

FROM THE RINK TO REALITY: EXPLORING TRANSITION  
EXPERIENCES OF RECENTLY GRADUATED NCAA  
DIVISION 1 WOMEN'S ICE HOCKEY PLAYERS

by

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## **Abstract**

The end of a sports career marks a significant transition for collegiate athletes. The existing literature has predominantly overlooked the transition experiences of female ice hockey players. This qualitative study explored the experiences of 14 recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's hockey players adapting to life beyond collegiate sport. Semi-structured interviews were grounded in Schlossberg's (2011) 4 S Model (*situation, self, support, strategies*). Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes within participant narratives. Findings highlighted participants' varying degrees of preparation for change, experiences of athletic identity loss leading to self-discovery, a mix of effective support and gaps in institutional support, and the implementation of coping strategies to manage uncertainty. This study contributed to a deeper understanding of the post-collegiate experiences of women in elite ice hockey, informing support systems and strategies tailored to their specific needs. Recommendations are provided for researchers, coaches, counsellors, and institutions committed to athletes' well-being.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this Master's Thesis to my family. To my mother, whose unwavering support has been my foundation; to my father, whose encouragement has pushed me forward; and to my brother, whose exemplary standards have inspired my aspirations. Thank you for being my biggest supporters throughout all my endeavours and teaching me the invaluable lesson that hard work pays off.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

After leaving Boston University and my four years on their NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey team, I no longer had my teammates, my routine, my nutrition plan, my workout plan, and the sport I loved. I felt lost. Since the age of 7, hockey has been part of my life and became a focal point of my decisions, the friends I was surrounded by, and the dreams I aspired to. I adopted the mindset that “hard work pays off” and engrained this motto into every step of my journey. I was often cut from teams, but this did not stop me. I eventually made it onto the national stage, putting on the Team Canada jersey at the age of 16 with the under-18 program. When I arrived at Boston University, my goal was to be the best teammate, and this landed me a title as captain in my final two years. I was never fully satisfied, always chasing the next goal I had set for myself. But when my time at Boston University was up, no more goals were in sight. Every former player had told me to enjoy my four years because they fly by; I finally believed them. My parents told me that life would work itself out and the skills I acquired from hockey would serve me beyond the sport, but I had a hard time believing them. Who am I outside of hockey?

This is a common experience for collegiate athletes facing the transition out of their sport; a period marked by significant change that requires adaptation which may feel unattainable (Menke & Germany, 2019). Given the challenges of this life transition, and coinciding with the trending growth in women’s hockey, this research aims to explore the unique experiences of recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women’s ice hockey players as they adapt to life beyond collegiate hockey.

Life transitions are complex and can result in changes in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg, 1981). To better understand how individuals cope with transitions,

Schlossberg created and adapted a transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984, 2011).

This research employs Schlossberg's (2011) 4 S model as a framework to assess how transition quality among recently graduated NCAA Division 1 female ice hockey players is influenced across four dimensions: *situation*, *self*, *support*, and *strategies*.

Schlossberg's (2011) transition model acknowledges the nature of transitions, how individuals cope through transitions, the degree of change related to the transition, where one finds themselves in the transition process, and how the model can be applied. This model incorporates a ratio of an individual's evolving *assets* and *liabilities*, also referred to as *resources* and *deficits*, throughout transitional situations to explain why individuals can react differently to similar situations and why the same person can react differently to the same situation at different times (Anderson et al., 2012). The situation variable encompasses factors pertinent to the transition, including triggers, timing, control, role change, duration, prior experience with similar transitions, and concurrent stress (Anderson et al., 2012). The self variable considers aspects of the individual that can affect transition quality, such as ego development, optimism, self-efficacy, commitments, values, and resilience (Anderson et al., 2012). The support variable examines the influence of both interpersonal and institutional support (Anderson et al., 2012). Lastly, the strategies variable encompasses coping skills or other strategies impacting the quality of the transition (Anderson et al., 2012).

Schlossberg's (1981, 1984, 2011) transition theories have been used across several studies in athletic settings because they acknowledge the complexity of transitions

(Smith & McManus, 2008), provide a structured framework for data collection and analysis (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Manthey & Smith, 2023; Smith & Hardin, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019), and yield insights that can inform practical strategies for supporting athletes through various stages of transition (Hansen et al., 2019).

Schlossberg's transition model provides the structure to analyze any life transition, which is why it has also been applied to a variety of domains, such as career changes (Ryan et al., 2011), retirement (Goodman & Pappas, 2000), response to natural disasters (Harley et al., 2008), and international students' transition experiences (Montgomery, 2017).

This study uses a phenomenological qualitative approach to explore the phenomena surrounding the transition experiences of recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players. Participants in this study completed a Personal Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix D) followed by a Semi-Structured Interview grounded in the 4 S model (Appendix E). The data gathered from the questionnaire and the interview helped answer the research questions. The study design and the data collection techniques are discussed in the methodology section.

### **Purpose of the Study**

As the literature review will highlight, no known study has focused on transitions for NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players. The recent establishment of a sustainable Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) in North America marks a historic moment for women's hockey, setting a stage that has the potential to generate greater interest in playing among younger girls (PWHL, 2023). As a result, it might also lead to an increased number of young women transitioning out of the sport in

the future. Given the establishment of the PWHL, combined with a lack of research in this area, it becomes increasingly important to shed light on the challenges, prospects, and overall journeys of collegiate female hockey players during their post-collegiate transition. By gaining a holistic understanding of this experience through the 4 S model, researchers and stakeholders can develop more tailored supports that foster a smoother transition for female hockey players pursuing personal, professional, and academic endeavours beyond collegiate athletics. The proposed research aims to shed light on the transition experiences of recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players to better understand how they navigate the challenges and opportunities that arise during the post-collegiate period.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the primary factors that impact the transition of recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players as they adjust to life beyond collegiate hockey?
  - a. How do recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players navigate the process of redefining their self-identity and finding purpose after their collegiate hockey careers?
  - b. How does the visibility and recognition of women's ice hockey at the professional level affect the aspirations and decisions of recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players navigating post-collegiate opportunities?
  - c. What role do support networks (i.e., social support and institutional support) play in helping recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's

ice hockey players successfully navigate the challenges of transitioning from college hockey to post-collegiate life?

- d. What coping strategies do recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players employ to manage the potential loss of athletic identity and adjust to new roles and aspirations?

## **Definition of Terms**

### ***Sports Career***

Sports Career is defined as the multiyear sports activities of the individual aimed at high-level sports achievements and self-improvement in sport (European Federation of Sport Psychology, 2000)

### ***Elite-Athlete***

Elite athletes are individuals who participate in their sport at a highly competitive level (i.e., National Collegiate Athletic Association, professional, or Olympic level) (Hunt & Anderson, 2011).

### ***Transition***

A transition consists of an event or non-event that leads to a shift in an individual's perceptions of themselves and their surroundings, which necessitates an adjustment in their behaviour and relationships (Schlossberg, 1981).

### ***Athletic Retirement***

Athletic retirement is the transition process from participation in competitive sport to another activity or set of activities (Coakley 1983). Through the literature, this process is synonymously referred to as "career termination" (Alfermann & Gross, 1997) and "transition out of sport" (Crook & Robertson, 1991).

### ***Athletic Identity***

Identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role and the subsequent incorporation of meanings, expectations, and performance associated with that role (Stets & Burke, 2000). Thus, athletic identity is defined as the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer et al., 1993).

### ***Identity Foreclosure***

Identity foreclosure is a state in which athletes make significant commitments to their sport without exploring occupation or ideological alternatives (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). With roots in Eriksonian developmental theory (Erikson, 1959), identity foreclosure was identified as one of four identity statuses within the fifth stage of psychosocial development (Schiedel & Marcia, 1985).



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This literature review delves into the complex realm of athletic career termination, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted process athletes undergo when transitioning out of sport. The review begins by examining how athletic career retirement is perceived and the factors that trigger athletes' departure from competitive sports.

The following section discusses the challenges related to athletic retirement, focusing on the dynamics of identity loss and life satisfaction experienced by athletes during their transition journey. It is crucial to understand the emotional and psychological challenges that athletes face to fully capture their experience. The literature also highlights positive transitions and examines the factors contributing to smoother transitions for athletes as they venture into new opportunities beyond their sporting careers. The factors affecting transition quality are explained using a guiding theoretical framework: the 4 S Model (Schlossberg, 2011). A close examination of the situation variable, the self variable, the support variable, and the strategies variable allows for a deeper understanding of the various elements that shape the quality of athletes' transition experiences. Lastly, the literature review focuses on the post-sport transition experiences of collegiate athletes, female collegiate athletes, and female collegiate ice hockey players as they transition out of sport. This specific focus allows for the discernment of the distinct challenges and opportunities that characterize their respective post-sport transitions.

This literature review was completed using the University of New Brunswick electronic library databases. Specifically, Academic Search Premier, ERIC, SPORTDiscuss, and PsychINFO databases.

## **Understanding Athletic Career Termination**

### ***Perspectives on Athletic Retirement***

Athletic retirement is the transition from participation in competitive sport to another activity or set of activities (Coakley, 1983). The transition athletes face following a sport career's end involves individual and environmental factors. It is a unique process that consists of several personally impactful complex variables (Coakley, 1983).

Prior to sport-specific research on athletic retirement, the transition process for athletes was often compared to a conventional career retirement. Frameworks of social gerontological models of aging and thanatological models of death and dying were employed to understand athletic career retirement (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). The social gerontological framework consists of several theories focusing on the interaction of the aging process and one's place in society. These theories aim to understand the processes of retiring athletes by suggesting that they may struggle with retirement adjustments because change disrupts social networks, social roles, social status, and daily routines (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). Although gerontological theories may help predict the challenges of athletic retirement, the consensus among sports researchers indicated limitations when comparing occupational retirement to the uniqueness of athletic retirement. Wylleman et al. (2004) stated that, compared to occupational retirement, athletic retirement happens earlier, retired athletes typically transition into an occupational career, and career termination may not always be negative. Additional concerns related to gerontological theories include its conceptualization of retirement as an event (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). Coakley (1983) contested that athletic

retirement is not an isolated event; rather, it occurs for a given person (age, race, marital status) at a given time (social, emotional, and material support systems) and for specific reasons (choice, injury).

The thanatological framework focuses on the process of death and dying. Thanatology attempts to explain athletic retirement through concepts such as “social death.” This refers to the loss of social functioning and social awareness and the experience of denial and acceptance of an inevitable upcoming career termination (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000). These theories are limited in their applicability to athletic retirement as many researchers agree it is not an end-of-life change, thus making it difficult to equate athletic retirement with death (Wylleman et al., 2004).

Baillie and Danish (1992) highlighted further how the career transition process in sports differs from traditional retirement. Sports participation consists of a developmental history of involvement and socialization around competition. Peer and family praise combined with reinforcement for athletic excellence results in the individual’s self-esteem being tied to performance (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Erpič et al., 2004). The label *athlete* embodies an identity that affects one’s sense of self (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Webb et al., 1998). The increased identification as an athlete may cause a decrease in the exploration of other career possibilities (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). The transition also consists of a lifestyle shift away from the satisfaction that sports previously provided (Baillie & Danish, 1992). Therefore, the end of the athletic role poses a significant loss to the foundation of the individual’s identity, a shift in their lifestyle, and a concern for the future.

Following attempts to understand the processes of athletic retirement, researchers created models specifically for sports to grasp the nuances of retirement in this context.

These models included causal factors initiating career termination, developmental factors related to adaptation, coping resources that affect adaptation, quality of the adaptation to retirement, and treatment issues for distressful reactions to retirement (Gordon, 1995; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) provided one of the first conceptualizations of the athletic retirement developmental course by drawing on previous theoretical and empirical findings within and outside sport. They suggested that an athlete's retirement from sport is a unique transition that brings about significant changes in the athlete's personal, social, and occupational life (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Grove et al. (1997) proposed a social psychology perspective on the athletic retirement process by comparing the loss of sport to other types of major losses. Harvey (1996) defined a major loss as a significant reduction in personal, material, and symbolic responses, often leading to fundamental changes in identity. One of the most beneficial ways of coping with the loss of identity is the notion of account-making, that is, confiding emotions, traits, and descriptions regarding self and others through constructing a story (Grove et al., 1997). Account-making is often accomplished through a micronarrative approach, one of the most used methodologies around major loss (Grove et al., 1997). Micronarrative account-making provides a framework to depict the emotional loss and identity loss experienced by athletes while simultaneously creating an opportunity for them to begin healing (Grove et al., 1997).

The transition is not only related to the athletic context but also the developmental context in which it occurs (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). A model was developed by Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) that adopts a holistic approach to reflect the interaction of co-occurring developmental processes. These include athletic,

psychological, psychosocial, academic, and vocational developmental aspects (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

Athletic retirement is a unique process with compounding changes at varying developmental levels that can impact individuals cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Research surrounding athletic retirement has shifted over time and continues to evolve (Stambulova & Samuel, 2020). Before exploring the transitional challenges athletes face, it is essential to understand under which circumstances athletes may transition out of their sport.

### ***Causes of Athletic Retirement***

Schlossberg (2011) suggests that the first step in dealing with change is understanding the different types of transitions. Athletes transition out of their sport for various reasons that are either within or out of their control. An anticipated transition includes major life events that are typically expected, such as age-related events like graduation, old age, and a decline in performance (Schlossberg, 2011). In contrast, an unanticipated transition consists of an unexpected disruptive event, such as an injury, the loss of a coach, or an unanticipated termination from the team (Schlossberg, 2011). Non-event transitions are those that are expected to happen, but do not (Schlossberg, 2011). For example, not receiving an expected promotion to a higher-level team despite rigorous training.

Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) identified four leading causes of career termination in the context of athletics: chronological age, deselection, the effects of injury, and free choice. Researchers have also tried to classify the reasons for retirement into broader categories: voluntary versus involuntary (Alfermann, 2000), planned versus unplanned

(Alfermann et al., 2004), and athletic versus non-athletic (Erpič et al., 2004). However, athletic career retirement contains a complex and diverse set of factors, making it difficult to classify into rigid categories. Fernandez et al. (2006) argued the need for more precise organization in creating a process-oriented analysis of reasons for career termination. The Athletes' Retirement Decision Inventory's (ARDI) was created to assess the athlete's decision process through a self-report questionnaire (Fernandez et al., 2006). This questionnaire considers perceived difficulties associated with post-sport life, positive aspects of post-sport life, attachment to the sports career, and negative considerations about the athlete's present life (Fernandez et al., 2006). This tool can assist counsellors and athletes by providing insight into the psychological connection to their sport and the factors affecting adjustment to life beyond their sport. The development of the ARDI highlights the complexity of the athletic retirement process.

The cause of sports career termination is pertinent because it can help predict the quality of the transition experienced by the athlete. Researchers have found that involuntary retirement may have complicating consequences for adjustment, compared to voluntary retirement (Blinde & Stratta, 1992). The subjective feeling of freedom of choice and control facilitates the adjustment to life after sport (Alfermann, 2000; Coakley, 1983).

### **Transitioning Out of Sport: The Challenges**

The unique experience athletes face transitioning out of their sport varies not only by the nature of the retirement but also by the diverse challenges encountered throughout the retirement process. A systematic review by Park et al. (2013) examined studies on athlete career transition out of sport conducted from the 1960s to the end of 2010 and

found that the challenges athletes experience generally included negative emotions such as feelings of loss and identity crisis, causing distress adjusting to post-sport life.

### ***Identity Loss***

Athletic identity is defined as the degree to which an individual devotes and defines themselves to the athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993). A recent systematic review by Karr (2023) examined articles between 2007 and 2023 to explore the effects of athletic career termination on an individual's mental health. Karr (2023) found that social acceptance, the demands of the sport, and lack of exploratory behaviour were all factors contributing to the strength of athletic identity and potential career termination anxiety. High-level athletes invest most of their time and energy into their sport. Because of this, many athletes experience identity foreclosure, that is, as a state in which they make major commitments to their sport without exploration of occupation or ideological alternatives (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). With roots in Eriksonian developmental theory (Erikson, 1959), identity foreclosure was identified as one of four identity statuses within the fifth stage of psychosocial development (Schiedel & Marcia, 1985).

**Athletic Identity.** The identity and label of an athlete are unique because they begin as soon as sports participation begins and are unlikely to be maintained past the age of 40 years (Bailie & Danish, 1992; Karr, 2023). According to Sokol (2009), developing new skills and talents plays a significant role in developing one's identity. Athletic talent is typically recognized at a young age, making the sport a central focus for the child and parents (Webb et al., 1998). Once young athletes remain involved in highly competitive sports into adolescence, their self-identity can become dependent on athletic performance at the expense of other possible social roles (Coakley, 1993). Identity

foreclosure is most pronounced during late adolescence, as this is a significant time to establish a sense of personal identity (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Erikson, 1959). The internalized athletic identity takes over the individual's self-concept (Webb et al., 1998). Elite athletes who dedicate several years to their sport carry this label for a long time. The centralized athletic identity becomes so prominent that retirement causes a major disruption in redefining the individual's self-concept (Webb et al., 1998).

A study by Houle et al. (2010) examined the development of athletic identity across three age groups and found that it increases until age 15 and remains constant into young adulthood. With that said, athletic identity can fluctuate in response to success or failure. For example, a study by Brewer et al. (1999) found that the athletic identity scores of athletes who had endured a losing season were lower than those who had experienced a winning season.

