have been given the opportunities that they had in sport, and though they “wouldn’t have changed a thing,” all of the participants, except for one, came to the conclusion that they would never want their own child to go through what they had been through. Two of the athletes went as far as to say that they will not be putting their children in any form of competitive athletics. It was evident, over time, that there is a mentality in the athletic community which protects the sporting institution. During our initial interviews, the athletes rarely spoke of any challenges or difficult times they experienced throughout their careers. However, as we got to know each other better and as my understanding of their history in sport grew, my perception of what each of them had been through changed. Suddenly, a career filled with great memories and successes was also flanked with depression,
horrendous injuries, terrible struggles with body image and eating, and dysfunctional relationships with coaches. I mentioned this observation to the cyclist and he replied with:

Well, I’m not surprised. I attended a Youth In Sport conference a year or so ago. I sat on the panel with some great athletes who had all been to the Olympics or other big multi-sport events and we all stood up in front of a bunch of wide eyed kids and their parents and talked for an hour and a half about how amazing sport is. Then afterwards we were all chatting backstage, recounting our stories. The difference in content would have amazed you – it was like two completely different accounts. Everyone had so many stories of challenge and hardship. I’m not trying to say that it was all bad, but it was a far cry from what we spoke about in front of that audience. I think that there is a certain pressure… to uphold this idea that sport is so pure and that being an “elite” athlete is something to strive for. I mean, I think there was external pressure for us to be tremendously positive – no one wanted to be a downer - but then there was also a sort of internal pressure because this is what all of us had spent our lives doing. What would that say about us, if we were honest about some of our challenges? It didn’t feel quite right, promoting sport in such a glamorous way.

In light of this observation, I have spent a tremendous amount of time attempting to unpack the ways in which knowledge was created in this study. I considered the possibility that I was projecting my own views onto the study participants, or that they were perhaps influencing me in more significant ways than I was aware of. I also considered that they might be inventing the stories that they wanted to tell, or even, the stories that they thought I wanted to hear. The participants expressed that they were well aware of these challenges, but none of them articulated concern in this regard. On numerous occasions they would say things like, “I may not
have said this a month ago, but”… or “I don’t know if I really feel this way, but….” From these statements, the participants were able to clarify that their narratives, including things that they mentioned as historical fact, were mere constructions, based on memory, and interpreted in the physical, psychological and social context of the present. This is a reality of qualitative research and I acknowledge the inevitable incomplete and circumstantial nature of this material; however, I believe that to be a strength of this type of work, as opposed to a weakness.

The constant creation and recreation of knowledge, as a function of the longitudinal nature of the interviews, was particularly evident in this work. From beginning to end, the participants discussed their opinions and stories, changed their viewpoints, and re-invented many of the experiences that they had previously shared with me. We established a relationship over the course of 18 months, in which we discussed our various interpretations of the retirement transition out of sport. These discussions shifted their thinking and shifted mine, highlighting that how we come to understand the process of retiring, is not only constantly being re-created, but also co-created. Trust was central to the relationships I established with each of the participants, allowing for this synergistic dialogue to emerge.