**Social Acceptance.** Another aspect of the transitional challenges related to athletic identity is the public nature of this label. Webb et al. (1998) highlight the psychological impacts of losing the public athletic identity compared to the private athletic identity. The public athletic reputation becomes a part of the athlete's overall identity and strongly influences the individual's self-esteem (Webb et al., 1998). Athletic accomplishments significantly shape the athlete's subjective well-being (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Upon reaching the end of a career, the goals centred around athletics decrease in relevance, leading to the loss of collective recognition and a decline in self-confidence (Kim & Moen, 2001; Webb et al., 1998). Problems in athletic retirement following the loss of athletic identity often result in diminished self-esteem (Botterill, 1981). Emotional loss may also occur because of the interpersonal loss of pre-established social support networks centred around the sport (Lavalley et al., 1997). This



network of supports could include, for example, teammates, coaches, therapists, and strength coaches.

**Demands of Sport and Lack of Exploratory Behavior.** Athletes often show a limited tendency or an unwillingness to broaden their experiences beyond the athletic domain. They may not engage in exploratory behaviour outside their sport because of the time commitment demands, the approval received from peers, the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards from accomplishments, the lack of need for relatedness and competency, and the encouraged compliance of team norms (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Many high-level athletes' extensive investment in their sport leaves them with limited external experience and could result in poor employment prospects (McKenna & Thomas, 2007). A study by Ackerman (2012) explored the vocational consequences and benefits of being a student-athlete and how these contributed to developing the collegiate athlete's vocational identity. Findings revealed that participants faced time constraints, prioritizing academics, athletics, and rest over extracurricular opportunities and career-related activities. Some participants reported feeling pressure to prioritize athletics due to its role as a source of educational funding and concerns about perceptions of commitment from teammates and coaches. (Ackerman, 2012). Although athletes gain life skills throughout their time in sports, they are often concerned with the transferability of these skills into the non-sport world (Swain, 1991). Transitioning out of sport requires that the athlete transforms their previously established athletic role into something much less familiar. Investment in sports may also require long-term social sacrifices to reach competitive excellence, such as family or friends being put aside (Bailie & Danish, 1992). This may perpetuate a negative self-perception of their attributes and create a fear of being unable to find a new, satisfying life (Werthner &

Orlick, 1986). These emotional difficulties and feelings of loss can result in distress adjusting to post-sport life (Park et al., 2013).

Elite athletes' identities are enhanced by social acceptance, strengthened through the demands of the sport, and inadvertently cause a lack of exploratory behaviour. The end of an athletic career marks a "disruption" in how athletes understand themselves and the world around them (Cosh et al., 2013). Thus, athletic retirement may make them feel unequipped to deal with life outside of sports, and this could result in career termination anxiety.

### ***Life Satisfaction***

Life satisfaction can be defined as a cognitive evaluation of one's life (Shin & Johnson, 1978). Sport-related research on retired athletes' level of life satisfaction has yielded contrasting results. Athletic retirement can sometimes elicit psychological and emotional difficulties, while others may experience a positive lifestyle change. Werthner and Orlick (1986) interviewed 28 of Canada's best amateur athletes and found an overall decrease in life satisfaction following athletic retirement. On the other hand, Sinclair and Orlick (1993) examined the experience of 199 retired high-performance athletes and found that 74% of the sample was satisfied with their lives after athletic retirement, and 63% indicated it was a positive change. These findings shed some light on the complexity of athletes' unique experiences during the transition out of sports and highlight the importance of comprehending both the challenges and positive aspects of this process.

## **Positive Transitions Out of Sport**

Although most studies on athletic retirement highlight adaptation challenges, other studies have provided a contrasting view of the athletic career retirement process. Findings from these studies suggest positive outcomes due to time passed after retirement (Park et al., 2013), a feeling of relief from the physical, mental, and timely demands of their sport (Martin et al., 2014), and successful skill transferability (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).

Transitions present unique opportunities for growth and transformation (Anderson et al., 2012). Park et al. (2013) found several longitudinal studies indicating positive associations between time passed after retirement and former athletes' quality of adjustment. Martin et al. (2014) suggest that increased life satisfaction over time may be attributed to increased free time, freedom from injury, and freedom from the stressors of athletic competition.

Sinclair and Orlick (1993) found that several athletes experienced a positive adjustment to life after sport and felt that athletic retirement changed their lives in a positive direction. They noted that many individuals in their study transferred the mental training skills acquired through sports, such as setting goals, planning, and visualizing, into other aspects of their lives, likely contributing to a smoother transition (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). These findings are consistent with Blinde and Greendorfer's research (1985), which stated that successful transitions occur when athletes capitalize on their transferable skills.

The extensive research highlighting both the positive and negative experiences of transitions out of sport is a testament to the complexity and individuality of the process.

It is crucial to consider the spectrum of potential outcomes to uncover the facilitators and barriers that affect the quality of adjustment to life after sport.

### **Understanding Transitions Using the 4 S Model**

Given the complexity of transition experiences, Schlossberg (2011) suggested a framework to understand change, how it affects the individual, and how it can be applied. Schlossberg (1981) proposed the first Adult Transition Model that identified three factors associated with the characteristics, impact, and outcomes of transitions: (a) the characteristics of the transition (i.e., anticipated transition); (b) the characteristics of the individual (i.e., health, past experiences, social status) (c) the characteristics of the pre-and post-transition environments (i.e., the presence of support systems). Schlossberg (2011) later adapted the original transition model into the 4 S model, which expanded upon the original three categories and included a fourth. The 4 S model highlights four significant factors influencing one's ability to cope during transition: the situation, the self, the support, and the strategies (Schlossberg, 2011). This model incorporates a ratio of an individual's evolving assets and liabilities, throughout transitional situations to explain why individuals can react differently to similar situations and even why the same person can react differently to the same situation at different times (Anderson et al., 2012). For an athlete adjusting to life after sport, the transition quality depends on various internal and external factors. Past and present research has revealed specific barriers and facilitators that significantly influence the quality of athletes' transition out of sport. These findings each fall within the categories of the 4 S model and are outlined below.

### ***The Situation Variable***

The first determinant of adaptation to transition is the situation variable. According to Schlossberg's (1981) original Adult Transition Model, the trigger (source), timing, control, role change, duration, and degree of stress are all characteristics of the transition that play a role in determining the quality of a transition. These factors impact how the individual perceives their unique transition and can subsequently affect their adaptation.

**Trigger.** The trigger of the transition is also referred to as the source initiating the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition noted that reasons for retirement impacted the athlete's subjective well-being post-retirement. Schlossberg (1981) claims that individuals adapt more quickly to transitions when the source of change is internal. This concept was further investigated by Alfermann and Gross (1997), who looked at the differences in the adjustment process of athletes who retired voluntarily versus those who retired involuntarily. They differentiated the overall positive and negative reactions to career termination and differences in coping strategies for voluntary and involuntary retired athletes. They concluded that athletes who voluntarily retired from their sport reported more positive emotions, active coping processes, and lifestyle after career termination than involuntary retirees (Alfermann & Gross, 1997).

On the other hand, athletes who had terminated their careers involuntarily reported more negative feelings, a greater number of passive coping strategies, and a higher need for social support than voluntary retirees (Alfermann & Gross, 1997). These findings align with numerous studies suggesting that voluntarily choosing to end one's career is linked to a smoother transition into life after sports (Alfermann, 2000;

Alfermann & Gross, 1997; Erpič et al., 2004; Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Involuntary retirement, on the other hand, can result in psychological challenges, such as decreased self-esteem and heightened feelings of anger and depression, most likely caused by the athlete's perception of involuntary retirement as failure (Crook & Robertson, 1991).

**Timing.** The timing refers to the internal social clocks adults use to judge whether the transition is “on time” or “off time” concerning life events. “Off-time” transitions occur at a different or unexpected time and deviate from the typical timeline (Schlossberg, 1981). For an athlete, unpredictable career termination is often the result of an injury or deselection (Alfermann, 2000). These types of transitions may catch the athlete off guard and present greater challenges in planning, implementing support structures, and adapting emotionally. Alfermann et al. (2004) conducted a cross-national comparative study to examine the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural consequences of athletic career termination. They found that planned retirement contributed to a greater cognitive, emotional, and behavioural adaptation. Another factor related to the timing of career termination is the athlete's sense of accomplishment. Sinclair and Orlick (1993) explored the transition experiences of high-performance athletes. They found that athletes who adjusted smoothly typically retired on their terms once they had accomplished their sport-related goals. These results are supported by the previous research of Werthner and Orlick (1986), who found that athletes with a sense of accomplishment felt ready to get on with new challenges.

In contrast, those lacking a sense of accomplishment had a more difficult transition out of their sport (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). A systematic review by Park et al. (2013) also highlighted an overall positive correlation between sport goal

achievement and the quality of career transition. Therefore, the challenges of an “off-time” or unpredictable career termination may include a diminished window of time to plan retirement and a sense of unfinished or unfulfilled goals.

Transitions with gradual onsets are usually easier to adapt because they allow the individual to prepare for them (Schlossberg, 1981). Onset is closely related to timing because sudden, unexpected life events may not allow preparation. For athletes, gradual onsets provide time to plan, gain awareness of transferable skills, and pursue other interests in preparation for life after sport, which can contribute to a more successful transition (Danish et al., 1993). Athletes who plan their retirement experience higher cognitive, emotional, and behavioural readiness for the transition to post-sport life than those who did not prepare for their retirement (Knights et al., 2016).

However, gradual onsets are not a guarantee for easier transitions. Gradual changes may still be accompanied by sudden awareness and result in abrupt shifts in the same ways as unexpected events (Schlossberg, 1981). This is particularly true for collegiate athletes who are aware of their graduation date but are hesitant to seek retirement preparation planning assistance due to the fear that coaches or teammates would perceive it as a withdrawal from their athletic responsibilities (Murdock et al., 2014). Werthner and Orlick (1986) also mentioned the added uncertainty that athletes may experience when unsure what they want to do or are even capable of achieving beyond their athletic career. Thus, when the onset is gradual, taking advantage of available resources is crucial to increase the likelihood of a smooth transition from athletic endeavours to post-sport life.

**Control.** Perceived psychological control is the extent to which one believes they influence their life outcomes (Anderson et al., 2012). The sense of control provides a

feeling of self-efficacy and an ability to plan, which increases the likelihood of a successful adjustment (Anderson et al., 2012). A study by Martin et al. (2014) examined 62 Australian athletes from three different phases of their athletic careers with 5-year increments and found that the higher degree of control an athlete had over the decision to retire, the greater they reported an increase in life satisfaction post-retirement.

According to Taylor and Ogilvie's Conceptual Model of Athletic Retirement (1994), causes of career termination in which choice is absent include age, deselection, and injury. Each of these reasons for retirement consists of circumstances that are beyond the athlete's control. There are also variations to consider among the specific causes of involuntary retirement. An athlete retiring due to age, albeit involuntarily, may have a very different experience leaving their sport than one retiring due to deselection or injury. Athletes who experience deselection and attribute their retirement to performance declines tend to face greater challenges with self-confidence and feelings of loss, perceiving the outcome as a personal failure, compared to those who retire for different reasons (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Alfermann (2000) highlights a notable distinction between athletes retiring due to performance loss and those retiring due to injury: the former may have already reached their full athletic potential, whereas the latter missed out on this opportunity. Even if the transition is outside the individual's control, they can still control their response to it (Anderson et al., 2012). Therefore, when assessing the impacts of successful transitions, it is important to consider how the individual can regain or maintain control regardless of the retirement trigger and timing.

**Role Change.** For athletes, transitioning out of sport signifies losing their athletic role while simultaneously navigating the potential challenges of adopting a new role. This process can cause stress due to the loss of identity and purpose. Grove et al. (1997)



examined 48 former elite-level athletes' occupational, emotional, and social adjustment to retirement from sport, their level of athletic identity, use of coping strategies, and perceived quality of adjustment to retirement. Findings revealed that individuals with a higher athletic identity at the time of retirement experienced a higher degree of emotional adjustment difficulties and that an individual's adjustment quality tends to improve as athletic identity decreases. These results support previous research indicating that narrow self-concepts increase the likelihood of negative emotions due to a loss of self-identity in the adjustment to life after sport (Brewer et al., 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Similarly, in a systematic review by Park et al. (2013), 34 studies found that a strong athletic identity and high identity foreclosure were negatively correlated with the quality of athletes' transition out of sport. Another study by Russell et al. (2018) investigated the influence of athletic identity on the utilization of coping mechanisms. Results highlighted the importance of assessing the athletic identities of competitive athletes to identify which individuals may be more susceptible to difficulties upon transitioning out of sport and more likely to use ineffective coping strategies (Russell et al., 2018).

A narrowing self-concept may also contribute to difficulties in seeing how skills acquired through sport may be valuable in non-sporting environments. Athletes acquire many skills in sports that are highly transferable to future careers and life: the ability to overcome opposition, collaborate with a team, manage time, and strive for success. However, one of the main barriers to using transferable skills is that athletes are not always aware of them (Danish et al., 1993). The degree to which athletes consider alternative roles possible during their athletic careers strongly indicates a successful transition out of sport (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). Similarly, Mayocchi and Hanrahan

(2000) found that athletes who are aware of the universal applicability of skills acquired through sport are better equipped to explain to future employers how they will be useful beyond their sport. When athletes can redirect the energy they previously invested in their sports careers towards new tangible pursuits, they may be more likely to experience a smoother transition (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). As athletes recognize they possess skills essential for success in various aspects of their lives and start envisioning how these skills can be applied, they become better prepared to navigate new roles in their post-sport life.

**Duration.** The expected duration of the change experienced also impacts adaptation to change. For example, a change regarded as permanent may be more difficult to adapt than one known to be temporary (Schlossberg, 1981). For athletes, a shorter transitional period can be achieved through planned retirement, leading to more positive emotional reactions to career termination (Alfermann et al., 2004). Athletes who lack an athletic retirement plan, often due to uncertainty or unexpected outcomes, commonly experience a sense of being “in limbo” for an extended period (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). This prolonged uncertainty is recognized as a significant challenge in the transition process (Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

**Previous Experience with a Similar Transition.** Past experiences can help determine an individual’s mindset when approaching similar situations. An individual who has successfully experienced a transition in the past is likely to be more successful in dealing with another similar transition (Anderson et al., 2012). In contrast, an unfavourable experience transitioning may create a challenge of self-confirming prophecy (Anderson et al., 2012).

**Concurrent Stress and Assessment of the Situation.** Schlossberg (1981) highlights that the stress associated with a specific event relies less on the event itself and more on the balance between an individual's deficits and resources when the event occurs. A transition viewed negatively will likely generate more stress than one that is welcomed by the individual. The most significant stress levels are derived from a change in which there is perceived uncertainty (Schlossberg, 1981). McKnight et al. (2009) suggest that athletes could benefit from exploring the emotions associated with this significant life change since they are often taught to move past their emotions in sports. Heightened levels of anxiety related to the transition can negatively impact the success of the transition. Meanwhile, athletes who welcome the transition out of sport and view it positively are more likely to have an easier transition (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). As Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) suggest, the degree of change combined with the athlete's perception related to change is a predictor of the quality of the adaptation to life after sport. The individual's perception of their transition out of sport and the experienced stress depends not only on external factors but also on internal factors.

### ***The Self Variable***

The second determinant of adaptation to transition is the self variable. Schlossberg's 4 S model focuses on the impacts of personal demographic characteristics and psychological resources (Anderson et al., 2012).

**Personal and Demographic Characteristics.** Gender, socioeconomic status, age and stage of life, ethnicity/culture, and state of health all affect how an individual experiences a situation. Through a systematic review of 24 studies addressing demographic issues related to the quality of the athletic career termination transition,

Park et al. (2013) found studies indicating that female athletes adapt to post-sport life quicker than males. Perhaps because women's capacity for intimacy makes it easier for them to navigate transitions, whereas men may be socialized to hide emotions (Anderson et al., 2012). The systematic review also revealed that social status and high financial status are positively associated with the quality of the athlete's transition (Park et al., 2013). Individuals who are financially dependent on their athletic role are likely to perceive their retirement as threatening and experience distress (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Inconclusive and conflicting results were presented in studies examining the impacts of age and ethnicity on the transition process out of sport (Park et al., 2013). Anderson et al. (2012) explain that one's life stage may be a more useful concept in examining the impacts of transitions. Ethnic-specific cultural practices are challenging to study because they can be a resource for strength, just as they can be a deficit when navigating transitions (Anderson et al., 2012). Injuries and health issues were clear sources of transitional difficulties for retired athletes (Park et al., 2013). Werthner and Orlick (1986) explained that retiring athletes experiencing injuries or health problems needed more time to adjust to post-sport life. The injury constitutes a transition in itself and can be a source of stress in addition to the transition out of sport (Anderson et al., 2012). Other factors like marital status and educational status increased the likelihood of a positive transition out of sport (Park et al., 2013). Fernandez et al. (2006) found that married athletes experienced less challenges in their transition and a higher degree of perceived support from their partner. Athletes with more education tend to have greater professional knowledge and occupational opportunities, which can contribute to less occupational challenges in their post-sport career life (Erpič et al., 2004).

**Psychological Resources.** Personality traits and behavioural tendencies impact the quality of adjustment to life after sport. Athletes with fewer self-imposed restrictions and other alternatives will naturally be better positioned to deal with the transition out of sport (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). According to Anderson et al. (2012), psychological resources include ego development, optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, commitments, values, and spirituality.

***Ego Development.*** The ego development refers to an individual's level of maturity and frame of reference (Anderson et al., 2012). The level at which a person operates subsequently informs their reactions to situations. At a higher level of ego development, individuals exhibit autonomy, critical thinking, and an improved ability to navigate ambiguity (Anderson et al., 2012). Conversely, at a lower level of ego development, individuals tend to conform and follow instructions without questioning (Anderson et al., 2012). When it comes to athletes transitioning out of sport, the level of ego development can be likened to the prominence of athletic identity. Athletes with a stronger athletic identity, who have conformed to meet the expectations of their sport, often experience a more significant disruption during the uncertainty of their transitional period (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Erpič, 1998; Pearons & Petitpas, 1990; Webb et al., 1998; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). An individual's level of maturity and frame of reference shapes their response and ability to tolerate ambiguity during the transition process (Anderson et al., 2012).

***Optimism and Self-Efficacy.*** The 4 S model suggests that another way to understand individuals is to know their outlook on change (Anderson et al., 2012). Both optimism and self-efficacy are key influential factors in shaping an individual's outlook. Most transitions are neither bad nor good but, rather, they are what the person makes of

them. Anderson et al. (2012) describe optimism as a crucial key to coping with transitions as it generates a positive perspective in response to a neutral situation. As mentioned, The Situation Variable can significantly influence an individual's self-assessment and overall optimism.

Anderson et al. (2012) compare self-efficacy to perceived control. An athlete's perceived control over their transition out of sport can be derived through anticipatory socialization and personal management skills. Crook and Robertson (1991) define anticipatory socialization as the proactive response to preparing for athletic retirement before it happens. Research shows that a lack of attention to preparing for life after sport causes adjustment difficulties (Crook & Robertson, 1991), whereas those who plan can gain better direction and experience a smoother adjustment (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Planning can include considering alternative roles, having other interests, and participating in other activities. The extent to which athletes explore alternative role possibilities is a significant indicator of successful transitions from sport (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985).

Another form of self-efficacy is the extent of one's personal management skills. Whether it is the training program, the nutrition plan, or playing time, athletes are often at the mercy of decisions made by coaches or sports administrations. Werthner and Orlick (1986) found that 80% of competing athletes rated themselves low on perceived control. This may weaken the athlete's self-management skills and create a significant challenge in transitioning to life after sport (Crook & Robertson, 1991).

Overall, athletes with greater control over their lives also experience greater self-esteem, higher life satisfaction, and think more positively about the future (Webb et al., 1998). However, an appropriate balance of desired control is essential because there are

cases in which too much self-efficacy can lead to more significant challenges. Many athletes' efforts to develop within their sport reflect their level of self-efficacy and commitment to self-improvement. This overarching need for personal control can cause a reluctance to seek treatment and leave athletes separated from potential sources of social support (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). A more recent article by Mannes et al. (2019) provides a systematic review of literature from 2000 to 2017 examining the prevalence and correlates of psychological distress among retired athletes. Findings revealed that athletes experiencing psychological distress in retirement often do not seek treatment (Mannes et al., 2019).

**Commitments.** An individual transitioning away from a primary commitment will be much more vulnerable than one who can use their primary commitment as a distraction (Anderson et al., 2012). Most athletes playing at elite levels eat, sleep, and breathe their sport. Transitioning away from this major time commitment creates a void of time that can now be filled with something else. In some cases, this can provide a sense of freedom, whereas others may feel a longing to regain the routines and rigorous schedules they once had. Athletes who find the right balance between sports and non-sport events during their athletic careers tend to report higher life satisfaction after retiring than those who did not (Park et al., 2013).

**Values and Spirituality.** Values and spirituality play a role in dictating an individual's response to transitions. Values can help drive purpose and guide an individual during uncertain times. They can also introduce challenges in the face of change because a useful value system at one life stage may not be at another (Anderson et al., 2012). For example, an athlete with a strong work ethic may find athletic retirement difficult because they are unsure where to spend that energy. Spirituality is

another avenue of connectedness toward meaning and purpose and can be referred to as a resource for coping with transitions (Anderson et al., 2012).

**Resilience.** As Anderson et al. (2012) describe it, resilience cannot be defined by one characteristic; instead, it includes several: positive, focused, organized, proactive, and flexible. An athlete with a resilient attitude may be better equipped to deal with transitions than one without. A systematic review by Knights et al. (2016) investigated the factors contributing to successful end-of-sport career transitions. Due to a lack of literature focusing on positive athletic retirement outcomes, Knights et al. (2016) suggested that examining the impacts of flourishing aspects, including positive emotions and resilience, may be helpful.

### ***The Support Variable***

The third determinant of adaptation to transition is the support variable. Social resources can be crucial in assisting individuals throughout their transition out of sport. Interpersonal and institutional support systems help the retiring athlete process emotional burdens, access psychological resources, and provide guidance, opportunities, improvement materials, and honest feedback (Anderson et al., 2012).

**Interpersonal Support.** Interpersonal support systems include intimate relationships, the family unit, and the network of friends (Anderson et al., 2012). Characteristics of the social context can influence the degree of difficulty posed by transitions out of sport. Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Retirement Among Athletes emphasizes the importance of social support in people's ability to respond effectively to the challenges of retirement. In Park et al.'s (2013) systematic review, they found 27 out of 29 studies reporting that support from others



positively influenced the quality of the athletic career transition and eased the difficulties of the athlete's adjustment. A notable finding was that emotional and esteem support can lead to greater success in coping with retirement because it helps foster positive self-regard and reduces emotional distress (Lavallee et al., 1997). Family, friends, and especially partners/spouses are recognized as important sources of emotional comfort (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

Brown et al. (2018) investigated how social support may influence the athlete's adjustment to life following retirement from elite sport. Findings indicated that social support was most effective because of the strength and closeness of the relationship with the supporter and the participant's perception of feeling cared for and understood (Brown et al., 2018). Therefore, the type of support, the source of support, and the perception of the support are important characteristics to consider when assessing interpersonal interventions to aid athletes in their transition out of sport.

For athletes, interpersonal support systems also include their teammates. When athletes transition away from their sport, they often experience a loss of their sport-related social networks. Athletes receive less support from this network, which was previously a significant part of their lives (Lavallee et al., 1997; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). A simultaneous loss of their social identity and social support could cause the athlete to feel lonely and socially isolated (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Park et al., 2013). Fortunately, over time, Brown et al. (2018) suggested that the athlete's evolving sense of self in the social world positively impacts their adjustment process. New social roles, social relationships, and opportunities to support others created a sense of growth and a feeling of being supported. For example, athletes offering support to other retiring

athletes can be just as effective at facilitating adjustment to retirement as receiving support (Brown et al., 2018).

**Institutional Support.** Institutional support includes those an individual can turn to for help, such as organizations, community support groups, and religious institutions. (Schlossberg, 1981). The institutional support system for athletes also encompasses the coaching staff and the athletic organization. Previous research highlighted a lack of organizational support available to athletes, suggesting that most organizations were not paying as much attention to athletes moving out of the organization as they were helping them move in (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Wippert and Wippert (2008) examined the stress levels of athletes undergoing career termination and found that those who experienced supportive termination had less stress than those who did not.

With increasing attention on the benefits of institutional support, many transitional support programs have been created to assist athletes, at varying levels, in their transition out of the sport. Athletic support programs for retiring athletes function to address the various aspects of pre-retirement planning. Park et al. (2013) highlighted life skills development, increased motivation for career decisions, and greater self-identity as positive impacts of athlete support programs, which improve the quality of their transition. Other examples include offering information, easing social integration, teaching coping skills, assisting in finding a career, and providing mentoring opportunities. A more recent study by Reifsteck et al. (2018) evaluated the impacts of The Moving On! program and found that participants experienced positive shifts in their self-perceptions, self-determined motivation, and reinforced intentions to adopt a healthy lifestyle in the future. Aside from support programs, McKnight et al. (2009) suggested that the coaching staff can also play a role in helping athletes learn personal

management skills. When organizations, coaches, or trainers provide information before a transition, athletes experience fewer transition difficulties or negative emotions and a greater sense of control than those who do not receive the information. This is supported by Werthner and Orlick (1986), who found that positive relationships with the coach lead to better transitions.

Despite the increasing number of transitional programs and their reported benefits, there are also shortcomings and barriers to consider. For one, support systems often emphasize help with employment rather than emotional support (McKnight et al., 2009). A second is the need for more research on the long-term impacts of post-sport transition programs (Reifsteck et al., 2018). Third, many athletes are reluctant to actively seek help and support (Mannes et al., 2019; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Yoon & Petrie, 2023), meaning available resources may not be accessed.

### ***The Strategies Variable***

The fourth determinant of adaptation to transition is the strategies variable. Anderson et al. (2012) summarize coping as an attempt to modify, control the meaning, or manage stress related to the situation. The strategies variable is closely related to the support variable because support networks can aid individuals in acquiring coping mechanisms. Coping strategies or coping skills are addressed in Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Athletic Retirement. The findings suggested that the quality of adaptation to retirement by athletes mainly depends on how they address these changes (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Examples of useful coping strategies athletes use when transitioning out of their sport include searching for new careers or interests, keeping busy, talking to former teammates about their experience, acceptance,

and seeking psychosocial support (Grove et al., 1997; Lally, 2007). Using coping skills is key in helping athletes deal with the loss of their sport (Menke & Germany, 2019). Research supports the benefits of coping strategies for a smooth adjustment to life after sport for retiring athletes, yet few have found whether specific strategies are more effective than others (Park et al., 2013). A recent study by Hayes et al. (2023) revealed that combining self-compassion and social support may effectively alleviate the negative psychological distress associated with disruptions in athletic identity during transitional periods. By embracing acceptance over self-criticism throughout transitional periods, athletes can navigate stress without feeling overwhelmed or psychologically distressed (Hayes et al., 2023).

Eggleston et al. (2020) found that athletes who are experiencing grief may struggle to implement practical coping skills, which negatively impacts their transition. This is especially true for athletes forced to retire (Alfermann & Gross, 1997). These individuals may experience mood swings, depression, isolation, and intense anxiety (Eggleston et al., 2020). Retiring athletes facing struggles and lacking effective coping strategies may perpetuate negative well-being and resort to maladaptive coping methods in search of relief. For these individuals, there may be long-term consequences such as depression, anxiety, substance misuse, and disordered eating (Chang et al., 2020).

### ***Applying the 4 S Model***

The 4 S model incorporates the individual's evolving set of assets and liabilities across the four key dimensions. The ratio of assets to liabilities acknowledges that an adjustment may be relatively easy when assets outweigh liabilities in comparison to an adjustment occurring when liabilities outweigh assets (Anderson et al., 2012). For

example, an individual with minimal support and a challenging situation is likely to experience greater challenges when transitioning in contrast to someone else in a challenging situation who has abundant support.

When applying the 4 S model, another key factor to consider is the stage at which an individual is navigating their transition—be it the initial phase of entry (*moving in*), the progression phase (*moving through*), or the phase of exit (*moving out*) (Schlossberg, 2011). This timeline is critical as it directly influences the individual's experiential processing and management of change and consequently informs the practical application of the 4 S model. In the context of athletics, an athlete who is entering a new team would be moving in, an athlete who is going through their career would be moving through, and an athlete transitioning away from their sport would be moving out (Anderson et al., 2012). Schlossberg (2011) notes that transitions undergo a continuous cycle because just as the individual is moving out of something, they are once again moving into another position where they will begin moving through. An athlete in this cycle would experience moving out and away from their sport, followed by the experience of moving into their post-athletic life.

Schlossberg's (1981, 1984, 2011) transition model was traditionally applied in work-life career transitions but has since been applied to examine transitions across various contexts. Following a study examining transition experiences among retired athletes with disabilities, Wheeler et al. (1996) suggested this model may prove extremely useful to counsellors, coaches, and athletes in examining the athletic career, transition, and coping with retirement. Further studies within the athletic context have applied Schlossberg's transition model as a foundation for data collection, data analysis,

and future implications (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Hansen et al., 2019; Manthey & Smith, 2023; Stokowski et al., 2019; Swain, 1991).

## **Post-Sport Transition Experiences**

### ***Collegiate Athletes Transitioning out of Sport***

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) holds a prominent position in sports and plays a significant role in collegiate athletes' transition process. Following the completion of eligibility to compete as a collegiate athlete, individuals are confronted with the choice of either retiring from elite sports or pursuing a professional career. According to the NCAA (2022), only 2% of all college athletes can make a career out of sports, making it an option for a select few. Therefore, retirement from elite sports is inevitable for most graduating collegiate athletes.

The average division 1 student-athlete dedicates 33 hours to athletics, 35.5 hours to academics, 14.5 hours to socializing, and 85 hours to other (sleep, job, extracurricular) (NCAA, 2016). This demanding schedule makes the transition out of sport unique for a collegiate athlete because it involves leaving the sport behind while navigating changes in their social, academic, nutritional, and physical environment. Essentially, collegiate athletes face the challenge of adapting to a less structured life, moving away from a schedule centred around athletics, and dealing with the absence of constant support from teammates, coaches, and athletic department staff, as well as coping with the loss of their sport (Miller & Bottell, 2018).

The profound sense of loss linked to these aspects revolves around a loss that is rooted much deeper: the loss of their athletic identity. Athletic identity loss can be a contributing factor to adaptation difficulties for collegiate athletes (Bopp et al., 2021;

Harry & Weight, 2021). Although this process is predictable, many athletes experience trepidation in anticipation of their transition and often feel unprepared once they face it (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020). Lack of preparation can cause the collegiate athlete to feel anxious and perpetuate adaptation difficulties (Bopp et al., 2021). Loss of athletic identity and a lack of preparation emphasize the need for stable support systems to assist collegiate athletes in their transition (Stokowski et al., 2019). These findings are supported by Menke and Germany (2019), who highlighted the benefits of having a post-retirement plan and talking about emotions related to losing athletic identity.

Similar to the literature exploring the retirement adjustment of professional athletes, collegiate athletes each have a unique range of experiences, varying from positive to negative. Stokowski et al. (2019) examined 178 former collegiate athletes' perceptions of adapting to transition. Results indicated that 57.3% reported a negative perception of transition, and 42.7% reported a positive perception of transition (Stokowski et al., 2019). Despite many athletes feeling unprepared, others experienced a sense of freedom and readiness for life beyond sport (Stokowski et al., 2019). Barcza-Renner et al. (2020) explored the retirement experiences of 15 NCAA Division 1 collegiate athletes, of whom 12 were female, five months after their retirement. They found the commonalities among participants with successful transitions included those who had accomplished their athletic goals, reported at least one support group, and had a plan following their retirement (Barcza-Renner et al., 2020). Harry and Weight (2021) had similar findings that former collegiate athletes voicing strong interpersonal support systems were more successful in navigating their post-college transition than peers who lacked interpersonal support. A positive player-coach relationship was also highlighted

as a key factor in smooth transitions for former collegiate athletes (Harry & Weight, 2021).

**Collegiate Athlete Transition Support Programs.** Findings from the current literature offer practical implications to support collegiate athletes in preparing for life after sports by addressing crucial factors known to facilitate smoother transitions. These include broadening their identity beyond sports, devising a plan, and establishing a support system (Hansen et al., 2019). Studies found that collegiate athletes who take the time to plan for their post-collegiate sports career in terms of career, psychological, personal/social, and financial aspects tend to transition with greater ease (Park et al., 2013; Stellefson et al., 2020). Institutional programs have been created to assist collegiate athletes in transitioning out of sports. Existing resources for collegiate athletes include the *NCAA Life Skills Program* which teaches collegiate athletes how to balance academic achievement, athletic success, and personal well-being (NCAA, 2008), *Moving On!* which helps foster long-term health and well-being through healthy levels of physical activity post-retirement (Reifsteck & Brooks, 2018), and *Life After Sports Transition* which aims to help collegiate athletes prepare and embrace life after sports (Stellefson et al., 2020). While many institutions have taken steps to address the needs of collegiate athletes, there remains a scarcity of well-established systemic programs specifically designed to navigate the adaptation period post-collegiate sports (Hansen et al., 2019; Stellefson et al., 2020). Several studies underscored the necessity of conducting further research on the retirement process for collegiate athletes and emphasized the importance of providing proactive support to meet their needs (Barcza-Renner et al., 2020; Bopp et al., 2021; Menke & Germany, 2019; Miller & Botell, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019). Examples include pre-retirement workshops, mentorship



programs, education on transferable skills and coping skills, career planning, and building a solid support system.

Although one in five collegiate athletes experience some type of mental health concern, fewer than half seek mental health treatment (Drew & Matthews, 2019). Understanding the barriers and facilitators of collegiate athletes seeking mental health services is helpful. Collegiate athletes often believe in their own self-reliance and lack confidence that mental health treatment would be effective (Yoon & Petrie, 2023). There is also a barrier rooted in collegiate athletes' perception that their head coach has negative attitudes toward mental health and that their personal information may not be kept confidential when accessing services (Yoon & Petrie, 2023). Factors encouraging collegiate athletes to consult a sports psychologist include the ability to share identities through discussions about similarities and differences, having a shared experience as an elite athlete, and having played the same sport as the athlete (Yoon & Petrie, 2023).

### ***Female Collegiate Athletes Transitioning out of Sport***

In the 2020-2021 season, the NCAA saw its most significant percentage increase for women competing in championship sports since 2000-2001, with 226,212 female collegiate athletes (NCAA, 2023). Due to a limited number of professional leagues and gaps in pay compared to male sports, the trending growth in women's collegiate athletics entails that more women will eventually be transitioning out of their sport. While research on female collegiate athletes transitioning out of sport may be relatively limited compared to their male counterparts, valuable research still sheds light on their unique journey during this transitional period.

Saxe et al. (2017) provided one of the first studies focusing on a more general perspective of the female collegiate athlete experience. Findings suggested that senior female collegiate athletes experienced anxiety and confusion about their athletic career and identity ending (Saxe et al., 2017). Identity loss and confusion were also salient themes emerging from a study by Smith and Hardin (2019), who explored the experiences of 10 retired female collegiate athletes. Due to the time demands of their sport, female collegiate athletes were limited in their ability to develop friendships or participate in activities outside of their sport, which affected their emotional and social growth (Smith & Hardin, 2019). Salient themes experienced by female collegiate athletes transitioning out of sport emerging from a study by Oshiro et al. (2023) included taking a break from their sport, navigating an identity crisis, and re-establishing themselves in various facets of their lives. Among the general confusion experienced by female collegiate athletes stepping away from their sport were uncertainties related to a lack of education about nutrition, exercising, and maintaining fitness levels in contexts beyond their sport (Oshiro et al., 2023; Smith & Hardin, 2019). Women competing in aesthetic-type sports, like gymnastics or swimming, may experience changes in their body weight and composition following retirement, which could be psychologically distressing (Papathomas et al., 2018).