Attempting to un-pack what is “valid” or what qualifies as “good” or “bad” research is challenging in all research disciplines, but defining these parameters can be particularly difficult when it comes to subjectivist qualitative work. Regardless of the methodological and theoretical paradigm, it is important that the measurement tools which are used to assess the validity of the research match the methodology and the ontological/epistemological assumptions which our foundational to the work. Thus, this dissertation will adopt a non-foundational approach, concluding that, just as the data collected within this work are subjective in nature, the perceived quality of the research must be assessed subjectively. That does not mean, however, that there
are no parameters by which to measure the quality of the work, but instead, that each individual research project must be assessed based on its own unique research objectives and outcomes. Patty Lather (1986), suggested that four parameters be considered in the assessment of subjectivist qualitative research, including, triangulation, face validity, reflexive subjectivity and catalytic validity. Further, Smith, Sparkes and Caddick (2014), suggested a long list of potential criteria for judging qualitative work including: impact (does this work affect the reader?), substantive contribution (does this work contribute novel insights to the greater body of literature?), worthy topic (is this research relevant, timely, significant, interesting and evocative?), sincerity (is the researcher reflexive and transparent regarding their biases, short-comings, strengths and weaknesses?), rich rigor (does this work provide sufficient, abundant, appropriate and complete theoretical constructs, data and time in the field, analysis?), and credibility (has the researcher spent sufficient time with the participants?). While many qualitative methods experts recommend against using a strict formula to determine the validity, or quality of work, it is useful to examine multiple parameters and determine which will effectively allow for a comprehensive examination of the research. In this work, triangulation and sincerity were used to add to the richness and complexity of the data (through data cross-checking), and to contemplate the utility of the methods and theories used (through discussion and collaboration with committee members and colleagues). The longitudinal nature of this study allowed for increased face validity and credibility, as I was able to discuss data, emerging themes and conclusions with the participants across our 18-month interaction. They were able to provide insight into which aspects of this work aligned with their understandings and experiences and which aspects felt incongruent. They were also able to clarify remarks they had made previously if they felt that they didn’t do justice to their “true” understandings or interpretations of events. Reflexive subjectivity requires that some documentation pertaining to the researcher’s
assumptions (and how those assumptions have affected the data) be included in the work. In this dissertation, the hope and objective was to present my own autobiographical story up-front to allow for the reader to make their own judgments and assessments of my biases. Especially considering my closeness to the phenomenon of elite athletic retirement, every effort was made to ensure that there was transparent and reflexive information shared regarding my own experiences. Finally, catalytic validity is the suggestion that “good” and “valid” research has the potential to create change, to encourage reflexivity and to inspire action or even activism. This parameter will need to be assessed by the reader of this work. Did you feel compelled and moved by this work? Did it shed light onto the experiences of elite athletes, and how they cope with transition? Did you feel that the work affected you? Intellectually or emotionally? My hope is that this work did all of those things, and that practitioners, athletes, coaches and sports psychologists will be able to use this dissertation to improve the sporting experience for themselves and others. Further, it is my hope that this dissertation makes a substantive contribution to the literature, in the near future and for years to come.

9.1.1 Autobiographical Account

“Narrative is so powerful that not only is it the tool for revealing ourselves to ourselves as social beings (sociology), but it is also able to effect healing” (Garrett, 1998, p. 31).

I initially undertook the challenge of writing the story of my athletic career to crystallize my history and to give the reader an idea of my own bias and experience within the sporting context. It was not only a very cathartic experience, but also enabled me to clarify how I had come to establish my own beliefs and attitudes about the sport retirement process. I grew up in sport, starting gymnastics at the age of five, and thus who I am as a person has been moulded by
my involvement. Truthfully, this degree of closeness to sport made me feel a little uneasy. Would I be able to step back and see the phenomenon of athletic retirement from an objective perspective? I am still retiring, aren’t I? Additionally, I feared that an autobiographical submission may be perceived as self-centred. I had to ask myself, “Is a researcher ever truly in a position of objectivity?” and then, “Is a subjective position a purely negative feature of research, or is there something to be gained from the ‘insider’ experience?” What did my personal history add to this work?

First of all, I believe that my transparency engendered a relationship of trust and comradery between myself and the participants. One individual noted, “I think that you are brave for putting your name on this and telling your story. I am happy to share my story, but I wouldn’t want people to know who I was.” I believe it showed the participants that I was invested enough in the research and the greater goal of improving athlete welfare to expose myself and, in a sense, to be vulnerable.

Secondarily, I feel strongly that, regardless of my ability to separate myself from my own experiences, sharing my story enables the reader to explore my history and bias and to more fully assess whether they agree with my conclusions based on the data I present. It is my personal belief that the qualitative paradigm is inherently subjective, and thus, the more a reader can know about the researcher and her or his subjectivities, the better able she or he is to draw fair conclusions about the body of work. Neglecting to place oneself into the research is to neglect what it means to be human in interaction with other humans. Feminist scholars were some of the first to address this issue of subjectivity, Harding (1986) stating that knowledge is already ‘biased’ by the knower’s standpoint. Many have addressed this as more of an advantage than a problem since stories of personal experience can be deconstructed to reveal how the social world
influences our lives (Garrett, 1998). Sociologists in more recent years have now been compelled to do more than simply reveal the sources of their data, but to further examine the links between their personal and social worlds in their writing.

It is not the fact that I was an elite athlete or that I have now adjusted to ‘retirement’ or life outside of sport which lends me credibility or makes what I write useful. Simply ‘being there’ does not grant me authoritative status, nor does having studied these phenomena make for ‘expert’ accounts. Instead, it is the critical appraisal of my own personal experience and the academic literature, and my in-depth explorations of others’ experiences that allow me to produce a body of work for readers to assess from their own personal stand-points. When researchers attempt to articulate their own subjectivity within the body of work, it can be analyzed just like every other part of the narrative, and can in turn become an incredibly valuable aspect of the research.

Some suggest that a danger of autobiography lies in its potential for error of fact, especially considering the unreliability of memory. While this is a legitimate concern, the real value of personal narrative is that it is focused on the present, not the past, and thus is an ideal vehicle for understanding life transitions and the process of retirement. Regardless of whether the autobiographical account is wholly “accurate” in its depiction of historical events or facts, what is more telling is the events and details which are remembered, how they are remembered, and the emotions they evoke in the present moment. The facts of each person’s life are much less important than the facts and details that person chooses to delve into while telling their story. Sparkes (1996) suggests that in order to successfully bring the reader into the “intricacies” of the narrator’s world, he or she must “weave its way impressionistically between facts, facticities, and fiction.” Sparkes describes that while facts are events that are believed to have occurred,
facticities describe how those events were experienced by the narrator, and goes on to express that the primary concern of a narrative account is “evocation rather than representation” (Sparkes, 1996, pg. 467).

9.2 Practical Recommendations

Interview data collected in this research emphasized the intricate and complex relationships which athletes establish with food, body and exercise during their elite careers and beyond. Without blaming or shaming the athletes of this study and those who exist beyond the scope of this work, I want to address some of the practical issues and concerns which I encountered through this dissertation. I have attempted to avoid adopting a moralistic tone or resorting to a paradigm of ‘healthism,’ in which the individual is reprimanded for wrong-doing and stigmatized for their attitudes or behaviours. More than anything, this study has taught me that the environment in which we exist profoundly shapes and moulds our thoughts, emotions, interactions, and of course, our bodies. Therefore, I do not want to imply practical recommendations strictly to the individual, but also suggest that great systemic changes must occur if optimum holistic wellness is to exist for the human beings who participate in elite sport. I began with the question, “how can sensorial insights allow for greater empathy and compassionate understanding into how individuals experience life-altering transitions?” and what follows will attempt to provide practical solutions which align with that question.

The past few decades have seen rise to a whole new scope of elite, amateur athletics. Sport is now big business, with global reach and commercial appeal, and as a result the athletes
have become a form of productive human capital. As this shift has occurred, the emphasis on winning medals and triumphing over opponents has taken priority over the creation of holistically-well human beings. Athletes have internalized performance narratives and have learned that winning is the only path to a contented sporting experience. Douglas and Carless (2006) used Frank’s (1995) conception of narrative types to describe how “performance narrative,” in which a story of “single-minded dedication to sport performance to the exclusion of other areas of life and self,” emerges dramatically within the narratives of high performance sportspeople. Consistent with Anna Dacyshyn’s statement that “sport is life and life is sport,” Douglas and Carless describe how “winning, results, and achievement are pre-eminent” and how for elite athletes, these performance outcomes are closely linked to their “mental well-being, identity and self-worth.” The data in this study went further, suggesting that these performance narratives were not simply manifested in the cognitive, emotional or psychological realms, but also built and embossed onto the body. To Mitch, vascularity, thinness and boney protrusions were both aesthetically and corporeally pleasing, and represented athletic and personal success. The physical sensations took on both psycho-emotional and social meaning. Physically feeling thin and light (in Mitch’s case) was thoroughly intertwined with his sense of self and worth.

The athletes in this study described how these scripts about the body and self remained relatively unproblematic during much of their early careers, especially during times of athletic growth, winning and achievement. However, as the body began to degrade, through injury, aging or detraining, their bodily understandings and sensations (how they felt in their body, how it performed and what it looked like) severed their once comfortable narrative scripts. As Douglas and Carless (2009) suggest, “when the storyline of the dominant narrative fails to align with one’s personal experiences, narrative theory suggests that mental well-being and sense of self will be threatened” (p.216). Thus, while a performance narrative has become strongly entrenched
in the culture of athletics, it appears that such emphasis on winning and achievement has the potential to detriment both an individual’s sense of self, and (as this study reports) corporeal comfort (and health). If a thin, lean body is representative of success and worth, then in the face of a degrading body, how is an athlete not to feel a strong sense of bodily alienation? Hence, my first practical recommendation from the data collected in this study, which aligns with the work of many academics who have come before me, calls for a critical examination of the priorities of elite sport. Should the primary objective of elite sport be winning? Or should the primary objective take the form of fostering well-rounded, healthy, contributing members of society, while casting medals and performance outcomes into subordinate positions? Achievement and winning have always been, and will always be, an integral aspect of sport, but does that mean that “owning the podium” must trump an emphasis on human development?