Female collegiate athletes who graduated between 2010 and 2020 perceived a lack of organizational support within their institutions (Oshiro et al., 2023). Female collegiate athletes could benefit from early education and preparation for their transition out of collegiate sports to address the primary feelings of loss and confusion associated with athletic retirement. Competing female collegiate athletes who remain open to other life areas, identities, interests, or relationships experience greater life satisfaction post-

retirement (Shander & Petrie, 2021). Engaging in shared conversations during this process may provide valuable support. Passing down the knowledge of their experiences to a teammate, whether positive or negative, can offer female collegiate athletes a sense of meaning (Saxe et al., 2017). The prioritization of having access to a therapist (Orisho et al., 2023) and particularly a same-gender sports psychologist are other key considerations for female collegiate athletes (Yoon & Petrie, 2023). Smith and Hardin (2019) suggested that providing education to female collegiate athletes through mentorship programs as role models who have already experienced the transition and succeeded in life beyond sport can be highly beneficial.

### ***Female Collegiate Hockey Players Transitioning out of Sport***

The existing literature on the transition away from sport for collegiate athletes has yet to explore the unique experiences of NCAA Division 1 female hockey players. Despite the considerable growth of women's hockey by 14% between 2020 and 2022, surpassing other sports in percentage increase (NCAA, 2023), there remains a gap in research concerning their transition experiences.

The professional women's ice hockey landscape in North America has undergone significant changes in 2023, with the establishment of a new league: the Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL). Before this announcement, there were two separate women's professional hockey leagues in North America: the Professional Women's Hockey Players' Association (PWHPA), which had four teams, and the Premier Hockey Federation (PHF), which had seven teams (The Canadian Press, 2023). To establish a new unified league that provides its players with support and a living wage, the PWHPA acquired the PHF, aiming to create a sustainable and equitable

professional hockey platform for women (The Canadian Press, 2023). On September 18th, 2023, the league's inaugural draft took place (PWHL, 2023). Since the new league includes only six teams, limited roster spots were available, and not all players from the previous leagues secured a spot in the new setup. Some female hockey players had to explore alternative options, such as European leagues, to continue their competitive careers. Meanwhile, many players faced the inevitable transition away from hockey and needed to explore other career opportunities.

The PWHL has made a significant impact and is experiencing growing popularity in the sports landscape with widespread support from fans, media outlets, and the National Hockey League (NHL) (The Canadian Press, 2023). A recent game received a record-breaking attendance of 19,285 spectators, establishing a new milestone for the league (PWHL, 2024). The PWHL's developments underscore the increasing significance of women's ice hockey and highlight the importance of understanding the challenges, opportunities, and overall experiences of female hockey players navigating the post-collegiate phase of their careers. Further investigation into this under-researched area is warranted in order to address the need for comprehensive support systems and tailored interventions that facilitate a smooth and successful transition for female hockey players pursuing professional, personal, and academic endeavours beyond their collegiate athletic journey.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

According to McMillan (2016), a qualitative phenomenological study describes, clarifies, and interprets participants' lived experiences to understand the essence of the experience as consciously perceived by the participants. The first step is to ensure the topic is investigated through the shared experiences of different people rather than a simple survey (McMillan, 2016). The second step is to identify participants who have lived the experience and can relive and communicate their thoughts about the phenomenon (McMillan, 2016). The key characteristics of qualitative research include natural settings, direct data collection, detailed narrative descriptions, process orientation, inductive data analysis, participant perspectives, socially constructed meaning, and emergent research design (McMillan, 2016). This study met the requirements for a qualitative phenomenological approach as it aimed to explore and understand the complex phenomena regarding recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players' experiences transitioning out of college through semi-structured interviews. This approach was chosen because it is designed to uncover how people understand, interpret, and attribute meaning to their experiences (McMillan, 2016). Although the current research specifically focused on the participants' transition experience, the broader goal was to gain insights into various potential phenomena emerging from their experiences. This encompasses phenomena related to all four dimensions of Schlossberg's (2011) 4 S model: situation, self, support, and strategies. The 4 S model as a theoretical framework assisted in discovering themes and patterns within diverse participant experiences.

## **Study Participants**

The following section will outline the study's inclusion criteria, recruitment strategies, and the final participant sample obtained.

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

The current study used a purposeful sampling strategy to select participants who have experienced the phenomena under study (McMillan, 2016). In this study, all participants needed to meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) *attended and played hockey for an NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey team for a minimum of four years;* (b) *graduated from university in 2023*. Given the impacts of COVID-19, all players competing during the 2020-2021 season received an extra year of eligibility to compete (NCAA, 2022). With an extra year of eligibility to consider, many athletes may have transferred to compete at another university due to limited spots on current rosters, a desire for change in their final year, or even academic pursuits. Thus, it is essential to note that athletes who may have transferred within their fourth or more years to compete at a different NCAA Division 1 school remained eligible for the study. The inclusion criteria for this study were identified after careful consideration to obtain the most pertinent sample to answer the research question. The first criterion ensures that participants possess the necessary depth of experience in collegiate athletics to articulate their transition experiences effectively. The second criterion addresses the timeliness of the participant's experience, given that they have recently graduated and are transitioning away from their sport. When assessing the timeliness of participants' graduation year, the relevance and applicability of the study's findings surrounding the current landscape of women's ice hockey were also taken into consideration.

### ***Recruitment***

Recruitment was conducted via email invitations. The initial email communication was sent to NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey coaches, providing an overview of the study and extending an invitation to share the contact information of eligible players (Appendix A). Since the researcher is a former collegiate athlete, the recruitment email was sent to NCAA Division 1 coaches from her contact list. After obtaining the contact information of eligible players, an email was dispatched to potential participants, containing study details, outlining the eligibility criteria, and providing an invitation to join the study (Appendix B). In terms of sample size, there were no strict qualitative study guidelines for the necessary number of participants. As McMillan (2016) suggests, the intent is to select information-rich cases that would allow an in-depth understanding of the central phenomena. Based on the researcher's knowledge of the population and the identified criteria, a decision was made to include enough information-rich cases (McMillan, 2016). Interviews concluded upon reaching thematic saturation, where no new data was forthcoming.

### ***Final Sample***

This study included 14 recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players. Ages ranged from 22 to 25 years old, and the sample exclusively identified as female. All participants met the inclusion criteria. Participants were selected in the order they responded to online communication. Three individuals expressed interest in participating in the study after thematic saturation had been reached. These individuals were informed that an email would be sent to them if more

participants were required, for example, if a participant withdrew from the study. Participant demographics are detailed in Chapter 4.

### **Data Collection**

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a qualitative inquiry was deemed the most effective approach to obtaining a deep understanding of the athletes' transition experience. A phenomenological methodology was employed to delve deeper into the experiences of multiple individuals who have encountered the phenomenon. The primary method for data collection included a Personal Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix D) followed by a Semi-Structured Interview (Appendix E). Participants received the Personal Demographic Questionnaire and scheduled interviews after securing their informed consent document (Appendix C).

#### ***Personal Demographic Questionnaire***

The rationale for a constructed questionnaire is justified when its development and utilization are substantiated by theoretical underpinnings and prior research (McMillan, 2016). The current study included an online Personal Demographic Questionnaire to understand the participants' backgrounds across personal, athletic, educational, and professional dimensions. Collecting participants' background information online also allowed more time to focus on experiential aspects during the interview.

#### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

Participants were invited to schedule a 60-minute interview via Microsoft Teams. The interview was conducted at a time most convenient to the participant. During the interview, the participants were given the opportunity to review the consent form, choose a pseudonym, and engage in a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured



interviews offered flexibility to delve into participants' stories, maintaining alignment with the theoretical framework and the research question (McMillan, 2016). Open-ended questions allowed participants to discuss narratives and reflections regarding their transition experiences freely. The interviews lasted approximately 30-80 minutes, depending on the participant.

The researcher developed the Semi-Structured Interview protocol based on the theoretical framework and target of the research. Interview questions were formulated in alignment with the four components of the 4 S model: self, situation, support, and strategies. The first set of questions aimed to uncover aspects of the self, which included questions related to the participant's identity, sense of self, personal experience, and strengths related to their transition out of collegiate hockey. The next set of questions focused on the participants' situation and the external context in which their transition out of collegiate hockey occurred. This section examined participants' experience through questions that targeted their anticipation, control, preparation, concurrent stressors, opportunities, and challenges faced throughout their transition out of collegiate hockey. This section also included questions about previous experiences with a similar transition and an inquiry about the participant's current situation. The third set of questions pertained to the support variable, which gathered information about the availability and effectiveness of social and institutional support facilitating participants' adaptation to life beyond collegiate hockey and additional support they may have desired. The final set of questions explored the adaptive strategies implemented by participants when navigating their transition. This section also focused on post-graduate endeavours, interests, hobbies, and their ongoing relationship with hockey. Closing

questions allowed participants to reflect, synthesize their experience, articulate advice for others in similar situations, and provide feedback on the interview's potential impact.

All data gathered throughout this study was qualitative. The first step was transcribing the interview data, including participant and researcher dialogue (McMillan, 2016). Each interview was recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams. The transcription file was labelled using the participant's chosen pseudonym. Each interview recording was played back to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. Each transcript was edited to clean up repetitions or grammatical errors and ensure the core message's clarity. As part of the effort to increase validity, member-checking was employed as transcriptions were sent to participants to allow them to review the content's accuracy, provide additional information, or request the omission of certain information. None of the participants identified information to be added or removed from their final transcript, allowing content analysis to occur upon completion of each interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Once transcribed, the collected interview data was subjected to thematic analysis, which involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and insights within the narratives provided by the participants (McMillan, 2016). The following sections outline the appropriateness and use of thematic analysis in the current study and the integration of Schlossberg's (2011) transition model.

#### ***Thematic Analysis***

Thematic analysis helps make sense of meanings and experiences (Terry et al., 2017). The selection of this method was informed by its flexibility across various research topics, data collection methods, possibilities for coding, and theoretical

frameworks (Terry et al., 2017). With 14 participants, this study's sample size falls within the suggested range for thematic analysis to produce sufficient patterns across data sets (Terry et al., 2017). Given that it is a flexible analysis approach, it requires deliberate choices throughout its six-phase process to ensure the analysis remains coherent and aligned with the overarching research objectives. The researcher's methodological choices throughout the analysis process were guided by *The Quality Checklist for Good Thematic Analysis* (Terry et al., 2017). The following sections will detail the phases of thematic analysis, highlighting the researcher's decisions at each stage of the process.

**Phase 1: Familiarisation.** Familiarisation with the data entails a deep engagement with the data set, which includes observing and noticing patterns and reflective thinking (Terry et al., 2017). In this study, familiarisation began during the data collection process. After the interviews, the researcher listened to the recordings and reviewed transcriptions. Observational notes and preliminary insights were noted post-interview to facilitate reference to early analytic observations at a later stage (Terry et al., 2017). This process also allowed for proper bracketing of the researcher's responses and reactions to the data and the participants (McMillan, 2016).

**Phase 2: Coding.** After developing a sense of the overall data set, the researcher generated codes by tagging the dataset's meaningful segments with labels relevant to the research question (Terry et al., 2017). A free and open-source qualitative research software called Taguette was used to upload transcripts, tag the codes, and export results into Excel (Rampin et al., 2021). The analysis began with an inductive stance, using the data as a foundation from which patterns, ideas, and codes naturally emerged (Terry et al., 2017). Both semantic and latent codes were developed to capture explicit content

and underlying meanings. The coding process was iterative, permitting ongoing refinement of codes to reflect concepts more accurately, always in reference to the research question (Terry et al., 2017). The software eased the process of editing codes and organizing data.

***Integrating the Transition Model.*** After identifying the initial codes, the researcher employed a deductive approach using Schlossberg's (2011) theoretical lens to refine and contextualize the data further. Terry et al. (2017) suggest that the analytical approach should align with the research question rather than adhere to a prescribed hierarchy of methods. Given that the research seeks to explore the primary factors that impact the transition of recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players as they adjust to life beyond collegiate hockey, the theoretical framework provided a scaffold for understanding the patterns within the participants' transitions. Schlossberg (2011) emphasizes considering the point at which an individual finds themselves in their transition. After exporting the coded data into an Excel spreadsheet, the researcher organized the codes into Schlossberg's (2011) three stages, marking the participant's stage of transition: 1) *moving through* (life as a collegiate hockey player), 2) *moving out* (transitioning out of collegiate hockey), and 3) *moving in* (adapting to life after collegiate hockey). This three-stage approach has been used in previous studies to analyze elements of the transition within different moments of the transition process (Smith & Hardin, 2020; Wheeler et al., 1996).

After organizing the codes into the three stages of transition, the researcher achieved greater conceptual clarity, facilitating the application of the 4 S model's elements. The researcher revisited the theoretical framework to ensure consistency

throughout the classification process, carefully noting the relevancy between each code and the dimension of the framework. A two-tiered analytical coding process allowed for a temporal and process-oriented structure to the participants' experiences. The researcher circled back to clarify or modify earlier coding and to avoid unique codes that overlapped. This iterative process ended with a compiled list of codes that captured relevant meaning within each dimension of the 4 S model.

**Phase 3: Theme Development.** The research question determines relevancy across the coded data during theme development (Terry et al., 2017). This phase involves examining codes and clustering or collapsing them into more meaningful patterns (Terry et al., 2017). By identifying rich codes that could capture several other codes within its boundaries, the researcher began to identify central organizing concepts. Understanding the core concept is essential in determining whether a code fits (Terry et al., 2017). It is important to find patterns that are present across the data set, which is why the researcher paid close attention to the frequency of the number of participants who mentioned it. During this process, candidate themes surfaced within each of the 4 S categories while allowing the exploration of other possibilities (Terry et al., 2017). Relationships between candidate themes were considered because, although they should work together, they should also remain distinctive (Terry et al., 2017).

**Phase 4: Reviewing Themes.** Terry et al. (2017) describe the reviewing phase as a quality control exercise that ensures the themes work well in relation to the coded data, the dataset, and the research questions. The review process is critical for clarifying or rejecting candidate themes (Terry et al., 2017). Decisions regarding what to include or exclude are important in phase 4 (Terry et al., 2017). When reviewing, it is important to ensure that the coded data within the candidate theme is accurately captured by the

theme's central organizing concept. (Terry et al., 2017). It is also important to check that candidate themes work well across the whole data set (Terry et al., 2017). The researcher's approach to reviewing themes involved examining the relevancy of raw data within each central organizing concept and verifying the representation of participants across the themes. The distinction between themes was examined by ensuring most codes were allocated to only one candidate theme. The researcher implemented sub-themes when necessary to capture a distinct aspect of a theme that shared the same central organizing concept (Terry et al., 2017). This phase is complete upon a final review, ensuring candidate themes address the research questions (Terry et al., 2017). The researcher was confident that the emerging themes were comprehensive enough to respond effectively to the research questions.

**Phase 5: Defining Themes.** Terry et al. (2017) note that by this stage, the researcher adopts an interpretative stance and makes sense of underlying meanings. The theme names are created to indicate the content found within (Terry et al., 2017). The researcher formulated concise definitions of each candidate theme to ensure clarity of the core ideas they encompass. This process helped reveal the depth within themes and solidify sub-themes (Terry et al., 2017).

*Validating Themes.* The data analysis process was discussed with the researcher's academic supervisor to ensure intentional decision-making at each stage. Discussions assessed the alignment of the themes with the research objectives and theoretical framework. A comprehensive summary of each theme was provided to the participants as a way of member-checking. They were invited to review the document and offer feedback on whether the themes aligned with their experiences and perspectives of the transition. Member-checking allows participants' expertise to

enhance the final product (McKim, 2023). Through consultation and confirmation, the themes were validated by participants.

**Phase 6: Producing the Report.** In this final phase, data analysis and scholarly literature intersect to comprehensively understand the research questions and the broader project scope (Terry et al., 2017). The researcher elected to integrate illustrative and analytic representations of data, presenting narrative evidence alongside discussions of specific data extracts.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethics approval was obtained through the Research Ethics Board (REB) of the University of New Brunswick prior to the commencement of this study to ensure all ethical research standards and regulations were met. The autonomy and confidentiality of participants were maintained by obtaining informed consent and upholding confidentiality. Once participant eligibility and acceptance were verified, the informed consent document (Appendix C) was sent to their preferred method of communication. Each participant was provided with informed consent to ensure they understood the study's purpose and procedures. Informed consent was reviewed again at the beginning of the interview, before starting the recording, to reaffirm the participant's understanding and address potential questions. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time during or after the interview. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and ensuring their personal information was not disclosed in any publication or presentation resulting from this research. To further protect the identity of participants, the names and locations of the institutions were referenced by the league in which they reside: Eastern College Athletic Conference

(ECAC), College Hockey America (CHA), Hockey East Association (HEA), New England Women's Hockey Alliance (NEWHA), Western Collegiate Hockey Association (WCHA). The interview recordings and transcriptions were securely stored in a password-protected document within a password-protected computer. No voice recordings were used when presenting the findings, and all interviews will be deleted upon completion of the study. All other data collected, including interview transcriptions, will be kept for two years past the completion of the study, at which time they will be deleted.

### **Validity**

Numerous validity criteria are used in qualitative research (Whittemore et al., 2001). When assessing the quality of a qualitative study, Daniel (2019) suggests using four critical dimensions: *trustworthiness*, *auditability*, *credibility*, and *transferability* (TACT). Whittemore et al. (2001) offer a list of techniques contributing to qualitative research validity. The techniques for ensuring the validity of a study involve considerations at each stage of the research process, including the research design, data generation, data analysis, and presentation. The validity techniques used in this study are outlined based on the TACT model (Daniel, 2019).

### ***Trustworthiness***

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to readers' degree of trust or confidence in research findings (Daniel, 2019). According to Daniel (2019), the researcher can achieve trustworthiness in two ways: employing a systematic process in organizing and analyzing data and acknowledging prior assumptions and experiences they bring to the study. Throughout each stage of the research process, the researcher



maintained an organized and systematic approach, which included conducting a thorough literature review and considering aspects of the research design. Computer programs, such as Microsoft Teams, Excel, and Taguette, were used to facilitate data collection and analysis (Rampin et al., 2021). The acknowledgment of prior assumptions is described below through the researcher's positionality.

**Researcher Positionality.** Trustworthiness is also established by acknowledging potential biases or preconceptions the researcher may bring to the study (Daniel, 2019). The researcher's position in the study has been shaped by their background as a former NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey player. Their personal and professional connections to the current study stem from a prior experience transitioning away from collegiate athletics. From a personal standpoint, the researcher understood the potential challenges of navigating life after sport and was interested in understanding how individuals like herself have experienced the transition. From a professional standpoint, the researcher hoped to gain insights into the transition process of female collegiate hockey players to better assist them in their adaptation to life after sport. The researcher acknowledged that their experiences as former NCAA Division 1 female hockey player could influence their perceptions and interpretations of this study. The researcher set aside preconceived notions of their experience to mitigate personal bias. McMillan (2016) suggests that *bracketing* prevents personal biases from interfering with data analysis. The researcher employed bracketing to refrain from imposing any perspectives other than those of the participants. Bracketing was employed through a process of reflection before conducting interviews and by enabling participants to review their transcripts for accuracy. The researcher also met with a supervisor weekly to maintain reflexivity and account for personal biases. In doing so, the researcher aimed to provide

participants with opportunities to express their viewpoints on their unique transition experiences.

Despite potential biases, the researcher's background was also an asset to the current study. Coaches often function as gatekeepers and can present challenges when trying to gain access to collegiate athletes for research purposes. Given the researcher's background in the NCAA, they had access to several contacts within women's ice hockey that were useful for the study. The researcher's experience as a former NCAA Division 1 female hockey player and their potential connection to participants as former teammates or adversaries helped foster discussions on sensitive topics and allowed them to engage empathetically with participants. McMillan (2016) describes this type of researcher as a *complete insider*, a researcher who has established a role in the data collection setting and can engage in genuine and natural participation.

### ***Auditability***

Auditability refers to the documentation and description of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data (Daniel, 2019). One technique to demonstrate validity is articulating sampling and data analysis decisions (Whittemore et al., 2001). To ensure the auditability of the current study, the researcher provided methodological and decision-making transparency throughout the entire research process.

### ***Credibility***

Credibility entails that findings are dependable, relevant to the central phenomenon, and congruent with the data gathered (Daniel, 2019). In the design consideration and data-generating stages of the study, credibility was addressed by giving voice to participants in interviews, providing verbatim transcription, and

demonstrating thematic saturation. During data analysis, a detailed description of decisions was provided to outline how themes emerged. Participants received their final transcripts along with a summary of the study's themes and were given the opportunity to offer corrections or make additions. This process is called *member-checking*, where data is presented to participants for feedback (McKim, 2023). Using this technique increases the validity of the findings (McKim, 2023). Credibility was reinforced throughout the results and discussion stages by providing thick descriptions and direct evidence to support interpretations.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability, comparable to reliability in a quantitative study, suggests that findings from this study can be applied to other settings or groups of people (Daniel, 2019). Transferability requires a detailed description of the sample characteristics, participant demographic information, and recruitment methods (Daniel, 2019). The current study addressed these aspects through criterion sampling, a personal demographic questionnaire for participants, and detailed recruitment methods. This study established the transferability of NCAA Division 1 female collegiate hockey players' transition through interviews that aimed to capture a typical experience. Sampling strategies ensured that participants from NCAA Division 1 institutions across various leagues were included. Findings were presented and compared to existing literature to highlight commonalities and differences.

### **Research Timeline**

Upon receiving the REB ethics approval at the end of November 2023, the first phase of the research project began with the recruitment of participants at the beginning

of December 2023. Once all participants were recruited and informed consent documents were complete, data collection commenced through the dispatch of demographic questionnaires and the scheduling of interviews. The data collection process began during the Winter of 2023. This timeline was deliberately aligned with the period in which participants typically engage in hockey-related activities. Since players generally graduate in the spring, this timeline also gave them enough time to navigate their transition beyond collegiate sports. Between December 2023 and January 2024, interviews were completed, and data analysis began. Results and discussions were finalized in February 2024, and the first draft was submitted for review.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

This chapter presents the results of the research study, highlighting the key themes identified through the data analysis. Semi-structured interviews with 14 participants were conducted to explore the transition of recently graduated NCAA Division 1 female hockey players into life beyond collegiate hockey. Results begin with a summary of the data collected through the Participant Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix D). Please refer to Table 1 for participant demographics (certain demographic details have been omitted from this table and described in aggregate form to protect participant confidentiality). The following section includes a presentation of the themes emerging from the Semi-Structured Interviews (Appendix E) surrounding participants' transition experiences. All themes are presented through the lens of Schlossberg's (2011) 4 S model. Identified themes are displayed in Table 2.

### **Personal Demographic Characteristics**

In the context of transitions, it is crucial to understand the characteristics of the study's sample to contextualize findings, account for potential variables that may influence participant experiences, and assess the generalizability of results. The Personal Demographic Questionnaire yielded an overview of participants' backgrounds across personal, athletic, educational, and professional dimensions.

Among the 14 participants, eight were in domestic partnerships, while six were single. With each participant receiving the option for a fifth year of NCAA eligibility, nine chose to fulfill their eligibility, and five did not. Notably, six participants had transferred institutions at some point in their collegiate hockey careers. Representation across NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey leagues was comprehensive, with

attendees from the Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC), College Hockey America (CHA), Hockey East Association (HEA), New England Women's Hockey Alliance (NEWHA), and Western Collegiate Hockey Association (WCHA).

Financial support through athletic scholarships varied; eight participants received full scholarships, and the remainder were awarded partial scholarships. Their hockey positions were diverse, including seven defensemen, six forwards, and one goalie. Academic pursuits were equally varied, with degrees spanning from natural sciences and social sciences to business, communications, and hospitality. The participants' GPAs ranged from 3.0 to 3.9, averaging 3.47.

Post-graduation trajectories also provided insight into the impact of their athletic and academic experiences. While four participants completed graduate degrees during their collegiate hockey careers, five are currently furthering their education. Employment post-college saw five individuals working in fields related to their degrees, four in other sectors, three playing professional hockey, and two pursuing full-time education.

While the Personal Demographic Questionnaire included a question related to the participant's current living location, this was deemed not pertinent to the central research questions and thus is not discussed further in the results.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>NCAA Eligibility Fulfilled</b>	<b>Years Playing</b>	<b>Current Hockey Status</b>
Sarah	23	Yes	19	Done
Christine	24	Yes	21	Done
Marie	22	No	17	Done
Vanessa	24	Yes	22	Pro Hockey
Jennifer	24	Yes	20	Pro Hockey
Linda	22	No	18	Done
Allison	24	No	20	Done
Bridget	25	Yes	20	Done
Diana	23	Yes	20	Done
Emma	22	No	13	Done
Rachel	23	Yes	15	Done
Hailey	24	Yes	17	Done
Kayla	24	Yes	20	Done
Nancy	22	No	16	Pro Hockey

**Table 2***Schlossberg's 4 S Model (2011) Theme Development*

<b>4S</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>
Situation	Theme #1: Ups and Downs of Collegiate Hockey	
	Theme #2: Ready to Move On	- 5 <sup>th</sup> Year Impact
	Theme #3: "It Flies By"	
	Theme #4: Navigating Independence	-Financial Independence - Routine Independence
	Theme #5: Gains and Losses	
Self	Theme #1: Learning Through Hockey	
	Theme #2: Mental/Physical Toll	
	Theme #3: Identity Exploration	- Feeling Lost - Self-Discovery
	Theme #4: Renewed Outlook	
Support	Theme #1: Interpersonal Support	- Teammates - Family and Friends
	Theme #2: Institutional Support	- Identifying Gaps - Effective Resources
Strategies	Theme #1: Willingness to Adapt	
	Theme #2: Restoring Structure	
	Theme #3: "I'm Going to Try to Keep Hockey in my Life"	
	Theme #4: Reflective Perspective	



## **Situation**

The situation includes elements of the transition such as the trigger, timing, control, role changes, concurrent stress, previous experience with a similar situation, and one's assessment of the transition.

### ***Theme #1: Ups and Downs of Collegiate Hockey***

Upon reflecting on their collegiate hockey experience, participants described their rigorous routine, highlighted their accomplishments on and off the ice, and shared a general feeling that it was a challenging yet rewarding experience. Kayla captured this when she said, "It was probably one of the best or the best experiences of my life, but at the same time one of the toughest, mentally and physically challenging." At least half of the participants acknowledged dealing with different sources of adversity throughout their collegiate hockey experience. Many participants identified COVID-19 as a challenge. Several also noted the negative impact of coaches on their experiences, leading to feeling overlooked and having a sense of unfulfilled potential. Bridget addressed her younger self and said she felt:

sad for the girl that wanted to be so much better than how I was in hockey. I could have been so good, I really could have been, but just not getting the encouragement that I needed, not even wanted, needed. And the support, and just the coaching. I felt bad for her. I was like, you deserved so much more than you got and I'm sorry you didn't get it.

### ***Theme #2: Ready to Move On***

Leading up to the transition away from collegiate hockey, several participants described a sense of anticipation and excitement for the future. Some participants

expressed feeling academically prepared to transition; others shared a general psychological readiness for the next chapter of their lives. Those who shared this sentiment tended to report feeling more prepared for the entire transition, either due to having instilled a plan, seeing other friends moving on, or simply looking forward to a change in pace. When asked how prepared she felt for graduation, Marie said, “I guess just seeing people's lives outside of being a student-athlete, I kind of just was drawn to it and I just hit a point where I kind of was like, I'm ready to move on with the next chapter.”

**5th Year Impact.** The unique context of extended eligibility allowed participants to take a fifth year. The decision was simple for those ready to move on but proved complicated for those who did not yet feel their collegiate hockey career was over. Participants described how the decision process was complex as it involved considering and aligning academic pursuits, financial resources, athletic opportunities, and personal factors. Linda outlined the factors that made her decision not to take a fifth year. She said,

I still really wanted to try and get on. I was very close, but their roster was full. That would have been the only school I would have done a fifth year because I could have gotten a scholarship for my master's.

According to the participants who did fulfill a fifth year, narratives highlighted how this extra year offered an opportunity to pursue additional academic degrees and a valuable cushion of time to begin planning their post-collegiate lives. Hailey reflected on her fifth year and stated:

I also got a little bit more time to explore what is next for me because undergrad is just a completely different schedule than masters. So I wasn't running around

to classes, I was completely online so I could kind of work at my own pace. And I was actually interested in the school, so I was connecting what I was learning to what I wanted in life to what I was doing currently, way more likable than undergrad.

Some participants also noted that their fifth year was a different dynamic than years prior due to former teammates moving on, being the oldest on the team, or even having to transfer and adapt to a new team. This extra year provided a sense of maturity and instilled a readiness to move on, which may not have been the case following their fourth year. Sarah noted her level of preparation following her fifth year. She said:

I was also very secluded from the team, just in general like I was a fifth year. I was living off campus with my boyfriend, who was already working and graduated, so for me it was a lot different that way because I was ready for it and I did get my plan together... So yeah, I felt, I felt okay the second time.

### ***Theme #3: "It Flies By"***

In contrast to the previous theme, the third theme reflects a common thread among participants who felt the end of their collegiate hockey career approached abruptly. Notably, many participants reference advice from older teammates to cherish every moment, which they later appreciated. Linda recalls how quickly her collegiate experience unfolded. She said, "Four years definitely was not enough. When I was a freshman, all seniors were saying ohh it's gonna go by so quick. I definitely doubted that [in] freshman year, but then senior year came around, and it was really fast". The narratives show a mix of anticipation, procrastination for planning, and denial about the impending end of their collegiate hockey career. Participants reported feeling

unprepared for the emotional impact and practical aspects of this change, which caused great stress. When asked to what degree she felt she had time to plan for life after collegiate hockey, Bridget said:

I don't know, I mean, I procrastinated that a lot because it was just, I don't know, I think I didn't start thinking about what I wanted to do until maybe like January or February of 2023, so towards the end of the season. But, yeah, I mean, I was still freaking out after graduation in May because I didn't know what I was gonna do.

When asked about previous experience with a similar transition, some participants compared their experiences to their transition from high school into boarding school or from high school into college. However, over half of the participants noted that this transition was unlike anything they had ever experienced. Marie responded to the question by saying:

No, not to this extent, I mean, obviously, I played for my high school so I stayed put throughout high school, I wasn't sent off to boarding school where I was thrown into a different situation, so I would say leaving going into college, and then leaving college is definitely the biggest thing.

#### ***Theme #4: Navigating Independence***

**Financial Independence.** Significant stressors at the time of transition for nearly every participant were related to financial awareness and job market navigation.

Participants reported feeling caught off guard by transitioning from being a collegiate athlete with financial support and limited expenses to complete financial independence.

Jennifer stated:

As collegiate athletes we're in a time where we don't really have to pay for as much, most of us are on some sort of a scholarship and get some sort of money to pay for rent and stuff. So at the end of your college, you're like ohh crap, I have to pay for rent, I have to budget money differently than when you're in college and all you had to worry about was going to the grocery store once a week, you know? So I think that was probably the biggest thing.

Participants expressed feeling stressed managing the uncertainty of job searching and career stability, as they found the process unfamiliar. Some participants felt disadvantaged compared to other candidates who likely had more time to build experience. Hailey reflected this by saying:

Thinking about a career was a bit stressful. Before I started interviewing with the corporate job I was like, what am I gonna do? How do I even find a job? What? Like I didn't know anything. So I just kind of started doing that, but that was probably the major stressor, especially because nowadays if you don't have four years of work experience leaving college for an entry level role, you're not getting it. I'm like that doesn't even make sense, but whatever.

**Routine Independence.** For many participants, the end of their collegiate season marked a shift from being part of team activities, to feeling like an outsider. Participants described losing not only their sense of belonging to the team but also the structure that the team provided. Nancy conveyed this sense of abrupt disconnection as structured team activities continued without her, and she was left to navigate her own routine. She said:

The workouts got a little more difficult to do because you wanna be with the team, but also we couldn't really be with the team as a now graduate person. So it

felt a little more isolated and felt kind of caught in this position where like you're part of the team but also now I'm not part of the team. Umm, but all the extracurricular activities, you'd still do together. School was kind of a little more challenging because with hockey you're like, OK I have to do this in this time period because it's my only free time of the day versus now I'm like, OK, I have all day to do this.

When asked about shifts in time commitments post-college, participants reported how their jobs and other responsibilities replaced the rigid schedules of classes and collegiate hockey demands. Several participants highlighted the process of striking a balance between work and personal life. Aside from a few participants looking forward to doing their own workouts, nearly every participant noted that maintaining fitness independently was a new challenge. Some participants found it difficult to motivate themselves without the structure provided by the team, whereas others tended towards overexertion. Bridget felt caught in the middle. She said:

I don't know if I need to be harder on myself or more forgiving sometimes where it's like, uh, do I need to get harder on myself for working out and being physical? But then it's like, why am I like that? Why am I beating myself up? Because a normal person doesn't need to work out five days a week. You don't need to do that, but, yeah, I don't know. And then just forgiving myself for stuff that slips or if I don't do something one day, it's like I can't feel guilty for something if it's not going towards an end goal.

### ***Theme #5: Gains and Losses***

The initial emotional impact of this transition was clear, with many participants expressing feelings of grief, such as crying and struggling to get out of bed. Sarah noted, “For a couple of weeks after hockey ended. I wouldn't get out of my bed. I just, I don't know, I'd never been in a state like that.” The excerpts reflect a profound sense of loss, sadness, and adjustment the participants faced. The loss of team camaraderie and the daily presence of teammates was emphasized by many as they experienced a sudden absence of constant social interaction. Allison described the transition as an all-encompassing loss. She said:

I think that the reason it was so hard and so unlike any other change in my life was because it didn't just change my life in one aspect. Every single aspect of my life changed at the drop of a hat. So, you know, you could fix one error, one area, maybe, you know, financially my parents are supporting me and maybe I could get this job, OK. But then it doesn't fix how you're feeling socially, how you're feeling mentally and how you're feeling physically and all that stuff. So it was hard because it wasn't just one fix versus, you know, playing hockey another year could have felt like that fixed all those things.

For other participants, the end of their collegiate hockey career brought relief, enjoyment, and opportunity. Following her final game, Hailey said, “It's like there's a weight off my body, off my chest. I'm lighter.” The decreased stress and increased ability to focus on other pursuits were seen as positive changes. Participants who pursued academics or employment following their transition reported a greater ability to focus on these areas. At the same time, those who continued professional hockey benefited from shifting their attention from academics to athletics. Vanessa said:

Now, being a professional athlete and not having the school aspect, my life is 100% hockey. Obviously I have a social life and stuff, but I just know in the back of my head I shouldn't have any other distractions distracting me from hockey because those relationships in my life if they are distracting me from hockey, then they aren't necessarily something I need in my life. So, school was probably the only thing that would distract me in the past.

Social opportunities expanded for many participants as they found more time to engage with family, friends, and leisurely activities. When reflecting on increased time spent with her family since graduation, Diana said:

We're always doing stuff even if it's just ping pong out in the garage, just doing more things like that, it doesn't need to be like big things. It's just more so the time aspect, getting to spend it with them, I would say has been the biggest thing. And having the freedom to go see other family and friends has been nice too. So I'd say almost like not strengthening, but almost like. I don't know how to put it, but like investing more into the relationships because I didn't have enough time to before.