One aspect of this “winning vs. wellness” divide which I cannot reconcile is that which pertains to the quantity of exercise required for high level performance. I cannot help but question whether it is in the best interest of individuals to train for such sports as triathlon, gymnastics and cycling at the elite level. Even in the most “well-balanced” elite athlete, does this type of training not inevitably detract from personal growth in psychological, social and physical domains? As a result of the data which emerged from this study, I am particularly interested in the physical effects of elite training. Not only did the athletes in this study leave sport feeling utterly dependant on high levels of physical activity, but in some cases they experienced that dependence while concurrently suffering with chronic injuries (as a direct result of intensive training) which prevented them from engaging in such activity. Working out six to eight hours a day during their athletic careers was the norm, not the exception. Athletes learned to love that intensity of work. They enjoyed how it sat with them physically, and how accomplished and successful vigorous work felt. Of course, that type of training is not sustainable. So how then do
athletes reconcile their desire to feel ‘right’ in their bodies once they leave sport? If elite sport performance is to come at the expense of athlete wellness, we, as an informed sporting community, must address the problematic moral and ethical dimensions of such intensive athletic participation. Prioritizing athlete wellness need not exclude the opportunity for great sporting action and accomplishment; however, our youth must be provided every opportunity to grow and thrive within their sporting careers and beyond.

The second practical recommendation is two-pronged and pertains to fostering critical reflexivity and building open dialogue about food, exercise and body issues within the sporting community. With regards to bodily habits, I encountered an array of problematic eating and exercise styles which were established in the sporting context and became deeply enmeshed with the athlete’s corporeal ways of being over the course of their careers. These habits and physical preferences were emotionally, socially and physically built into the athletes, and thus were recalcitrant in the face of athletic retirement. As such, it is important that we begin to change the ways we speak with (and about) athletes post-retirement. Is it any surprise that an athlete would enjoy intensive workouts, even into their retirement? Or have an attachment to the bodily feel, look, shape – which they credited their sporting success to and from which they derived a sense of self-worth? Though five of the six athletes in this study described problematic eating and/or exercise attitudes and behaviours, only one of the athletes used the term “disordered eating,” to describe his experience. All of them suggested that they never spoke about their eating, exercise and body issues, despite their admission that their habits were physically damaging and/or psycho-emotionally distressing. Many of them suggested that their retirement made them even less inclined to discuss such issues, as they felt that their departure from sport should have resolved any issues which existed: “I should be over this by now” (Hilary). Firstly, discussing the systemic food, exercise and body issues which pervade sport may help the athletes recognize
that they are not alone in feeling distressed about their attitudes and behaviours. This realization may allow them to feel more at-ease discussing their struggles. This includes connecting them with pertinent research in the field which describes such phenomena as the “glorified self” (Adler & Adler, 1989), “performance narratives,” (Douglas & Carless, 2006), “thinnergy, and group-think” (Atkinson, 2009), and other valuable resources. Perhaps workbooks (or other more approachable resources) which close the gap between theoretical research and practice would be useful to help engage athletes “on the ground” in dialogue about these phenomena.

Secondly, once a degree of critical reflexivity has been stimulated, there is opportunity for more fluid dialoguing between athletes and their support systems. Douglas and Carless (2006) describe how privileging “one narrative type over others,” is the “experience of silencing.” Thus, when athletes establish a narrative which promotes oneself as a strong, competent, “winner,” it disallows other more nuanced aspects of those individuals to find grounding and voice. If athletes can embrace the uniqueness of their lives and characters, then they can begin to build more layered, complex and coherent identities for themselves. Crossely (2000) suggests that opportunities to share openly and honestly allow for personal resolve and the construction of a meaningful sense of worth for individuals. As Douglas and Carless explain, it is imperative that sports psychologists (and I would argue coaches, parents, peers, and the public) “listen closely to the athletes’ voices” and “invite those stories that may be dangerous to tell” (p.228). Our data would suggest that speaking to bodily sensations is an integral part of coming to terms with one’s athletic experience and sense of self and adapting to post-retirement life. Recognizing and communicating about the physical preferences which were formed within sport, describing what “feels good,” or “feels right” (in non-pathological terms), could be a useful starting place.
One final recommendation would be for sports psychologists, and others who work to counsel athletes (such as coaches), to gain exposure to critical academic work, which explores issues related to disordered eating, abuse in sport, injury, transitions, and more. My own personal academic path has enlightened me to the various challenges and struggles which athletes face, and the ethical and moral obligations that we, as practitioners, have to the athletes. Considering the myopic world that most elite sportspeople live in, it is imperative that sports psychologists do not participate in the single-minded, performance focus, while neglecting the whole individual. Sports psychology practice must shift its focus towards building strong, well-adjusted, confident young people, who can use those stable foundations to achieve fantastic sporting goals. Performance objectives can be met, while the health and well-being of the athlete flourishes.