## **Self**

Self refers to the individual's demographic characteristics and psychological resources during the transition. Identity, health, personal strengths, values, and general outlook on life are all key elements regarding the Self variable.

### ***Theme #1: Learning Through Hockey***

The first theme related to the self variable emerged from participants' responses to questions about personal strengths that helped them cope with the change. Participants



highlighted hockey's impact on instilling life skills, fostering maturity, and profoundly shaping their identity. Participants reflected on the skills acquired during their hockey careers and further developed in collegiate hockey, acknowledging a sense of personal growth and transferability of skills. Some expressed that these unique life skills have translated into valuable assets beyond hockey, particularly in the workforce. Consider the following data excerpts, demonstrating participants' recognition of growth and skill transferability:

I feel like leaving the college level you go from being so young like you enter college at 18 years old and I left at 24. So, I just kind of grew up so much like I feel like I went from a girl to a woman in those, whatever 4-5 years being at college. (Vanessa).

Being an athlete, you're over prepared for the real world so much more than any other undergrad that wasn't an athlete. Even if you think you might not be, you are, so kind of just remembering that and knowing that even though you don't have the experience in the work world, you have the experience where it matters, you have the skills that those people can't be taught, everything else you can learn. (Hailey)

Participants identified team dynamics, facing adversity, and time demands as contributing factors to developing interpersonal effectiveness, resilience, and diligence. Participants spoke of conflict resolution and self-advocacy as critical components for interpersonal growth. Sarah noted:

I'm able to stand up for myself a lot more than if I wouldn't have played hockey. I grew up playing boys hockey, so I had to be tougher and be able to deal with people, maybe not feeling the same way I feel about something or even in

hockey, just dealing with conflict, just being able to speak up, even if what I'm saying might not be right or if I don't totally know the answer to something I don't feel, I guess, scared to speak up in a way.

Half of the participants described how the demands of collegiate hockey reinforced work ethic, time management, and dedication. Linda noted, "Playing a sport and going to school as a full-time student really that time management and the balance of both two very demanding schedules is something that has definitely grown me as a person." Resilience was a key strength emphasized by participants who dealt with adversity throughout their collegiate hockey careers. Allison stated:

I think the adversity that I faced throughout my time as being a student athlete. You know, my freshman year I wasn't top of the lineup, I was fighting tooth and nail every single day to get into the lineup, and dealing with so much rejection and dealing with so much adversity and negativity, and basically when all the odds were against me and finding out a way to figure out a way to keep going and I feel like that's a huge parallel to life and how resilient you have to be in life.

### ***Theme #2: Mental/Physical Toll***

Some participants described the physical and psychological strains they experienced during their collegiate hockey careers. The narratives relayed a sense of burnout after years of intense dedication to their sport. Participants described feeling exhausted from injuries, chronic pain, pressure to maintain a certain physique, and rigorous training schedules. Overall levels of health at the time of transition impacted

participants' decisions to step away from hockey and work towards maintaining a healthy, balanced lifestyle. Hailey stated:

I had back problems my whole career. I luckily was never majorly injured, but it was just dragging on, I was so modified in the gym. My body had a hard time recovering and I was always tired, I was always jacked up... I honestly didn't even realize how messed up my body was until it finally had time to relax and destress and as soon as [the] season ended I dropped 15 lbs and I swear it was stress.

### ***Theme #3: Identity Exploration***

When asked to complete the sentence "I am," participants typically described themselves by their qualities, current roles, or emotions. However, Emma's initial response was indicative of the initial confusion several participants expressed. She stated, "That's hard... I am. Oh my gosh, this is so hard umm..." This third theme encapsulates participants' process of losing and redefining their identity as they transitioned out of collegiate hockey and into life beyond collegiate sports.

**Feeling Lost.** Participants described how losing their athletic identity caused uncertainty as they searched for a purpose beyond collegiate hockey. Sarah reflected this sentiment when she said:

I played since I was four years old. So I was always the girl that played hockey. And then coming to college nothing else changed, I was still the girl that played hockey. Once I graduated and stopped playing hockey. Umm, what was I? What was I left with? I didn't have any really big interests outside of what I already knew and sort of grew up and shaped my whole life around.

**Self-Discovery.** Participants were asked to discuss shifts in their values or priorities since graduation. Stepping away from collegiate hockey commitments prompted a time for self-discovery among participants. They discussed learning to prioritize their needs and explore personal interests. Diana reflected on this process and said:

Moving on from something that you've identified yourself with for so long definitely helps you. Even though you're giving up such a big part of yourself, you almost find yourself more because you're not identified by something that has been your sole focus for so long. You find other things.

Participants also realized that shifting away from a team environment meant they would need to prioritize valued relationships as they were no longer built into their structure. Rachel noted:

You have to put a lot more effort in to see your friends. They're not just down the hall or, you're gonna see them five times a day at practice and stuff, so it's not a convenience thing anymore. I think just figuring that out, I would say, are priorities for relationships.

#### ***Theme #4: Renewed Outlook***

The fourth theme captures participants' outlook on life, which went from experiencing the constant pressures of hockey to finding contentment in daily life. Participants' narratives reflected an overarching optimism as they began navigating new endeavours and felt self-assured about their place in society beyond hockey. When asked about the biggest takeaway from her transition out of collegiate hockey, Allison stated:

I think a big lesson is that, you know, student athletes are more than just the sport. I think that's a big problem where, you know, we grow up, there's so much pressure to get recruited and so much pressure to get in the lineup, so much pressure to get statistics, and whether it's from yourself or your family or the team, it could just get so challenging. So, knowing and reminding yourself I'm more than just a sport and I'm more than just being an athlete, I'm a good person and I can offer this, I can offer that. It's not just hockey I can offer.

## **Support**

Support refers to the resources available for participants throughout their transition out of collegiate hockey. Both interpersonal and institutional support systems were identified as important factors.

### ***Theme #1: Interpersonal Support***

**Teammates.** When asked to describe their collegiate hockey experience, nearly every participant mentioned the bonds they had created with teammates and their connections with other athletes. Despite athletic hardships, Emma underscored teammates' positive impact on her collegiate experience. She said:

I have lifelong best friends and people who made me feel welcome. Because, although I had a negative experience with hockey, I had a very positive and happy relationship with all of my teammates and everybody that I met at my institution that might not have played hockey. So I would say socially I had a very, very positive experience.

As participants navigated the challenges of their transition, they found solidarity in connecting with teammates and other athletes. The shared experiences provided

reassurance, encouragement, validation, understanding, and practical advice, contributing to a sense of being supported. Kayla said, “I feel like unless somebody else was going through exactly what I was going through, it was hard to feel supported in that moment I think.”

**Family and Friends.** Participants identified their family as a critical source of support during their collegiate careers and transition away from collegiate hockey. Support from families included encouraging participants to pursue passions, helping alleviate their financial stress, offering advice during decision-making processes, and providing living accommodations. Friends and partners also offered a sense of companionship, motivation, and an outlet for emotional support. When reflecting on ways her support systems influenced her adaptation to life after collegiate hockey, Nancy said:

I think it’s allowed me to try things and although there is a lot of stress in it, it's also taken off some of the stress in the fact that I know there is help and support around me and, you know, people I can count on to help me going forward in whatever direction that will be.

### ***Theme #2: Institutional Support***

**Identifying Gaps.** When asked what resources the athletic department offered to assist them in their transition, just over half of the participants agreed that either nothing was available or the resources available were insufficient. Kayla explained how she felt inadequately supported throughout her transition:

No, no. I mean, we were always offered to have an athletic therapist and a few students ones that were working with her. But I would even say that’s something

that they had to work on because I feel like unless they were ultimately super concerned about you and if they felt like your life was threatened, they weren't really following up or checking in, and it wasn't a great system, I believed. But they offered literally nothing, like literally nothing. It was kind of just like immediately, we have to focus on getting ready for next year. And so you know. So I mean, yeah, no, they didn't.

Participants were invited to share what additional supports or resources they would have wanted during their transition away from collegiate hockey. There was a clear desire for more practical support related to financial management and career-focused preparation. Jennifer stated:

I think if it would have been some sort of workshop just getting yourself ready to financially support yourself and how that looks realistically in the outside world, I think would have been really helpful and something I would have definitely taken part in just learning how to manage your money, how to budget, how to get a credit card, how to do all that stuff.

Other participants noted a desire for more mental health resources specifically tailored to their experiences, whether through discussion-based groups or increased access to therapists. Kayla suggested:

Keeping maybe all graduated students involved that final year and maybe holding events where everyone can go to and talk about it or things or maybe offering additional resources like an extra therapist to talk to... Just keep making those students and athletes who have graduated from their sport no matter what time in the year, feel still, like they're involved and they're still at the school for a reason.

Participants also acknowledged potential lack of engagement when they suggested ideas for institutional resources. Participants stated that many resources were overlooked and underutilized. The tendency to underutilize resources was evident as over half of the participants were aware of available academic resources, yet less than half used them. Participants reported that overlooking resources was attributed to perceptions that they were irrelevant, lack of awareness about them, preoccupation with other things, a general disinterest, or a preference for self-dependence. Sarah reflected on the resources available to her:

I was kind of out of touch too. Maybe they did have a program, but I was never emailed about it. I didn't ever hear about anything, so I'm not sure if they do or not. As far as I'm concerned, they didn't.

**Effective Resources.** Those who accessed available resources expressed appreciation, such as Marie, who reflected on the impact of her academic advisor, “They were the ones who helped me get an initial internship and leads to, I guess, companies as well as alumni.” Participants identified coaches and therapists as the main sources of transition-specific well-being support within their institutions. Just under half of the participants reported the ongoing support from their coaching staff and its positive impacts on their transition, including Nancy who said:

The support staff that we had, I still do keep in contact with a lot of them. Coach has been great with helping me out every time I've sent an email asking for help. I still talk to our staff counsellor, so there's been a lot of support around, and I'm thankful for that... just knowing that they're there and that they are supporting me in any way they can.



Two participants stated that discussions with a therapist from their institution were an integral source of support. Rachel said:

The team psychiatrist that we had helped me a lot through the season and also through the transition to realize I'm so much more than just a hockey player and that helps a lot because obviously the career was ending, so it's something you need to hear.

### **Strategies**

Strategies consist of the coping mechanisms implemented by participants to navigate their transition experience. Strategies can be utilized to modify the situation, control the meaning of the situation, or manage stress related to the situation.

#### ***Theme #1: Willingness to Adapt***

The first theme related to the strategies variable is the participants' willingness to adapt. As participants approached the end of their collegiate careers, they began weighing options for the next steps. Participants expressed the power of adaptability when adjusting to new roles or dealing with unexpected changes in plans. They reported the importance of perseverance, even when things did not go as planned. Jennifer reflected:

I feel like the biggest lesson that I've learned from all this is if your original plan doesn't work out, don't go running for the hills, you're gonna be good...I applied for certain jobs, I didn't get the ones that I wanted, so I had to kind of be able to go with the other plan. So I'd say Plan A doesn't work out, you know you can be just as happy with Plan B or C.

Many participants expressed a newfound appreciation for life's unpredictability, acknowledging that the process had taught them to maintain an open mind, step out of their comfort zones, and embrace the unknown, equipping them to handle the uncertainties of post-collegiate life. Looking back on the most significant insights from her transition experience, Sarah said:

Honestly, the biggest thing I learned is uncertainty is OK, like that was a huge overarching theme for me and still working on believing that sometimes, but like I said, I had such a planned-out life my whole life. I've always known I'm going to college, always known I'm studying this, so now that it has ended, just being able to accept the uncertainty and accept that I don't know where I'll be in a year from now, but that's OK, I'll figure it out.

### ***Theme #2: Restoring Structure***

Participants discussed strategies for restoring structure in their post-collegiate life as they navigated the loss of a built-in schedule and community. This included travelling, creating routines, and exploring interests and hobbies to occupy the newfound free time they had not experienced as collegiate hockey players. Some described the importance of finding new hobbies as it re-instilled a sense of fulfillment and created an outlet for passions. When asked about strategies used to navigate her transition, Diana stated:

I think just finding other things that you're passionate about, like you don't have to set goals but just finding other things that you enjoy in your life and uh like doing them and making them happen I think is a big part of staying happy and staying fulfilled in that aspect of missing something else that you've given up.

Another part of restoring the structure for participants in their post-collegiate life included building social connections for support, advice, networking, or new relationships. Participants reported the benefits of being social, vulnerable, and genuine in this approach. Marie described her approach, “I would literally just look up alumni that were in the same field as me and reach out and see what happened... I guess just being vulnerable with past teammates, asking them how they went about life after college.”

***Theme #3: “I’m Going to Try to Keep Hockey in My Life”***

At the end of their collegiate hockey career, some participants considered continuing to play. They weighed the desire to play professionally against other life opportunities, such as pursuing careers, educational paths, and relationships. Diana relayed her decision-making process and said:

I ended up getting this job offer, so I was kind of deciding between the two, and then I really laid out. Like, OK, yes, you love hockey, but maybe this is the time, and these are the right opportunities that are coming your way to kind of help you move on in the best way possible.

Three participants continued playing hockey professionally and shared a sense of gratitude for this opportunity combined with the realization of their impending transition. Vanessa stated:

Being able to compete at a higher level now is just like extremely fun... So I kind of put the transition on the back burner and never really thought about it, and I still haven't thought about it because I have yet to make the transition, and I don't want to.

Those who did not continue their hockey careers shared a bittersweet realization of a chapter closing. Fewer than half of the participants have continued playing hockey for fun. Linda relayed the shared sense of freedom derived from playing in a fun environment:

It's definitely different than when I played at college. I love it though, I've always loved it, I still love it...But now? It's more of a love that's freeing because there's nothing holding me down. There's no one in my head. There's no one yelling at you from the bench, so I think it's just a different type of love.

Other participants kept hockey in their lives through coaching and watching. Participants expressed enjoyment in remaining connected to hockey from a new perspective. Diana shared the impact of her coaching experiences:

I remember it feels like yesterday, having the big kids come out and run your practice... So I definitely have been enjoying being that for other kids, especially little girls that come out and skate. I would say that's always been super special to me being able to be someone that they can look up to and give them hope that that could be them one day.

#### ***Theme #4: Reflective Perspective***

The fourth theme addresses participants' reflections on their collegiate experience and transition from collegiate hockey. As participants were asked to reflect on their current relationship with hockey, there was a clear sense of nostalgia, gratitude, and introspection. Many participants reported a decreased love for the game as it became more of a job during their collegiate hockey experience. Over half of the participants

reported a desire to step away from playing hockey following their final game. Rachel said:

I need to take time away because it was my life for so long, and then it became a job, and so it was just like I need to detach from that for a while and actually miss it before I think about doing anything hockey related.

Despite any potential lingering bitterness or adversity from their experience, nearly every participant expressed a profound appreciation for everything hockey had given them. Kayla noted:

Overall, it was a great experience. I think it's important to recognize how awesome it was. I feel like even though during it, there were days I was like, this is horrible, why am I doing this? I think having time away, sometimes you don't realize what you had till it's gone. So, looking back, it was a great thing... I think it's also important to realize my growth as a person following hockey was great.

The final question invited participants to share what it was like talking about their transition out of collegiate hockey with the researcher. Every participant reported that it was helpful in some aspect. Many participants stated they had not yet had an opportunity to discuss this with anyone. They suggested that such conversations could be helpful for others navigating similar transitions, especially speaking with someone who understood their experience. Linda said, "I mean, you're the first person I've ever talked to really about it, so it's been really good, especially considering you've been there."

Participants found the conversation evoked emotions, provided clarity and appreciation for their experiences, and instilled a sense of reassurance about moving forward. Emma said:

It's been good. I mean, it kind of made me realize that my life is kind of boring now. I really don't do anything, but at the same time, I think it's what I need. So I feel like it's kind of made me feel a little bit secure in my place that I'm in now cause I'd sometimes feel just a little, eh, about the fact that I'm not really doing anything or working out, but I feel like actually talking about it has made me feel a little bit more comfortable with my social, physical, mental and financial condition.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This research study is the first body of literature to explore the lived experiences of female NCAA Division 1 players transitioning out of collegiate ice hockey. Overarching themes pertinent to the dimensions within the 4 S model were a testament to the complexity of participants' transition experiences. The narratives spanned a spectrum: on one end were individuals who felt the transition was a source of relief, and on the other were those who encountered considerable stress. Despite individual differences in experiences, the findings here suggest that participants underwent significant mental, physical, emotional, and social change through their transition from collegiate hockey. During this period of change, interpersonal support and numerous coping strategies proved helpful.

The discussion aims to provide an understanding of female hockey players' transition out of collegiate ice hockey as it relates to the research questions, the literature, and the broader context of psychology in athletics. This chapter begins by revisiting the research questions that have guided this study. Next, the study's key findings will be discussed within the broader framework of existing literature on this topic. A thorough examination of the study's limitations will also be provided, followed by an analysis of the implications of the findings in terms of their relevance and practical applications for research, athletes, coaches, institutions, and the field of counselling psychology. Finally, recommendations will be presented for both future research and practical implementation of what has been learned.

## **Returning to The Research Questions**

This study aimed to explore the primary factors that impact the transition of recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players as they adjust to life beyond collegiate hockey. After examining the results, returning to the research questions is essential.

### ***Research Question 1***

How do recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players navigate the process of redefining their self-identity and finding purpose after the conclusion of their collegiate hockey careers?

Recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players navigate the redefinition of self-identity and search for purpose post-collegiate hockey through a multifaceted process. This includes a period of reflection and self-discovery, where they grapple with losing their athletic identity and explore new interests and roles. The transition is also a time to explore personal values and priorities, often leading to a renewed outlook on life. Many leverage the life skills acquired during their athletic careers, like diligence, interpersonal effectiveness, and resilience, to forge new paths in education, the workforce, or further athletic endeavours.

### ***Research Question 2***

How does the visibility and recognition of women's ice hockey at the professional level affect the aspirations and decisions of recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players navigating post-collegiate opportunities?

The visibility and recognition of women's ice hockey at the professional level influenced recently graduated players by providing a pathway to continue their athletic



endeavours. Since the league had not yet been established at the time of their transition, most participants considered playing professional hockey overseas rather than in North America. The league's increasing visibility now offers a realistic option for those still passionate about the sport. It also presents a dilemma for those contemplating a shift to non-athletic careers as they weigh the desire to play professionally against other life opportunities. For some, it extends their athletic career and delays the transition process, while for others, it underscores the challenges of continuing hockey and reaffirms their decision to move on.

### ***Research Question 3***

What role do support networks (i.e., social support and institutional support) play in helping recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players successfully navigate the challenges of transitioning from college hockey to post-collegiate life?

Support networks are crucial in assisting recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players during their transition. Emotional and practical support from teammates, family, friends, and coaches helped mitigate the sense of loss, offers guidance through uncertainty, and provides a foundation of reassurance. Institutional support is helpful when available and accessed but was generally perceived as insufficient. There was a shared desire for more practical support and enhanced mental health resources tailored to their situation.

#### ***Research Question 4***

What coping strategies do recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players employ to manage the potential loss of athletic identity and adjust to new roles and aspirations?

The coping strategies used by recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players involve creating new routines to replace the structured environment of collegiate athletics, seeking fulfillment in new hobbies and social connections, and maintaining a connection to hockey through coaching or recreational play. Reflective practices, such as acknowledging past achievements and embracing the life lessons learned through sports, help deal with losing their athletic identity. Adaptability and openness to new experiences are key to adjusting to life's uncertainties and new roles post-collegiate hockey.

#### **Key Findings Using the 4 S Model**

Participants' assets and liabilities varied as they moved through their collegiate hockey careers, moved out from collegiate hockey, and moved into life after collegiate hockey. Schlossberg's (2011) 4 S model helped conceptualize the data and create themes. The following section will discuss and relate each factor to the literature.

#### ***Situation***

The situation includes elements of the transition such as the trigger, timing, control, role change, concurrent stress, previous experience with a similar situation, and one's assessment of the transition. Participants reflected on the simultaneous challenges and rewards of their collegiate hockey careers, acknowledging both the adversities

faced, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or difficult coaches, and the highlights, like significant accomplishments and growth.

In the context of NCAA Division 1 female collegiate hockey players' transition away from collegiate ice hockey, most of the transitions would be classified as anticipated events because the trigger for change is the completion of their NCAA eligibility. The option for a fifth year of eligibility due to COVID-19 introduced unique decision-making complexities. The individuals who considered completing a fifth year but failed to do so due to external circumstances could be classified as experiencing a non-event (Schlossberg, 1984, 2011). Some left involuntarily, as they were required to stop playing because their eligibility expired or they could not find suitable options for their fifth year. Others felt prepared to move on, whether after their fourth or fifth year, resulting in a voluntary transition.

Some female collegiate players were ready to move on after four years, while others used their fifth year as a buffer. The option to take a fifth year added an element of control and created a more gradual onset to the transition away from collegiate hockey. It also provided individuals an opportunity to reach their maximum athletic potential, which is an important consideration surrounding readiness for athletic retirement (Alfermann, 2000). The extra year of eligibility allowed for planning, gaining control, and achieving athletic goals. As the literature suggests, transitions are easier when they are gradual (Danish et al., 1993; Schlossberg, 1981), when the individual has a plan (Knights et al., 2016; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993) and a sense of accomplishment (Alfermann, 2000; Park et al., 2013; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), and when the transition is within the athlete's control (Anderson et al., 2012; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Martin et al., 2014; Webb et al., 1998).

Despite the inevitable ending of their collegiate careers, some participants still felt it ended abruptly, leaving them with a mix of procrastination and urgency as they faced the reality of life's next chapter. This finding is consistent with previous research that found many collegiate athletes experience trepidation in anticipation of their transition and often feel unprepared once they face it (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020; Murdock et al., 2014). Similar to participants' narratives, Brewer and Petitpas (2017) found that athletes' time commitment demands may cause them to disengage from exploratory behaviour outside their sport, which can perpetuate the feeling of being unprepared for change. In line with the findings of Bopp et al. (2021), a lack of preparation caused participants to feel increasing stress about their transition.

Female collegiate hockey players transitioned to new roles beyond the structured demands of hockey. Some looked for jobs, while others continued to pursue higher education. A select few continued playing professional hockey. With new roles came a sense of independence accompanied by new freedoms and the establishment of new routines. Participants who typically never had to worry about finances entered a new reality of financial independence. Previous findings suggest that financial dependence on the sport can lead to a perceived threat during the transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Several participants experienced uncertainties related to re-establishing workouts beyond collegiate hockey. These findings are consistent with previous transition studies related to female collegiate athletes (Hardin, 2018; Oshiro et al., 2023). While some individuals embraced the transition, many struggled with navigating uncertainty as it contrasted with the familiarity and comfort of a pre-planned schedule. This finding is consistent with Schlossberg's (1981) notion that the greatest stress levels are caused by a change in which there is perceived uncertainty. This

adaptation process varied among individuals, with some experiencing it as an ongoing process and others viewing it as a phase they have successfully navigated and moved past. The overall complexity of participants' transition preparation and adaptation echoes the range of experiences found in a study by Stokowski et al. (2019).

### *Self*

This variable includes personal demographic characteristics and psychological resources during the transition. Regarding personal demographic characteristics, the most notable aspect observed among participants pertained to their health status. Studies have found that health-related concerns at the time of transition can be an added source of stress during the transition out of sport (Anderson et al., 2012; Park et al., 2013). However, individuals in this study discussed how the mental and physical toll exerted by their experiences ultimately gave them relief upon stepping away. This finding is supported by Martin et al. (2014) who outlined feelings of relief from the physical, mental, and timely demands of their sport.

At the core of this transition lies the personal identity of each participant. Participants' transition away from collegiate hockey shed light on their psychological ability to adapt to change. In line with previous findings, participants in this study recount the confusion that followed the loss of their athletic identity (Bopp et al., 2021; Harry & Weight, 2021; Saxe et al., 2017; Smith & Hardin, 2019). It was clear many individuals had dedicated so much to their sport that they neglected to consider occupational or ideological alternatives. Brewer and Petitpas (2017) would describe this as undergoing identity foreclosure. Mayocchi and Hanrahan (2000) found that athletes are best equipped for new roles when they are aware of the transferability of skills

acquired through sport. Interviews with participants underscored how the demands of collegiate hockey had instilled resilience, matured personal values, and honed life skills that translated beyond the ice. Successful skill transferability can also translate to positive transition outcomes (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). This held true as self-assurance was enhanced once participants' skills transferred into their new endeavours.

Participants' athletic identity loss prompted a need for self-exploration and inspired a renewed outlook on life that embraced roles beyond sports. Anderson et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of optimism in coping with transitions, as it provides a positive perspective to a neutral situation. Values and priorities previously centred around hockey shifted towards self-prioritization, enhancing social relationships, and embracing life with diminished pressure.

### ***Support***

The role of interpersonal and institutional support is important during periods of change. The camaraderie and bonds formed with teammates, the backing from family and friends, and the guidance from academic and athletic institutions were discussed. The findings in this study support those of previous studies suggesting family, friends, and partners were important sources of emotional comfort (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Former teammates also served as role models for advice during participants' transitions. The benefits of mentorship approaches were identified in a study by Smith and Hardin (2019). Similar to the findings of (Brown et al., 2018), the perceived feeling of understanding was an important aspect in the effectiveness of

support provided. This support helped shape participants' abilities to cope with and adapt to new realities.

There remains a scarcity of well-established resources tailored to navigate the life-after-sport transition for collegiate athletes (Hansen et al., 2019; Oshiro et al., 2023; Stollefson et al., 2020). Previous research highlighting the shortcomings and barriers to institutional support aligned with this study's findings. Support systems often focused on career rather than mental health (McKnight et al., 2009), and many available resources were not accessed due to reluctance to seek help (Drew & Matthews, 2019; Mannes et al., 2019; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Yoon & Petrie, 2023).

Academic advisors, team therapists and coaches were identified as effective supports among the institutional resources mentioned. Parallel to the findings of Menke and Germany (2019), participants shared the profound impact of conversations with a team therapist about their emotions related to losing their athletic identity. A study by Yoon and Petrie (2023) found that athletes tend to prioritize having access to a same-gender sports psychologist who preferably played the same sport. This was the case for some participants who expressed an appreciation for the shared common ground with the researcher, as well as the participant who reported a positive therapeutic experience due to the therapist's shared background of playing hockey at the same university.

Participants highlighted the positive impacts of having their coach's ongoing support post-transition in contrast to the challenges of those who felt suddenly dismissed from their athletic community following their final collegiate game. Harry and Weight (2021) found that a positive player-coach relationship can contribute to smoother transitions. When coaches help athletes learn personal management skills, athletes can feel a greater sense of control over their transition (McKnight et al., 2009). Overall

findings related to institutional resources reinforce the established necessity for further research into the retirement process for collegiate athletes and highlight the need for proactive support that meets their needs (Barcza-Renner et al., 2020; Bopp et al., 2021; Menke & Germany, 2019; Miller & Botell, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019).

### *Strategies*

Coping strategies used to navigate this significant life transition included being willing to adapt, restoring structure through new passions and pursuits, remaining involved with hockey in varied capacities, and reflecting on previous experiences with gratitude. Similar coping strategies are reflected in previous studies (Grove et al., 1997; Lally, 2007; Oshiro et al., 2023). Embracing the unknown and stepping away from self-criticism can help navigate stress and avoid feeling overwhelmed, as noted by Hayes et al. (2023). For athletes experiencing grief, it may be more difficult to implement practical coping strategies (Eggleston et al., 2020). This was evident as participants reported feeling sad after their final game and struggled as they adjusted to life without hockey in their senior spring term.

Taking part in a discussion about their transition experiences left many participants feeling grateful, relieved, and enlightened. McKnight et al. (2009) suggested that athletes are often taught to move past emotions which is why they could benefit from exploring emotions associated with this life change. The concept of micronarrative account-making, as proposed by Grove et al. (1997), provides an opportunity to recount a loss experienced, while simultaneously creating an opportunity to begin healing. This proved to be evident in the current study through participants' emotional narratives and discussion feedback.



## **Limitations**

This study possesses certain limitations which must be taken into consideration. The first limitation is that various factors restrict the generalization of the findings to different populations. The study's results may be too specific to provide broader applicability to athletes from different sports, genders, or backgrounds. Within the scope of women's ice hockey, the findings may not be transferable to collegiate hockey players from different divisions (i.e., Canadian Institutions, Division 3). The participants who took part in this study also had a unique experience compared to the usual NCAA Division 1 female hockey players as they faced the challenges of COVID-19. Getting an extra fifth year of eligibility is not a common occurrence, so the outcomes of this study may not apply to future groups in the same setting. The researcher sought participants from each league in the NCAA Division 1 to ensure a diverse range of experiences while meeting all the inclusion criteria. Other ways to mitigate these limitations are found in the recommendations for future research. It's worth noting that while COVID-19 was a rare occurrence, its effects highlighted the advantages of a fifth year in preparing participants for the transition.

A second limitation is the potential for researcher bias, given the researchers' personal experience with the transition out of NCAA Division 1 collegiate hockey. This dual role as a researcher and member of the population under study may have influenced various aspects of the research process. The researcher's experience could have shaped how they interpreted the data, conducted interviews, and chose findings. The researcher's personal experience might inadvertently shape participants' responses, leading to less detailed accounts as they presume shared understanding or, conversely, excessively detailed narratives based on an assumption about the researcher's

expectations. The researcher attempted to navigate these limitations by providing transparency about the researcher's positionality and bracketing. The researcher also frequently met with a supervisor to ensure reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process and to critically assess and account for personal biases and preconceptions. Details are provided in Chapter 3's section on Validity.

A third limitation might be self-selection bias, meaning those indifferent to or less affected by the transition may not have been as motivated to participate. Perhaps those who participated in the study had stronger opinions about their transition. Nonetheless, the results yielded a variety of experiences, suggesting a broad spectrum of perspectives was captured.

## **Implications**

### ***Research***

Findings from the current study contribute to the growing body of literature surrounding collegiate athletes transitioning away from sports. The interviews provided new insight into the unresearched experiences of female collegiate ice hockey players. Findings from previous studies were strengthened, and new themes surfaced. This study's sample proved unique with the complexities of COVID-19 and the added year of eligibility. Findings showing the impact of the fifth year in preparing female collegiate athletes to move on, reveal how additional time in collegiate sports can provide significant advantages in personal growth, career planning, and psychological readiness for life beyond sports. Given that collegiate athletes typically only have four years of eligibility, there are implications for research in understanding what may be different in that transition process.

Another research implication to consider is the evolving landscape of professional women's ice hockey in North America. At the time of the participants' graduation, the PWHL was not yet fully established. Its establishment has altered the decision-making process for NCAA Division 1 female ice hockey players nearing the conclusion of their collegiate careers. Under the collective bargaining agreement between the PWHL and its Players' Association, players' salaries range between \$35,000 and \$80,000, and are to rise by 3% annually throughout the duration of the eight-year agreement (Toronto Sun, 2023). A realistic option now exists for these athletes to continue playing the sport professionally. However, given the league's current structure of only six teams and the fact that most professional ice hockey players retire around the age of 30, it is likely many women will need to pursue a second career after concluding professional hockey. Pursuing professional hockey would subsequently extend the transition away from hockey, which could influence long-term career planning, increase the duration of their athletic identity, and potentially affect their readiness for life after sport.

### *Theory*

The study's findings illustrated the applicability of the 4 S model framework to understand the transition of recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players. Just as previous studies have shown, this model is useful to counsellors, coaches, and athletes in examining the athletic career transition and offers a foundation for data collection, data analysis, and future implications (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Hansen et al., 2019; Manthey & Smith, 2023; Stokowski et al., 2019; Swain, 1991; Wheeler et al., 1996). In the current study, the 4 S model (Schlossberg, 2011) helped

structure comprehensive semi-structured interviews, facilitate the conceptualization of detailed data, and anchor the literature review in the discussion section. Schlossberg's (1981,1984, 2011) transition models have been modified and refined over time. researchers have tended to gravitate towards the model that best suits their research questions and methodology. In contrast to the one-dimensional data analysis used in most studies, the use of two-dimensional data analysis in this study allowed for visualizing each dimension of the 4 S model at every stage of the transition: moving through (life as a collegiate hockey player), moving out (transitioning out of collegiate hockey), and moving in (life after collegiate hockey). The application of the theory in the current study reflects its potential for assessing athletes' assets and liabilities at each stage of their transition process. For instance, the current study revealed that participants adopted significantly more strategies as they transitioned into life after collegiate hockey, compared to few strategies utilized during and immediately following their collegiate experience. Gaining a holistic view of the athletes' transition process may help inform more tailored support programs, enhance the development of transition strategies, and ultimately improve outcomes for retiring athletes.

### ***Practice***

The current study provided insight into practical implications for individuals, coaches, institutions, and counsellors. At the individual level, there was a distinction in readiness for the transition away from collegiate hockey; some participants felt prepared to move on, while others did not. It was clear that individuals who were prepared navigated the change with greater ease, spending less time mourning their sports careers. Despite these differences, all participants found ways to adapt in the face of change and

move forward with a refreshed perspective. The adaptation process incorporated skills acquired through hockey combined with new competencies developed during the transition. Skills such as interpersonal effectiveness, resilience, and diligence were acquired through hockey, while the transition fostered new strengths like independence, adaptability, and self-prioritization. Participants found ways to leverage existing skills and embraced the opportunity to acquire new ones, regardless of their initial readiness for the transition. This finding suggests that female hockey players' experiences in hockey combined with the challenges and opportunities encountered during their transition, contribute to a versatile skill set that facilitates their adaptation to life after collegiate hockey.

Interpersonal support proved to be instrumental in offering participants effective reassurance, guidance, and motivation throughout their transition periods. Teammates offer relatability and shared understanding, while family can offer guidance and financial support. Increased understanding surrounding the specific ways family and teammates provide support may help inform the delivery and content of institutional transition supports.

The findings shed light on the remaining gaps that prevent collegiate athletes from feeling adequately supported by their institutions during their transition. After around 20 years of playing hockey, many female collegiate hockey players reported feeling dismissed by coaches following their final game. This created a strange feeling for many as they navigated the last few months of academics without the sense of belonging provided by athletics. Those who had positive experiences with support from coaches benefited from the emotional backing and the prolonged sense of belonging. This implies that coaches can profoundly impact individuals' transition away from

hockey, contributing to added stress for the athlete or supporting their transition. Coaches who provide support for athletes transitioning out of collegiate sport may not only facilitate the athletes' adaptation process but also enhance the institution's reputation. Institutions promoting post-college support from coaches could appeal to recruits, reassuring them of continued care and support for their entire collegiate experience beyond their time on the team.

In terms of institutions, there is a clear need for greater support for athletes in their final year, ensuring that resources are available, proactive, and tailored to their needs. One of the noteworthy insights overlooked in prior studies pertained to participants' experiences with financial stress and job navigation. The impact of the stress they experienced informed their recommendations for more practical support to prepare for these changes. Particularly, those with full scholarships experienced a drastic shift as they entered a new financial reality. This implies that workshops focused on career guidance and basic financial education could help reduce stress and facilitate quicker adaptation for new graduates.

Obstacles impeding female collegiate athletes' access to resources included reluctance, stress, disinterest, or preoccupation. This demonstrates that even if institutions have reputable resources, athletes might not be aware of them, may not attend, or may not actively seek them out. These barriers highlight the importance of ensuring that resources are available, clearly communicated, and easily accessible for athletes.