It is not uncommon for retired athletes to transition into supportive sporting roles (such as sports psychology and coaching). This is of great benefit to the athletes they work with, as the personal experience and expertise they ascertained in high level sport assists them in their new role. That being said, caution should be taken to not have athletes who were raised in a narrow, high performance environment, become the next generation of coaches and therapists in the absence of critical dialogue and thinking about their own experiences. Attitudes and behaviours in elite sport are normalized, and it takes a tremendous amount of reflection to contemplate the ways that elite sport can be detrimental and harmful when you remain entrenched in sporting culture. Debra Shogan reflects on this point suggesting a need for, “a new pedagogical role for sport ethics that encourages participants in high performance sport to notice and question ways in which they are homogenized and normalized by sport discipline and ask how this implicates them in certain ethical issues. By questioning what is presumed to be ‘universal, necessary, and obligatory,’ the constraints of identity production in high performance sport may become apparent to participants, thus opening the possibility of refusing at least some technologies of
homogenization and creating other ways or understanding and participating in high performance sport” (Shogan, 1999, p. 17). There is more research now than ever before which exposes the issues and challenges with high performance sport, thus it is important to disseminate that work to athletes and to those who work with athletes.

9.3 Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study included: a lack of participants from diverse backgrounds, the restricted number of face-to-face interactions, and the challenge in collecting “embodied” knowledge. While I attempted to recruit a wide variety of participants for this study, there was a degree of homogeneity within the group. The subjects were mostly middle to upper class, four of the six were Caucasian and all participated in “able-bodied” sports. Considering the emphasis placed on the corporeal dimensions, there would be great benefit to including those with diverse embodied vantage-points.

Though I made every attempt to meet each of the participants in person at least once, there was one participant whom I did not speak to face-to-face. Further, at least half of my interviewing was done over the telephone, which did not allow me to react and respond to non-verbal cues. That being said, I found the depth and richness of my conversations over the phone to be very strong, and in some ways I wondered if the participants felt somewhat ‘safer’ in the confines of their homes, and with the distance the phone provided us, in sharing their intimate stories.

The greatest challenge of this research was in eliciting dialogue about the athletes embodied or emplaced experiences. The ways in which our bodies experience day-to-day
phenomenon go mostly unspoken, and in many cases our language appears to lack the semantic capacity to describe bodily senses. In future work I would incorporate a greater variety of methods such as, photography, journaling, and video data, in order to gain greater depth and quality of response, and to make the work more accessible. There is a power in being able to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ things about our lives, and I wondered if the participants would have felt an increased sense of connectedness with the work, had alternative methods been incorporated.

This study was exploratory in nature, and thus, opened up many avenues for future research. Over the course of the study, I often wondered how the athletes would reflect on our current time and place in eight to ten years from now. I wondered what a decade of time and distance from sport would provide the athletes in terms of reflexivity and beliefs about their retirement process. One of the most fascinating aspects of this longitudinal research was how the athletes had much more deep and personal insights into their struggles once the time had passed and they were somewhat distanced from their period of ‘coming to terms.’ For example, when I first spoke to Anthony, he was in the midst of a very challenging time, feeling depressed, lost and lacking direction. However, he didn’t overtly express this difficulty to me until our third or fourth meeting, when he said, “when we first chatted, that was one of the hardest times in my life.” I had certainly felt that he was low during that initial interview, but I had no idea he was struggling to such a degree. This insight made me wonder whether interviewing ten years post-sport might provide new and interesting perspectives on their athletic careers and their retirement. Further, while this study did focus on pain and experiences with chronic injury, I believe that there are interesting and fruitful lines of research which could be pursued with this topic in mind. Better understanding how physical pain is tied to psycho-emotional well-being, especially in athletes who are so used to feeling “well” is a potential avenue for future investigation. Further, while Melanie and Veronica both experienced motherhood almost
immediately upon their exit from sport, there is room for greater exploration into how becoming a mother, with a changing physical form and a perceived loss of control over one’s physical self, could be a valuable direction for future research.


Carless, D., & Douglas, K. (2009). ‘We haven’t got a seat on the bus for you’or ‘all the seats are mine’: narratives and career transition in professional golf. Qualitative research in sport and exercise, 1(1), 51-66.