A final implication related to practice, for counsellors, is the therapeutic effect of the interview process itself. Participants engaged in the research process expressed an appreciation to reflect on their experiences and stated interest in the study results. Their

feedback highlighted the positive effects of discussing their journey during the interviews. Aside from those who had met with a counsellor before their transition, participants had not previously had the chance to discuss their transition away from collegiate hockey. Many felt enlightened by reflections that uncovered experiences from their collegiate hockey careers, their transition process, and their current situation. They valued the opportunity to reflect on their journey and gain comfort in their current situation. This demonstrates the benefits of checking in on graduated collegiate athletes and simply offering space to reflect. Many noted a desire for more mental health resources specifically tailored to their experiences as student-athletes, whether through discussion-based groups or increased access to counsellors. This may be a fruitful finding for counsellors in athletic institutions committed to student-athlete wellness.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on the implications drawn from the research, theory, and practice. Further research is warranted into the transition experiences of female collegiate ice hockey players experiencing the standard four-year eligibility period. Investigating different divisions, such as Division 3 or Canadian institutions, could yield insightful comparisons regarding the differences in their transition experiences. The influence of professional hockey as an opportunity during the transition processes of collegiate athletes and the prolonged transition of professional players also merits further investigation.

The 4 S model (2011) should continue to be applied across other sports transitions to validate its effectiveness within the athletic context. Athletic departments and universities might consider developing comprehensive transition programs that

focus on emotional and practical support to deal with change. Athletic departments or counsellors could utilize this study's two-dimensional data analysis to develop comprehensive transition programs that address athletes' assets and liabilities at each transition stage. Emotional support for athletes could include considerations from coaches, discussion-based groups with athletes, check-in discussions for graduates post-transition, and ensuring access to a counsellor. Practical support could include implementing financial education and career guidance workshops for athletes. Resources should be proactive and well-communicated to athletes.

## **Conclusion**

This study used a phenomenological qualitative approach to explore the transition experiences of 14 recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players. Through personal demographic questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, participants' narratives provided insight into the commonalities and differences among transitions. A thematic analysis was employed to make sense of the data within the theoretical framework and the guiding research questions. Schlossberg's three-stage categorization (1981) and 4 S model (2011) served as the foundation for a two-dimensional analysis process. Within the dimensions of Schlossberg's (2011) 4 S model, a total of 15 themes emerged.

While the experiences of female collegiate hockey players included both rewards and challenges, all participants developed valuable, transferable life skills. As the transition period approached, some participants felt prepared for the next chapter, while others were caught off guard and only a few contemplated continuing hockey professionally. Coaches and therapists provided effective support for some, but for the



majority, institutional resources were either insufficient or underutilized. Immediately following the transition, participants experienced a significant loss of athletic identity, daily structure, camaraderie, and purpose, though others welcomed the change with relief and excitement for new pursuits. During this time, family, friends, partners, and teammates provided participants with the best support. Regardless of participants' readiness to transition away from collegiate hockey, a period of adaptation was required to manage the changes and uncertainty. Navigating new roles, self-exploration, and gaining independence contributed to participants' renewed optimism and willingness to embrace change. As participants restored the structure they had lost, some found ways to keep hockey in their lives, whether through playing, coaching, or watching. Although the passion for hockey had faded for many, time to reflect offered an opportunity to truly appreciate their experiences. Through reflections, participants were also able to feel self-assured about their current situation and next steps.

The findings from this study add further conversation to the body of literature surrounding female collegiate athletes' transition away from sport. By highlighting the experiences of recently graduated NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players, findings highlighted the unique challenges of COVID-19 and the potential benefits of an additional year of eligibility for career planning and personal growth. Recommendations include further research to explore the transition experiences of other female hockey players, especially within the new landscape of professional women's ice hockey in North America. The study highlighted the need for emotional and practical support as well as the importance of relationships in coping with these changes. The 4 S model could help understand athletes' transitions and improve support at different levels to make female collegiate athletes' adaptation to post-college life smoother. It is

recommended that institutions develop comprehensive transition programs that offer both emotional and practical support for athletes at various stages, ensuring they are well-communicated and available.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Email to Coaches

**Subject:** Seeking Assistance: Research Study Former NCAA Division 1 Women's Ice Hockey Players Adapting to Life After Sport

Hello [Coach's Name],

I hope this email finds you well and everything is going great with your team! My name is Natasza Tarnowski. I am a graduate student in the Master of Education in Counselling at the University of New Brunswick working under the supervision of Dr. Helen Massfeller. I am also a former ice hockey player for Boston University (Class of 2020). I'm reaching out to you today because I am conducting a research study on the experiences of former NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players transitioning to life beyond collegiate sports.

As a former collegiate hockey player at Boston University and now a researcher, I'm passionate about understanding and supporting athletes during this crucial phase. I'm seeking your assistance in connecting me with players who meet the following inclusion criteria:

- (a) *Have attended and played hockey for an NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey team for a minimum of four years.*
- (b) *Graduated from university in 2023.*

The participation process is straightforward consisting of a questionnaire and one interview. The questionnaire is brief and will collect demographic information. The interview will be conducted via Microsoft Teams and will take approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. The players' identities will remain confidential, and their responses will be completely anonymous. The video recordings will be deleted once the study is completed, and any personal information will be removed from the final research findings. Their involvement is completely voluntary, and they can withdraw at any time without needing to provide a reason. There is no payment for involvement in the study, and there is no cost for participation.

If you could let me know the best way to get in touch with any eligible players, I'll reach out personally to explain the study in more detail.

Thank you so much for your support and consideration in helping me with this study. Your assistance will play a crucial role in uncovering the experiences and needs of former female collegiate hockey players during their transition to life beyond the NCAA. Should you be interested, I would be happy to share the results of my research with you. If you have any questions or need more information about the study, please don't hesitate to reach out to me. Thank you for your time and I hope to hear from you soon.

*This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of the University of New Brunswick and is on file as REB# 2023-166*

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Email and Eligibility Criteria for Participants

**Subject:** Invitation to Participate in Research Study: Transition Experiences of Former NCAA Division 1 Women's Ice Hockey Players

Dear [Participant's Name],

My name is Natasza Tarnowski. I am a graduate student in the Master of Education in Counselling at the University of New Brunswick and former ice hockey player for Boston University (Class of 2020). I'm reaching out to you today to invite you to participate in an important research study that aims to explore the experiences of former NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players in successfully transitioning to life beyond collegiate sports.

The purpose of this study is to gain insights into the unique challenges, opportunities, and strategies involved in transitioning from the competitive world of collegiate hockey to the next phase of life. By understanding these experiences, we hope to provide valuable information to support current and future athletes in their transition process.

Your participation would involve the completion of an online questionnaire and one interview. The questionnaire is brief and will collect demographic information. The interview will be conducted via Microsoft Teams and will take approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. Your identity will remain confidential, and your responses will be completely anonymous. The video recordings will be deleted once the study is completed, and any personal information will be removed from the final research findings. Your involvement is completely voluntary meaning you can withdraw at any time without needing to provide a reason or decline to answer any question at any time during the interview with no negative consequences. There is no payment for involvement in the study, and there is no cost for participation. As an appreciation for your time and contribution, you will have the option to receive a summary of the key findings from the study if you are interested.

**Please confirm whether you meet the inclusion criteria outlined below:**

I have attended and played hockey for an NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey team for a minimum of four years:

Yes  No

I graduated from university in 2023:

Yes  No

If you answered yes to all questions, you are eligible to complete the study. If you are interested in participating or have any questions regarding the study, please contact me: [n.tarnowski@unb.ca](mailto:n.tarnowski@unb.ca). I will be more than happy to provide any additional information you may need. Once you confirm your entrance into the study, I will send an informed

consent document which clearly outlines the purpose, procedures, and your rights as a participant.

Thank you for considering participating in this research study. Findings will be presented at conferences and published in a peer-reviewed journal. Your insights and experiences will greatly contribute to our understanding of successful transitions for collegiate female hockey players adapting to life beyond sports.

*This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of the University of New Brunswick and is on file as REB# 2023-166*

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent for Research Interview

**Researcher:** Natasza Tarnowski, Graduate Student, University of New Brunswick

**Supervisor:** Dr. Helen Massfeller, Faculty of Education, University of New Brunswick

**Contact Information:** Natasza Tarnowski may be contacted at [n.tarnowski@unb.ca](mailto:n.tarnowski@unb.ca)

If you have any concerns about the research you may contact Dr. Helen Massfeller:

[helen.massfeller@unb.ca](mailto:helen.massfeller@unb.ca)

If you wish to communicate with someone who is not directly involved in the study you may contact Dr. David Wagner: [dwagner@unb.ca](mailto:dwagner@unb.ca)

This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of the University of New Brunswick and is on file as REB# 2023-166.

Dear Participant,

My name is Natasza Tarnowski. I am a graduate student in the Master of Education in Counselling at the University of New Brunswick. You are invited to take part in a research study designed to explore the transition experiences of former NCAA Division 1 women's ice hockey players. Your participation in this research will take approximately 65 minutes. I would invite you to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (5 minutes) and interview you once via Microsoft Teams (60 minutes). I am asking for your permission to video record our interview in order to capture your opinions and ideas accurately, however, if you want me to stop recording at any time, you can let me know. Your name, the institution you attended, and any other identifiable information will not be specified in the reporting of the data. Additionally, you do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering. The recording will be securely stored in a password-protected computer. After I transcribe the interview, I will prepare a transcript and send a copy to your provided email address. Though I will take all reasonable steps to protect the security and confidentiality of your information, it is important to acknowledge there are some inherent privacy and security risks with online communication. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. If you do wish to withdraw, please contact me via email to indicate you no longer want to participate. If you withdraw from the research after completing any stage of the data collection, your demographic questionnaire, video recording of the interview, and interview transcript will be destroyed and excluded from the data analysis.

Your experience and insights will help future female hockey players understand the career transition process from NCAA Division 1 to life beyond sport.

By providing my name and contact, I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred Method of Contact:

Phone  Preferred Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email  Preferred Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions regarding your participation in this research, you may contact me: [n.tarnowski@unb.ca](mailto:n.tarnowski@unb.ca)

## Appendix D

### Personal Demographic Questionnaire

Directions: Please answer all questions as accurately as possible. Responses will be securely stored. Your information will be kept confidential. A pseudonym will be used to protect your responses.

1. Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Current zip code or postal code of residency \_\_\_\_\_
4. Which of the following best describes your current relationship status?
  - a. Single
  - b. In a domestic partnership
  - c. Married
  - d. Separated
  - e. Divorced
  - f. Widowed
5. What is your gender identity? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Did you fulfill your NCAA Division 1 eligibility?
  - Yes
  - No - how many years do you have remaining? \_\_\_\_\_
7. List the university(ies) you attended during your minimum of 4 years playing hockey in the NCAA Division 1: (If you attended more than one university, please indicate the years you spent at each university and where you graduated.):  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Did you receive an athletic scholarship?
  - Yes- full scholarship
  - Yes- partial scholarship
  - No
9. Number of years playing hockey: \_\_\_\_\_
10. What position did you play on your team? \_\_\_\_\_
11. What was your major? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Undergraduate cumulative GPA: \_\_\_\_\_

13. Are you pursuing further post-secondary education (if yes please describe)?

\_\_\_\_\_

14. What is your current employment status? \_\_\_\_\_

*This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of the University of New Brunswick and is on file as REB# 2023-166*

## Appendix E

### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

#### 1) Introduction

- Go over informed consent and provide an opportunity to answer any questions the participants may have.
- Assign a pseudonym to the participant

#### 2) Sample Interview Questions

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Self Variable:</b> “The person’s inner strength for coping with the situation.” (Schlossberg, 2011)</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Complete the sentence, I am _____... What else?</li><li>2. Describe your experience as a collegiate hockey player.</li><li>3. How prepared did you feel for graduation?</li><li>4. After graduating, what shift have you noticed in your time commitments?</li><li>5. How have your goals, values, or priorities evolved since your college graduation?</li><li>6. What do you perceive as one of your personal strengths that helped you cope with the period of change?</li></ol>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Situation Variable</b> “The person’s situation at the time of transition. Are there other stresses?” (Schlossberg, 2011)</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>7. How anticipated was your transition away from Division 1 hockey?<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Take me through the decision to take/or not to take a 5<sup>th</sup> year.</li></ul></li><li>8. To what degree do you feel you had time to plan for life beyond collegiate sport?<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ When was your earliest memory of people talking about the transition?</li></ul></li><li>9. Describe what life was like in the months following your last game/retirement from collegiate hockey.</li><li>10. What specific stressors were you confronted with at the time of the transition? (ie: finances, accommodation, transportation)</li><li>11. Describe your current situation and the changes you have experienced since no longer competing.</li><li>12. Have you ever experienced a similar transition in your life?</li><li>13. Can you share any opportunities you encountered during this transition period?</li><li>14. Can you share any challenges you encountered during this transition period?</li></ol>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Support Variable</b> “The support available at the time of transition.” (Schlossberg, 2011)</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>15. Describe the types of social support you received during your transition away from hockey.</li></ol>



16. What resources did the athletic department offer to assist you in your transition out of collegiate hockey? (i.e.: psychoeducational program, workshops, events)
17. How has your support system influenced your adaptation to life after leaving college hockey?
18. If you could have had additional support or resources during your transition away from hockey, what would they have been?

**The Strategies Variable**

**“Ways the person tries to reframe/reduce stress around it” (Schlossberg, 2011)**

19. What strategies or approaches have you used to navigate this transition?
20. Can you discuss any specific steps or actions you have taken to pursue your post-graduation goals?
21. What are your current interests or hobbies outside of hockey?
22. What is your current relationship with hockey?

**3) Closing Questions:**

23. Looking back at your transition experience, what were the most significant lessons you learned or insights you gained? Is there anything you wish you had known or done differently? What advice would you give someone?
24. Is there anything else you would like to share about your transition experience or any additional insights you think are relevant?
25. What has it been like to talk about your transition out of collegiate hockey with me today?

*This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of the University of New Brunswick and is on file as REB# 2023-166*

## Proof of Research Ethics Board Approval

2/12/24, 11:52 AM

Mail - Natasza Elizabeth Sandra Tarnowski - Outlook

REB 2023-166

David John Coleman <dcoleman@unb.ca>

Tue 11/28/2023 11:04 AM

To: Natasza Elizabeth Sandra Tarnowski <n.tarnowski@unb.ca>

Cc: Elizabeth Harrison <eli.harr@unb.ca>; Ethics, Department of <ethics@unb.ca>; Helen Massfeller <helen.massfeller@unb.ca>

Natasza Tarnowski, Graduate Student (Master of Education in Counselling);

Faculty of Education

University of New Brunswick Fredericton

To Natasza Tarnowski:

As Chair of the Research Ethics Board (REB) at UNB Fredericton, I have reviewed your ethics application for the project entitled "From the Rink to Reality: Exploring Transition Experiences of Recently Graduated NCAA Division 1 Women's Ice Hockey Players" which has been assigned the file number **REB 2023-166**. On the basis of the review, I consider your project to be eligible for delegated review, since any risk to participants that might exist appears not to exceed the "minimal risk" outlined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2nd edition (TCPS2). I am also pleased to inform you that, in my opinion, your project is in compliance with TCPS2 and the University Policy on Research Involving Humans (UPRIH). **Accordingly, please consider this E-mail to represent official notification of REB approval of your project. This REB approval is in effect from November 28, 2023 to November 28, 2026.**

**NOTE 1:** In the appropriate designated space in each of your Recruitment Email to Coaches (Appendix A), Recruitment Email and Eligibility Criteria for Participants (Appendix B), and Informed Consent Form (Appendix C) documents, would you please insert the REB File Number assigned to this project (**REB 2023-166**)? Then, would you please email to me (cc to <ethics@unb.ca>) a copy of each of those modified documents for our records? There is no need to send a revised version of the whole application.

If you require an official hardcopy letter of this approval to satisfy a funding body, please inform the UNB Fredericton Research Ethics Board office <ethics@unb.ca> as soon as possible. If the funds for this research project are held until REB approval, then please inform UNB Fredericton's Office of Research Services of this approval in order to release your funds.

Please note that, in the future, if you find that you must make any changes to your protocol, those changes must be considered and approved by the REB before they are implemented. Please submit the REB Case Modification Request form, available online through the Research Ethics page of the Office of the VP (Research).

Also please note that you are obliged to advise the REB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this approval period. An adverse event includes — but is not limited to — a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants, or a situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant or participants.

Finally, Annual Reports for this project are due on the 15th of January each year, provided that this date is at least six months after the date of this project approval. Final reports are due 90 days after project completion. Form templates for both of these reports can be found on our website at <https://www.unb.ca/research/vp/ethics.html>.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research project.

— David

**David Coleman**

Chair • UNB Fredericton Research Ethics Board

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## Curriculum Vitae

Ms. Natasza Tarnowski

University of New Brunswick, Master of Education in Counselling  
Degree Status: In progress (2022-2024)

Boston University, Bachelor of Arts in Psychology  
Degree Status: Completed (2020)

Boston University, Bachelor of Sciences in Health Science (*Cum Laude*)  
Degree Status: Completed (2020)

### Academic Awards:

Joe and Deb Owens Education Scholarship, University of New Brunswick, 2023

Distinguished Scholar, Boston University, 2020

All-American Scholar, Boston University, 2019, 2020

Hockey East All-Academic Team, Boston University, 2017-2020

Publications: N/A

### Conference Presentations:

Tarnowski, N. & Massfeller, H. (2024, June 21-23). *From the rink to reality: Exploring transition experiences of recently graduated NCAA Division I women's ice hockey players*. [Poster session]. Canadian Psychological Association's 85<sup>th</sup> Annual National Convention. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. <https://convention.cpa.ca/>